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Research Article

Tony Harrison's Adaptation of Phaedra's Moral Conflict: *Phaedra Britannica*

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ABSTRACT

This essay sets out to discuss Tony Harrison's play *Phaedra Britannica* (1975) by drawing primarily on Linda Hutcheon's views as expressed in her theory of adaptation and Harrison's own insights into adaptation. In this discussion, *Phaedra Britannica* as an adaptation of Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), is understood as the outcome of an evolutionary process which started with ancient cultures and, at the same time, as an autonomous work. In order to make the story of Phaedra relevant for contemporary audiences, Harrison sets his play in a colonial context, during the British occupation of India. This essay addresses the adaptation of the play through the moral conflict associated with the story of Phaedra, a woman in love with her stepson Hippolytus, with a focus on shame and guilt. Throughout the centuries, these moral concepts have played a significant role in the story. The culture in Racine's *Phèdre* has been described as one dominated by guilt, but in Harrison's play a return to the shame culture depicted in *Hippolytus* by Euripides can be observed. Unlike Euripides, who is ambiguous about the role of gods, goddesses and fate, Harrison makes it clear that the characters' attempts at assigning blame to other people or to the gods of the colonised territory is simply their way of deflecting responsibility for the tragic events.

Keywords: Transcultural adaptation, moral emotions, Phaedra, Tony Harrison, *Phaedra Britannica*

Introduction

The culture in which a work of fiction is adapted is the primary agent in how that work will be both created and received. Even a more general explanation of the word adaptation would give us a natural and cultural phenomenon which defines "the capacities for human, cultural, and biological adjustments as a way of surviving, advancing or simply changing" (Corrigan, 2017, p. 26). Adaptation, then, is a dynamic concept by its very nature; it is formed and reformed in an unceasing fashion as it is anchored essentially in change. Linda Hutcheon, a leading figure in the field of adaptation studies, describes literary, film, theatrical and media adaptations as being based on stories that change over time and are rewritten in different cultures for particular reasons (2006, p. xvi). Even though an adapter's decision to take on a previously existing story may have ideological, stylistic or simply financial grounds, the impetus behind it, more often than not, is to appeal to contemporary audiences and their culture.

If stories change over time even within the changing structures of the culture they were born in, the transformation can be even more significant in transcultural adaptation. The traditional tale of Phaedra has been adapted not only across time and place, but also across genre and medium. As an example of mythical literature, it "depends upon, incites even, perpetual acts of reinterpretations in different contexts" (Sanders, 2006, p. 63). Despite the fact that the first authored version of the story belongs to Euripides (*Hippolytus*, 428 BCE), it was already a retelling of existing myths. The story does not have complicated or challenging content but is simply built on love, passion, vengeance, fate and death. Phaedra's passion for Hippolytus, her stepson, inflicted upon her by the goddess Aphrodite, ends up in death. When he rejects her, she accuses him of rape in a tablet found by her husband Theseus next to her corpse. His wife's suicide and the tablet incriminating the young man are enough to convince the father of his guilt. As a consequence of a curse granted by the god Poseidon, Hippolytus dies. This is how Euripides retells the story. However, similar patterns can be found before Euripides' time in other cultures as well, such as in the book of Genesis with the story of the Potiphar, his wife and Joseph (*Genesis 39*, Sarna, 1989, pp. 271-276), or in Egyptian mythology with the tale of Anubis, his wife and Batau (*Tale of Two Brothers*, pp. 95-99).

The reputation of the female protagonist, reinforced through numerous adaptations, gained her a place in psychological terminology, i.e. 'the Phaedra Complex', to

characterise the "non-pathological stepparent-stepchild attraction" (Messer, 1969, p. 213). In literary context, Albert S. Gérard introduces the term 'the Phaedra Syndrome' in his book *The Phaedra Syndrome: On Shame and Guilt in Drama* (1993) to refer to the moral conflict present in the story of Phaedra as adapted by Euripides, Seneca, Bandello, Lope de Vega and Racine. The subtitle 'on shame and guilt in drama' shows that throughout the centuries, these two moral concepts have played a key role in the story. Gérard (1993) doubts whether Phaedra's moral struggle can still "be regarded as a relevant topic for serious aesthetic treatment" (p. 135) in contemporary society. His view was challenged by Winston (1995) in his discussion of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* (1989), which through a different myth brings about the same issues referred to in the Phaedra Syndrome. Winston agrees to a certain extent with Gérard, who "is no doubt right to speculate that Phaedra's agony of sexual guilt does not speak directly to the preoccupations of a contemporary audience", but he adds that matters "of sex and ethics remain very much at the heart of contemporary moral concern" (p. 511). It should be mentioned that, even if Wertenbaker's play addresses contemporary audiences, she chooses an ancient setting for the play, and not a contemporary one. The relevance of the Phaedra Syndrome may in fact be attributed, at least partially, to this decision.

