



A placeholder for the love story of Phaedra and Hippolytus: What's love got to do with it?

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A placeholder for the love story of Phaedra and Hippolytus: What's love got to do with it?

June 21, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, Pausanias reader](#)

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2018.06.21 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. When Phaedra sees Hippolytus for the very first time, she is already falling in love with him. That is what Pausanias seems to be saying as he retells the myth. The ancient Greek word that he uses in this context is *erasthēnai*, which is conventionally translated as 'fall in love with'. I think, however, that this translation can be misleading—unless the relevant contexts are explained from an anthropological perspective. I attempt such an explanation here. Relevant is an observation once advanced by the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers (1970:870 n. 5) in an article he wrote for a *Festschrift* honoring Claude Lévi-Strauss: some "brave" person, he said, should write a study on the anthropology of love or, let me say it this way, of falling in love. I attempt here some preliminaries to such a study as I now proceed to ask this question: what's love got to do with it?

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)



Drawing after the [music video](#) for "What's love got to do with it" (1984).

§1. In the city of Troizen (or Trozen: Barrett 1964:157), as Pausanias tells his readers (2.32.4), he saw the taphos 'tomb' of Phaedra, young wife of Theseus king of Athens. The queen, myth has it, had fallen in love with the young hunter and athlete Hippolytus, whose father was Theseus and whose late mother was Antiope, queen of the Amazons. This Antiope, as Pausanias retells the relevant myth at an earlier point in his narrative (1.2.1), had once upon a time fallen in love with Theseus, who abducted her and took her with him to Athens. Right away, I must ask my basic question about the very idea of 'falling in love' in these two interconnected love stories as we see them being retold by Pausanias. The question is, what's love got to do with it?

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§2. The original Greek word that translators conventionally render as ‘fall in love with’ is *erasthēnai*, as we see for example in the version produced a hundred years ago by the Loeb Classical Library (Jones 1918). In my earlier work, in fact, that is the way I too regularly translated *erasthēnai* in my overall analysis of the myths centering on Hippolytus (H24H Hour 20). Lately, however, I have begun to question the accuracy of such a translation, as in the post for [2018.06.14](#), where I experimented with translating this way instead: ‘conceive a passion for’. Still, I am reluctant to give up altogether on the expression ‘fall in love with’, hoping to work out an explanation from an anthropological perspective that tracks correlations between myth and ritual. As I argue, myths about ‘falling in love’ are correlated with myths about ‘dying of a broken heart’. And such correlation between such stories, I also argue, involves rituals of hero cult.

§3. Pausanias at 2.32.4 highlights a detail about Phaedra: her *taphos* or ‘tomb’ in Troizen is located next to a myrtle-bush—and it was there, as Pausanias says earlier at 2.32.3, that Phaedra saw Hippolytus for the very first time:

{2.32.3} In the other part of the enclosure [*peribolos*] is a race-course [*stadion*] named after Hippolytus, and looming over it is a temple [*nāos*] of Aphrodite [*invoked by way of the epithet*] *Kataskopiā* [*‘looking down from above’*]. Here is the reason [*for the epithet*]: it was at this very spot, whenever Hippolytus was exercising-naked [*gymnazesthai*], that she, feeling-an-erotic-passion-for [*erān*] him, used to gaze away [*apo-blepein*] at him from above. Phaedra did. A myrtle-bush [*mursinē*] still grows here, and its leaves—as I wrote at an earlier point—have holes punched into them. Whenever Phaedra was feeling-there-was-no-way-out [*aporeîn*] and could find no relief for her erotic-passion [*erōs*], she would take it out on the leaves of this myrtle-bush, wantonly injuring them.

Here is what Pausanias had said even earlier about this myrtle-bush:

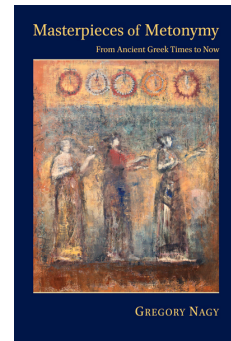
{1.22.2} When Theseus was about to marry Phaedra, he did not wish, in case he had children, for Hippolytus either to be ruled by them or for Hippolytus to be king [*basileuein*] instead of them, and so he sent him [= Hippolytus] to Pittheus [*in Troizen*] to be raised there to become the future king of Troizen. Sometime later, Pallas and his sons rebelled against Theseus. After killing them he [= Theseus] went to Troizen for purification [*katharsia*], and Phaedra first saw Hippolytus there. Conceiving-a-passion [*erasthēnai*] for him she made-contrivances [*bouleuein*] that resulted in death. The people in Troizen have a myrtle-bush [*mursinē*] that has every one of its leaves pierced with holes; they say that it did not grow originally in this way, the holes being the result-created [*ergon*] by two causes. One was the saturation-of-longing [*asē*] that she felt in her erotic-passion [*erōs*] and the other was the pin [*peronē*] that Phaedra wore in her hair.

