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Molière tried to persuade people that it was easier to write a tragedy than a comedy. All you need to do, according to Dorante in La Critique de l’École des femmes, is to fulminate:

Il est bien plus aisé de se guinder sur de grands sentiments, de braver en Vers la Fortune, accuser les Destins et dire des injures aux dieux, que d’entrer comme il faut dans le ridicule des hommes. (sc. 6, I, 504-05)

This is of course a parody of tragedy. If tragedy uses this kind of writing – curses, maledictions, imprecations, execrations – it does so sparingly, and at moments of high emotional intensity. Indeed, in his Pratique du théâtre of 1657, d’Aubignac includes imprecation in a short list of especially powerful figures of speech appropriate to tragedy. The others are apostrophe, pro sopoeia, irony, exclamation, hyperbole and interrogation, but imprecation is especially privileged at the climax of the list: “Or entre toutes, l’Impréca tion sera jugée certainem Théâtrale, à cause qu’elle procède d’un violent transport d’esprit; aussi faut-il que le discours soit fort impéteux, l’impression hardie, et les choses extrêmes” (p. 481). This article explores the nature of imprecation as a figure of speech and the different ways it can be embedded into a dramatic context. It does so by examining occurrences of imprecation in plays from Euripides to Racine that deal with the story of Theseus, Phaedra and Hippolytus – a story that hinges on imprecation.

Approaches to imprecation

Not all rhetorical terms have a clear line of descent from the ancient world, and imprecation is one such term. Despite its Latin etymology (it means “to call down upon”), it is not used by the rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian, or indeed any other ancient rhetorician (Delphine Denis,
“Rhétorique et Herméneutique”, § 4). Instead they use the synonym “ex(s)ecratio”, though say very little about it as a technique. In the De Oratore Cicero includes it as the final item in a long list of figures of thought, and pairs it with its antonym, “optatio” meaning “to make a wish for something good” (II, 3.53.205). In the Institutio Oratoria Quintilian quotes this very passage of Cicero (III, 9.1.32). D’Aubignac’s ready use of the term “imprecation” alongside other rhetorical terms suggests, however, that it enjoyed currency in the seventeenth century, and such is indeed the case.

Rhetoricians are already using it in the sixteenth century. In his Rhétorique française of 1555, Antoine Foclin gives two examples of imprecation, which he explains as occurring “quand nous souhaitons du mal à quelqu’un” (p. 74). In England, in the 1593 edition of his Garden of Eloquence Henry Peacham defines imprecation as “a forme of speech by which the Orator detesteth, and curseth some person or thing, for the evils which they bring with them, or for the wickednesse which is in them” (p. 64). He also gives details about its use: “This figure is the fit instrument of speech to expresse the bitternesse of the detestation within us against some evill person, or evill thing, and forasmuch as it sendeth forth the flame of revenge kindled in our affections, it may well be compared to the casting of wildfire, or poysoning of shotte, to destroy the enemie” (p. 64). Such is the potency of this figure that he cautions only occasional recourse to it: “The use hereof ought to be verie rare, and not to rise but against intollerable impietie, not measured by man’s malice, but assigned by the divine sentence” (p. 64).

Seventeenth-century French definitions are in line with Peacham, but more concise. In his Rhétorique française of 1665 René Bary is a little coy in the way he explains the term: “Cette figure consiste à faire des souhaits désobligeants”, and the very particular bitterness of the figure leads him to recommend its use in only the most extreme circumstances: “Cette figure est trop aigre, l’on n’en doit user qu’après l’exagération de quelque endurcissement horrible” (pp. 343-44).

Impprecation has been little studied as a rhetorical figure, but two recent articles devoted to imprecation in Racine provide a useful theoretical framework for further analyses. Gilles Declercq has analysed Clytemnestre’s imprecation against Ériphile, Agamemnon and the Greek fleet in Iphigénie V, 4, and Delphine Denis Agrippine’s imprecation against Néron in Britannicus V, 7 along with Athalie’s against Joas in Athalie V, 6 (see respectively, “L’Imprécaction de Clytemnestre” and “Rhétorique et Herméneutique”). What Declercq’s and Denis’s analyses have in common is a celebration of the emotional intensity of imprecation. It is a large-scale figure that typically
incorporates a characteristic range of smaller-scale figures and grammatical features: exclamation, interrogation, apostrophe, hyperbole, hypotyposis, irony, the lexis of hatred and mortality, the recourse to second- or third-person imperatives and the use of the future tense (Denis, § 14).

In Declercq’s example, Clytemnestre is reacting to the news that her attempt to save Iphigénie from sacrifice has been foiled by Ériphile. Clytemnestre expresses hatred of Ériphile, though does not call down harm upon her. Instead, she turns her attention to the Greek fleet, which she urges the ocean to destroy: “Quoi pour noyer les Grecs et leurs mille Vaisseaux, / Mer, tu n’ouvriras pas des abîmes nouveaux?” (*Iphigénie*, V, 4, 1684-85).

In Denis’s examples, there is even more of a sense of the casting of wildfire, as Agrippine and Athalie both speak directly to the characters (Néron and Joas, respectively) on whom they wish harm. This, in itself, increases the emotional intensity of these two examples. For the murder of his step-brother, Agrippine hopes that heaven will spatter her son with the blood of all his future victims (including hers) before forcing him to shed his own (*Britannicus*, V, 7, 1707-10). For God’s current triumph over her with the restoration of her grandson Joas to the throne, Athalie hopes that the boy will turn against God, profane his temple, and so avenge her (*Athalie*, V, 6, 1784-90). Both these passages use the language of hope, both use future tenses in which the speakers graphically envisage future destruction or profanation that will give them posthumous satisfaction, and ensure that their enemy’s current triumph will be short-lived.