The markedly individualistic traits of shame and guilt have also been employed to describe cultures at large: 'shame culture' and 'guilt culture' respectively. American cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict is best known for popularising these concepts in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1947). To Benedict, guilt is based on an "internalized conviction of sin" which can be relieved through confession and atonement, whereas shame[1] is "a reaction to other people's criticism", and cannot find such relief (p. 223). A defender of ethical relativism, Benedict argues that "morality differs in every society" (1934). In the adaptations of the story of Phaedra, the moral focus shifts according to the culture producing the adaptation. For instance, the culture portrayed in Euripides' *Hippolytus* has been characterised as a 'shame culture', particularly due to Phaedra's concern with the opinion of others; she does whatever is necessary to keep her reputation intact and goes so far as to falsely accuse Hippolytus of rape (Kovacs, 1980). Phaedra's accusation has dire consequences, but "the bare fact that she causes the death of the young man she thinks is her enemy

1 Benedict has been heavily criticised for describing Japanese culture as 'shame culture.' She has not been criticised for her description of American culture as being driven by guilt, this criticism implying that shame is a feeling less desirable than guilt.

and the enemy of her good name [and with whom she has been passionately in love] would not in the fifth century have been regarded, without further encouragement from the poet, as evidence of moral failure" (Kovacs, 1980, p. 301), whereas in modern societies it is more likely that she would be perceived as an immoral human being. However, in Jean Racine's adaptation *Phèdre* (originally *Phèdre et Hippolyte*), first performed in 1677, the prevalent aspect is guilt and this can be explained by the influence of the theological movement of Jansenism, with its moral rigour and "the emphasis on faith, [and] the expressions of guilt" (Calcamp, 2016, p. 122). This influence can be seen not only on French culture, but also on the playwright at a personal level, 1677 being the year when Racine's religious beliefs in the teachings of Jansenism revive.

Written by British poet and playwright Tony Harrison, *Phaedra Britannica* (1975) is a play based on Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677). This essay sets out to discuss the manner in which the moral conflict present in the story of Phaedra has been adapted by Harrison for the English stage, by drawing primarily on Linda Hutcheon's views as presented in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) and Harrison's own insights into adaptation which he provides in the introduction to the play. The play, as an adaptation, is understood as the outcome of an evolutionary process which started with Greek tragedy and the first versions of the story of Phaedra, which in turn developed with similar stories from other cultures. However, this essay also explores what exactly makes *Phaedra Britannica* an autonomous work and how the story is integrated into a colonial context, the play being set in nineteenth-century India. Not surprisingly, the nature of a story about the love of a woman for her stepson entails a moral conflict; for this reason, it is significant to investigate how moral issues such as shame and guilt have been integrated by Harrison in the colonial setting of his adaptation. Furthermore, the characters' internal struggles are valid only if they are responsible for their actions. If the actions, their causes and consequences are controlled by a divine power, then, the very notion of a moral conflict proves futile. For this reason, the role played by fate in the play is also integrated into the discussion of this essay.

Phaedra Britannica as an Adaptation

First performed in 1975 by the National Theatre Company at the Old Vic, the play featured Dame Diana Rigg as Phaedra and was directed by John Dexter (The National

Theatre Archive). *Phaedra Britannica* is an adaptation of Racine's *Phèdre* which, in turn, was inspired by the tragedies of Seneca and Euripides. Sanders (2006) observes that "frequently adaptations adapt other adaptations" (p. 13) which may be based on social circumstances at a given time or cultural characteristics at large while the initiative to adapt a particular version of a story is, more often than not, a matter of personal choice shaped by "a political or ethical commitment" (Sanders, 2006, p. 2). In the case of *Phaedra Britannica*, it was the National Theatre that commissioned the play after the success of Harrison's verse translation of Moliere's *The Misanthrope*; together, these two plays "firmly established the National as a rival to the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in the production of verse drama" (Marshall, 2009, p. 266). Moreover, Harrison's successful collaboration with the National Theatre in the production of these plays, *Phaedra Britannica* ran for 47 performances and *The Misanthrope* for 82 (The National Theatre Archive), challenges the common belief that the works of Moliere and Racine cannot thrive on the English-speaking stage (Ploix, 2018, p. 491). Harrison (2002) was aware of this challenge and he thought that, in order to overcome it, one should "rediscover a s*ocial* structure which makes the tensions and polarities of the play significant again" (p. 115). The playwright's resolution proved to be effective indeed, since the main reason behind the change in the reception of the plays can be attributed to the setting of *The Misanthrope* and *Phaedra Britannica*, which are Charles de Gaulle's regime and British India, respectively. These fragments of history are more relevant for the English-speaking audiences than the distant, both in time and space, ancient Athens and even seventeenth-century France.

