Phaedra’s Defixio: Scripting Sophrosune in Euripides’ Hippolytus

While readers of Euripides’ Hippolytus have long regarded Phaedra’s deltos as a mechanism of punitive revenge, I argue here that the tablet models itself on a judicial curse (defixio) and that its main function is to ensure victory for Phaedra in the upcoming “trial” over her reputation. In support of my thesis I examine three interrelated phenomena: first, Hippolytus’ infamous assertion that his tongue swore an oath while his mind remains unsworn (612); second, Phaedra’s status as a biaiothanatos; and third, Phaedra’s claim that Hippolytus “will learn sophrosune” (731), a speech act that, I conclude, anticipates the silencing effect on Hippolytus of Phaedra’s death and her writing.

When we think of dramatically significant objects in tragedy, certain things come to mind: the purple fabrics in Agamemnon, the bow in Philoctetes, or the urn in Sophocles’ Electra. Each of these props is, in the words of one scholar, “a magnet for the central issues” of the tragedy in which it is featured. Although visually less striking if only because of its smaller size, Phaedra’s deltos radiates a similarly magnetic force, becoming a concrete node for the interpretive complexities that confront viewers of Euripides’ Hippolytus. Simultaneously

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speechless and, at least to Theseus’ eye, “shouting out accursed things” (βοξι βοξι δελτος αλαστα, 877), the tablet embodies the paradox of voiceless voice. Despite being fashioned out of seemingly inert substance, it is possessed of a performative kind of logos that the human actors in this play can only dream of. It forces one speaker to release from his mouth a curse with deadly effects, while in turn preventing another from speaking up in his own self-defense.

The deltos is hanging from Phaedra’s wrist when Theseus discovers it in full view of the audience, a staging that would seem to encourage spectators to regard woman and object as somehow fatefully intertwined; but the deltos is far better than Phaedra at keeping its secret hidden from prying eyes and ears (including those of the theater audience). Phaedra, as we know, confesses her adulterous desire for her stepson when she hears her Nurse utter the name “Hippolytus” and can keep silent no longer (310). Her deltos has only one designated reader, to whom the fawning design of its golden sphragis makes special appeal, and this reader consumes the object’s written message in silence. Historians of ancient literacy regularly cite Theseus’ visual examination of his wife’s deltos as the first fictionalized representation of silent reading, but tragedy scholars seem to have given little thought to the originality of the scene’s staging and its importance within the drama. Why, for instance, are we not given unimpeded access to Phaedra’s words as we are to those of Agamemnon and Iphigenia, the two other (extant) Euripidean letter writers? Most critics have simply treated Phaedra’s suicide and letter-writing as acts of punitive revenge against Hippolytus. But Hippolytus’ praise of her sophrosune (1034) gives us strong reason to believe that Phaedra’s purpose in writing, as in suicide, may have been very different indeed, or at least more complicated. I shall argue that Phaedra’s tablet, contrary to having a single punitive function, draws resonance from its associations with judicial curse tablets (defixiones) and possibly even with erotic curses.

Euripides was infamous in antiquity for his fictional “bad women,” to borrow an expression made popular by T. B. L. Webster. In the contest of the tragic poets in Aristophanes’ Frogs, for example, Aeschylus scores points by referring to the Euripidean Phaedra and Stheneboea as “whores” (πορνας, 1043). This, of course, is comic parody. The line most likely alludes to the Phaedra from Euripides’ other Hippolytus play and attacks the playwright’s moral integrity by caricaturing him as obsessed with lustful women. Yet somehow the assumption that our Phaedra is also “bad” seems to have embedded itself in the collective consciousness of modern critics, who routinely characterize the extant Hippolytus as “a sophisticated variation on . . . the ‘Potiphar’s Wife’ situation.”

2. This scene is typically cited as the earliest literary representation of the practice of silent reading in ancient Greece, on which see Knox 1968.
Phaedra has had her ardent defenders, she says more often been regarded as weak-minded, petty, and morally dissolute, especially when it comes to her supposedly vengeful streak. Nancy Rabinowitz (1987: 134), for example, writes that “as woman and character, Phaedra is destroyed by speech and writing; she loses her honor and her moral superiority to Hippolytus (my emphasis).” In contrast to the Aeschylean Clytemnestra’s “complete mastery over language,” Phaedra’s proclivity towards “linguistic ambiguity” displays, according to Laura McClure (1999: 117), a “loss of self-control brought about by her sickness.” Yet none of Phaedra’s self-stated goals for her death and her writing match up with the portrait critics have painted of a spiteful, pathetic woman who is obsessed with punishing the man who has spurned her. The language of vengeance is Aphrodite’s alone (i.e., τιμωρήσομαι, 21), and although Phaedra alludes to the fact that she “will become a kakon to another” (728), she never suggests that her goal is destroy Hippolytus. She imagines Aphrodite taking pleasure in her defeat—a kind of pleasure that places the goddess squarely in the nexus of revenge-driven behaviors common to tragedy’s heroic tempers (725–27). But there is no gloating on the mortal woman’s part when she anticipates the effect of her death on Hippolytus. Phaedra, it would seem, has attracted the kinds of scathing critiques of character better suited to Aphrodite.

What Phaedra fears most is Hippolytus’ tongue and its ability to defame her. Her writing, I will suggest, is a defensive measure aimed at silencing Hippolytus. Whatever it is that Phaedra actually inscribed on her tablet—and I will return to the hermeneutic challenges of extracting a written text from the scene of reading—she is preoccupied most of all with her own good name (eukleia) and Hippolytus’ power to destroy it, should he decide to break the oath of silence he swore to her Nurse. By letting the template of revenge dictate how we read

5. E.g., Norwood 1954: 78, describing her as “the most subtly and beautifully drawn character in Euripides.”
6. E.g., Pohlenz 1930: 279, comparing Phaedra unfavorably with Medea, in so far as it was in Phaedra’s nature to be “susceptible to foreign influence, conventional morality, and societal judgments.” (“Phaidras Natur ist Schwachheit, Abhängigkeit von fremdem Einfluss, von konventioneller Sittlichkeit, von Urteil der Gesellschaft.”) This kind of criticism has been given a poststructuralist turn in more recent scholarship. McClure 1999: 116, for example, treats Phaedra as an incarnation of the Gorgianic doctrine of deception: “since reality cannot be known, the important thing is to appear to conform to the dictates of conventional law.” On how modern tastes for sexually empowered and gender-bending women have contributed to the rise in popularity, as well as rewriting, of tragedies featuring certain heroines (e.g., Medea, Jocasta, Hecuba, Electra, and Clytemnestra) see Hall’s 2010: 328–31 pertinent remarks.
7. Compare Conacher 1967: 41n.19, on the decision to write a suicide note incriminating Hippolytus as “a considerable fall from grace on Phaedra’s part.”
8. Pace Barrett ad loc., who, recognizing the importance of line 612 on the subsequent action of the play, argues that Hippolytus’ words are essential to the play in so far as “they serve to make Phaedra believe that he will ignore the oath; and it is in that belief (689–92) that she plots his destruction” (my emphasis).
9. On Phaedra’s concern with her own legacy, Hipp. 423, 489, 687, 717. Scholars have judged Phaedra’s pursuit of eukleia as a masculine characteristic, and as resulting in psogos (e.g., McClure
Phaedra and her writing, we have turned a blind eye to the cultural analogues from the agonistic world of juridical sparring that might help to illuminate some of the more puzzling and intriguing elements of the tablet’s action as well as its visually striking placement in Phaedra’s hand. This agonistic connection, when cautiously pursued, will reveal to us an object at the core of this play that performs much like a defixio. With the judicial parallels in mind, and by reading closely what Phaedra herself says about how she envisions her “device” (ἐὕρημα, 716) as acting, we will not only be better equipped to separate out the different strands of the complex plot that brings Hippolytus to his death, but we will also reach a more nuanced understanding of the heroine’s character and of the deltos that continues to represent her in death.

EURIPIDEAN LETTERS, THEIR AUTHORS, AND THEIR READERS

How is a reader to respond to a written text that fails to secure its own interpretive context or, even worse, embeds itself in deliberately misleading circumstantial evidence? Unlike the tablets that make appearances in Euripides’ Iphigenia plays and that can be engaged straightforwardly as letters, Phaedra’s deltos hovers provocatively between at least two different generic constructs.10 On the surface, it looks just like a letter.11 When he first encounters the tablet, Theseus assumes that his wife has written “instructions” (epistolas, 858) detailing her dying wishes for the care of their children and his future (858–59).12 But a troubling disjunction opens up between Theseus’ initial perception of the tablet as a letter and its devastating inscription.13 Later in the play, Theseus will treat this same object as evidence that securely convicts his son, and not in the manner of a bird-watcher’s prophecy (ἡ δέλτος ἥδε κλείστηκεν οὐ δεδεγμένη / κατηγορεῖ σου πιστά, 1057–58). Theseus’ changing perceptions of the tablet mediate our own

10. In this respect it is comparable to the inscribed sēmata lugra that Proetius sends to the king of Lycia in Iliad 6, a written text (pinax) that has served the scholarly record in two capacities, as the first example of a fictional Greek letter (e.g., Rosenmeyer 2001: 40–44) and as one of the earliest literary references to defixiones (e.g., Gager 1992: 243 and 248).
11. Deltos is the standard term for writing tablets in the classical period. Euripides uses the word nineteen times, of three different letters: Phaedra’s tablet in Hipp., Agamemnon’s letter to his wife in the IA, and Iphigenia’s letter to her brother in the IT. In Aeschylus, deltoi: the tablets of the mind, Pr. 789; Sophocles, deltos: tablet left by Heracles (on which is recorded the oracle from Zeus at Dodona), Tr. 47, 157.
engagement with this stage property and offer a useful reminder that the object does not have a fixed form in and of itself apart from its dramatic function(s). But neither are Theseus’ perceptions to be considered infallible. The deltos is not, in fact, foolproof evidence of Hippolytus’ guilt and at the end of the play Artemis rebukes Theseus for having cursed his son with undue haste: ἀλλὰ θῆσασον ἥ σ’ ἐχρῆν / ἄφας ἐφηκας παιδὶ καὶ κατέκτανες (1323–24). Rather than interrogating his son and taking the time to uncover the truth, Theseus has rushed to condemn.

