

## *THE PRINCE OF PARTHIA BY THOMAS GODFREY*

"**The Prince of Parthia**" is a Neo-Classical tragedy written by Thomas Godfrey. It holds the distinction of being the first stage play written by an American to be presented in the United States by a professional cast of actors. The play premiered on April 24, 1767, at the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia

---

### **Sociopolitical and Historical Contexts**

"The Prince of Parthia" by Thomas Godfrey is set against a rich sociopolitical and historical backdrop. Here are some key aspects:

#### **Sociopolitical Context :**

1. **Neo-Classical Tragedy :** The play is a Neo-Classical tragedy, a genre that was popular during the 18th century. It adheres to the classical unities of time, place, and plot, and most of the characters follow decorum.
2. **American Theatre :** "The Prince of Parthia" holds the distinction of being the first stage play written by an American to be presented in the United States by a professional cast of actors. This reflects the development of American theatre during this period.

#### **Historical Context :**

1. **Parthian Empire :** The play is set in the Parthian Empire in the 1st century A.D. during the Arsacid dynasty. The Parthian Empire was a major political and cultural power in ancient Persia (Iran), which defeated Alexander the Great's successors, the Seleucids, and controlled most of the Middle East and southwest Asia.

2. **American History** : The play was written by Thomas Godfrey, who was born in Philadelphia in 1736. He was a part of the Pennsylvania militia for the expedition against Fort Duquesne in 1758. This reflects the historical context of colonial America and the conflicts that were taking place during this period.

In summary, "The Prince of Parthia" is deeply rooted in its sociopolitical and historical contexts, which add depth to the narrative and provide a richer understanding of the play.

### **Plot Overview**

The play follows the unities of time (happens in a short amount of time, usually 24 hours), place (happens in one place) and plot (one or few plot lines). It also has a five-act structure, and most of the characters follow decorum. However, with verisimilitude (or, the appearance of truth), the play is lacking. The idea that the entire plot line could happen within 24 to 48 hours is astonishing.

### **Plot Highlights :**

- **Act One** : Phraates and Gotarzes discuss Arsaces' return. Trouble brews as Vardanes plots against Arsaces.
- **Act Two** : Vardanes and Lysias decide to accuse Arsaces of treason.
- **Act Three** : Thermusa reveals Artabanus' lust for another woman (Evanthe). Vardanes aims to destroy Arsaces and seize the throne.
- **Act Four** : Phraates overhears Vardanes and Lysias planning to kill King Artabanus. The plot thickens as alliances shift.
- **Act Five** : Vardanes comes on to Evanthe, but she does not reciprocate his feelings. Before Vardanes can hurt Evanthe, Lysias runs in and tells Vardanes that Arsaces has escaped and knows of Vardanes' plot. This act brings the play to its climax, with the characters' fates hanging in the balance. The tension and drama of the previous acts culminate in this final act, leading to a resolution of the conflicts introduced earlier in the play.

## **Key Characters :**

- **Phraates** : An officer at court, faithful to the Heroic Prince Arsaces.
- **Gotarzes** : Prince, who admires ceaselessly his brother Arsaces.
- **Vardanes** : Prince, Gotarzes' brother, who is jealous of his brother Arsaces and who wants to take over the Parthian throne.
- **Thermusa** : Arsaces' stepmother and the Queen of Parthia, seeking vengeance for her son Vonones, who was killed by Arsaces for treason.
- **Bethas** : A Noble Captive, Parthian enemy; father of Evanthe.
- **Evanthe** : Daughter of Bethas, in love with Arsaces, but Artabanus, the King of Parthia, has illicit feelings for her.
- **Arsaces** : The triumphant prince returning from foreign wars.
- **Barzaphernes** : Lieutenant-General, faithful to Arsaces.
- **Lysias** : Vardanes' officer.
- **Artabanus** : The King of Parthia.
- **Cleone** : Evanthe's maid and confident.
- **Edessa** : Attendant on the queen, confident of the Royal lady.