Changes in adaptations reinforce the link between a play that belongs to a past setting and the contemporary audience of a given culture. The version on which *Phaedra Britannica* is based, Racine's *Phèdre*, already displays a number of significant diversions from the classical plays of Euripides and Seneca. Following Seneca, the suicide of Phaedra happens later, but this time by poison, which is a slower way to die and offers the necessary time to clear Hippolytus' name. In Euripides' version, however, she hangs herself before learning the dire consequences of her desperate act. Another important innovation is Hippolytus' love for Aricia, an Athenian heir to the throne kept prisoner by Theseus. The insertion of this female character can be addressed in a number of ways. On the one hand, Hippolytus' rejection of Phaedra's feelings is not driven solely by the incestuous nature of such a union; his heart in this case belongs to someone else. On the other hand, and more importantly, his feelings towards Aricia shift the motivation behind Phaedra's accusation of rape, from a woman who wants to protect

her reputation in the classical texts to a woman whose vengeance is driven by jealousy in Racine's version.[2]

The core story of *Phaedra Britannica* is the same in the Racine version, but the setting and the characters are entirely different. The action takes place in the 1850s before the Indian Mutiny, in the Governor's Residency in British India and as Huk (1993) points out, the play "subtly shifts its focus from the title character to the larger social rhythm that creates her plight" (p. 211). The names of the characters are integrated into this context: Governor stands for Theseus, Memsahib[3] for Phaedra, Thomas Theophilus for Hippolytus and Ayah for Oenone. The British officials' government of the Indian territory, reinforced by the presence of their European wives, is antithetical to the role of native nurses, i.e. ayahs, forced to leave their own family to serve their masters (Harrison, 2002, p. 152), thus underlining the tension between opposing political and social forces. The names of Theseus, Phaedra and Oenone have no resonance with the turbulent history of colonialism and therefore they would not have been as powerful as the titles of Governor, Memsahib and Ayah to illustrate the British dominance over India which seems to be precisely what Harrison wants to emphasise by having a different take on the story of Phaedra.

The clues for a better understanding of *Phaedra Britannica* as an adaptation lie in Harrison's revealing introduction to the play; it is virtually impossible to discuss the play without taking this introductory part into consideration. The playwright tackles various aspects of adaptations and perhaps the most significant is his argument that, to produce an adaptation is as difficult and time consuming as the creation of the text to be adapted; in the case of both Racine and Harrison two years were necessary (Harrison, 2002, p. 113). The reason behind this similarity may be the fact that the authors are both adapters, which means they had to face the same challenge: to create a new play starting from an already existing story told by very prominent dramatists. Hutcheon (2006) underlines the fact that "the adapted text (…) is not something to be reproduced, but rather something to be interpreted and recreated" (p. 84), so that it can stand on its own as an autonomous creation. Furthermore, it

2 In his lecture regarding the dramatic representations of Phaedra, Professor George Brandt (2001) explains that the motif of jealousy and Hippolytus' love for another woman which culminated in Phaedra's ending her life through poison, are introduced by Gabriel Gilbert in his play *Hippolyte ou le garcon insensible* (1645/1646) and with Mathieu Bidar's version *Hippolyte* (1675), respectively (pp. 9-10).

3 *Memsahib* was used to refer to or address white foreign women of high social status living in India, particularly the wife of a British official as is the case in *Phaedra Britannica*.

can be argued that each new adaptation is more challenging than the previous one since with every adaptation there are fewer and fewer gaps to be filled in the storyline. There have been more adaptations of Phaedra's story over the past three centuries than before Racine adapted his *Phèdre,* therefore presumably Harrison's task was more difficult than Racine's. Harrison openly offers insights into his experience as a poet and adapter when he writes, "In a pre-Romantic age I would feel little need for self-justification, nor feel I need be defensive about the poet's role as adapter" (Harrison, 2002, p. 113). The playwright's words imply a comparison with Racine, who lived and wrote in a pre-Romantic era and was spared of such necessities. Starting with the Romantic period though, literary purity and originality have become chief concerns for the poet; according to Hutcheon (2006), the "valuing of the original creation and of the originating creative genius (…) is clearly one source of the denigration of adapters and adaptations" (p. 4). The need to discuss his contribution to Racine's tragedy derives not so much from external pressure, but rather from an awareness of the substantial changes to the adapted text which becomes embedded within his own poetic and dramatic style. However, style may not be enough for the successful reception of a story which has been around for more than two millennia; another key element of poetic creativity is to present contemporary audiences with the prospect of identifying in the play elements closer to their political, social and cultural context.