The question naturally follows why Theseus was in such a hurry to convict his son of a crime he did not commit and why, also, Hippolytus failed to defend himself adequately. Clearly, there was something about Phaedra’s “testimony” that Theseus found so convincing that he bypassed the usual process of forensic elenchus (σοὶ ἥλεγξας, 1322), as Artemis charges. Elenchus, as Segal (1992: 438) notes, “belongs to the language of juridical examination which a litigious democracy like Athens must necessarily regard as a model of reasonable and reliable procedure.” It is precisely this procedure that Phaedra’s suicide has circumvented. As Artemis explains to Theseus, “through her death your wife destroyed the proper examination of logos, so as to persuade your mind” (Επείτα δ’ ἡ θανοῦσι’ ἀνήλωσεν γυνὴ / λόγων ἐλέγχους, ώστε σὴν πεῖσαι φρένα, 1336–37). Her death and the script that accompanies it have enabled Phaedra to switch positions with Hippolytus: she turns him into the defendant while she herself becomes a “witness” backing up Theseus’ position as the plaintiff accusing his son. When Hippolytus wishes out loud that the house could testify to his innocence (1074–75), Theseus hears this as his son’s desperate bid to summon “voiceless witnesses” to his self-defense (ἐς τοὺς ἀφώνους μάρτυρας φεύγεις, 1076), not realizing, of course, how much authority he himself has granted similarly silent objects (Phaedra’s body and her tablet).

The inscribed tablet lies on the cusp between speech and silence, but also between animate and inanimate realities. Inspired originally, of course, by their authors’ designs for them, these written objects in Greek tragedy take on, or at least seem to possess, a voice of their own when they come into contact with their internal readers. Phaedra’s tablet speaks in the coded language more commonly associated with monuments or wordless things: “Does it wish to signify something new to me?” (θέλει τι σημαίνας νέον; 857), Theseus asks when he first notices the object. The verb σημαίνας registers a distance that is at once physical and semantic between the thing itself and its interpreter: the verb programmatically forecasts the semantic event—i.e., the act of reading—that will follow. Yet the power dynamics between reader and text are far from clear. Who is in control?

15. Theseus refers to Phaedra’s corpse as “the surest witness” (παρόντος μάρτυρος σαφεστάτου, 972). On forensic language in the play and the agon’s similarity to a trial, see Mirhady 2004, with references to earlier scholarship.
In the question he poses, Theseus ascribes both an autonomous will (θέλει) and the ability to communicate (σηματεπειρον) to this inanimate piece of wood.17 Theseus recognizes on the tablet’s surface “the impressions of the dead woman’s gold wrought seal” that “fawn” on him (οἵδε προσσαίνουσί με, 863).18 And he decides to break open the seal to see “what this deltos wishes to tell me (865).” The audience may already be questioning the reliability of his perceptions. Has Theseus projected his desire to know onto the unresponsive medium of the deltos? Or, is the tablet itself magically animated?

Letters both real and fictional are the stuff of personal tragedy, their delivery as much as their production subject to unforeseen hazards. The earliest material example of a letter from the Greek world, the so-called Berezan Letter which dates to around 500 BCE, records a plea which a father, in danger of being enslaved, addresses to his son.19 The letter apparently never reached its recipient as the lead sheet on which it was written was still rolled up when archaeologists found it, its address intact on the outside. The letters embedded in Euripides’ dramas echo the disaster narratives of their real-life epistolary counterparts; they are, in addition, a dramaturgically effective device, as Rosenmeyer (2001: 63–68) has shown, for drawing the audience into the action and bringing them up to speed on crucial details of the plot. As scripts demanding to be acted upon, moreover, these stage tablets gesture metatheatrically to the process of theatrical plotting with its crisis-driven praxis. In Iphigenia at Aulis Agamemnon has been moved by a last-minute change of mind to rewrite an earlier letter; Iphigenia’s letter in Iphigenia in Tauris—transcribed for her by a sympathetic Greek prisoner—is both a product of her exile among the Taurians and a testament to her desire to escape them.20 Phaedra’s tablet also arises from a context of crisis in so far as it is the heroine’s response to having been assaulted by erōs. But this tablet’s stage role differs significantly from that of the other two letters, its dramatic function being to hide rather than to reveal its contents publicly.21

17. The material of Phaedra’s tablet, while not specified in the scene of its discovery, can be deduced from the messenger’s comment later in the play that he would not doubt Hippolytus’ innocence “even if the whole race of women should hang themselves and fill the pinewood (πεύκην, 1254) of Ida with letters (γραμμάτων).” Peukei is used of Agamemnon’s letter at IA 39. On the semantics of the deltos as a material object, DuBois 1988, Carson 1986: 98–101.
19. The letter, written on a sheet of lead, was found at Berezan, still folded and sealed; see further Rosenmeyer 2001: 29–30 and, for an edited text of the letter, Trapp 2003, letter 1.
20. Burnett 1971: 54–55 describes the letter as a “material witness to a principal quality of Iphigeneia’s spirit, her faithful confidence, reminding us that she had never quite ceased to hope for rescue and return.”
21. In another sense, of course, this brings Phaedra’s tablet more in line with actual letters; in so far as letters are a private form of communication, their appearance on stage represents something of a paradox, for the very form of the deltos (its folded leaves) implies secrecy, on which see, e.g., Carson 1986: 98–101.
If Euripides had wanted his audience to know precisely what Phaedra had written, he could easily have staged a scene in which Theseus reads the text aloud—just as Agamemnon and Iphigenia do in their respective plays. Both Agamemnon and Iphigenia dispatch letters with personal couriers. Each letter-writer also reads aloud, for the benefit of the Messenger as well as of the play’s audience, what has been inscribed in the folds of their tablets (IA 98 and 112–13; τάνόντα κάγγεγραμμέναν ἐν δέλτου πτυχαίς, IT 760). Agamemnon begins by naming the letter’s addressee (IA 115–16): “Oh child of Leda, I am sending to you a letter (deltous, 116) in addition to the one I sent you earlier....” And he goes on to reveal the purpose and content of this second letter. The Old Man’s eagerness to hear, word for word, what Agamemnon has written serves as a useful ploy to have the audience overhear the tablet’s contents. For her part, Iphigenia clearly marks off the end of her recitation with deictic pronouns: αἵδιὰ ἐπιστολαί, τά δέστα τάν δέλτοισιν ἐγγεγραμμένα (IT 786–87). By contrast, when Theseus speaks the following lines, he is summarizing his impression of what he has read (885–86):

Ἱππόλυτος εὗρης τῆς ἐμῆς ἐτήθη θιγείν, τὸ σεμνὸν Ζηνὸς ὄμμα ἀτιμάσας.

885–86

Hippolytus dared to touch by force my marriage bed and has dishonored the holy eye of Zeus.

There are no deictic markers to suggest that Theseus here recites verbatim from Phaedra’s letter.23 As spectators and auditors, all we can conclude is that the tablet’s inscription has driven Theseus to take immediate action against his son. For without even a gap of a line, he calls upon Poseidon to grant him the use of one of the three vows promised to him earlier (887–90). Turning the vow into a curse (ara), Theseus condemns Hippolytus to die before the day is over.24

It may reasonably be objected at this point that even though we haven’t heard word for word what Phaedra wrote, we would be justified in assuming, based on Theseus’ reaction to her text, that Phaedra has accused Hippolytus of raping her, or something similarly awful. What else could have triggered such a passionate outburst on Theseus’ part? I agree that the deltos implicates Hippolytus in reprehensible, even violent, behavior towards Phaedra, yet I still

22. “Speak and tell me, so that I may in my own voice (literally, “with my tongue”) make an accurate report of your letter,” says the Old Man at 117–18. And by honoring this request, Agamemnon discloses the letter’s contents simultaneously to both the internal and external and audiences.

23. Rosenmeyer 2001: 92 suggests that these words “could very well represent the first two lines of Phaedra’s actual letter which Theseus presumably still holds, particularly because the possessive adjective ‘my’ applied to the marriage bed may be understood as referring to either Phaedra or Theseus.” As I argue above, I see in these lines no particular linguistic markers of direct quotation.

24. Ἀραί can mean vow, or wish, or curse, and Theseus plays on this ambiguity in using the same word in two different senses to refer both to Poseidon’s three promised vows (888, 890) and his own speech act (896).
want to emphasize that in terms of the audience’s reception of this intensely emotional spectacle, a very different result is achieved by having the tablet’s verbal transcript remain unspoken. If Theseus had read out an explicit statement accusing Hippolytus of rape, such a text, by presenting itself as a description of “what really happened” and a denunciation of the perpetrator, clearly would have called for a careful examination of its truth-value. As the author of such a denunciatory text, Phaedra herself would then have had to stand trial. Both his son and Artemis harshly criticize Theseus for not conducting precisely the kind of inquiry (elenchus) necessitated by such a bold accusation. 25 The swift sequence of events, from Theseus’ silent reading to his bold cursing of Hippolytus, remains uninterrupted by a forensic interrogation of the evidence. As it has been choreographed, therefore, the scene skillfully circumvents the question of precisely who or what is to blame by distributing the agency for Theseus’ curse among several “actors”—human, material, and divine. The point of this staging may in fact be to keep us from focusing our attention too closely on the tablet’s verbal proposition, to coax us, in other words, to view the object itself as an instigator of Theseus’ curse. I will return to the question of what Phaedra may have had in mind as she was scripting her tablet. For now I simply draw attention to the gap that Theseus’ silent reading opens up between the tablet’s signifying actions and its author’s motivations, a gap that positions the tablet to be viewed as a freestanding agent, directing Theseus’ response in ways that Phaedra may not have anticipated. We can find theoretical support for taking the tablet seriously as an actor in its own right in the work of anthropologist Alfred Gell.