## **FULL SUMMARY OF THE PLAY**

In the first act, Phraates, an officer at court, and Gotarzes, a prince, discuss Prince Arsaces' triumphal return from foreign wars. But there is trouble at home. Vardanes, the brother of Gotarzes and Arsaces, is jealous of Arsaces' marital successes. Thermusa, Arsaces' stepmother and the Queen of Parthia, wants to avenge her son Vonones who was killed by Arsaces for treason. Vardanes and his officer, Lysias, decide to use Thermusa's vengeance to destroy Arsaces. Meanwhile, Evanthe, whose father, King Bethas, has been imprisoned, is in love with Arsaces, but Artabanus, the King of Parthia, has illicit feelings for Evanthe. The plot then moves into Act Two; when Vardanes and Lysias hear Arsaces tell Bethas that he loves Evanthe, they decide to tell King Artabanus that Arsaces is a traitor for sympathizing with Parthian enemies. And that is all; like most plays with a five-act structure, there are usually one or two

acts that are just one scene. This keeps the five-act structure, but does not mess with the believability of the plot.

By the time the plot reaches Act Three, Thermusa is very angry because she knows King Artabanus is lusting after someone else. She tells this to Vardanes, who decides to use this to destroy Arsaces and take the throne of Parthia for himself. Arsaces asks for Evanthe's hand in marriage in front of King Artabanus. Artabanus decides to let Arsaces have Evanthe because he promised Arsaces anything he wanted for being such an awesome child. Evanthe tells Arsaces that King Artabanus loves her, to which he replies that he loves her more. Vardanes then tells King Artabanus that Arsaces is a traitor.

Act Four takes a sharp plot turn, which causes some incongruities. Phraates tells Gotarzes that he overheard Vardanes and Lysias talking about how they killed King Artabanus in his sleep. Vardanes and Lysias plan on blaming Arsaces, while Phraates and Gotarzes plan on telling the general Barzaphernes about who actually killed the king. Arsaces has been accused of the regicide and thrown in prison along with Bethas. They bond over their fear for Evanthe's safety. Thermusa enters the prison to kill Arsaces, but she sees a bloody ghost of King Artabanus, which causes her to "brain" herself against the wall, committing suicide. Barzaphernes appears and releases Arsaces. Together, they plan to get Vardanes and make Parthia right once more.

In the exciting conclusion of Act Five, Vardanes comes on to Evanthe, but she does not like it. Before Vardanes can hurt Evanthe, Lysias runs in and tells Vardanes that Arsaces has escaped and knows of Vardanes' plot. Then, a huge battle occurs, pitting Vardanes, Lysias and all of their followers against Arsaces, Barzaphernes, Phraates, Gotarzes and their men. Cleone, Evanthe's maid, watches the battle from a window. Cleone believes Arsaces was killed in the battle by Vardanes, but it was really Phraates. Cleone tells this to Evanthe, who drinks a vial of poison. When Arsaces, who has taken down Vardanes, hears of Evanthe's death, he impales himself on Barzaphernes' sword. In the end, only Barzaphernes and Gotarzes live.

### **THEMES**

**"The Prince of Parthia"** explores several themes that offer a compelling glimpse into human nature and the consequences of power struggles. Here are some of the key themes :

~ **Love** : The play explores the complexities of love, especially in the context of power dynamics. The love triangle between Arsaces, Evanthe, and Artabanus is a central plot device.

~ **Politics** : The political machinations within the Parthian court form the backbone of the narrative. The struggle for power, especially between the brothers Arsaces and Vardanes, is a major theme.

~ **Human Flaws** : The characters in the play are not perfect; they are driven by their flaws - jealousy, ambition, and vengeance. These flaws lead to the tragic events of the play.

~ **Jealousy** : the theme of jealousy is a significant element in "The Prince of Parthia". It's primarily seen in the relationship between the brothers Arsaces and Vardanes.

**Vardanes' Jealousy** : Vardanes, driven by jealousy, plots against his brother Arsaces. He is envious of Arsaces' successes, both on the battlefield and in love. This jealousy fuels his ambition and leads him to conspire against Arsaces, setting the stage for the tragic events of the play.

**Artabanus' Jealousy** : King Artabanus also exhibits jealousy, particularly towards Arsaces. Despite being the king, he harbors illicit feelings for Evanthe, who is in love with Arsaces. This jealousy complicates the dynamics within the royal court and adds another layer of tension to the narrative.

**Queen Thermusa's Jealousy** : She is extremely jealous when she discovers that the King Artabanus (her husband) is lusting for Evanthe.