Thésée’s imprecation against Hippolyte in Racine’s *Phèdre* (IV, 2) has much in common stylistically with those of Agrippine and Athalie, though dramaturgically it is significantly different, and arguably even more emotionally charged. Agrippine and Athalie both speak at the end of their respective plays. The key actions have already taken place: Agrippine accuses Néron of the murder of Britannicus, which he has just committed; Athalie acknowledges her defeat and the triumph of Joas, restored to the throne before her very eyes. The imprecations are a response to the climactic action and an anticipation of potential catastrophes in post-dramatic time.

The imprecation of Thésée, however, occurs in Act IV of *Phèdre*. It may superficially resemble the imprecations of Agrippine and Athalie in containing a judgement on the immediately preceding actions of their interlocutor. Thésée’s imprecation certainly judges Hippolyte, whom Thésée wrongly believes to have made sexual advances on Phèdre. But what is different about Thésée’s imprecation and what makes it so dramatically distinctive is that his judgement and its concomitant imprecation itself
actually constitute the play’s climactic action. By uttering an imprecation, a father sends his son to his death, so satisfying one of Aristotle’s criteria for tragic action: “What sort of events, then, do seem apt to rouse fear, or [rather] pity? […] The cases we must look for are those where the pathos involves people closely connected, for instance where brother kills brother, son father, mother son, or son mother.” (Poetics, XIV, 1453b, p. 68). With his imprecation against Hippolyte, Thésée commits the kind of intra-family murder that Aristotle thinks most likely to arouse the emotions proper to tragedy, and this lends Racine’s use of the figure here an especially chilling force: the imprecation itself brings about the catastrophe. The full emotional force of Thésée’s imprecation at this juncture in Racine’s play, however, can best be appreciated by comparison with the treatment of the same figure, both stylistically and dramaturgically, by other dramatists, ancient and modern, who have treated the story of Hippolytus.

Euripides

In Euripides’ Hippolytus, immediately upon his return Theseus hears that his wife Phaedra has hanged herself. With her corpse, which is brought on stage, is a tablet, on which it is written that Hippolytus had attempted to defile her. Without reflection and without questioning Hippolytus, Theseus makes his imprecation to his father Poseidon in the presence only of the chorus: “But, father Poseidon, those three curses you once promised me – with one of them kill my son, and may he not live out this day, if indeed you have granted me curses I may rely on!” (887-90). In contradistinction to all subsequent versions, this imprecation is characterised by extreme rhetorical economy and plainness. It has the necessary elements of an imprecation: the apostrophe to Poseidon and a second-person imperative, reinforced by a third-person imperative, both demanding the death of Hippolytus (all features present in the original Greek). The imprecation is accompanied with the reminder that Poseidon had granted Theseus three wishes. These few elements are expressed in the briefest way without any elaboration. It is a sharp burst of verbal violence: a father, quick to anger, sentences his innocent son to death, in his absence, without questioning the evidence or giving him a hearing.

Euripides makes clear to the audience the structural importance of this imprecation in the tragic economy of his play. After Theseus has later been told of Hippolytus’s life-threatening accident, the goddess Artemis appears and tells him the truth: that Phaedra had hanged herself in shame after her nurse had informed Hippolytus of Phaedra’s love for him; and that, in an attempt to save her reputation, Phaedra had written the false accusation on
the tablet. The most chilling truth that Artemis speaks, however, is Theseus’ murder of his own son: “You have killed your son in godless fashion” (1287). She particularly foregrounds the imprecation as the rhetorical agent of the catastrophe: “Do you know that you were given by your father three curses certain of fulfilment? One of these you took, base man, to use against your son when you could have used it against an enemy. Your father, the sea Lord, kindly disposed as he was toward you, granted what he had to grant seeing that he had promised.” (1315-17).

Euripides brings Hippolytus on stage to die, and this affords the opportunity of exchanges with both Artemis and his father. To both he shows his awareness of being his father’s victim: “I am shamefully treated by the unjust utterance of an unjust father” (1348-49); “O ill-fated curse of my father” (1378), “Poseidon your father’s gifts, what woe they brought!” (1411). Too late, Theseus movingly regrets his imprecation: “Would that the curse had never come to my lips!” (1412). Hippolytus breathes his last, as his father covers his son’s face. Brief though it is in expression, Theseus’s imprecation is the tragic core of Euripides’s play: a father kills his son with the active agency of the grandfather.

But there is more to it than this. For Euripides encases his tragic story within a broader narrative frame. The goddesses Aphrodite and Artemis dominate the beginning and end of the play respectively. At the beginning, Aphrodite reveals her intentions to the audience. Stung by Hippolytus’s steadfast chastity and devotion to the manly pursuit of hunting, under the tutelage of Artemis, Aphrodite intends to punish him: “the young man who wars against me shall be killed by his father with curses the sea lord Poseidon granted him as a gift” (43-46). Phaedra, Theseus and Hippolytus are thus the playthings of a goddess. An angry father makes a fatal imprecation against his son, and the audience can respond with tragic emotion. But the influence of Aphrodite, revealed by Artemis to Theseus and Hippolytus at the end of the play, ultimately absolves the father of all blame and goes some way to mitigating the tragic outcome. Artemis is unambiguous in the absolution she grants to Theseus: “You were not responsible for killing him, and when the gods so ordain, it is to be expected that men will make disastrous mistakes” (1433-34). On a human level, the play ends positively as the dying Hippolytus explicitly absolves his father of blame (“for this murder I acquit you” (1449)) and wishes him “plenteous joy” (1453). Euripides so conceives Theseus’s invocation as to make it both the agent of the play’s tragic effect and the instrument by which that effect is re-contextualised and modified.
Seneca’s plotting is different from that of Euripides with the result that the imprecation is newly contextualised in the Latin play. Phaedra is not dead when Theseus returns. The Nurse tells him that Phaedra is suicidal and Phaedra herself tells Theseus that Hippolytus attempted to rape her, brandishing his sword as evidence. Phaedra is therefore present to hear Theseus’ immediate, long, angry reaction, culminating in his imprecation to Neptune:

Whither weapons cannot be hurled, thither will I hurl my prayers. My father of the sea granted me thrice to fashion prayers whereto the god would bow, and, calling upon Styx, confirmed the boon. Now fulfil the sad boon, O ruler of the sea! Let Hippolytus see the bright day no more, and in youth pass to the ghosts that are wrathful with his sire. Now bring aid, which my soul abhors, O father, to thy son; never should I squander this last boon of thine, did not great ills o’erwhelm; in depths of Tartarus, in presence of dread Dis, and imminent menace of hell’s lord, I was sparing of this prayer. Keep now thy promised faith. Father, dost thou delay? Why are thy waves yet silent? Now veil the night with dark clouds driven by the winds; snatch stars and sky from sight; pour forth the deep; and, rising high, summon the floods from Ocean’s self. (941-58)

Seneca retains the basic elements of the Euripidean apostrophe: the reminder that Neptune had granted Theseus three wishes, the apostrophe to Neptune, the second-and third-person imperatives. But Seneca is less economical. His Theseus is at pains to justify his use of the third wish and he prompts Neptune to act swiftly with an extended list of imperatives (again, all these stylistic features are present in the original).

The imprecation by Seneca’s Theseus sends Hippolytus to his death as surely as does that of Euripides’ Theseus. But whereas in Euripides Theseus might inspire fear and invite blame by the cursory rapidity of his sentence, in Seneca Theseus’ reaction has some justification. It is true that he does not ask to see Hippolytus, but that is because Phaedra has claimed that Hippolytus promptly fled (901-01). This is immediately, if rashly, taken as proof of guilt by Theseus.

Again, where Euripides concentrates on arousing fear for the victim of Theseus’ hasty judgement, Seneca handles the imprecation so as to arouse both fear for the son about to be murdered and pity for the father, who is not so much hasty as hesitant. This explains the greater length and elaboration of the imprecation in Seneca. It is a “sad boon” that Theseus asks for; it is “aid, which [his] soul abhors”. He expresses the wish for Hippolytus’ death in the most periphrastic and non-violent terms: “Let Hippolytus see the bright day no more”, “[let him] pass to the ghosts”. He
troubles to justify the use of the third wish to Neptune by insisting on the
enormity of the crime it is going to punish: “never should I squander this
great boon of thine did not great ills o'erwhelm”.

But if there is pity for the reluctant, and misguided, assassin, there is
also fear, prompted by Seneca’s inscription of silence into the performance.
Once decided on punishment, Theseus wants immediate action. He wants to
hear Neptune’s rage as Hippolytus seeks to flee. But he hears nothing:
“Father, dost thou delay? Why are thy waves yet silent?”. The lack of
immediate response from Neptune results in the climax of Theseus’ impre-
cation, an accumulation of imperatives urging swift retribution.

As in Euripides, Neptune acts and Hippolytus is fatally wounded. But
otherwise Seneca’s plotting, and so his emotional range, differs from that of
Euripides. In Euripides, it is Phaedra’s corpse that prompts Theseus’ anger
against his son; in Seneca, Phaedra actually returns to the stage to react to
Hippolytus’ death and confess the truth to her husband. In Euripides, the
dying Hippolytus is brought on stage to protest his innocence, absolve
Theseus and hear his regrets; in Seneca, Hippolytus’ severed limbs are
brought on stage, the focus of Phaedra’s dying words and Theseus’ grief.
Whatever the plotting, the imprecation to Neptune is kept in the foreground
and so handled as to prompt a variety of emotions.

Still thinking his son at fault even after he has heard the messenger’s
account of Hippolytus’ accident and death, Seneca’s Theseus is torn: grief at
the loss of his son, acknowledgement that he himself brought it about, a
clear reference to the imprecation. Seneca uses resounding antitheses:
“Guilty, I wished him dead; lost, I lament him” (1117), “Not that I lost, but
that I slew, I weep” (1122). Seneca does not use Euripides’ dramatic
framework of Aphrodite and Artemis, which allowed the Greek dramatist to
modulate the audience’s reaction to Theseus. Instead he shows Theseus
momentarily hesitant when making the imprecation and self-consciously
torn on hearing of its consequences. But the messenger’s reaction to Theseus
ensures that the audience’s sympathy for Theseus is limited: “Not rightfully
may any weep what he has willed” (1118).

The reappearance of Phaedra is crucial in Seneca since she is the means
whereby Theseus will be simultaneously disabused of Hippolytus’ guilt and
apprised of his own catastrophic mis-judgement. When she returns to the
stage with “wailing sounds” and “naked sword” (1154-55), she at first
speaks to Theseus only indirectly through an apostrophe to Neptune that
irresistibly and ominously recalls his own: “Me, me, assault, O savage ruler
of ocean’s depths; against me send forth the blue sea’s monsters” (1159-60).
This is Phaedra’s *entrée en matière* to her confession of her false accusation
against Hippolytus, but in making her confession she does not release
Theseus from the guilt of his own hasty judgement and the murder of his son: “Thou art the destroyer of thy home” (1166).