In the introductory chapter of his Art and Agency, Gell anticipates the objections of colleagues who may be out of sympathy with his “action”-centered approach to interpreting works of art (1998: 6, emphasis in the original):

This refusal to discuss art in terms of symbols and meanings may occasion some surprise, since the domain of “art” and the symbolic are held by many to be more or less coextensive. In place of symbolic communication, I place all the emphasis on agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it. The “action”-centered approach to art is inherently more anthropological than the alternative semiotic approach because it is preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process, rather than with the interpretation of objects “as if” they were texts.

25. Hippolytus (1051–52) asks Theseus to let time be the judge (μηνυτής) of his case, and Artemis criticizes Theseus for acting overly swiftly and without consultation of prophets (1321–24); the goddess refers to Phaedra’s destruction of elenchus at 1310–12 (by means of her ψειδε iotaperispomeneς γραφάς) and at 1336–37 (by means of her death: ἔπειτα δ’ η θανος ἀνήλωσεν γυνὴ λόγων ελέγχους, ὥστε σὴν πείσαι φρένα.)
Gell’s approach offers a way of accounting for the materiality of Phaedra’s tablet as an essential component of the prop’s agency, without simply reducing the object to its textual message. It is precisely the object’s un-readability—its opacity to the viewing public—that, I have been arguing, gets emphasized in the scene’s staging. We have a clear sense that Phaedra’s agency has in some way produced this material artifact. Borrowing Gell’s vocabulary, we would say that Phaedra’s agency can be “abducted” from the tablet, meaning that we infer the existence of its originator (i.e., Phaedra) from the object’s material presence. But this is not the same as asserting that Phaedra qua originator is in every way responsible for the tablet’s actions in the world. Objects in certain situations instigate actions independently of their own originators, and thereby acquire a kind of agency, or even animacy. Such animacy is evidenced in the stage interaction between Phaedra’s tablet and its internal reader, as we have just seen.

In ascribing to the tablet the wish “to signal” to him, Theseus has already endowed the object with a certain degree of animacy. In calling it a “song voiced in writing” (γραφαῖς μέλος ϕθεγγόμενον, 879–80) he gives greater specificity to the quality of its voice, which is audible only to its reader’s eyes. In Theseus’ description of its verbal contents as a melos, the tablet inches yet further away from the textual indictment whose validity may be affirmed or refuted through the rational scrutiny of elenchus. Melos indicates a register of incantatory speech that is capable of enchanting its listeners in ways very different from normal (i.e., constative) utterances. The Furies who sing a binding song over Orestes refer to their humnos also as a melos, in Aeschylus’ Eumenides 329. Faroane (1985: 152) has demonstrated, moreover, that these Erinyes, who are portrayed as “litigants in a forthcoming murder trial,” actually make use of verbal formulas familiar from defixiones, for example, by “binding the phrenes” of their victim (Eum. 327–33 = 341–46). In Euripides, melos more than once stands for the magical melody through which Orpheus swayed forces of nature not normally subject to human persuasion. It is important to keep in mind the incantatory potential of melos illustrated in these examples.

27. Halleran 1995 ad loc. projects the significance of the term melos onto the reader, with the suggestion that “the combination of sight and sound (sunaesthésia) might underscore Theseus’ distraught state.” How Theseus responds to it, I would add, is a crucial indicator of the tablet’s performative effect. This is an object that the audience comes to grips with primarily through its reader’s response.
28. On the Furies as visual enactments of their speech act, Prins 1991, and commenting on the strophe that contains the phrase humnos desmios (1991: 185): “Beginning again with ἐπί, it is ingeniously constructed as a series of appositions, so that the cumulative weight of ‘this melody’ (τόδε μέλος) bears down upon (ἐπί) Orestes, both rhythmically and syntactically.” See, also, McClure 1997.
29. In Alcestis, Admetus wishes out loud that he had the power of Orpheus’ song—εἰ δ’ Ὄρφεως μοι γλώσσα καὶ μέλος παρέχῃ (357)—so that he could persuade either Demeter’s daughter or her husband, “charming them with hymns,” to release his wife from Hades (357–59). And in Medea, Jason counts Orpheus’ ability to sing among humankind’s greatest resources (541–43).
Just as the Furies deploy a “binding song” against Orestes, Phaedra may also be exploiting magical means to protect herself in what she projects will be a forthcoming trial. But, I reiterate, her projected vision of how the tablet ought to function is not necessarily coextensive with its real-world activities. Let me summarize what has been obtained by disentangling Phaedra’s authorial intentions from the tablet’s action. In so far as Theseus takes the tablet’s inscription as compelling proof of Hippolytus’ violation of his marriage-bed, the deltos can be said to have caused Theseus to curse his son. Theseus also invokes Poseidon as the divine enactor of that curse and this god’s agency is later “indexed” in the fulfillment of Theseus’ speech-act.30 While Phaedra’s agency as the tablet’s author can be inferred from its being attached to her body and sealed with her sphragis (which Theseus recognizes) we are not licensed to abduct from Theseus’ reaction to it her intentions regarding the tablet’s action(s). Separating out Phaedra’s agency from that of her tablet enables us to imagine a dramatic situation in which Phaedra has encoded the tablet with a script that seeks to silence Hippolytus and punish him for his arrogance, but one that Theseus actually takes as a strong provocation to destroy his son. If we were not already predisposed to regard Phaedra’s intentions towards Hippolytus as vindictive, this would perhaps present itself as the most likely scenario. Supposing that the tablet does contain a direct or indirect accusation of rape—and, given my contention that its inscription is inaccessible to the audience, this hypothesis cannot be ruled out—I would still want to maintain that this false accusation serves Phaedra as a mechanism of self-defense rather than as cruel and unusual punishment of her stepson’s piety. An exploration of Phaedra’s motivations will round out our view of the tablet’s stage persona, allowing us to weigh the object’s effects on its reader in light of its author’s projected intentions for it.

PHAE德拉 THE DEFENDANT

It is while she is eavesdropping on the Nurse’s conversation with Hippolytus that Phaedra first becomes aware of the magnitude of the public relations disaster that she has on her hands. Phaedra realizes that she stands to lose everything—her marriage, her reputation, her children’s good name—when she hears Hippolytus sophistically backtracking on the oath of silence he had earlier sworn in the Nurse’s presence. “My tongue has sworn,” he says, “but my mind is unsworn” (ἡγ λ  ὁμωμοχ ὀμώμοχ, ἡ δὲ φρὴν ἀνώμοτος, 612). This celebrated line took on a life of its own in antiquity, being parodied thrice in two extant plays by Aristophanes.31 From

30. A further layer of divine agency is also present in Aphrodite’s role as director of all the proceedings. Artemis in the end forgives Theseus’ error (ἡμαρτίαν, 1334), she says, first because it was made out of ignorance and, later, because he fell victim to the deceptions of another goddess (1406).
Aristotle (Rhetoric 1416A 28–34) we learn that a certain Hygiainon even used Hippolytus 612 during an antidosis trial against Euripides, citing it as evidence of the playwright’s impious character. Although Hippolytus later promises to abide by his original oath (656–60), the threat of the violation of the oath lingers, and the strategy that Phaedra shortly thereafter adopts in order to safeguard her reputation bears the imprint of this threat.

Hippolytus’ invective against women is the first sign of the forensic turn the plot will take. His dream of living in a world without women includes the fantasy that men might get their offspring directly from the gods, acquiring progeny in exchange for precious metals (616–24). He expresses his hatred for the “wise” wife in particular, since she has been specially gifted by Aphrodite with a criminal disposition (642). Even in his own voice, Hippolytus characterizes his diatribe as a kind of slander, and he ends his speech with what must sound especially to Phaedra’s ears like a renewed threat of oath-violation:

.Hex νῦν τις αὐτὰς σωφρονεῖν διδαξάτων,
.ἢ κἂν ἐάτω ταῦτα ἐπεμβαίνειν ἄει.

667–68

Either let someone teach them how to exercise self-restraint,
Or let me forever keep attacking these women.

Hippolytus therewith gives himself license to pursue his verbal offensive against all women, Phaedra included, until they offer some public proof of having been taught sophrosune. Such a challenge places Phaedra on the defensive, to say the least. How is she, then, “to loosen the knot of speech” (κάθαμμα λύειν λόγου, 671) with which Hippolytus has bound her?