**Impact of Jealousy** : The destructive power of jealousy is a central theme in the play. It leads to betrayal, conspiracy, and ultimately, tragedy. The characters' actions, driven by jealousy, have far-reaching consequences, affecting not just their own lives but the stability of the entire kingdom.

~ **Revenge** : The theme of revenge is prominent in the play, particularly in the character of Thermusa, who seeks vengeance for her son's death.

~ **Despair** : The death of the beloved one sinks characters into despair and even suicide. For instance, both Evanthe and Arsaces make suicide out of despair.

~ **Disappointment** : The play creates a strong feeling of disappointment at the end as the hero and many other goodhearted persons die.

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

**Topic - 1** : Discuss the them of love in Thomas Godfrey's The Prince of Parthia (1767).

### **Answer**

The theme of **love** in Thomas Godfrey's "**The Prince of Parthia**" is a central element that drives the plot and influences the actions of the characters.

1. **Arsaces and Evanthe** : The love story between **Arsaces** and **Evanthe** forms the heart of the narrative. **Arsaces**, the triumphant prince returning from foreign wars, is deeply in love with **Evanthe**. Their love is pure and sincere, but it becomes a source of conflict due to the political machinations within the Parthian court.

2. **Artabanus' Unrequited Love** : **King Artabanus** harbors unrequited feelings for **Evanthe**, which adds a layer of complexity to the plot. His illicit love for **Evanthe**, who is in love with **Arsaces**, creates tension and conflict within the royal court.

3. **Love as a Source of Conflict**: The theme of **love** in "**The Prince of Parthia**" is not just about romantic relationships, but also about how love can be a source of conflict. The love triangle between **Arsaces**, **Evanthe**, and **Artabanus** leads to jealousy, betrayal, and power struggles.

4. **Love and Power**: The play also explores the intersection of love and power. The characters' romantic desires are intricately linked with their ambitions for power, leading to a complex web of alliances and betrayals.

In summary, the theme of love in "The Prince of Parthia" is multifaceted, influencing the characters' motivations, driving the plot, and adding depth to the narrative.

**Topic - 2 :** In the light of your reading of Thomas Godfrey's The Prince of Parthia (1767), show why Vardanes could be considered as an antagonist to the hero Arsaces.

### Answer

In Thomas Godfrey's "The Prince of Parthia", Vardanes can indeed be considered an antagonist to the hero Arsaces for several reasons:

1. **Jealousy and Ambition :** Vardanes, the brother of Arsaces, is driven by jealousy and ambition. He is envious of Arsaces' successes, both in terms of his military victories and his romantic relationship with Evanthe. This jealousy fuels Vardanes' ambition and leads him to conspire against his own brother.
2. **Conspiracy and Betrayal :** Vardanes, along with his officer Lysias, plots to destroy Arsaces. They plan to use the vengeance of Thermusa, Arsaces' stepmother and the Queen of Parthia, to their advantage. Vardanes' actions represent a betrayal of family ties and royal loyalty, further solidifying his role as an antagonist.
3. **Threat to the Protagonist :** Vardanes poses a direct threat to Arsaces, the protagonist of the play. His actions and plots create significant obstacles for Arsaces, adding tension and conflict to the narrative.
4. **Desire for Power :** Vardanes' desire to seize the throne of Parthia for himself reveals his lust for power. This desire, coupled with his willingness to harm his own brother to achieve his goals, underscores his antagonistic role.

In summary, Vardanes' actions and motivations throughout the play clearly position him as an antagonist to Arsaces.

**Topic - 3 :** Discuss the theme of Betrayal in Thomas Godfrey's The Prince of Parthia (1767).

### Answer

The theme of betrayal is a significant element in Thomas Godfrey's "The Prince of Parthia". It's woven into the fabric of the narrative and is instrumental in driving the plot forward.

1. **Betrayal of Family Ties:** The most prominent instance of betrayal in the play is seen in the relationship between the brothers Arsaces and Vardanes. Vardanes, driven by jealousy and ambition, plots against his own brother, Arsaces. This represents a betrayal of family ties and royal loyalty.
2. **Betrayal of Trust:** Vardanes, along with his officer Lysias, conspires to use the vengeance of Thermusa, Arsaces' stepmother and the Queen of Parthia, to their advantage. This is a betrayal of trust, as they manipulate Thermusa's desire for revenge to further their own ambitions.
3. **Betrayal of Love:** King Artabanus harbors illicit feelings for Evanthe, who is in love with Arsaces. This unrequited love leads to a betrayal of the trust placed in him as a king and father figure.
4. **Betrayal Leading to Tragedy:** The betrayals committed by the characters have far-reaching consequences, leading to a series of tragic events. The destructive power of betrayal is thus a central theme in the play.