Left alone with the chorus, at the end of the play, to reflect on what he has done, Theseus inspires pity, precisely through the clear-sightedness with which Seneca shows him re-visiting his imprecation to Neptune. It is true that even here there is ambiguity, as if Theseus is trying to share some blame with Neptune himself: “And thou, father, who didst ever give too quick assent to my angry prayer, I am not worthy of an easy death who have brought unheard-of destruction on my son” (1207-08). But such equivocation is swiftly followed by clear self-condemnation: “while, as a swift avenger, I was punishing an unreal crime, [I] have myself fallen into true guilt” (1210). And faced with the scattered remains of Hippolytus’ body, whilst recognizing the complicity of Neptune, he takes the blame upon himself: “Mine is the sin, I do acknowledge it; ‘tis I who have murdered thee, and, lest once only or alone I might be guilty, when I his father would dare crime, my own sire I summoned to my aid. Behold, I enjoy my father’s boon.” (1249-52). And again, finally, still looking at his son’s mangled limbs, he acknowledges the dreadful power of his imprecation: “Thus comes back son to father in answer to his prayer” (1272).

Whilst plotting their plays very differently, both Euripides and Seneca make the imprecation to Neptune a key moment in the dramatic action and a vital generator of audience emotion, revisiting this moment in subsequent parts of their plays. Euripides softens the blame attached to Theseus’ hasty imprecation thanks to the intervention of Artemis. Seneca has no Artemis to moderate the audience’s sense of Theseus’ guilt at the end of his play. Instead he invites pity for Theseus, as quick to accept responsibility for his precipitous mis-judgement as he was to make it in the first place.

From the Ancients to Racine

If the plays of Euripides, Seneca and Racine are the most famous treatments of Theseus’ wrongful murder of Hippolytus, they are certainly not the only ones. Consideration of other French treatments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reveals the variety of rhetorical permutations for Theseus’ imprecation, and especially the very different theatrical impact resulting from the different ways in which it has been contextualized. The plays are: Garnier’s Hippolyte (1573), La Pinelière’s Hippolyte (1634), Gilbert’s Hypolite ou le garçon insensible (1647), Bidar’s Hippolyte (1675), and Pradon’s Phèdre et Hippolyte (1677). Susanno Phillippo acknowledges that “it is, admittedly difficult to be sure whether these writers had detailed knowledge of the Greek play, or were more loosely familiar with its main
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outlines” (*Hellenic Whispers*, p. 41). It is safe to assume, however, that they knew the Latin play much better.

In his version, Garnier shows no interaction between father and son. Under pressure to reveal the causes of her distress, Phèdre makes the wrongful accusation against Hippolyte, which leads Thésée to rail, at some length, against his son in the presence of both Phèdre and her nurse. The tirade ends, unchecked by the others present, with an imprecation to Neptune, insisting, as Seneca’s does, on the gravity of the event that leads Thésée to make his wish. Garnier’s version of the imprecation is the longest of all those considered (1823-48)\(^1\). At the end of Act IV, Garnier shows his chorus invoking Neptune in turn, asking him not to proceed with the punishment; but any audience hopes to which this intervention might give rise are immediately dashed at the start of Act V. There has been nothing to make Thésée regret his imprecation. Rather he congratulates himself on it: “Je voy bien que ma voix a eu de l’efficace” (1968). Yet, when he hears

\[\text{\begin{verbatim}
Ne sçais-tu pas, chetif, que Neptune, le Roy
Des marinières eaux soumises à sa loy,
M’a promis, en jurant par les eaux Stygiennes,
M’octroyer par trois fois, trois des demandes miennes?
O grand Dieu marinier, c’est ores que je veux
Te presenter, dolent, le dernier de mes vœux.
    Fay, mon cher geniteur, fay que tout à cette heure
En quelque part que soit Hippolyte, il y meure:
Qu’il descende aux enfers, appaisant la rancœur
Qu’irrité contre luy je porte dans le cœur.
Ne me refuse point, grand Dieu: car ma priere,
Bien qu’elle te semble estre (ainsi qu’elle est) meurtriere,
Est juste toutefois, et de cerveau rassis
Je te requiers en don le meurtre de mon fils.
    Je n’entreprendroy pas de te faire demande
De ce troisiemes vœu, que pour chose bien grande:
Et si je ne sentoy mon esprit angoissé
D’extremes passions extremement pressé.
Tu sçais qu’estant là bas aux pieds de Rhadamante,
Prisonnier de Pluton sous la voûte relante,
J’ay toujours espargné ce vœu, que langoureux
Je despens aujourd’hui contre ce malheureux.
Souvienne toy, grand Dieux, de ta saincte promesse;
Trouble toute la mer, un seul vent ne relaisse
Au creux Eolien; mutine avec les flots
Tes grans troupeaux monstreux que la mer tient enclos.
(Garnier, *Hippolyte*, 1823-48)
\end{verbatim}}\]

\(^1\) Ne sçais-tu pas, chetif, que Neptune, le Roy
Des marinières eaux soumises à sa loy,
M’a promis, en jurant par les eaux Stygiennes,
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O grand Dieu marinier, c’est ores que je veux
Te presenter, dolent, le dernier de mes vœux.
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Tes grans troupeaux monstreux que la mer tient enclos.
(Garnier, *Hippolyte*, 1823-48)
Phèdre's confession, he takes responsibility for what he has done: “J’ay meurtry mon enfant” (2321).

La Pinelière is reminiscent of Euripides in his use of a prologue in which Venus explains the punishment she is about to wreak on Hippolyte: “Mais cét insolent aujourd’hui / Sçaura le pouvoir de mes charmes” (Prologue, 65-66). As in Euripides, this framing device serves to some degree to disculpate Thésée from the charge of filicide, though Venus seems to have been forgotten by the end of the play and Thésée takes responsibility: “Hippolyte mourut de la main de Thésée” (V, 4, 1364). Or, more accurately, he shares responsibility with Neptune, to whom he refers acerbically: “Voyla le beau present que mon ayeul m’a fait” (1390). His imprecation to Neptune is the climax of Act IV (1110-18), a feature which Pradon will copy. He makes it having extracted a false accusation from Phèdre, but he makes it whilst alone on stage and without any confrontation with Hippolyte, who has already fled. Moreover, he makes it whilst holding Hippolyte’s sword, a visible sign to the audience of the error of judgement that has led him to commit an injustice.