Just a few lines after she has queried “what strategy or speech” (τίν’ ἢ νῦν τέχναν ἐχομεν ἢ λόγον) she might avail herself of, Phaedra wonders out loud whether human or divine allies could be forthcoming:

.τίς ἂν θεῶν ἁρωγὸς ἢ τίς ἂν βροτῶν
.πάρεδρος ἢ ζυγεργὸς ἢ δίκαιον ἐργον
.φανείη;

675–77

The question is rhetorical in nature. No gods or human allies will appear to help Phaedra and as the Chorus make clear in their two-line riposte to her, the technai implemented by the Nurse have been an utter failure (κοὐ κατώρθωνται τέχναι, 680). The judicial inflection of Phaedra’s language, moreover, emerges as she laments that she has gotten “justice” (ἐτύχομεν δίκας, 672). Here δίκας

32. See further Avery 1968: 22–35 on Hygiainon’s accusation and the significance of this line within the Hippolytus.


can be taken to refer not only to her “just desert” or “payback” but also to the upcoming “trial” for which Phaedra is already preparing. Anticipating that she will be called to account for whatever slanderous discourse Hippolytus attaches to her name, Phaedra weighs all sources of support, including any human associates or advocates who could help her combat the “unjust deeds” (ἀδίκων ἔργων, 676) perpetrated against her.

One recourse for the ancient defendant was the use of judicial curses (defixiones). John Gager (1992: 118) has suggested that “the clients who commissioned the defixio saw themselves as threatened by the legal proceedings and consequently took extralegal measures in order to guarantee a favorable outcome.” Many of the judicial curses that have survived, moreover, are aimed at weakening an opponent’s verbal performance in court, and as such they frequently target the tongue. While revenge curses take as their aim the total destruction of the antagonist (and his or her family), judicial spells are more conservative in the harm they aim to inflict. Very few instances of the verb ὄλλυμι (“destroy”), for example, are to be found in the corpus of judicial curses. Let us, therefore, examine the play’s discourse about the tongue and its potentially deadly speech acts, paying special attention to the role of Hippolytus’ tongue in giving shape to Phaedra’s defense strategy.

**BOUND TONGUES AND JUDICIAL CURSES**

Tongues are regularly mentioned as a distinctive target of judicial curses, but we should not assume from this that the bound tongue itself is evidence of the practice of magic. It seems that bound tongues were a much more widespread phenomenon in classical antiquity and could be regarded as symptomatic of a variety of disorders, from poverty to erōs. Theognis 177–78, for example, mentions a man who, afflicted by penury, is incapable either of acting or speaking—for “his tongue has been bound” (γλωσσα δὲ οἱ δέδεται). But even those who are well-born and wealthy could find their tongues temporarily disabled. One such tongue-paralyzing mechanism was fear, and what we know today as “stage fright” was also experienced by public speakers in antiquity. This is nicely illustrated

35. Commissioners of judicial curses frequently targeted the plaintiff and his associates; a number of the inscriptions provided by Gager 1992: 124–50 contain mentions of sundikoi and sunegoroi.

36. Faraone 1991: 8n.28. Maggidis 2000: 98 has calculated that within the corpus of judicial curses, this verb “appears only five times overall (0.5%), three of which are tentative restorations (DTA 75a, SGD 89), while the remaining two, a third-century-bc tablet from the Chersonese and a fifth-century-bc tablet from Selinus, involve the traditional formulaic curse ‘may they be destroyed with their kin/families’ (εἰνεκλίλειν καὶ κύτων καὶ γενεῖς, SGD 104).” The use of a verb of binding (e.g., epideo), notes Faraone 1991: 19, “and the specific mention of the tongue as the target of paralysis are immediate clues that some sort of judicial binding spell has been employed.”

37. For examples, Ogden 1999: 27.
by a fragment from Euripides’ lost Alcmene,\(^{38}\) where the speaker claims that “fear paralyzes the tongue” when a man’s life is at stake (ὁ φόβος ... τὸ τε στόμι᾽ εἰς ἐκπλήξειν ἀνθρώπων ἄγει). Symptomatically related to fear is the powerful desire that nearly disables the first person narrator of Sappho fragment 31, who confesses that her tongue is “broken” or “fixed” in silence, depending on how one chooses to restore the textually corrupt ninth verse (ἀλλ᾽ ἄκαν μὲν γλῶσσα τέξαγετ).\(^{39}\) Political oppression and tyranny could also dampen the free flow of speech. The heroine of Sophocles’ Antigone asserts, for instance, that the citizens of Thebes would have voiced their approval for her were it not for the fact that “fear was sealing shut their tongue” (ἐὰν ἄκαν μὲν γλῶσσαν ἐγκλήιοι φόβος, Ant. 505).

As the tool that enables him to speak articulately and to compelling effect, the tongue therefore serves as a general index of a man’s political and social standing in his community, as well as attesting to his rhetorical gifts. At the far positive end of the spectrum we have the example of Orpheus. At the end of Agamemnon, for example, Aegisthus contrasts Orpheus, who “led all things through the pleasure of his voice” (Ag. 1630) with the Chorus’ remarkable inability to persuade, or what he calls their “anti-Orphic tongue” (Ὀρφεῖ δὲ γλῶσσαν τὴν ἑνταντίαν ἔχεις, 1629).\(^{40}\) The fact that judicial curse tablets so often target tongues with binding spells is not therefore a unique feature of magical practice but rather an attempt, on the part of these tablets and their clients, artificially to reproduce the verbal paralysis that can arise from fear, poverty, slavery, love, or other natural causes.

If an experienced speaker was dissatisfied with his oratorical performance in court, he might blame a curse as a face-saving measure, or those in attendance at his particularly poor showing might reach a similar conclusion on their own. We have a comic staging of such a scenario in Aristophanes’ Wasps, where Labes, a dog on trial for having eaten a wheel of Sicilian cheese, is apparently incapable of speaking up, or rather barking, in his own defense.\(^{41}\) A discussion ensues between Philocleon and his son during which the latter compares the dog’s silence to that of a certain Thucydides who was also struck by a case of “lock-jaw” (ἀπόπληκτος ἐξαίφνης ἐγένετο τὰς γνάθους, Vesp. 948).\(^{42}\) Despite being known as an “excellent orator” Thucydides was unable to defend himself, and as the scholia vetera to these lines inform us, he was believed to have had his tongue frozen by a curse (ὡσπερ ἐγκατεχομένην ἔσχε τὴν γλῶσσαν).\(^{43}\) The scholiast’s

\(^{38}\) Or perhaps from the Alcmene: TGFr Alcmeone F 88a is the same as Alcmeone F 67 N².

\(^{39}\) Catullus’ lingua sed torpet (51.9) is closest to Barnes’ suggested πέπαγε, as Campbell 1982 ad loc. notes, but most editors, including Campbell himself, print ἔαγε (“is broken”).

\(^{40}\) See also Eur. Alc. 357–59.

\(^{41}\) Faraone 1989, on this scene in connection with Attic defixiones.

\(^{42}\) The scholia vetera, reprinted at Faraone 1989: 149, identify this Thucydides as the son of Melesias, an “excellent orator” (ῥήτωρ ἄριστος) who was nevertheless incapable of speaking at trial in his own defense. The reason given by the scholia for Thucydides’ verbal paralysis differs slightly from what Aristophanes tells us at Vesp. 948.

\(^{43}\) This reinterpretation of Thucydides’ lock-jaw as a frozen tongue suggests to Faraone 1989: 158 that the scholiast was familiar with Attic defixiones.
is not some recherché explanation but a perfectly plausible account of how a skilled speaker could be unexpectedly struck dumb by stage fright.

Although she does not mention his tongue explicitly, Phaedra indicates that Hippolytus’ abusive rhetoric is what she fears most. As soon as she overhears Hippolytus’ vitriolic response to the Nurse’s confession, Phaedra develops a plan to counter the blame speech with which, she imagines, he will denounce her. The following lines speak to the urgency of the situation, and to Phaedra’s quest for a special kind of speech with which to contain the crisis brought on by the Nurse’s indiscretion:

θανούμεθ’ ἄλλα δεῖ με δὴ καίνον λόγων· οὐτος γὰρ ὀργή συντεθηγμένος φρένας ἐρεί καθ’ ἡμοῦ πατρὶ σᾶς ἁμαρτίας, ἐρεί δὲ Πιθεὺς τοῦ γέροντι συμφοράς, πλήσει τε πᾶσαν γαῖαν αἰσχίστων λόγων.

We will die. But I need new words (kainoi logoi): for this man, his mind whetted by anger, will denounce me to his father for your errors, and will tell old man Pittheus our misfortunes, and he will fill the entire land with the most disgraceful words (aischistoi logoi).

Just as fear can seal the tongue shut, anger unleashes it. The anxiety that Phaedra gives expression to when she describes Hippolytus as “whetted in his mind with anger” (ὀργῆς συντεθηγμένος φρένας, 689) is best understood in connection with the tongue’s susceptibility to these powerful emotions. For comparison we might consider how the Chorus of Salaminian Sailors in Sophocles’ Ajax rebuke their leader after hearing him take leave of his son: οὐ γάρ μ’ ἀρέσκει γλώσσα σου τεθηγμένη (586). Ajax’s “whetted” tongue is a weapon potentially as dangerous as the sword on which he will eventually kill himself. It is this kind of deadly speech that Phaedra imagines Hippolytus unleashing against her, thus prompting her to take preemptive counter measures. But even before she fears Hippolytus’ tongue, Phaedra fears her own. She details for the Chorus the arc of her thinking about her “disease.” First came her attempt to maintain silence and hide her illness. “There is nothing to be trusted to the tongue, which knows how to criticize the thoughts of other men, but actually acquires the greatest evil for itself, through its own agency,” Phaedra tells the Chorus (395–97). When silence fails her—and she is forced into speaking by hearing Hippolytus’ name spoken (310)—Phaedra next tries sophrosune (398–99). And when that, too, proves too weak a weapon against Aphrodite, Phaedra turns, finally, to death. But her plans here have not reached their final form. At this point, Phaedra sees in death a means of monitoring her own actions. By dying, she will prevent herself from becoming an adulterous wife, and thereby bringing shame to herself, her husband, and her children (420–23). Only after she overhears Hippolytus’ horrified reaction to the Nurse’s confession
does Phaedra realize that, in order to protect her reputation, she will have to do more than police her own behavior.