I see here indications of a hero cult for Phaedra, as reflected in such details as the use of the verb *aporeîn* at 2.32.3, which I translate ‘she was feeling-there-was-no-way-out’. There was no way out for Phaedra to escape from her erotic passion, just as there was no way out for Hippolyte to escape from her sorrow:

{1.41.7} Near the hero-shrine [*hērōion*] of Pandion is the tomb [*mnēma*] of Hippolyte. I will write down [*graphein*] the kinds of things that the people of Megara say with regard to her. When the Amazons, having made war against the Athenians because of Antiope, were defeated by Theseus, most of them met their death in the fighting, but Hippolyte, the sister of Antiope and on this occasion the leader of the women, escaped with a few others to Megara. Having failed so badly with her army and feeling disheartened [*athumōs ekhein*] at her present situation, given that she felt-there-was-no-way-out [*aporeîn*] with regard to getting back home in safety [*sōtēriā*] to Themiskyra, she died in her sorrow [*lupē*]. And, now that she was dead, the people of Megara buried her. The shape [*skhēma*] of her tomb [*mnēma*] is like an Amazonian shield [*aspis*].

§4. Like Phaedra, Hippolyte has a tomb, as we see in this passage, and the tomb here is an explicit sign of hero cult. Accordingly, just as the feeling of no-way-out from erotic passion—or let us continue to call it ‘falling in love’—has led to the death of Phaedra and, ultimately, of Hippolytus, so also the sorrow—or let us call it the ‘broken heart’—of Hippolyte had earlier led to her own death and to heroization. I posit a parallel heroization for Phaedra.

§5. In bringing this essay to a close, I highlight the role of Aphrodite, goddess of erotic passion, in presiding over Phaedra’s first gaze at Hippolytus as she looks down from the hilltop where the myrtle-bush grows. The identity of the goddess here as *Kataskopiā* ‘looking down from above’ is defined by that gaze.



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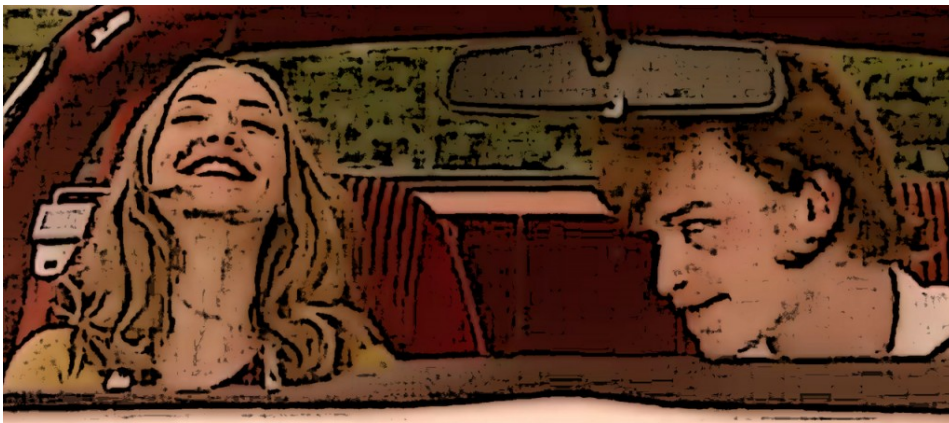
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Drawing after Twin Peaks, [season 3, episode 5](#).



Drawing after Twin Peaks, [season 3, episode 5](#).

Coda: Two songs about love

1. "I love how you love me"

Song performed by the Paris Sisters, single released in 1961,
composed by Barry Mann and Larry Kolber

Twin Peaks - Becky in convertible



Part of the soundtrack for Twin Peaks "season 3," "The Return Part/Episode 5," directed by David Lynch and written by Mark Frost and David Lynch, which was first shown 2017.08.04. Amanda Seyfried as Becky, Caleb Landry Jones as Steven

I love how your eyes close whenever you kiss me
And when I'm away from you I love how you miss me
I love the way you always treat me tenderly
But, darling, most of all I love how you love me . . .

2. "What's love got to do with it"

Song performed by Tina Turner, recording released in 1984,
composed by Terry Britten and Graham Lyle

What's love got to do, got to do with it
What's love but a second hand emotion
What's love got to do, got to do with it
Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken

Tina Turner - What's Love Got To Do With It



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For an overall bibliography that accompanies A Pausanias reader in progress, see the dynamic [Bibliography for APRIP](#).

Tags: [Aphrodite](#), [Hippolyte](#), [Hippolytus](#), [Julian Pitt-Rivers](#), [Megara](#), [Pausanias](#), [Phaedra](#), [Theseus](#), [Troizen](#)

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