Harrison's decision to set the play in British India addresses this contemporary issue of adaptation studies, but the playwright adds that he aims furthermore at a subtler effect; i.e. to stress the protagonists' internal struggle through the dichotomy between Minos and Pasiphae who are Phaedra's parents. Being the daughter of parents with conflicting personalities, Phaedra may be expected to feel and act in an imbalanced manner, yet the playwright views this dichotomy as "maintain[ing] the tension of the whole play" (Harrison, 2002, p. 117). Phaedra's father is, according to Greek mythology, one of the three judges of the Underworld. By referring to him as 'the Judge', this time in the physical realm, Harrison foregrounds the parallelism with Victorian Britain as a time and place which stands for the part that creates moral codes. In contrast, Phaedra's mother, and by extension India, represents the desire for the forbidden and the transgression of morality (Harrison, 2002, p. 117); in other words, what the coloniser both desires and condemns as immoral. In Pasiphae's case, her 'unnatural' desire for having sexual intercourse with a bull results in the birth of the Minotaur, a creature half bull, half man. It is worth pausing on the fact that, in the play, she does not receive a

proper name; instead, she is always referred to in relation to her husband or daughters, which signifies patriarchy's limitation of women to the roles of wife and mother.

Unlike Pasiphae, the Governor's desire is not related to crossing the borders between species. He desires what he cannot pursue in his own country or within the limits of his own culture, "leading, by virtue of his position, a double life" (Huk, 1993, p. 211). In the beginning of the play, when Thomas Theophilus is worried about his father's long absence, his tutor Burleigh, suggests that the Governor may have personal reasons for disappearing:

> BURLEIGH: (…) perhaps for reasons of his own
> H.E. prefers his whereabouts unknown.
> One knows his nature, ready to pursue
> anything that's savage, strange, or new,
> his 'curiosity' how wild tribes live,
> his 'scholar' 's passion for the primitive.
> (…) preoccupied both day *and* night,
> let's say 'researching' some strange marriage rite! (Harrison, 2002, p. 142)[4]

In Racine's play, this passage covers five lines and it mentions only a possible love affair for the absence of Theseus, whereas in *Phaedra Britannica* it is expanded to thirteen lines, thus making a point of the hypocrisy of the coloniser for whom India is a means of satisfying desires viewed as immoral in his own culture. Under the pretext of 'curiosity', 'scholar's passion' and 'research', the Governor manages to have experiences to satisfy his instincts, while at the same time remaining above the experiences themselves and those who indulge in them but lack his 'erudition'. A vivid example of this contrast can be seen in the way he describes his captor, which is in fact another addition to Racine's version:

> GOVERNOR: My captor was a beast, obscene, perverse,
> given to practices I won't rehearse,
> to crude carnalities that overrode
> every natural law and human code.
> He'd draw the line at nothing. No taboo
> would stop him doing what he wanted to. (p. 182)

4 *Phaedra Britannica* in *Tony Harrison Plays 2* (London 2002). All numerical references to quotations from this play are from this book.

The long time spent in the captivity of this "black tyrant" (p. 182) is the reason why his family thought him dead. What is intriguing is that the two men present very similar traits. The only essential difference between them lies in the way the Governor perceives himself, as a superior white male; he is bound by laws and codes and although he wishes to, cannot engage as freely as his captor in obscene and perverse practices.

If the appellatives selected by Harrison for the characters of Phaedra (Memsahib), Theseus (Governor) and Oenone (Ayah) can be explained plainly in terms of colonial discourse, the case of Thomas Theophilus, the equivalent of Hippolytus, is more intriguing and yet, Harrison himself offers no explication for it. Nevertheless, some tentative steps can be taken towards an understanding of how the name works within the play. Contemporary audiences may not be aware of the fact that, in Greek, Hippolytus' name means 'he who unchains the horses'. Thus, the implicit relation between his name and his tragic end, when he is torn apart by his own uncontrollable horses, may escape them. Thomas Theophilus, on the other hand, sounds more familiar because Thomas is a common male name in many western countries. Even the religious reference to Thomas the Apostle, best known for being the only one out of the twelve apostles who doubted the resurrection of Jesus (thus called 'Doubting Thomas'), is not too foreign, at least in a Christian context. The religious aspect of the name becomes significant particularly when it is associated with the name Theophilus, meaning 'he who loves God'. The internal conflict of someone who both doubts and loves God is in line with Harrison's statement that the entire play is first and foremost a constant interplay and conflict between opposing forces. Moreover, the fact that Thomas Theophilus is the only main character who receives a proper name (two in actuality) stresses his uniqueness, his 'hybridity': he is neither British nor Indian. Born to a British governor and a woman from the prominent Rajput clan, he feels at ease neither in England, where his stepmother exiles him for a while, nor in India. However, even if his life meant a struggle between conflicting feelings, his death symbolises the beginning of a new phase in the relations between the two nations. Before dying, Thomas Theophilus asks his tutor to take care of Lilamani and expresses his hope that his father would treat her in a kinder way. The Governor's response seems to mean acceptance which goes so far as embracing her as his family. In Racine's version, Theseus' reconciliation with Aricia indicates the beginning of his atonement for his share in the death of Hippolytus. The end of *Phaedra Britannica* brings about the notion of social, and not divine, justice. Lilamani deserves to have an active role in

the government of her own country, more than the Governor himself. From a historical point of view, the Indian Mutiny, though unsuccessful, paved the way for India's independence. Harrison's play, thus, ends with the promise of hope overshadowed by Hippolytus' sacrifice, marking destruction as the first step towards a new order of things.