The version of Phaedra’s story staged in Euripides’ extant Hippolytus presents her suicide as an attempt to guard her good name against potential ruin.44 While the act of suicide would normally be construed as a reaction or sequel to the permanent loss of eukleia, in Phaedra’s case it is actually designed to foreclose that loss. There has been no adulterous activity outside of the discourse of adultery, and in this respect it is fitting that the measures that Phaedra seeks to deploy are also discursive, and that she alludes to the need for “new words” (καινον λόγων). The shift from speech to writing constitutes the “newness” of Phaedra’s logoi, as well as their special capacity to serve her posthumously.45 By posing as a reaction to an absent reality (i.e., loss of reputation), Phaedra’s carefully staged spectacle in death controls the response of its audience(s) and continues to elicit very real effects, such as Theseus’ curse and, a bit later, Hippolytus’ praise (1034). The “device” (ἐὑρήμα, 716) of inscription has given Phaedra the technology to shore up for herself and her children the legacy of an honorable life (ὡς προσθηκεῖνα βίον, 717) that Hippolytus’ words have threatened to undermine. But the technology of the curse tablet (κατάδεσμος in Greek or, more commonly, defixio in Latin) with which I am suggesting that Phaedra’s tablet shares performative resonances has no equivalent in the modern world, and it is therefore worth exploring it in more detail.

PHAEDRA AND THE RESTLESS DEAD

In the Greco-roman world, defixiones were deposited in places of maximal contact with the underworld. Although it is frequently cited, David Jordan’s definition of defixiones as “inscribed pieces of lead, usually in the form of thin sheets, intended to bring supernatural power to bear against persons or animals” (1985a: 206) may also be criticized for making too much of medium.46 The fact that the majority of extant curse tablets are written on lead is an accident of survival, and not necessarily an inherent feature of the defixiones themselves, although sympathetic magic could make use of the intrinsic properties of the matter inscribed (Gager 1992: 4).47 More important is the contact that the tablets were intended to initiate between the worlds of the living and the dead. Plato

44. The reconstructions of Euripides’ lost Hippolytus attempted by Barrett and Halleran in the introduction to their editions may need some modification in the light of P. Mich. Inv.6222A. See, e.g., Hutchinson 2004 and Gibert’s (1997) challenge to the traditional view that the extant Hippolytus offers a revision of the non-extant play.

45. Kainoi logoi is taken to refer to the written medium of Phaedra’s words (e.g. Segal 1970; McClure 1999: 145). On inscription as a means of controlling the discourse of the living about the dead, see e.g., Scodel 1992 and Svenbro 1993.

46. Other media for defixiones include bronze, ostraca, limestones, wax, and, especially in Egypt, papyrus (Gager 1992: 3, with references).

(Rep. 364C) describes how itinerant magoi offered their services to prospective clients who sought to boost their chances of a victory in court through magical means; but it is just as likely that many defendants in the classical period would simply have written their own curses, for “the act of flattening out a soft piece of lead and then scratching a name into it certainly did not require much more effort or technical skill than inscribing a potsherd for a vote of ostracism.”

The judicial curse tablets, once inscribed, were then deposited in places of maximal contact with the underworld.

Of those tablets whose find spots can be identified, about half come from tombs and cemeteries, many of them buried in the graves of those who had recently died in an “untimely” or “violent” manner—the aôroi or the biaiothanatoi. The concept is an old one,” as Graf (1997: 150) notes, for “these beings appear already in the texts found on curse tablets from classical Athens.” It had long been thought that the tablets were deposited in or near tombs so that the dead could serve as messengers, ferrying the curses to underworld divinities who would then act upon their directives. Sarah Johnston, however, ascribes to the dead a more active role. Observing that the gods who are most frequently invoked in the classical period—Hecate, Hermes, and Persephone—were known to have “special control” over the dead, Johnston argues that these gods were not expected to fulfill the curses directly but rather to mobilize the dead into performing them. In support of her thesis is the fact that by far the most desirable destinations for curse tablets were the tombs of the aôroi and the biaiothanatoi. The liminality of these “restless dead,” as well as the lingering bitterness they were imagined to feel, made them ideal candidates to do harm to the living. The biaiothanatoi as a category comprise those who have died before their allotted time, whether because of plague, disease, murder, execution, or from suicide. Phaedra’s untimely and violent death not only qualifies her to be classified among the biaiothanatoi, it yields insight into the mechanism of Hippolytus’ future tongue-tied performance. With the advantage

49. Jordan 1985a: 207 has calculated that 325 of the roughly 625 defixiones (outside the agora) with identifiable find spots come from tombs and cemeteries, and Jordan 1988: 273 estimates that the aôroi in whose graves the tablets were placed were quite young when they had died; see also Faraone 1999: 34–35 and Johnston 1999: 71–75 on the graves of the aôroi as particularly popular sites for depositing curse tablets.
51. Although the tablets from earlier periods generally contain much less information about their burial context, later tablets do address themselves to the “untimely dead” and “you unmarried ones,” giving hints as to how the dead were called upon (in ritual if not in writing) in earlier times. A third-century tablet from Attica (DT 52 and Gager 1992: 73) begins with four names and then continues: “I bind Kerkis, the words and deeds of Kerkis and also the tongue, in the presence of those who died before marriage. . . .”
of hindsight, we can see Phaedra’s prospective view on her “dying” (at 687) as implying a causal connection with the “new words” that she also mentions in this same line. I would even argue that Phaedra’s rhetorical juxtaposition of these two factors—death and logos—plants the suggestion in her listener’s mind that she is cognizant of the illocutionary force that her suicide will impart to her “new words.”

Despite the genre’s commerce in violent death, it is rare for characters in tragedy to be explicitly named as biaiothanatoi, and the combination of some form of θανεῖν with the adverb βιαίως occurs in only two extant plays. The infrequency of such language makes it all the more significant that Hippolytus is one of these plays. The Chorus of Trozenian women lament their mistress’ death in the presence of Theseus, addressing her as βιαίως θανούσα (814). The other example is in Aeschylus’ Choephoroe, where Orestes interprets his mother’s dream by reading himself into the role of the snake that has drawn blood from Clytemnestra’s breast (548–50). Since, as he says, his mother has raised a serpent as her own child (ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἐκπαγλὸν τέρας, 548), she is also destined to die a violent death (δεῖ τοί νῦν ... θανεῖν βιαίως, 549). In being killed before her time through an act of violence, Clytemnestra not only fits the profile of the biaiothanatos herself, she is also represented as the victim of the restless agency of another biaiothanatos—the husband she violently felled before his allotted time. In fact, the editions of Aeschylus’ Choephoroe that print the restored lines from Aristophanes’ Frogs as Choephoroe 1–5 (e.g., West 1991 and Sommerstein 2008) actually contain a direct mention by Orestes that his father “was destroyed violently by a woman’s hand” (βιαίως ἐκ γυναικείας χερός ... ἀπώλετο, 3b-c).53 We never meet Phaedra’s ghost on stage as we do Clytemnestra’s in the Eumenides, nor are we led to expect Phaedra’s return from the dead in the same way we suspect that Agamemnon’s restless spirit could rise from his tomb in the Choephoroe. Nevertheless, the Chorus’ designation of Phaedra as a βιαίως θανούσα renders the restless agency of the violently dead (biaiothanatos) the violent death (βιαίως θανούσα) a suggestive cultural context within which to read her suicide and its eventful aftermath. Such a context also offers a way of accounting for the tablet’s striking placement, in close proximity to its author’s dead body.

Theseus describes Phaedra’s tablet as “suspended from her hand” (ἐκ φίλης χερὸς / ἠρτημένη, 856–57), a detail that has inspired critics to comment on the visual dimension of Phaedra’s entanglement with her own words. Loraux remarks that the tablet reproduces Phaedra’s own physical aspect, hanging from her hand as she hangs from the rafters of her bedroom ceiling.54 Zeitlin (1996) adds that when Hippolytus gets caught up in the reins of his own horses, he “suspends” his body backwards with the same verb—ἀρτάω—with which Phaedra’s tablet

53. I owe this observation to Mark Griffith.
54. Loraux 1978: 54 notes the mirror effect between hanging tablet and hanging woman: “... à la main de la morte pend une tablette qui joue à imiter la femme pendue.”
hangs from her wrist (1222). “This entanglement,” writes Zeitlin, “results directly from the tablet that Phaedra has wrapped with sealing cords and that Theseus must unravel (exelixas) to read its message.”

While Zeitlin and Loraux both explore entanglement as a literary topos, neither ventures into more historically grounded interpretations of the binding theme. Not even Goff (1990), the primary focus of whose book is on the power of logos, seems to realize the extent to which Phaedra’s physical entanglement with her own words may be part of a plot designed to elicit real effects in the world.

First, a thought on the tablet’s placement: we may suppose that there could be a pragmatic reason, underlying the symbolic ones just mentioned, for Phaedra to attach the tablet to her hand. That defixiones were frequently buried with the untimely dead is reason enough to suspect that Phaedra’s suicide is being exploited for a similar purpose. How better to guarantee that her curse derive agency from her death than to bind the tablet to the hand that wrote it? This suggestion becomes more compelling when we take into account an intriguing piece of archaeological evidence. Two defixiones (Peek Kerameikos, Fluchtafeln 3 and 6 = Jordan, SGD 1 and 2), which are now housed in the Kerameikos museum in Athens, were discovered in graves that can be dated to the fifth century BCE. One of these (SGD 1 = Peek 3) is described by Jordan as cursing “more than twenty men and women and often their tongues and souls as well.” Especially interesting is the unusual find spot of these defixiones. Each one was found carefully wrapped and placed in the right hand fingertips of the skeleton whose grave it shared—a clear sign of the belief that the tablet would derive agency from the body itself and that the dead person was in some fundamental way entrusted with performing the defixio.