In summary, the theme of betrayal in "The Prince of Parthia" is multifaceted, influencing the characters' motivations, driving the plot, and adding depth to the narrative.

**Topic - 4 :** Through a short illustration, show why Thomas Godfrey's The Prince of Parthia (1767) is a successful tragedy. Discuss the tragic end in the play.

## Answer

"The Prince of Parthia" by Thomas Godfrey is considered a successful tragedy for several reasons :

1. **Adherence to Classical Tragedy Structure :** The play follows the classical unities of time, place, and plot, and has a five-act structure. This adherence to the traditional structure of tragedy lends credibility and dramatic weight to the narrative.
2. **Complex Characters :** The characters in the play are complex and flawed, which is a hallmark of successful tragedies. Their personal and political passions drive the action, leading to a series of tragic events.



3. **Tragic Themes** : The play explores themes such as love, jealousy, loyalty, and revenge, which are typical of tragedies. These themes add depth to the narrative and contribute to the tragic outcome.

4. **Tragic Ending** : The ending of "The Prince of Parthia" is undeniably tragic. Cleone believes Arsaces was killed in the battle by Vardanes, but it was really Phraates. Cleone tells this to Evanthe, who drinks a vial of poison. When Arsaces, who has taken down Vardanes, hears of Evanthe's death, he impales himself on Barzaphernes' sword. In the end, only Barzaphernes and Gotarzes live. This tragic conclusion, where the protagonists meet a tragic end due to their flaws and circumstances, is a key element of a successful tragedy.

In summary, "The Prince of Parthia" is a successful tragedy because it adheres to the classical structure of tragedy, features complex characters and themes, and concludes with a tragic ending.

**Topic - 5** : Discuss the theme of Vengeance in Thomas Godfrey's The Prince of Parthia (1767).

The theme of vengeance is a significant element in Thomas Godfrey's "The Prince of Parthia". It's woven into the fabric of the narrative and is instrumental in driving the plot forward.

1. **Thermusa's Vengeance** : Thermusa, Arsaces' stepmother and the Queen of Parthia, wants to avenge her son Vonones who was killed by Arsaces for treason. This personal vendetta becomes a pivotal plot point, as Thermusa's desire for revenge influences her actions and decisions throughout the play.

2. **Vardanes' Use of Vengeance** : Vardanes, the brother of Arsaces, decides to use Thermusa's vengeance to destroy Arsaces. This manipulation of Thermusa's desire for revenge is a clear example of how the theme of vengeance is used to drive the narrative and create conflict within the story.

3. **Impact of Vengeance** : The theme of vengeance in "The Prince of Parthia" is not just about personal vendettas, but also about how these desires for revenge can have far-reaching consequences. The actions driven by vengeance lead to a series of tragic events, underscoring the destructive power of this emotion.

In summary, the theme of vengeance in "The Prince of Parthia" is multifaceted, influencing the characters' motivations, driving the plot, and adding depth to the narrative.

**Topic - 6** : Discuss the theme of Jealousy and its effects in Thomas Godfrey's The Prince of Parthia (1767).

## Answer

The theme of jealousy is a significant element in Thomas Godfrey's "The Prince of Parthia". It's woven into the fabric of the narrative and is instrumental in driving the plot forward.

1. **Vardanes' Jealousy** : Vardanes, the brother of Gotarzes and Arsaces, is jealous of Arsaces' marital successes. This jealousy fuels his ambition and leads him to conspire against his own brother. His actions represent a betrayal of family ties and royal loyalty.
2. **Artabanus' Jealousy** : King Artabanus harbors illicit feelings for Evanthe, who is in love with Arsaces. This unrequited love leads to a betrayal of the trust placed in him as a king and father figure.
3. **Effects of Jealousy** : The destructive power of jealousy is a central theme in the play. It leads to betrayal, conspiracy, and ultimately, tragedy. The characters' actions, driven by jealousy, have far-reaching consequences, affecting not just their own lives but the stability of the entire kingdom.

