Phaedra’s long speech is one of the most important elements in Euripides’ most intricate play. We may confidently assume that with his surpassing interest in women and in rhetoric the dramatist will have lavished more than usual pains upon it. Interpretation of it has suffered in the past from false preconceptions and lexicological imprecision. The nature of the speech is such that we can be led far astray by a small misjudgement of the connotation (whether for Phaedra or the audience) of such words as γνώμη, χρηστός, εὖ φρονεῖν, τὸ καλὸν, αἰδῶς; at the same time there are some profoundly significant variants in the manuscripts, and it will be argued that the text of 405–12 has suffered from ancient garbling and interpolation. In the following discussion I am everywhere indebted to W. S. Barrett’s commentary, whose detailed approach at least draws attention to numerous difficulties that have been hitherto neglected; but the conclusions reached differ radically from his.

(i) 373–87

Throughout her speech, as elsewhere, Phaedra’s conscious purpose is to present herself in the best light, consistent with her ruined circumstances and the distressed state of her mind. She knows that her overriding need is to win the sympathy of the shocked Chorus, for only by ensuring their silence can she save anything at all from the wreck of her fortunes. She begins with a formal allocutory couplet, which has rhetorical value as a flatteringly elaborate address (courtesy is certainly one of her qualities), and as serving to emphasize that she has, temporarily at least, come to her senses and will speak as rationally as she can. She proceeds at once with a

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1 CQ 18 (1968), 11–43. My thanks are due especially to Professor K. J. Dover, whose patient criticisms have saved me from many errors and premature conclusions.
disquisition whose object is to reassure the Chorus that she was, and still is, εὖ φρονοῦσα although now κακῶς πράσσουσα. We find this easier to accept than a Greek would, for 'sound ideas' and 'a successful life' were conventionally believed to go hand in hand (as in the phrase καλὸς κάγαθός, which combines moral with social preeminence); nor was a clear distinction drawn between sanity and morality, both being included in a single-concept of 'right-mindedness' (τὸ εὖ φρονεῖν = 'proper functioning in respect of thought and feeling'). We must not allow ourselves to be overpersuaded and conclude uncritically that she is in fact εὖ φρονοῦσα and possessed of ἀγαθή γνώμη: she herself is uncertain (cf. 317, and 240 ποὶ παρεπλάγχθην γνώμη ἄγαθη;), and although she certainly deserves our sympathy, Euripides is not likely to have portrayed his Phaedra as a paragon of saintly virtue, quite apart from the distortion of values associative with violent sexual desire.‡

375–6. 'Some time ago, in different circumstances, I pondered during the long hours of night upon the manner in which the life of mortals has become imperfect.' ἧδη ποτ’ ἄλλως, i.e. 'before love wounded me': Phaedra rebuts in advance the charge of special pleading; but the phrase has dramatic as well as rhetorical value: we are to be given a glimpse of Phaedra as she was in happier days. ἐφρόντις (aorist): see on 388–90 below. θνητῶν ... βίος: not exactly 'the downfall of men’s lives' (Barrett). Phaedra had pondered a wider problem, the imperfection which in greater or lesser degree spoils (lit. 'has spoil') the life of all human beings. Barrett argues that Phaedra is concerned with 'wrongdoing', but this would be alien to her purpose (she admits to failure, disgrace, and evil desires, but not to misdeeds), and no Greek would hear Barrett's narrow meaning in the context of Phaedra’s situation (cf. 317). The 'spoiling' embraces all departures from what Phaedra conceives to be 'the good life': she has yet to enlighten us about this, but to the average Greek 'the good life' primarily connoted 'success'. ἧ: 'the manner in which', not 'the reason why'. She is at first concerned not so much with causes as with the way in which δυσπραξία should be viewed (cf. κατά 377 and τήθο’ ὀθρητέον 379).

377–8. καὶ μοι δοκοῦσιν οὐ κατὰ γνώμης φύσιν | πράσσειν κάκιον: 'And it seems to me that they fall short of the good life in a manner unrelated to (their) innate quality of apprehension'. 'Mortals in general' is the subject. To continue the thought of διεφθαρται βίοι we want the most general possible expression for 'have imperfect