The vast majority of the adaptations of the story of Phaedra focus on the female character, as it can be deduced from the name by which the story is known and the titles of most adaptations. The same can be argued for the performance of the plays, an issue Harrison discusses in the first paragraphs of his introduction by engaging in a dialogue with Roland Barthes and Jean-Louis Barrauld. In agreement with them, Harrison observes a "theatrical imbalance" (p. 115) in the prominence given to Phaedra and implicitly the actress impersonating her. The playwright addresses this issue mainly by emphasising the role of the Governor (Theseus). Harrison grounds his decision on the fact that unlike his wife and son, the Governor does not have the 'privilege' of dying; he has to continue living with the burden of his deeds (p. 115). The playwright gives more significance to the father and further strengthens the link with the adapted text by including a direct allusion to the mythical character of Theseus, in the Memsahib's comparison of the young Governor with Theseus or Hercules (p. 169). In *Phaedra Britannica*, the Governor stands for the white Western hero personifying the agent of civilisation whose duty is to clean the face of the Earth of (both metaphoric and real) monsters, such as "a giant cannibal", "tigers" and "maneaters" (p. 145), which exist not in his own country, but in the colonised territory. His heroic accomplishments are more than enough to compensate for his other side, of a philanderer. The more he advances in age and success, the more he loses his innocence; when he was young and less of a hero, he was as innocent as his son and both the Memsahib and Lilamani fall in love with Thomas Theophilus, since he displays only the positive side of his father. The mainspring for Lilamani's love is "his father's good's in him without the ill" (p. 161) and in a similar manner, the Memsahib is aroused by the resemblance between the son and the young version of her husband.

Far from the two women's image of him, Thomas Theophilus is disappointed with himself for not having accomplished much. Thus, he sees himself as "the undistinguished son of such a father, and with nothing done!" and feels "trapped in this obscurity" (p. 181). These words are uttered after his father's reappearance from his presumed death. Thomas Theophilus is not aware that shortly afterwards he will have killed a terrifying

monster. The competition between father and son is a common feature of Ancient Greek mythology. A similar pattern can be seen in the case of the hero Odysseus and his son Telemachus, who for a long time is unable to stand up to the level of his father's achievements. Similarly, Thomas Theophilus engages in a competition with the Governor for the right of being called a hero and the moment of achievement follows the father's return after a long absence, just as in Homer's *Odyssey*.

In his discussion of 'the Phaedra Syndrome', Gérard (1993) underlines a taboo less obvious than that of incest, i.e. "the taboo against sexual competition between different generations which is the very foundation of family hierarchy" (p. 2). In *Phaedra Britannica*, the prize is not only the Memsahib. It is plausible, judging by the way his character is presented by Harrison, that the reason why the Governor orders house arrest for the Indian princess Lilamani, instead of killing her as he does with her entire family, is that he intends to make her his mistress. During his confession to Burleigh, Thomas Theophilus acknowledges the impossibility of their love precisely because his father forbids anyone to marry the princess. The Governor supports his decision on his fear that she or her hypothetical offspring may overthrow him:

> THOMAS: Could I be so distracted to dispute
> the Governor's veto for forbidden fruit?
> She's quite untouchable. A strict taboo
> falls like a scimitar between us two.
> Prohibited. The Governor rightly fears
> heirs to that family of mutineers. (p. 146)

Additionally, the end of the play with the Governor's acceptance to unite his family with that of Lilamani may signify either that he welcomes her as his own daughter, and this aspect has been previously discussed in this essay, or that he intends to make her his wife, now being a widower. The Governor "has the last word" (p. 115), just as Harrison suggests, even in the sexual competition with his young son. Regardless of what qualities Thomas Theophilus may possess and what qualities his father may lack, it all comes down to the latter's power. What is noteworthy is that this type of competition is perceived as a taboo by the patriarchy only when the son is the one to desire a woman his father forbids either for political or personal reasons, and not vice-versa.

