

RACINE'S USE OF MYTHOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL  
CHARACTERS IN HIS DRAMAS

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## PREFACE

Jean Racine saw through the outward splendor of the seventeenth-century society the beginnings of a hidden deterioration. This he pictured for the people in plays based, for the most part, on classical themes. This study is intended to show how Racine highlighted for the spectators or readers of his dramas their own virtues or faults and the probable outcome of the same by portraying these characteristics in the actions of known mythological and Biblical personages.

Though not a great deal is known about the personal life of Racine, especially during his most productive years, he was a courtier, a poet, and a Christian united into one person with amazing talent and consuming ambition.<sup>1</sup> These qualities of his personality, as well as his life and times, will be discussed particularly in their relationship to his writings. How much of the artificiality of Louis XIV and his court colors the Greek heroes and the Biblical characters of Racine? How much did he change the original story or the personalities of the original to make his point? Were these changes justifiable?

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<sup>1</sup>Pierre Salomon, Précis d'histoire de la littérature française (Paris: Masson, 1964), p. 175.

The dramas will not be arranged chronologically, but rather according to their source material. The mythological plays include La Thébaidé, Andromaque, Iphigénie, and Phèdre; the Biblical ones are Esther and Athalie.

Any study of Racine must include some mention of his greatest and most enduring qualities: his verse form, its use in portraying character, and his pure poetry, examples of which are of special interest for those concerned with the classical period of French literature.

However, the fundamental discussion, as suggested above, will be Racine's use, or misuse, of the basic mythological and Biblical characters.

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## CHAPTER I

### RACINE, THE MAN

The seventeenth century saw French civilization reach one of its highest peaks. Politics, art, and literature were flourishing. An urbane society developed around Paris and Versailles partly because Louis XIV had a great love of pleasure as well as of decorum. Versailles became a symbol of French prestige and of the King's power. Among the chief pleasures of the nobles was the theater which included drama, ballet, and opera. The writers and artists enjoyed mingling with the aristocracy and the wealthy middle class, while these latter took pride in patronizing and underwriting the former.

It was into such a world that Jean-Baptiste Racine was born at La Ferté-Milon, not far from Paris but very far from the atmosphere of the court. In the summer of 1638, an honorable and pious family of La Ferté-Milon gave asylum to some of the Port-Royal Jansenists who were fleeing persecution and who stayed in La Ferté until August of 1639, shortly before the birth of Jean-Baptiste. Their persuasive influence was felt in every phase of life in the village and two of them, Le Maître and Lancelot, later became teachers of Racine at Port-Royal.

Orphaned in infancy, Jean was reared by his grandparents, a very devout couple. He received his first schooling at the Collège de Beauvais, thirty-five miles north of Paris. It was a school closely allied in doctrine and principles to Port-Royal. After graduation from the Collège de Beauvais, Racine went to live with his widowed grandmother at Port-Royal. Since his aunt was abbess of the Convent, there was no other place for the fifteen-year-old Jean to go. Even though the school had been closed, the men who had made names for themselves in the world but had retired to Port-Royal for further contemplation and study, volunteered to teach the boy. There, Le Maître, who loved Racine as a son and dreamed for him a great success as a lawyer, taught him to recite with perfect articulation not only the prayers of the Church but also the orations of Cicero, so that he learned early the allurements of the spoken word. M. Hamon, for whom he had a special affection, taught him Spanish and Italian, Pierre Nicole guided him through his Latin studies, while Lancelot developed in him such a lively taste for Greek culture that he was often seen sitting somewhere in the Port-Royal forest with Euripides or



Sophocles engaging his complete attention.<sup>2</sup> It was here that he wrote his first odes at the age of sixteen.

In 1658, Racine came to Paris to finish his studies at the Collège d'Harcourt, which was also connected with Port-Royal, so that his entire education was unusually pious and unusually Hellenic.

After he left school, he assisted his cousin, Nicolas Vitart, steward of the Duc de Luynes, where he became acquainted with élite society, actors, and actresses. Vitart took pleasure also in encouraging Racine's taste for poetry and introduced him to La Fontaine and other writers.