Gilbert’s, Bidar’s and Pradon’s versions all have in common that Phèdre and Thésée are not yet married. But Gilbert’s has the exceptional circumstance that Hippolyte is himself in love Phèdre, though he is innocent of the violation of which Phèdre’s confidente will accuse him. This accusation propels Thésée to make his imprecation. It is the vaguest and least powerful of all the imprecations. It is made to the gods in general, and not to Neptune. It is a request for vengeance and punishment, but without

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2 Ma prière et mes vœux iront pour se vanger.
O Neptune il est temps en fin de m’obliger,
Flatte, flatte à présent la rage qui me presse
Grand Monarque des eaux songe en cette promesse
Que tu me fis jadis de m’accorder trois vœux,
Ne la revocque pas puis que tu ne le peux:
Car tu le le juras par l’onde sale et noire
Par qui jurent les Dieux et qui nous les fait croire:
Qu’Hippolyte perisse, et qu’une prompte mort
Punisse son forfait et finisse son sort.
(La Pinelière, Hippolyte, IV, 4, 1109-18)

3 Justes Dieux qui sçavez la peine où je me voy,
Venez à mon secours, vangez-vous: vangez-moy;
Vous-mesme punissez ce Monstre détestable;
Et que je sois vangé sans me rendre coupable.
Helas j’invoque en vain l’assistance des Dieux,
Ils sont sourds à mes cris, ils destournent leurs yeux.
(Gilbert, Hypolyte, IV, 3, 1095-1100)
reference to the kind of punishment that will eventually be meted out to Hippolyte. It copies from Seneca the theatrical effect of Thésée wanting an immediate response (whatever that might be in this case) and expressing impatience on not obtaining it. Above all, the tragic impact of this imprecation is muted because Hippolyte, if innocent of the crime of which he has been accused, is indeed in love with the woman Thésée himself wishes to marry. The imprecation is followed by an encounter between father and son, during which the latter fails to change his father’s mind about his guilt. So when Thésée eventually hears of his son’s death, he congratulates himself on the success of his imprecations (using the rhetorical term itself): “Leur Justice [des dieux] reluit dedans leurs actions, / Puisqu’ils ont exaucé mes imprécations” (V, 4, 1463-64). When he is told of Phèdre’s death, however, he understands what has happened and takes responsibility: “Et j’ay tué mon fils lorsque je l’ay banni” (V, 5, 1600). But even here Gilbert tries to diminish the responsibility for filicide by making Thésée’s servant Aristée attach all the blame to Phèdre’s confidante Anchrise who had taken it upon herself to make the wrongful accusation: “Chacun connoist d’Anchrise et le crime, et la ruse, / Tout le monde vous plaint, et nul ne vous accuse” (1605-06). The tragic focus on a father bringing about his son’s death is thereby much diminished in Gilbert’s version. It is as if the dramatist has not grasped the poetics of the genre in which he is notionally working.

Bidar’s play anticipates Racine’s in showing Hippolyte in love with a princess, which allows the dramatist to depict jealousy in Phèdre. As a result, Bidar’s Phèdre makes a false accusation against Hippolyte to Thésée. Extraordinarily, this version is the only one not to contain an imprecation, even though the imprecation is the tragic core of the traditional story. Instead, he simply expresses a conviction that his son will die: “Ah je sens dans le cœur un courroux légitime. / Il en mourra, Madame, et je le jure en Roy ...” (IV, 2, 1154-55). The absence of an imprecation proper much diminishes Thésée’s claim to responsibility on hearing of Hippolyte’s death: “J’ay fait mourir mon Fils” (V, 3, 1534). And his closing apostrophe to the gods (“Vous estes les Autheurs du tourment qui me presse” (V, 7, 1674)) would have greater tragic impact if he had previously made an imprecation to them.

Racine’s immediate rival Pradon retains the imprecation to Neptune and creates suspense in his fifth act, as Racine does, by making him want to retract his condemnation of Hippolyte. In other respects, however, Pradon tells a different story, which makes his audience respond rather differently to the imprecation. Pradon’s Thésée is entirely the victim of his own delusions. Without any false accusation being made against Hippolyte,
Thésée persuades himself that his son has designs on Phèdre. His conviction is crystallized when Pradon engineers Thésée’s entrance in IV, 5 precisely when he can see Hippolyte on his knees speaking of love to Phèdre. Hippolyte is in fact speaking in his father’s name and urging Phèdre to go ahead with her marriage to Thésée. But the father jumps immediately to the wrong conclusion. Hippolyte extricates himself from his father’s fury without protesting his innocence, leaving Thésée to fulminate against Hippolyte to Phèdre. Though she defends Hippolyte, she does not stop Thésée calling on Neptune to punish Hippolyte with death. With Thésée’s imprecation, Act IV reaches its climax and closes. The words of Aricie in Act V, however, give Thésée pause for thought, and, like Gilbert’s Thésée, he uses rhetorical terminology when reflecting on what he has said:

Mes imprécations dans mon jaloux transport
Pour toute grace aux Dieux ont demandé sa mort,
Et je crains que suivant l’effet de leur menace
Ils n’accordent trop tost cette funeste grace. (V, 3, 1593-96)

When news of Hippolyte’s death and Phèdre’s part in it swiftly follows, Pradon allows only one moment, a single line, and the very last in the play, in which Thésée expresses the merest hint of regret: “C’en est trop, Dieux cruels! vous estes obeïs” (V, 5, 1738). It is all the more surprising that Pradon creates no space for an exploration of Thésée’s responsibility, for an acknowledgement of his error and a frank admission that he has himself brought about the death of his son, because this play, uniquely, shows the imprecation resulting entirely from Thésée’s own misinterpretation of events. No character, Phèdre or confidente, actively misleads him by making false accusations against Hippolyte. Yet Pradon fails to focus on the tragic crux of the action in its closing stages.