Between Scylla and Charybdis[5]: Shame and Guilt

Hippolytus' love for Arica gives rise to Phaedra's thirst for revenge and this is perhaps the main reason why Gérard (1993) views in the French tragedy a shift from a culture characterised by shame, as is the case in Euripides' version, to a culture where the emphasis falls on guilt. In the shame culture presented in the ancient play, Phaedra's actions could be justified by the need to defend her and her family's honour. On the other hand, in Racine's version, with the insertion of the element of jealousy, the playwright emphasises the fact that there is simply nothing honourable in being so jealous as to cause the death of an innocent person. Racine's Phaedra is guilty not only for causing Hippolytus' death, but for doing so as a result of her uncontrollable jealousy towards the young couple. It might follow that Harrison's adaptation presents the same image of guilt-driven characters; however, this is not the case. It can be said that both feelings play a significant role, particularly for the Memsahib, and there are instances when Racine stresses the feeling of guilt and Harrison adds shame as well. When the Memsahib expresses her desire to die, before confessing her love for Thomas Theophilus, she simultaneously provides a definition of shame and guilt: "I'll die in any case. With twice the shame / once guilt, that's better nameless, gets a name" (p. 152). The second instance when shame comes to join guilt is when the two women are informed that the Governor is dead; in the Ayah's view, the Memsahib should now "fling guilt and shame aside" (p. 157) since the only reason to feel guilty or ashamed had to do with her being married, which is not the case anymore. Shame and guilt cannot be differentiated sharply; even so, it can be inferred from the Memsahib's words that guilt is related to something known only by the person who did something wrong, whereas shame is felt when that wrong is or may become known by others. The definitions provided by the Memsahib are in agreement with Benedict's views that unlike guilt, shame is an emotion related to the criticism of other people. However, more recent research shows that there is not enough evidence to support this private-public dimension. Anthony O'Hear (1976) remarks that shame does not necessarily "depend on a fear of public exposure, actual or potential" (p. 77). Similarly, June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing's (2002) extensive research into moral emotions has found that "there is little empirical support for the commonly held assumption that shame arises from public exposure of some failure or transgression whereas guilt arises from the more private pangs of one's internalized conscience" (p. 24). Nevertheless, the researchers

5 The meaning of the idiom is to be caught between two unpleasant or dangerous alternatives; Scylla and Charybdis being two sea monsters in Greek mythology.

stress that the desire to hide from the public eye is indeed associated with shame (2002, p. 25). The Memsahib's words in the beginning of Act 2 are in agreement with this; she says "Hide me (…) conceal my raw desire from the public view" (p. 173). She experiences shame in a peculiar way: the light of the day exposes her and her shame to the critique of other people. The Memsahib is consumed by light and by the sun's "all-seeing, penetrating rays" (p. 149) which make her "whole face hot with shame" (p. 150). It is obvious that she worries that, if exposed to light and others, her transgression will become a matter of public scorn, ridicule and contempt.

From the very first adaptations of the myth, Phaedra has been presented as a mother who cares for her children. In *Phaedra Britannica*, the Memsahib worries not only for her own reputation, but also for the reputation of her children "The only fear that lingers in my mind / is for my children. The shame I leave behind" (p. 178). This seems like a common concern, however, in her case there is more to it. She is a young woman who had to live with the shame of being the daughter of a woman who had sexual intercourse with an animal and gave birth to a monster. O'Hear (1976) stresses that "while guilt seems normally to involve a transgressive action or attitude, shame can without any problem be felt for a much wider variety of objects (…), such as (…) one's parentage" (p. 76). The Memsahib is terrified at the thought that her children will have to live with what the others will say about her: "the children, orphans, forced to face / those stories (all too true) of my disgrace" (p. 178). One of the distinctions between shame and guilt in Tangney and Dearing's (2002) opinion is that a person who feels shame is concerned "with other's evaluation of self", whereas in the case of guilt, one is concerned with the effects of his/her actions on others (p. 25). The Memsahib has to struggle not only with the shame of her mother's transgression and her own, but also with the feeling of guilt for the way her uncontrollable passion may affect the future of her children.

The Ayah cares deeply for her mistress and shares with her the burden of the whole situation, from the beginning almost to the very end. Later in the play, when the news of the Governor's death proves to be false, it is the Ayah who advises the Memsahib to accuse Thomas Theophilus of rape. She takes the responsibility to be the one to speak with the Governor and asks the Memsahib "only [to] keep silent" (p. 179), hoping, however, that he will not take any drastic action against his own son:

> AYAH: And just supposing guiltless blood were spilt
> to save your honour and to spare your guilt,

(…) Honour must be saved at all expense
even the sacrifice of innocence." (p. 179)

In this excerpt Harrison adds the word guilt, perhaps, to emphasise the passive role of the Memsahib in the events which eventually culminate in Thomas Theophilus' death and the more active role of the Ayah. For her, guilt can only be defined in terms of murder; when she wants to learn why the Memsahib feels guilty she asks "What blood of innocents have those hands spilt? / How could Memsahib's hands be stained with guilt?" (p. 151). The guiltless blood of Thomas Theophilus is spilled as a result of the incriminating words of the Ayah against him and the Governor who banishes and curses him; the Memsahib is guilty only of remaining silent. In previous versions of the play, she at least writes a letter incriminating her stepson, but this act is missing in the case of *Phaedra Britannica*. When she imagines that her father, the Judge of the Underworld, will have to choose a punishment suitable for her crime, she emphasises the fact that she 'did' nothing wrong and therefore should be spared of guilt: "I've broken laws, but never reaped the fruit!" (p. 194). She utters these charged words after learning that Thomas Theophilus is in love with Lilamani, information which makes her burn with jealousy and this is also the moment when she expresses the desire for the young lovers to die. However, as previously mentioned, Thomas Theophilus' death has already been set in motion by the Ayah's words and the Governor's curse to Shiva.