In the case of the archaeologically recovered curse tablets, we have to imagine a scenario somewhat different from the one being played out on Euripides’ stage. Clients would take their tablets, either professionally inscribed or “home made,” to the graves of the recently deceased, searching for those whose violent deaths rendered them suitable candidates for enacting curses. In burying her tablet in such a grave, a prospective defendant sought to channel the ghost’s restless energy against the person whose name supplied the desired target of whatever type of


56. Although it might have been possible for a tablet of a later date to have been deposited in a fifth-century grave, Peek 1941: 93 considers this possibility to have been refuted by K. Kübler: “Aber K. Kübler versichert, dass hier wie bei Nr. 6 Grab und Fluchtafel gleichzeitig sein müssen, und schließt die Möglichkeit, dass die Tafeln später in die seit langem bestehenden Gräber eingegraben sein könnten, ausdrücklich aus.” Unfortunately, Peek does not provide a reference to Kübler.

57. An edited text and photo can be found in Peek 1941: vol. 3, plates 22.3 and 23.2.

58. Peek 1941: 89: “Von den im folgenden mitgeteilten Fluchtafeln sind die Tafeln Nr.3 und 6 in Skelettgäubern gefunden worden; sie lagen zusammengewickelt je an den Fingerspitzen der rechten Hand. Das eine dieser Gräber ist durch eine ‘schwarze in der Form noch strenge Lekythos’ in die Mitte des V. Jhts. oder wenig später datiert, das andere gehört wegen seiner Fundlage in die gleiche Zeit.”
binding action had been prescribed, whether in writing or as a verbal performative. All of this presupposes that the dead were able to read these tablets, identify their targets, and afflict them with the prescribed malady.

In the case of Phaedra’s tablet we have no explicit verbal reference to a verb of binding. But Phaedra’s physical posture—her hanging from a noose, with the tablet bound to her hand—is in itself a non-verbal performance of a similar type, one that could be read as having been designed to divest Hippolytus’ future logoi of their power to harm her. By enacting the physical effect of his “noose of words” on her body, Phaedra has preempted and in this way also deactivated Hippolytus’ threat. Moreover, the tablet’s placement points not only to the site of violent agency, but also indicates its new direction. Phaedra’s hand, the source of violence that was in the first instance self-directed, now lends its agency to the words inscribed in the tablet that is bound to it. As in the case of Agamemnon who was brutally killed at Clytemnestra’s hand, one violent death spawns—or, where curses are involved, enables—other acts of violence. But we must also consider Theseus’ role. Theseus stands as an intermediary between Phaedra as “client” and Hippolytus as “target,” and in this sense he occupies the same middle ground as the biaiothanatoi. He reads Phaedra’s text and lets it direct his uncontainable anger against his son. The tablet would not have found such a cooperative reader in Theseus were it not for the co-presence of Phaedra’s corpse, the shocking sight of which prompts Theseus to take immediate action. Phaedra’s body in fact is present throughout the agon, like evidence at a trial, and in this regard, Theseus and Phaedra share between them the role of the biaiothanatoi with their restless agency.

I’m not proposing a one-to-one correspondence between the mechanics of a judicial defixio and the stage role of Phaedra’s tablet. But if we look beyond the precise verbal formulations of binding spells, we will notice that their goal, broadly stated, is to harness the volatile emotions that underlie agonistic judicial performances in such a way as to bolster the defendant’s chances of winning. Binding the tongue and mind of a said opponent is a concise formula for expressing and enacting this desired goal. But the same end—victory for the defendant—can also be achieved in less direct ways, for instance, by putting the plaintiff verbally on the defensive, or making him the target of the strong emotions (especially anger) that he had expected to channel against his opponent. In just this way, Hippolytus finds himself on the receiving end of the slander and opprobrium he had threatened to unleash against Phaedra.

PHAEDRA’S REVENGE, OR APHRODITE’S?

Every mention of the tongue in Hippolytus flirts with the possibility of dangerous, reputation-destroying speech. Phaedra is the first to mention the tongue as something not to be trusted (γλώσσηι γὰρ οὐδὲν πιστόν, 395): for when the tongue translates the mind’s thoughts into speech, it “acquires for itself
the greatest of evils” (397). Hippolytus threatens to make good on Phaedra’s statement when he tells the Nurse that his “tongue has sworn but his mind is unsworn” (612). If he were to break his oath, Phaedra’s phroneˆmata, the thoughts she had tried to keep secret by not speaking, would indeed have become so much grist in the mill of her critics’ slandering tongues. The discourse about the tongue and its defamatory capabilities is reprised in the agon between Theseus and Hippolytus, where once again it appears probable that Hippolytus will break his oath of silence. Shortly after his entrance on the scene, Hippolytus reprimands his father for what he misconstrues as his “light-hearted” tone (923–24). Barrett’s translation of these lines perfectly captures the unselfconscious irony of the speaker’s words: “But this is no time, father, for subtle talk: I fear your troubles may have made your tongue run wild” (δέδοικα μή σου γλώσσα νύπερβάλλη χαχοιτε). Hippolytus still has no clue just how wild his father’s tongue has run, not having been present for Theseus’ cursing of him just minutes before his arrival. Theseus’ tongue has been loosened by the very same “troubles” that will keep Hippolytus’ tongue tied up. Some fifty lines later, when he has realized the gravity of his situation, Hippolytus finds himself unable to speak in his own self-defense.

Hippolytus begins his rhesis at 983 with a trope well suited to the defendant at a trial; he plays up his own lack of rhetorical skill, particularly his ineptitude at speaking before a large crowd.59 As many have noticed, Hippolytus’ language comes from the courtroom and creates a forensic context for the agon between himself and his father.60 But the familiar forensic language comes to an abrupt end when he makes an unusual declaration, at 990–91: “Nevertheless [i.e., in spite of being an inexperienced speaker] necessity—the arrival of misfortune—forces me to let loose the tongue (γλώσσάν μ’ ἀφεῖναι).” This locution—“to let loose the tongue”—is highly unusual for the orator, but it recalls Hippolytus’ earlier equivocation about his tongue’s being sworn (ἡγ λ ομεγαπερισπομεν σσ ὁ μ ω μ ο χ) and at the same time echoes something Phaedra had said, in the context of reviling adulterous wives.61 Phaedra says φθογγὴ rather than γλώσσα (a term reserved for articulate human speech), but she makes a similar point: the voice, once released, exposes shameful behavior.

59. Lloyd 1992: 48 suggests that Hippolytus transforms a commonplace that was typically expressed in a deferential manner into an opportunity to express his superiority over the mob.
60. On the forensic language, see McClure 1999: 147 with further bibliography in n.116.
61. The tongue gets mentioned disparagingly in the orators, as, for example, when Aeschines declares of Demosthenes that “if one were to remove his tongue... there would be nothing left” (οὐ τὴν γλώτταν ὑπὲρ τῶν κυλῶν ἐὰν τις ἄρεξ, τὰ λοιπὰν οὐδὲν ἐστίν, 3,229); for the tongue in connection with the rhetoric of abuse, see Worman 2008: 236, 265–66, and 323.
62. See Loraux 1978: 53, and on other forms of nonverbal speech in the play, Turato 1976: 179. It is worth noting that Hippolytus wishes that the royal house could make an utterance (φθέγμα) in support of his innocence (1074–1075) and that the voice of the bull that rises from the sea is also called a φθόγγος (Hipp. 1205) and is later referenced as a φθέγμα (1215).
Hippolytus concludes with the piously intoned opinion that “it is not allowed for me to say more” (ἐμοὶ γὰρ οὐ θέμις πέρα λέγειν, 1033), falling back on the language of ritual propriety to explain his refusal to speak about why Phaedra killed herself. Theseus has every right to be puzzled by Hippolytus’ tongue-twisted and opaque speech, for he is ignorant of the earlier oath of silence his son swore in the Nurse’s presence, an oath whose binding power may now be reasserting itself in Hippolytus’ reluctance to say more. In so far as Hippolytus articulates a reason for his silence, that reason appears to be the ritually binding authority of the oath. However, neither Hippolytus nor Theseus is fully aware of all the facets of Phaedra’s plotting. The audience is in a position to weigh both factors and to recognize in Hippolytus’ refusal to speak about the cause of Phaedra’s death the combined effects of his oath and her tablet.

It should not be forgotten, of course, that Phaedra herself is a victim of Aphrodite who, from a macroscopic perspective, has designed and directed everything that unfolds before our eyes.63 As we know from the play’s prologue, Phaedra has been forced into playing a role in the goddess’s revenge plot against Hippolytus.64 The mortal woman’s weakened body and desperate fear of speaking are in themselves symptoms, both of Aphrodite’s assault on her and of Phaedra’s resistance. But even while being victimized by the goddess, Phaedra develops a strategy of her own for preserving eukleia for both herself and her children. Having decided definitively in favor of suicide, Phaedra concedes that she has been beaten by “bitter eros.” She recognizes that her death “on this day” will delight Aphrodite, but Phaedra draws consolation from the thought that in dying, as she says, “I will become a κακόν to another” (ἀτὰρ κακόν γε χἀτέρωι γενήσομαι/θανοςα, 728–29).65 Read in isolation, her language could be taken as a statement of intent to punish Hippolytus. Like other tragic characters that curse their enemies as they themselves are dying, Phaedra regards death as a source of agency rather than an obstacle.66 Phaedra does not merely foresee that Theseus will release from his mouth an ὀλοὸν κακόν (883–84). The circumstantial participle θανοςα in 729 has a causal force. It is because of her death that Phaedra will become a curse.