4 Mais de peur que l’Ingrat n’irrite cette haine,
Je m’en vais pour jamais l’exiler de Trezene.
C’est à vous que j’adresse un vœu si solennel,
Justes Dieux! Punissez un Fils si criminel!
Et toy? Neptune, & toy? Dont la Race Divine
De Thesée annoblît le sang & l’origine,
Plongeant ce sang impur dans l’abisme des eaux,
Donnes ce Monstre en proye à des Monstres nouveaux.
Et vous, Dieux! Qui là-haut faites trembler la terre,
Lancez sur ce Perfide un éclat de tonnerre,
Ma gloire est vostre ouvrage, il la veut outrager,
Et c’est bien moins à moy qu’à vous à la vanger.
(Pradon, Phèdre et Hippolyte, IV, 6, 1415-26)
Racine

A note in George Forestier’s edition of Racine’s theatre explains that Neptune has frequently been recognized as the father of Theseus and is so recognized explicitly in the imprecations in Euripides and Seneca: “chez Euripide comme chez Sénèque – dont Racine fait ici la synthèse – Thésée invoque [Neptune] en l’appelant « mon père »” (p. 1654). Racine’s Thésée does not specifically call Neptune his father. Perhaps Racine takes this detail for granted. Certainly the anonymous author of the Dissertation sur les tragédies de Phèdre et Hippolyte does so, when discussing both Racine’s and Pradon’s plays on the subject and referring to “Neptune son père” (Forestier edition, p. 895). What is most striking about Forestier’s explanatory note, however, is the claim that Thésée’s imprecation in Racine is a synthesis of those in Euripides and Seneca. This is how Thésée addresses Neptune:

Et toi, Neptune, et toi, si jadis mon courage
D’infâmes Assassins nettoya ton rivage,
Souviens-toi que pour prix de mes efforts heureux
Tu promis d’exaucer le premier de mes vœux.
Dans les longues rigueurs d’une prison cruelle
Je n’ai point imploré ta puissance immortelle.
Avares du secours que j’attends de tes soins
Mes vœux t’ont réservé pour de plus grands besoins.
Je t’implore aujourd’hui. Venge un malheureux Père.
J’abandonne ce Traître à toute ta colère.
Étouffe dans son sang ses désirs effrontés.
Thésée à tes fureurs connaîtra tes bontés. (IV, 2, 1065-76)

To call this a synthesis of Euripides and Seneca is to overlook how different it is from both. Racine avoids the extreme brevity and plain language of Euripides, who uses a simple form of address and literally phrased second- and third-person imperatives. Racine is closer to Seneca in choosing a more elaborate imprecation, but for the most part Racine chooses to elaborate it differently from Seneca. Less descriptive of Neptune and his former promise, Racine’s Thésée makes his apostrophe emphatic not only by using Neptune’s name but by repeating the second-person emphatic pronoun (“Toi [...] toi”). Racine takes from Seneca the rhetorical topic of comparison in order to justify his desire to have a wish fulfilled. He compares the gravity of his current situation with the perils he had experienced in the underworld. He had not then thought of asking for Neptune’s assistance, but he argues that his situation is so much more serious now as to require divine intervention. Whereas neither Euripides nor Seneca give any supporting arguments to back up Theseus’ request that his son be killed, Racine takes the trouble to
do so, three times over. Thésée presents the request as a form of rightful vengeance of father on son; he uses telling antonomasia when referring to Hippolyte as a “Traître”; and finally he evokes the sexual nature of the crime for which he wishes him to be punished “ses désirs effrontés”. Racine perhaps sensed the implausibility of Seneca’s Theseus wanting immediate action from Neptune and expressing impatience when the natural world is not instantly provoked to turbulence. Instead Racine’s Thésée lets his imprecation reach its climax by combining imperatives and hypotyposes: the imperatives invite vengeance and fatal punishment; the hypotyposes confidently envisage Neptune’s anger and Hippolyte’s blood-drenched corpse.

The anonymous author of the Dissertation is scathing about Racine’s version. He calls it “une prière [...] mal digérée” and refers to the quatrain evoking Thésée’s time in the underworld when he forebore to ask for Neptune’s assistance as “cet extravagant discours” (p. 895). The author’s very criticism, however, reveals the dramatic potency of Racine’s portrayal of Thésée here. The speech is so extravagant, he says, that it shows that Thésée “a perdu toute sorte de bon sens”. Exactly so. Racine conjures up a moment of unhinged and unreasonable anger to show his audience how a father might, in a momentary loss of control, speak irrevocably dreadful words about a son he loves.

Rhetorically, therefore, Racine’s imprecation is very different from those of Euripides and Seneca (pace Ronald Tobin, who finds Racine’s imprecation to have “a similar conception” to Seneca’s (Racine and Seneca, p. 135). Dramaturgically, it is worlds apart. Forestier’s note recognizes this without spelling out the far-reaching consequences of the different dramatic context in which Racine situates the imprecation: “chez [Euripide et Sénèque], comme chez leurs successeurs, c’est hors de la présence d’Hippolyte que Thésée invoque Neptune” (p. 1654). In all three dramatists, Theseus, at the point of making his imprecation to Neptune, has just heard and believed the false accusation against Hippolytus. In Euripides he has read it inscribed on the tablet attached to Phaedra’s dead body. In Seneca he has just heard the accusation from Phaedra’s own mouth. In Racine he has heard it from Œnone, speaking on Phèdre’s behalf. The rapidly executed imprecation, in all three dramatists, is a measure of the anger towards his son prompted by the allegation of sexual violence against Theseus’ wife.