Just like in Euripides' version, where Aphrodite seems to be the cause of Hippolytus' death, here Shiva, and implicitly India, is seen as the agent of destruction. The Memsahib blames India and its "dark gods mocking, knowing they can claim / another woman with the Judge's name" (p. 155) for her untamed passion for Thomas Theophilus. Even the Ayah states that "Our India destroys white womankind / sapping the body, softening the mind" (p. 155). However, Poore (2012) reminds the readers that "Harrison's introduction to the play discourages us from reading this as a simple act of the gods" (p. 54). One of the coping mechanisms listed by Tangney and Dearing (2002) under the emotion of shame is "Blaming others (instead of self) [which] can serve an ego-protective function" (p. 92). Particularly the Governor takes no responsibility for his share in the events: either India is to be blamed (p. 204) or his wife (p. 205). What is striking in the dynamic between the British couple and Shiva, is that, as followers of a monotheistic religion, they should not even believe in the existence, and therefore power, of a god belonging to the Hindu pantheon. In fact, they do not really believe in Hindu gods and always refer to them as something alien: "your [India's] gods" (p. 176; p. 186). In the classical

adaptations there is still the shadow of predestination and divine punishment hanging over the lives of the characters and gods' plans are apparently more important than the futile attempt of mortals. Yet, basing his argument on Aristotle's *Poetics,* Agard (1933) sees Greek drama as indeed "concerned with fate and with control by the gods; but it was more deeply concerned with the ways of men, the failures and the achievements of human freedom" (p. 126). Euripides' contemporaries still believed in the goddess Aphrodite, but by designating Shiva as the revengeful god, in which the Governor and the Memsahib have actually no faith, the play clearly indicates that human beings alone are responsible for their actions and words. Together with the couple's lack of responsibility, Harrison also points out their desire to denigrate the colonised territory in any possible way, from the suffocating weather to its cruel gods. Hutcheon argues that "adapters' deeply personal (…) reasons for selecting a certain work to adapt and the particular way to do so should be considered seriously by adaptation theory" (p. 95). In an interview for *The Guardian* (1 April 2000), Harrison says that he is "a total atheist". It is therefore not surprising that his characters' faults cannot be charged to any divine power, but entirely to their own words, silences, actions or passivity.

The emotion which characterises the Governor and his son is shame, not guilt. The father laments that "Given all my fame / so that the world can better see my shame / This time there's no escape" (p. 205). Even from the first lines of the play, Thomas Theophilus expresses his frustration and shame for not being the one to lead the search for his father: "frustrated and ashamed I'm not the one / directing the search-parties, me, his son!" (p. 141). The other reason for him to feel ashamed is his love for Lilamani. This is not because she is not worthy of him, but if his feelings become known by others, who are aware that the Governor forbids anyone to love and marry her, his father's reputation will be denigrated. Thomas Theophilus believes that it is his duty as a son to respect his father's orders and protect his image in the eyes of the people. Furthermore, when he asks Lilamani to run away with him, she hesitates because they are not married and she is afraid of what the others might think. He is well aware of this impediment and for this reason he had already planned to marry in a shrine. Thus, it can be argued that Thomas Theophilus and the Governor's moral compass points to shame; they act and speak always taking into consideration the community they live in, whose role is to judge what is right and what is wrong. As members of the patriarchy they are more interested in matters of honour, particularly in relation to the members of their families; any stain on the reputation of children or wives having a negative reflection on theirs.

In contrast to them, the Memsahib and the Ayah experience not only shame, but also guilt. Both women end their own lives driven by remorse, a feeling closely associated with guilt and both believe in the power of confession and atonement, actions viewed from a religious point of view as well as psychological (Tangney and Dearing, 2002, p. 25) as part of the process which leads to forgiveness and healing. In the beginning of the play, the Ayah implores the Memsahib to confess in order to feel better. But this is the very moment that puts in motion the tragic events and transforms the Memsahib from a woman who was feeling shame for her passion, to a woman feeling guilt for the death of an innocent man. This confession can be seen as a selfish act; by accepting to share her secret with the Ayah, the Memsahib makes her an accomplice and moreover, a person to later blame: "All your native guile and honied speech / put the unattainable within my reach" (p. 174). In the end of the play she confesses to her husband her share of guilt and honestly wishes to restore the innocence of his son. But once again, her confession may also have a more egocentric motivation. She makes the Governor aware of the fact that he was misled by two women, one of them being his servant, which was most probably a harsh blow to his ego. Additionally, she makes him realise that he was too hasty in banishing and cursing his son. The father's refusal to listen to his son's version of the truth has been a constant aspect of the story from the very first adaptations. The Memsahib's confession comes as a punishment for his rush to judgement, but perhaps her deeper urge is to punish him for all his wrong-doings towards her, mainly for being an incorrigible philanderer.