63. On Aphrodite as “primal cause” of the action and on metatheater more generally, Zeitlin 1996: 225–32.
64. Kovacs 1987: 71 takes the extreme view that Aphrodite bears full responsibility for all the faults of the mortal characters, but I agree with Gregory’s 1991: 80n.16 objection that “if Hippolytus and Phaedra were not responsible for the tragic outcome, they could not attain the heroic status Kovacs assigns to them.”
65. An expression curiously misunderstood by Loraux, who takes kakon out of context and interprets the line to mean that Phaedra will lose her honor (1978: 55): “L’honneur vrai a disparu: par son suicide, Phèdre devient un mal. Kakon genesomai: le contraire de la belle mort, dont le syntagme-clef, agathos genesthai, dit la conquête de la valeur.”
66. Ajax uses what looks like a curse formula (ὡσπερ/τῶς), at Ai. 840–41, in calling upon the Furies to punish the sons of Atreus. The authenticity of these lines, however, has been suspected since antiquity since nowhere in the tradition is Agamemnon killed by one of his descendants. Consider also Eurydice’s dying curses on Creon (Ant. 1304–1305), as reported by the messenger (σοὶ κακός/τράζεσι ἐφυμήσασσα).
Death here furnishes the means by which Phaedra will transform herself into a κακόν, enabling her to control the speech-acts of others from beyond the grave. But it is important to read her words in context, paying particular attention to the purpose clause in which Phaedra spells out her full motivation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ἐγὼ δὲ Κύπριν, ἦπερ ἐξόλουσί με,} & \quad 725 \\
\text{ψυχὴς ἀπαλλαχθεῖσα τῇδ’ ἐν ἰμέραι} & \\
\text{τέρψῳ πυκνῷ δ’ ἔρωτος ἰσασθήσομαι.} & \\
\text{ἄτ’ρ κακὸν γε χατέρῳ γενήσομαι} & \\
\text{θανοῦσ’, ἵν’ εἰδή χ’ τι τοῖς ἐμοῖς κακοῖς} & 730 \\
\text{ψυχὴς εἶναι: τῆς νόσου δὲ τῆς μοι} & \\
\text{κοινῆ μετασχῶν σωφρονεῖν μαθήσεται.}
\end{align*}
\]

725–31

I know that in giving up my life on this very day I will delight the one who destroys me: Aphrodite. And I will have been beaten by bitter eros. But I in turn by dying will become a curse to another, so that he may learn not to gloat over my misfortunes and by sharing in this disease of mine, will learn to practice sophrosune.

Notice first of all that Phaedra acknowledges Aphrodite as her destroyer; she does not blame Hippolytus. She anticipates, moreover, that the goddess will take pleasure in her death (ἐγὼ δὲ Κύπριν...τέρψῳ). “Revenge is sweet,” says Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (καὶ τὸ τιμωρεῖσθαι ἡδύ, 1370b30), for it is a kind of victory and “victory is pleasant to all” (καὶ τὸ νικάν ἡδύ, οὐ μόνον τοῖς φιλονίκοις ἀλλὰ πάσιν). Aristotle’s reasoning here taps into the popular ethos of “helping friends and harming enemies” that informs the actions of many characters on the tragic stage.67 In the prologue of Sophocles’ *Ajax*, for example, Athena encourages Odysseus to laugh at the spectacle of Ajax’s self-destruction (79): “Isn’t it the greatest pleasure of all to laugh at your enemies?” (οὔκουν γέλως ἥδιστος εἰς ἐχθροὺς γελαν). By the same token, if Phaedra had regarded Hippolytus as an enemy to be vanquished we might have expected from her some proleptic expression of enjoyment as she anticipated his imminent destruction.68 Phaedra ascribes the pleasure of revenge to Aphrodite but she crafts her own “curse” in very different language; she speaks of learning and self-restraint (sophrosune), eschewing the pleasure-infused rhetoric of revenge. Phaedra’s design is not to avenge a prior humiliation but to influence Hippolytus’ future behavior, and in this respect she projects a purpose for her death that mirrors the magical effect of a binding spell.

More specifically Phaedra articulates the hope that her death, while bringing harm, will teach Hippolytus not to gloat over her misfortunes (ἵν’ εἰδή χ’ τι τοῖς

68. Consider also Medea’s response to the messenger’s news about the deaths of Creon and his daughter (τέρψεις ἡμᾶς, ει τενώσε παγκάκως, Med.1135). On the pleasure of revenge, Blundell 1989: 26–28 and 60–68.
ἐμοὶ κακοὶ / ὑψηλὸς εἶναι, 729–30), and that by sharing in her sickness he will be taught sophronēσ (σωφρονεῖν μαθήσεται, 731). What, then, would it mean for Hippolytus “to share in the disease”? Given the common conception of erōs as a disease and the abundant manifestation of this metaphor in the first half of the play, it certainly seems as if Phaedra is plotting to make Hippolytus fall in love with her. While she has experienced the failure of the Nurse’s rhetorical appeals to Hippolytus, Phaedra does not reject absolutely the notion of deploying magical means to win his affection. We never of course get any concrete sign that her plans have evolved in this direction, but the wording of her “death wish,” as it were, is intriguing to say the least. As Faraone (1999: 81) notes, binding spells work by “forcing their victims to do something against their will.” Whether it is explicitly erotic in nature or closer to the pattern of judicial curses that we have been examining, Phaedra’s rhetoric suggests that by turning herself into a kagon she hopes to induce Hippolytus to adopt a disposition alien to his nature; her words gesture at the need to make him honor his oath, despite the signs that he intends to break it.

The perversity of Aphrodite’s revenge— the fact that she has afflicted Phaedra but not the true target of her anger with the “disease” of erōs—now admits of a new reading: Hippolytus is, in the end, also caught in the web of desire. If not enamored of the living Phaedra, he at least shows her the respect of guarding her secret in death. And in dialogue with Theseus later in the play, he forsakes the opportunity to save his own life, choosing (or being bound) instead cryptically to praise his stepmother’s self-control. “For although she was unable to be sophrōn,” Hippolytus claims, “she practiced sophronēσ” (ἐσωφρόνησε δ’ οὐχ ἔχουσα σωφρονεῖν, 1034). Here Hippolytus’ “inchoate wisdom,” as one scholar has put it, in fact precisely echoes Phaedra’s own language when she articulated her wish that Hippolytus would learn sophronēσ (σωφρονεῖν μαθήσεται, 731). “Hippolytus’s statement,” remarks Zeitlin, “seems to fulfill her prediction to the letter—and in the letter.” But what does this sophronēσ consist of? What kind of education in sophronēσ is Hippolytus in need of? Roisman (1999: 117) concludes that “she already begins to slander him in her assertion that she will teach him σωφροσύνη (sophronēσ, 731) since he does not already have it.” In other words, Phaedra has imputed to Hippolytus a lack of sexual self-restraint—she has slandered him with a charge that is patently false. But sophronēσ is not univocal; it has a particularly rich semantic range that extends beyond “resistance

69. There are twenty-four instances of νόσος, νοσεῖν, and νοσερός in Hipp., and most occur in the first 700 lines. On the distinctive uses of νόσος by different speakers in the play, see Kosak 2004: 51, and on the symptoms of Phaedra’s desire as (un)articulated in speech, Goff 1990: 30–39.
70. Relevant here is Faraone’s 1999: 55 observation that the essential difference between curses and erotic spells is that “the former torture their victims with fever or pain until they die, while the latter do so only until they yield” (my emphasis).
to illicit desire,” the sense in which Hippolytus most often deploys it.73 Sophrôn, as Gregory notes (1991: 90), is “Hippolytus’ favorite self-description, as well as his highest commendation for others.” Sophrosune is also, observes Goff (1990: 39), “one of the terms in the play that most acutely focuses the problems of the relation between desire and speech.” Phaedra’s ominous prophecy that Hippolytus “will learn sophrosune” both echoes and answers Hippolytus’ own earlier threat to keep slandering women until they might be taught sophrosune (668).74 But in her response she seems to have deliberately recoded the semantics of σωφρονείν: she uses it, I believe, not to mean sexual self-containment but as an ethical term operative within her own agenda of verbal self-restraint.

We have already examined in detail Phaedra’s concern with monitoring the verbal outpourings of Hippolytus’ tongue. Given the subtle interplay between speech and sexual desire that pervades this play, as well as tragedy’s traffic in verbal paradox more generally, it should hardly come as a surprise that sophrosune turns out to be about more than sexual self-control. Phaedra’s last words, σωφρονείν μαθήσεται, do not constitute a threat to divest Hippolytus of the kind of sophrosune for which he has publicly won renown (e.g., “resistance to illicit desire”). If we interpret this line within the broader context of her all-consuming, obsessive concern with eukleia, we will see that Phaedra is here predicting the performative effect of her death and curse tablet: Hippolytus will learn to exercise “verbal self-restraint” (σωφρονείν μαθήσεται); he will not, in other words, reveal to Theseus his wife’s secret.75 For Phaedra, sophrosune, like so much else in her world, is language-driven and logocentric, it is an ethical term with particular valency in the realm of logoi.