The rhetorical effect on the audience, however, is quite different in each case because of the precise context in which the imprecation is spoken. In Euripides Theseus makes the imprecation in an immediate fit of anger, having read the tablet, standing by Phaedra’s corpse and in the presence of the chorus, which witnesses his hasty judgement. In Seneca, he speaks the
fateful words, arguably more dramatically, in the presence of Phaedra; and the audience might think that her guilt (at making a false accusation) is compounded as she listens *silently* to Theseus’ rash verdict on his son. The contextualization in Racine is very different, and arguably the most emotionally charged of all the versions under consideration. After she has made the accusation against Hippolyte, Racine finds a reason for making Œnone leave the stage (to attend to the distressed Phèdre) and, therefore, to leave Thésée alone on stage.

The *Dissertation* informs us that in the early performances Thésée spoke a monologue at this point in which he “s’amuse à faire des exclamations sur [l’énormité de ce crime], au lieu d’aller chercher auprès de Phèdre ou d’Œnone, des preuves plus solides de cette affreuse accusation” (p. 893). Once again we see the author of the *Dissertation* basing an assessment on an (untheatrical) assumption that characters should behave rationally rather than emotionally. At all events, Racine did not retain this monologue when he printed his play. As soon as Œnone leaves the stage, having accused Hippolyte, Racine makes Hippolyte himself enter. This suddenly creates suspense and fear, since the father’s response to the accusation is about to be aired in the presence of the accused. Indeed Racine has so contextualised this encounter as to intensify the audience’s pity and fear for Hippolyte even more. Although Thésée himself cannot have been anticipating Hippolyte’s appearance at this moment, the audience is certainly expecting it. For, shocked at the end of Act III by the tense and troubling encounter between Phèdre and Thésée, Hippolyte tells Théramène that he intends to approach his father and tell him the truth about his love for Aricie:

> Mais l’innocence enfin n’a rien à redouter.  
> Allons, cherchons ailleurs par quelle heureuse adresse  
> Je pourrai de mon Père émouvoir la tendresse,  
> Et lui dire un amour qu’il peut vouloir troubler,  
> Mais que tout son pouvoir ne saurait ébranler. (III, 6, 996-1000)

There is deep retrospective irony in the first of these lines. When he approaches his father in IV, 2, Hippolyte’s innocence is powerless to defend him, and Racine is able to create a scene of terrifying conflict between unsuspecting innocence and misplaced rage. Thésée rehearses the accusation to an incredulous Hippolyte before passing judgement in his imprecation to Neptune.

The imprecation is all the more powerful for being uttered in the presence of Hippolyte. Father and son are together when the father performs the speech act that constitutes the tragic nub of the play: a father instigates the murder of his son. But there is more to it than that: the father’s guilt is intensified by his failure to listen to his son, despite
Hippolyte being present before him and ready to defend himself. When, after the sentence has been passed, Hippolyte does protest his innocence and, by way of self-justification, speaks of his love for Aricie (the very reason for his coming to see his father at this point), Thésée compounds his guilt by dismissing Hippolyte’s truthful words as crude lies: “Tu l’aimes? Ciel! Mais non, l’artifice est grossier. / Tu te feins criminel pour te justifier” (IV, 2, 1127-28).

The imprecatory speech act is fashioned from anger and hasty judgement. These are also expressed visually as well as verbally in this encounter. Thésée had not been expecting the appearance of Hippolyte and such are his emotions that he wishes to dismiss him from his sight. There is, throughout the scene, a focus on the potential, wrongful, but ignominious, departure of Hippolyte. Three times, in the run-up to the imprecation, Thésée rudely asks Hippolyte to leave: “Fuis, Traître” (1053), “Fuis” (1059), “Fuis, dis-je” (1063), all injunctions which lend intense physicality to Thésée’s condemnatory words. Hippolyte’s failure to react three times in quick succession can be interpreted as a goad to Thésée’s increasing rage and the immediate on-stage stimulus to the imprecation itself. After Hippolyte’s unsuccessful attempt at self-defence, Thésée resumes his imperatives of dismissal: “Va chercher des Amis” (1145), “Sors, Traître” (1155) (on Hippolyte’s refusal to speak the full truth, see Declercq, “Hippolyte calomnié”).

It is the use of the verb “sortir” that finally secures Hippolyte’s departure without further intervention, and it is dramaturgically interesting that, in the monologue that immediately follows, Thésée links this departure to the accomplishment of the imprecation:

Misérable, tu cours à ta perte infaillible.
Neptune par le Fleuve aux Dieux mêmes terrible
M’a donné sa parole, et va l’exécuter.
Un Dieu vengeur te suit, tu ne peux l’éviter. (IV, 3, 1157-60)

Seneca had shown Theseus more hesitant than this. In a momentary gesture to Thésée’s paternal role, Racine makes him recall his former love for his son and so prepare the audience for the regrets that will eventually follow:

Je t’aimais. Et je sens que malgré ton offense
Mes entrailles pour toi se troublent par avance. (1161-62)

As in Euripides and Seneca, so in Racine, the imprecation, once uttered, becomes a focus for subsequent depictions of the characters’ emotions and appeals to those of the audience. The different shape of Racine’s plot creates new opportunities, and the first of these immediately follows Thésée’s monologue after Hippolyte’s departure. Racine makes Phèdre enter – a surprise
Phèdre’s intervention is an impetuous one. It is not prompted by mature reflection about the injustice of having permitted a false accusation to be made against Hippolyte. It is the immediate reaction to hearing Thésée’s words spoken in anger against Hippolyte. Here, then, is a stage direction that the actor playing Thésée should significantly increase the volume and menace when calling down punishment upon Hippolyte. Phèdre has clearly heard both the anger and the specific threat. But which precise words of Thésée has she heard? The text does not make this clear. The retrospective stage direction might be applied to the imprecation proper (1065-75), in which case Phèdre has longer to ponder her intervention, or to the reprise of the imprecation in Thésée’s monologue (1157-60), in which case Phèdre’s reaction is instantaneous. Of course, the stage direction might refer to both moments, the first to prick her conscience and the second to provoke her intervention.