Conclusion

Although Racine's adaptation of the story of Phaedra is indeed the foundation on which Harrison writes his play, *Phaedra Britannica*, the latter only bears a resemblance to the adapted text. Hutcheon (2006) argues that there is a kind of pleasure in the reception of adaptations as adaptations which derives "simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (p. 4). Perhaps the same feeling is experienced by the adapters as well, which motivates them to choose to work on an already existing story. Harrison offers to the audiences of his play a great deal of pleasure since his play presents numerous variations from the adapted text. First and foremost of these is the entirely different setting, British India. Particularly for those familiar with Racine's play, engaging with *Phaedra Britannica* is a stimulating experience; the story seems both familiar and entirely different at the same time. Through the story of a woman who falls in love with her husband's son while they

live in a colony, "Harrison departs from sheer psychologism and transcendentalism: the myth is transposed into an anthropological and social reality" (Ploix, 2018, p. 482). He expands the focus from the love story, to the conflict between the coloniser and the colonised territory, an issue the twentieth-century audiences can relate to, or more significantly, cannot ignore.

The tragic story adapted by Harrison cannot be perceived only through the lens of colonial discourse, since it is at its heart a story about unrequited, forbidden love and the complex moral conflict which goes along with it. The Memsahib's love for Thomas Theophilus and his love for Lilamani create a love triangle which climaxes in the death of two of the lovers. *Phaedra Britannica* throws into question the degree to which the characters are guilty or innocent; the tragic end of the play is presented as the result of a chain of events to which, in a way, all of them participated. The Memsahib is clearly not guilty of incest, but her confession to the Ayah and her later silence lead to the death of her stepson. Rather paradoxically, the father figure, the Governor, does not acknowledge his own fault; instead, he sees himself as the victim of his wife's manipulation and of India, the territory he rules, and its gods. The Governor is depicted as a powerful and fearless man, a hero, but the end of the play reveals his weak character. He displays strength only when it comes to ruling others and not himself. When the time comes for him to face his errors, the Governor chooses to protect himself from the hurtful reality that he contributed to the death of both his wife and son. The Ayah stands in stark contrast to the Governor; the native nurse who has no power whatsoever in her own country takes more responsibility than him for her share in the events. Obviously, it is debatable whether committing suicide actually means taking responsibility for one's actions or fleeing from that responsibility; nevertheless, what the Ayah's suicide clearly shows is that she feels remorse and admits her guilt.

What characterises the entire play is that shame and guilt do represent a significant topic, therefore Gérard's doubts regarding the relevance of the moral conflict of Phaedra in contemporary society do not apply to *Phaedra Britannica*. However, it is true that Harrison, just like Wertenbaker did in *The Love of the Nightingale* (1989), deliberately chooses a setting where "the sense of transgression was once an agonising burden" (Harrison, 2002, p. 129). The culture of nineteenth-century British India, as portrayed in the play from the prism of the coloniser, places shame at the centre of the stage. Academia traditionally dealt with Phaedra's moral concerns to characterise the culture of a particular version as either shame culture or guilt culture. If one is to

follow this approach -- and despite Harrison underlining his desire to give prominence to the other characters as well -- it can be argued that the Memsahib/Phaedra is torn between the two moral emotions. As the daughter of her mother, she has learned from childhood what shame is and as her father's daughter she has learned that lack of reason and wrong-doing lead to punishment. Perhaps in the hope of softening her father, whom she will meet after death in his quality of Judge of the Underworld, or driven by remorse, she confesses to her husband that everything was just a lie and his son died innocent.

As mentioned before, Harrison states that the play is built on the opposing characters of Pasiphae and Minos. From this dichotomy several others emerge, such as passion and reason, barbarian and civilised, antihero and hero, shame and honour, guilt and innocence, silence and utterance, confession and punishment, fate and freedom. In the classical adaptations, including Racine's *Phèdre*, it was possible for the audiences to sympathise with the tragic characters and view them as victims of a cruel destiny since the idea that gods and goddesses interfere with the human's lives was still very credible. However, Harrison's *Phaedra Britannica* leaves no room for such interpretation and his Phaedra and Theseus fail to convince that they are simple pawns in the hands of the gods of the colonised territory. *Phaedra Britannica* engages with the concerns of Phaedra's story, but only to reframe them from a new perspective.

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