Such an analysis of Phaedra’s use of this term has the additional benefit of demystifying Hippolytus’ own cryptic statement about his past failure to exercise sophrosune (ἡμεῖς δ’ ἔχοντες οὐ χαλός ἔχρωμεθα, 1035). Whereas previously Hippolytus had equated sophrosune with chastity, in this line he adopts Phaedra’s understanding of the term as his own. Hippolytus is not confessing to a crime of passion that he did not commit, although this is how his words must sound to Theseus’ ears. Rather, in a bizarre but dramatically satisfying reversal of positions, Hippolytus credits Phaedra with having achieved his ideal of sophrosune in so far as she has resisted in her death the desire with which Aphrodite had sickened her: ἐσωφρόνησε δ’ οὐκ ἔχουσα σωφρονείν (1034). He blames himself, furthermore, for not having met her standard of sophrosune: ἡμεῖς δ’ ἔχοντες οὐ χαλός ἔχρωμεθα (1035). For the very threat of breaking his oath,

74. The staging of the scene containing Hippolytus’ diatribe has long been debated, and this verbal echo is a strong point in favor of the argument that Phaedra has been on stage listening to the whole of Hippolytus’ speech (616–68). Cf. Smith 1960: 168, contending that “the repetition is part of the dialogue between author and audience, not of argument between characters.”
Hippolytus implicitly concedes in this line, as well as his subsequent invective against women, constituted precisely the verbal assault—the lack of verbal self-restraint (sophrosune)—against which Phaedra felt compelled to defend herself. It is this (lack of) sophrosune for which Phaedra admonishes him when she says σωφρονεὶν μαθήσεται (731). In the later scene with Theseus, Hippolytus affirms the validity of Phaedra’s accusation. When he concedes that he failed to exercise sophrosune despite having had the capacity to do so (1035), Hippolytus rebukes himself for the reputation-destroying discourse that drove Phaedra to extreme measures. But in honoring his oath as well as his stepmother’s eukleia, Hippolytus presently proves that he has—as Phaedra performatively anticipated that he would—finally learned sophrosune.

PHAEDRA’S DEFIXIO

Inscribing your opponent’s name on a lead tablet, perhaps along with a binding curse, and then depositing the rolled up tablet in a grave—preferably the grave of someone who had died young and violently—is certainly not how you would seek to gain the upper hand in a trial today. But if we are to believe the archaeological record, judicial curse tablets were a fairly ordinary part of life for Athenians of Euripides’ generation.76 “We must now begin to consider the likelihood that commissioning a curse tablet against prospective judicial proponents was a regular feature of the legal process in the Greco-Roman world,” Gager (1992: 178) wrote almost twenty years ago. In a more recent article, Faraone (2002: 91–92) similarly concludes that the “Athenian courts [were]. . . sites of intense competition where perjury and binding curses are typical weapons which citizens used to attack each other . . .”77 In the light of such insights into Athenian legal practices it has become appealing to reconsider the deltos in Euripides’ Hippolytus as an object with performative resonances that echo those of the curse tablet.

Scholars used to believe that judicial defixiones were post-trial “revenge curses” until Richard Wünsch (1900: 68) demonstrated that all the curse formulas seemed to point to a future event. The conclusion reasonably followed that

76. Gager 1992: 117: “among the published Greek defixiones, judicial or legal types constitute the second largest subgroup.” Some sixty-seven have been published (ranging in dates from 500 BCE to the third century CE). The earliest tablets come from Sicily, but “several well preserved tablets” from the Greek mainland, dating to fifth and fourth centuries BCE, have survived.

77. E.g. Faraone 2002: 86: “we now have clear and compelling evidence that the ancient Greeks in Sicily, Attica and Olbia from as early as the fifth century BCE did indeed practice a form of magic known in Plato’s day as katadesmos or 'binding spell.’ . . . More than two hundred of these tablets dating to the classical period have been unearthed in or near Athens, mostly from the graves in the Piraeus or the Ceramicus.” The majority of these focus on an upcoming trial; Faraone 2002: 87 also notes that the binding spell of the Furies in Aeschylus’ Eumenides is part of the “charter myth” for this practice in Athenian courts. Moreover, it appears to have worked in the play—Orestes does not defend himself very well. See also Ogden 1999: 89–90 on reasons for the “ghettoization” within classical scholarship of the study of curse tablets and magical texts.
defendants deployed the curses before (or, at any rate, during) a trial. Their function was to influence the outcome of events.\(^{78}\) One of the strongest arguments for thinking of Phaedra’s tablet as a defixio is its pre-emptive function as an object poised, like the defixio, to influence the future, rather than to exact punitive revenge for past injuries. Phaedra knows that her reputation will depend upon what people say about her. Hippolytus puts her good name in jeopardy when he threatens within range of her hearing to break the oath of silence that he has sworn to the Nurse. Consequently, Phaedra develops a plan that is aimed, primarily, at inhibiting the free flow of Hippolytus’ blame speech. Theseus, as the reader of the tablet, becomes the medium through which Phaedra is able to gain a rhetorical advantage over her opponent.

While contemporary readers tend to refer to this deltos as Phaedra’s “suicide note,” such a nomenclature obscures the performative effect that Phaedra anticipates her words will have. Elise Garrison (1995), for example, uses the term “suicide note” loosely to refer to the places in tragedy where “death wishes” or the desire to be elsewhere are given verbal expression.\(^{79}\) But Phaedra’s writing represents more than a death wish; it is a script that is specifically designed to silence Hippolytus. With such a purpose behind its conception, the deltos models itself rather more closely on a binding spell than on an escape song or a suicide note.\(^{80}\) It is usually assumed, moreover, that in writing her letter, Phaedra is as interested in avenging her unrequited desire as she is in protecting her own reputation (eukleia). In this respect, scholars have aligned Phaedra’s motivations with those of the goddess who has infected her with the disease of eros. Or it may be that we are still viewing the extant Phaedra through the reflection of her less virtuous alter ego, the Phaedra of Euripides’ other Hippolytus. As I mentioned at the start, scholars have treated the extant Phaedra as essentially another “Potiphar’s wife,” a woman so maddened by frustrated desire that it is hard to imagine her planning for anything other than her coveted lover’s destruction. This, no doubt, was true to the character type of the earlier Phaedra, whose shadowy presence in this play is still palpable, I would venture, in our heroine’s deep and abiding concern with eukleia. Indirectly (or intertextually) aware of her predecessor’s disastrous reputation, our Phaedra sets out to preserve her own at any cost, and in the end, her virtue is recognized, both by the stepson whose life she has destroyed as well as by Artemis, who explains to Hippolytus that Theseus “was deluded by the plans of a daimon” (ἐξεπετήθη δαίμονος βουλεύσαν, 1406). Euripides, it seems, went out of his way in composing his second Hippolytus play (pace Hutchinson

\(^{78}\) Faraone 1991: 15: “They are attempts at binding the opponent’s ability to think clearly and speak effectively in court in the hope that a dismal performance will cause him to lose the case.”

\(^{79}\) Garrison 1995: 80: “In extant tragedies involving suicides or suicidal thoughts, escape songs function primarily as death wishes: suicide notes, as it were.” Phaedra’s deltos she calls “an actual suicide note” (89).

\(^{80}\) It remains uncertain whether there was an ancient Greek equivalent of the “suicide note” with which Euripides’ audience would have been familiar.
2004 and Gibert 1997) to create a Phaedra who would be as different as possible from the “bad woman” of the earlier Hippolytus. His second Phaedra is an ideal wife whose reputation for sophrosune manages to withstand even Aphrodite’s carefully plotted siege.

As we have seen here, the cornerstone of Phaedra’s defense strategy is to subject her own potential accuser to precisely the kind of slander, or innuendo, that she fears from him. That the agon of this play is conducted like a trial is not a new observation, but until now there has been no attempt to read the juridical turn of events backwards into the planning stages of Phaedra’s self-defense. The supposition that she sees herself as preparing for an upcoming trial gains credibility from Artemis’ observation that it was “for fear of falling into an elenchus” (εἰς ἔλεγχον μὴ πέσηι φοβουμένη, 1310) that Phaedra wrote her misleading text. In the case of Phaedra’s tablet, we have only circumstantial evidence pointing us in the direction of its status as a judicial curse. But a brief comparison between the “stage life” of Phaedra’s tablet and that of the other two writing tablets that achieve stage roles demonstrated just how different is the function of Phaedra’s writing.

We have examined three features that, in my view, compel us to regard Phaedra’s text as some form of a “pre-emptive judicial strike.” 81 First of all, like the commissioners of judicial curses, Phaedra is a defendant seeking desperate measures to avoid losing what is most precious to her—her reputation. 82 The primary aim of the judicial curses is to foreclose the possibility of a victory for the plaintiff rather than to avenge that victory after the fact, and in this regard the judicial curse offers an attractive model for Phaedra’s tablet, which likewise seeks to shape the future rather than to avenge the past. Second, in aiming to control the plaintiff’s court performance, commissioners of judicial curses frequently target the tongues of their antagonists, the tongue being the body part responsible for speech and therefore the plaintiff’s most valuable asset during the trial. Phaedra too greatly fears the damage Hippolytus’ tongue may do her, and in conceiving of a defense strategy she has been concerned to minimize his ability to speak. Third, it was common practice for clients to deposit their completed curse tablets in the graves of the recently and violently dead—a category of corpses known in antiquity as the biaiothanatoi. It is therefore perhaps not entirely incidental that the chorus refer to Phaedra as βιαίως θανος (having died violently) at 814. Just as we will never know what, precisely, Phaedra wrote inside her tablet, it is also impossible to know whether she would have approved of having that tablet labeled a defixio (or κατάδεσμος). Within the fictionalized world of the play, however, there are a striking number of signs that mark Phaedra’s tablet as such.

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