In 1660, at the age of twenty-one, Racine wrote La Nympe de la Seine, honoring the marriage of Louis XIV and the Spanish Marie-Thérèse. The poem was shown to Colbert, Minister of Finance, and earned for Racine a hundred louis d'or.

His family, as well as his professors at Port-Royal, worried about the temptations of life in Paris and about his friends of questionable morals. So it was arranged that Racine should make a prolonged visit to his uncle Sconin, an ecclesiastic of importance in

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<sup>2</sup>Charles A. Eggert, Racine's Athalie (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1906), p. vi.

the town of Uzès in southern France, to study theology and perhaps obtain a church position. While thinking seriously of entering a sacred order, Racine continued writing so that, according to his letter to M. Vitart, he was dividing his time between God and the Muses:<sup>3</sup>

Je passe tout le temps avec mon oncle, avec saint Thomas et avec Virgile; je fais force extraits de théologie et quelques-uns de poésie; voilà comme je passe le temps, et ne m'ennuie pas.

There is evidence, too, especially in his letters to La Fontaine, of a growing interest in the opposite sex. Because he thought the women around Uzès were dazzling, his uncle Sconin, the priest, advised him to be blind to them. Racine admitted, in a letter to his friend, La Fontaine, in 1661, that it would be impossible to be blind to them but he could at least be mute about them, for it was necessary to be like a monk when with the monks just as he had been a member of the café society when with La Fontaine and his friends in Paris ("Lettre à La Fontaine," Œuvres complètes, p. 497). So it is that this young man, who wore the black clerical robe, behaved with the correctness of a young curate during his long stay in Uzès. He extolled to his friends the

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<sup>3</sup>Racine, "Lettre à M. Vitart," Œuvres complètes (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1950), p. 488. Hereafter, quotations from the Œuvres complètes will be identified in parentheses in the body of the thesis.

gracious loveliness of the women as well as the expansive beauty of the countryside. However, he deplored the language of the people, refusing to call it French, but rather a mélange of Spanish, Italian, and French.

Toward the end of 1663, because he had not obtained a church office through his uncle, Racine left Uzès to enter the literary field in Paris. In 1665 he became prior of l'Épinay and later of Saint-Jacques de la Ferté and of Saint-Nicolas de Chézy. These benefices gave him a living as well as time to write.

During his twenty-fourth year, Racine's La Thébaïde was produced at the Théâtre-Royal by Molière and his troupe. This year Racine's name appeared for the first time on the King's list of Gratifications aux savants et hommes de lettres et étrangers for the smallest sum: six cents livres ("Chronologie," Œuvres complètes, p. 12).

In 1665, Alexandre, dedicated to Louis XIV, was presented by Molière with Mademoiselle du Parc, Racine's mistress, playing the lead. But Racine did not like the interpretation and, without mentioning the change to Molière, he gave Alexandre to the troupe playing at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. This meant sacrificing Molière's friendship to his career, which he did easily enough. But he did not wish to lose his mistress, Mademoiselle du Parc, so he persuaded her, though she had played many

leads for Molière, to go with him to the Hôtel de Bourgogne. This unworthy action caused much deserved criticism from the literary world and made enemies for Racine. However, he had the satisfaction of seeing his tragedy presented successfully in two theaters at once.

Several months later, Racine read in les Deux Visionnaires of Nicole, his former Latin teacher, a phrase which he considered directed toward himself to the effect that in the eyes of right-minded people the writing of stage plays was not very honorable and that dramatists were poisoners of men's souls ("Lettre à l'auteur des Deux Visionnaires," Œuvres complètes, p. 309).

Many writers feel that Racine was not disturbed by this because he was accustomed to the reproaches of his aunt, the Mother Superior of the Port-Royal convent, and he well knew that Port-Royal could not speak otherwise, since it followed the strict doctrine of the church. Jules Lemaitre suggests that it was rather Racine's pride which was hurt.<sup>4</sup> Racine's letter in response does justify this idea of Lemaitre when he asks why the works of the tragic poets of the theater should hold a less honorable place than the works of novelists or writers of comedies

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<sup>4</sup>Jules Lemaitre, Jean Racine (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1908), p. 122.

