

In this paper I will provide a critical reassessment of the object in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* that is typically referred to as Phaedra’s letter. At first glance, Theseus assumes on the basis of its external features that the tablet contains Phaedra’s last wishes for the care of their children, and he correspondingly refers to it as her missive (*epistolas*, 858). In practice, however, the tablet contains nothing so benign. The tablet’s immediate effect, obtained through Theseus’ reading of its undivulged contents, is to make Theseus curse his son. The gap between the tablet’s appearance and its reality (i.e. its performative effect) has rarely been acknowledged in the scholarship on this play, with the result that most readers assume, as Theseus himself did at first sight, that it is (and remains) a “letter” or a “suicide note.” The tablet’s generic transformation under Theseus’ reading eyes finds confirmation, however, in the dreadful action it forces him to take. By reanalyzing the “letter” as a curse tablet, I offer a new interpretation of the mechanics of Phaedra’s revenge—a revenge that I read, more generally, in the light of the play’s fascination with the troubling discord between visible exteriors and invisible interiors.

Letters are skillfully deployed and well integrated into the plots of two other Euripidean tragedies, *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Iphigenia Aulidensis*. In both of these plays, the author of the letter explains to the messenger entrusted with its delivery what has been inscribed in the “folds of the tablet” (*en deltou ptuchais*, *IT*760 and *IA* 98 and 112). In the *IA*, Agamemnon’s second *deltos* is sealed with his personal *sphragis* (155), in this way validating the tablet’s contents for its intended reader, his wife Clytemnestra. Phaedra’s tablet also is sealed with a *sphragis*, which beckons Theseus to open it (*Hipp.*864); but the contents of Phaedra’s tablet are never confirmed by its author—we have only Theseus’ response to go by. Herein lies a crucial difference between Phaedra’s “letter” and the others, and one that should lead us to suspect that the object that presents itself as a private communication between husband and wife—a personally sealed *deltos* with all the trappings of the more ordinary tragic *epistolai*—is in fact a curse in disguise. For as soon as Theseus has finished his silent reading, he describes the tablet’s contents as “unspeakable,” and calls out to the city (*iō polis*, 884) as he prepares to release from his mouth a “destructive evil” (*oloon kakon*, 883) that will afflict citizens as well as immediate members of his family. “In dying I will become a *kakon* to another (728-29),” Phaedra said before hanging herself, a statement that foreshadows the *oloon kakon* that will escape her husband’s mouth when he curses his son.

A few examples of curse tablets that configure themselves as letters addressed to underworld deities have led some scholars to speculate that originally curse tablets “could have had the form of letters.” (Graf1997,131). My aim here will not be to introduce a set of criteria for distinguishing between the two forms; rather, I suggest that Phaedra exploits the material configuration of the letter to achieve a revenge that relies on Theseus’ unwitting (but not entirely innocent) execution of her curse. There are a number of other images of hybrid objects in this play, and among them is the notorious metaphor of the *kibdēlon kakon* that Hippolytus uses of the race of women (616). As a bastard who turns out to be of better mettle than most legitimate sons, Hippolytus exemplifies in his own person the principle of the counterfeit, although in his case a noble interior is mismatched to his external status as a *nothos*. My reading of the hybrid nature of Phaedra’s tablet, therefore, re-situates this object within a familiar landscape of deceptive appearances and secrets concealed behind sealed doors. Furthermore, I conclude, Phaedra’s tablet embodies an important and underappreciated feature of Euripidean dramaturgy: by reconfiguring the props of everyday life, women, normally confined to the domestic quarters, can make significant, and on occasion even deadly, interventions into the public realm of the city and, via dramatic audiences, into civic memory.