Thésée does not assume that Phèdre has heard everything he has said, since he takes the trouble to spell out the role of Neptune in punishing Hippolyte and (as he sees it) avenging Phèdre: “Neptune me la doit [la perte d’Hippolyte], et vous serez vengée” (1178). The imprecation then becomes the subject of a momentary dispute between husband and wife. Phèdre wants his wish to be thwarted: “Neptune vous la doit! Quoi vos vœux irrités ...” (1180). But she is interrupted by a third iteration of the imprecation by Thésée: “Quoi craignez-vous déjà qu’ils ne soient écoutés? / Joignez-vous bien plutôt à mes vœux légitimes.” (1180-81). In order to ensure the efficacy of the punishment (“Espérons de Neptune une prompte justice” (1190)), Thésée leaves the stage to go to the altar of Neptune and, there, to reinforce his imprecation with a further prayer (1191).

After Phèdre has heard that Hippolyte loves Aricie and has abandoned her attempt to defend him, she explains to herself the nature of the intervention she had embarked upon: “Je cédais au remords dont j’étais tourmentée” (IV, 5, 1198). The audience may well take this at face value. Phèdre was prompted by remorse at an injustice committed. But the timing of her sudden intrusion on to the stage and the words she speaks as she enters (1167-70 quoted above) suggests that what most immediately
prompted her intervention was the thought of the death of the young man she still loved. Not quite the same thing as remorse.

After an encounter between Aricie and Hippolyte in V, 1, just before Hippolyte’s flight, the audience is given to understand that Hippolyte has explained the full story to Aricie, including his father’s imprecation. When, therefore, she has to face Thésée in V, 3 and hear him fulminating still against the moral impropriety of his son, she makes so bold as to defend Hippolyte (albeit in abstract terms and without targeting Phèdre explicitly). She tries to make Thésée re-think his position, and she does this by referring directly to his imprecation: “Repentez-vous de vos vœux homicides” (1434). Indeed, she speaks a chilling truth to Thésée, inviting him to see the imprecation in an unfamiliar context: “Craignez, Seigneur, craignez que le Ciel rigoureux / Ne vous haïsse assez pour exaucer vos vœux” (1435-36). Through the agency of Aricie, “Racine est le seul à montrer Thésée plein d’angoisse avant d’apprendre la mort d’Hippolyte” (Roy Knight, Racine et la Grèce, p. 358).

Thésée has of course waited too long. He hears of Œnone’s death and wants to revoke his imprecation: “Ne précipite pas tes funestes bienfaits, / Neptune. J’aime mieux n’être exaucé jamais” (V, 5, 1483-84). But it is too late. Hippolyte is dead, and Thésée can now only acknowledge the truth of Aricie’s warning: “Je hais jusques au soin dont m’honorent les Dieux” (V, 7, 1612). In his closing speech, he expresses regret for the fit of anger that led him to make an imprecation against his son and shows a determination to compensate for it with an act of affection and expiation: “Allons de ce cher fils embrasser ce qui reste, / Expier la fureur d’un vœu que je déteste” (1649-50).

All these subsequent references to the imprecation are vital to Racine for managing the audience’s emotional reaction to his main characters. Through such references he explores their understanding of their actions and their willingness to accept responsibility for them. It may be that Aricie’s reference to the gods’ readiness to act on human wishes and thereby punish the hasty at the same time as they punish the victims of haste is an acknowledgement of the divine drama that Euripides, in his version, reveals to be the framework for the human drama. In Racine, however, the drama is predominantly human: Aphrodite and Artemis are given no voice. Moreover, whereas Seneca’s Theseus is forcibly reminded of his responsibility for his son’s murder by both the messenger and Phaedra, Racine’s Thésée needs no such reminder. He has acted impulsively and he has been deaf to challenge, but the speed with which he subsequently repudiates his imprecation and acknowledges his agency in bringing about his son’s
demise, ensures that the murdering father, as well as the murdered son, earns the audience’s pity at the end of the play.

Conclusion

Theseus’ imprecation seems so central to the story that it might easily have lent itself to plain repetition from one dramatist to another. Yet in each version the content and the effect of the imprecation is different. Between Bidar’s virtual suppression of an imprecation proper and Euripides’ plain articulation of it on the one hand, and Seneca’s and Garnier’s poetic elaborations on the other, Racine occupies a middle ground. Racine’s Thésée vigorously invokes Neptune, has recourse to repeated imperatives, explains exactly the purpose of his request, and incorporates a modest amount of hypotyposis to underscore his anger and intensify the audience’s fear for Hippolyte. But more than the content of the figure in the different versions it is the way that it is contextualised in each that so radically changes its theatrical impact. All dramatists, but Racine especially, use retrospective allusions to the imprecation as a way of exploring Theseus’ (and in Racine’s case, also Phèdre’s) moral responsibility. Above all, Racine must take credit for being the first to sense the emotional impact to be derived from making the father speak his son’s death sentence in the presence of Hippolyte himself. If Thésée’s words are superficially addressed at this point to the absent divinity, the apostrophe in which he frames his imprecation is really spoken so that his son can feel at first hand the full force of his father’s paroxysm of anger: a rhetorical filicide.

Works Cited