In summary, the theme of jealousy in "The Prince of Parthia" is multifaceted, influencing the characters' motivations, driving the plot, and adding depth to the narrative.

## RELEVANT QUOTATIONS ALONG WITH THEIR EXPLANATIONS FROM THE PLAY

Here are some relevant quotations from the play, along with their explanations:

### 1. **Phraates on Leadership:**

- **Quotation**: "A prince should be as the public head, that gives life and motion to the body politic."

- **Explanation:** Phraates emphasizes the crucial role of a leader in guiding and sustaining the state. This reflects the play's exploration of the responsibilities of leadership and the impact of rulers on their people.

## 2. **Vardanes on Ambition:**

- **Quotation:** "Ambition's cravings never can be satisfied. It is a wild fire, that will not be quenched, but must consume everything within its reach."
- **Explanation:** Vardanes' reflection on ambition reveals his awareness of its destructive nature. This line underscores one of the play's central themes: the dangerous and insatiable nature of ambition, which drives much of the conflict and tragedy in the story.

## 3. **Artabanus Reflecting on Power:**

- **Quotation:** "How fleeting are the joys of power! How dangerous the possession!"
- **Explanation:** Artabanus acknowledges the transient and perilous nature of power. This sentiment highlights the play's meditation on the instability and inherent risks associated with holding power, a common theme in tragedies.

## 4. **Evanthe on Love:**

- **Quotation:** "True love is not confined to form or station, but, like the light of heaven, its purest rays enlighten the humblest valley as well as the proudest mountain."
- **Explanation:** Evanthe's view of love as universal and transcendent suggests that genuine love transcends social boundaries and status. This idealistic portrayal of love contrasts with the political and power-driven motives of other characters.

## 5. **Vardanes on Fate:**

- **Quotation:** "Fate, that mysterious power, which guides the actions of mankind, has marked me for destruction."

- **Explanation:** Vardanes attributes his downfall to fate, highlighting the theme of inevitability and predestination. This line reflects the tragic elements of the play, where characters often feel powerless against their destinies.

#### 6. **Phraates to his Soldiers:**

- **Quotation:** "Brave soldiers, though fortune may for a time desert us, let us still maintain our courage and our virtue. The gods will not forever remain inexorable."

- **Explanation:** Phraates encourages his soldiers to remain courageous and virtuous despite temporary setbacks. This speech underscores themes of resilience, honor, and the belief in divine justice, which are central to the characters' motivations and actions.

#### 7. **Bethas on Loyalty:**

- **Quotation:** "Though fate has marked me for her own, yet will I not forget my duty to my prince, nor the love I bear my country."

- **Explanation:** Bethas' declaration of loyalty and duty highlights the importance of patriotism and personal integrity. His unwavering commitment to his prince and country exemplifies the noble qualities valued in the play.

#### 8. **Arsaces on Honor:**

- **Quotation:** "Honor, my friends, is the noblest principle of the soul; 'tis that which gives the brightest sanction to our actions, and will shed unfading lustre on our memories when death has closed our eyes."

- **Explanation:** Arsaces elevates honor as the highest moral principle, guiding actions and ensuring a lasting legacy. This focus on honor reflects the play's emphasis on virtuous conduct and the enduring significance of one's reputation.

#### 9. **Gotarzes on Conflict:**

- **Quotation**: "War, horrid war, with all its direful train of desolation, waste, and woe, is drawing near."

- **Explanation**: Gotarzes' foreboding statement about the impending war highlights the destructive consequences of conflict. This line serves as a prelude to the turmoil and suffering that follows, emphasizing the devastating impact of war.

#### 10. **Phraates on Mortality:**

- **Quotation**: "What is this world? A transient scene of sorrow and of care; and those who longest live, but longest bear the heaviest load of grief."

- **Explanation**: Phraates' contemplation of life's transience and inherent suffering reflects the play's somber view of human existence. This philosophical musing aligns with the tragic themes of the play, underscoring the inevitability of sorrow and the burdens of life.

These quotations and their explanations provide insight into the characters' perspectives and the thematic depth of "The Prince of Parthia." The play explores complex issues related to power, loyalty, love, ambition, and the human condition.