("Lettre à l'auteur des Deux Visionnaires," Œuvres complètes, p. 309). Although Racine realized that the men of Port-Royal condemn the tragic poets of the theater, he does not believe they should stop others from honoring them. He continues by questioning the right of Port-Royal to condemn in French drama that which it finds pleasing in classical drama. His letter, full of bitterness, brought about an estrangement which lasted eleven years. However, Racine remained forever thankful to Boileau for dissuading him from publishing an even more caustic letter against his former teachers of Port-Royal. That Racine regretted having published the letter was evidenced several years later when the Abbé Tallemant reproached him before the French Academy for his conduct against Port-Royal, and he replied;<sup>5</sup>

Oui, Monsieur, vous avez raison; c'est l'endroit le plus honteux de ma vie, et je donnerais tout mon sang pour l'effacer.

With the assistance and intercession of Boileau, Racine was received again by the men of Port-Royal several years after his retirement from the theater.

In 1667, Andromaque, first presented at the Queen's apartment in the Louvre to the King and the court, was received with great enthusiasm. Within the year Racine

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

presented Les Plaideurs, his only comedy, a witty attack on lawyers. At first it had only two performances at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, for the people did not know quite how it should be received. After a presentation before the King, who laughed heartily, it was regiven at the Hôtel de Bourgogne with remarkable success.

Again at the presentation of Britannicus, 1668, the King showed his friendship and appreciation for Racine. In spite of a conspiracy by the critics to discredit the play, the King and all the court declared themselves loudly for it, so that, when reshowed in Paris, it was acclaimed and thoroughly enjoyed.

Bérénice (1670) has a most curious and contested background. The old story was that Henriette d'Angleterre, sister-in-law of Louis XIV, suggested to Corneille and Racine that each should write a play about the parting of Titus and Bérénice in 79 A.D. But this story was contested by Gustave Michaut<sup>6</sup> who offered the following explanation of the appearance of the same story, in the same year, by the two authors. Racine was bitter because Corneille had said, after reading Alexandre, that Racine's proper field was not drama. Then, after the sensational

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<sup>6</sup>Gustave Michaut, La Bérénice de Racine (Paris: Société française d'imprimerie et de Librairie, 1907), p. 133.

success of Andromaque, the admirers of Corneille tried to belittle it and said that, though the young dramatist could write a pretty play, he had neither the dramatic finesse nor the historical scope of Corneille. While chafing under these criticisms, Racine may have heard that Corneille was writing about Titus and Bérénice, hence he decided to undertake the same subject and to work hard so that the two plays could be produced at the same time and their respective merits would determine who was the greatest tragic dramatist of France. Racine wrote his play on these six Latin words of the Latin historian Suetonius: "Titus reginam Berenicem dimisit invitus invitam" (The unwilling Titus sent away the unwilling queen, Berenice). No matter which is the true story of its background, the greater success of Racine's play is unquestioned.

Bajazet, a lesser play, followed in 1672, and Mithridate, the favorite of Louis XIV, was played in 1673. Iphigénie (1674) had its première the evening when the conquest of Franche-Comté was being celebrated ("Chronologie," Œuvres complètes, p. 13). It was given before Louis XIV in the Versailles gardens under the light of crystal chandeliers hung in orange and pomegranate

trees. It became one of the great successes of the century.<sup>7</sup>

Following the presentation of Mithridate in 1673, Racine was elected to the French Academy. This and the outstanding reception of Iphigénie filled Racine's cup to overflowing, and there seemed nothing lacking to his happiness. However, when the partisans of Corneille and Molière learned that Racine was working on his new play, Phèdre, they persuaded Nicolas Pradon to write a rival play on the same subject, based on the legend as recorded by Euripides. Though at the time both plays enjoyed success, Pradon's play has long since been forgotten while that of Racine is still played, and the role of Phèdre is the ambition of every French actress.

Because of the jealousies and the conspiracies of his rivals, Racine became exasperated with the theater and considered again, even more seriously, donning the robe of the clergy. In the Préface of Phèdre, his religious leanings came to the fore as he seemingly tried to appease Port-Royal for his earlier criticism. He indicated the moral value of the theater and especially of Phèdre which, he asserted, stresses virtue, punishes severely the least

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<sup>7</sup>Racine, Théâtre complet (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1960), pp. 472-73.



faults, presents the confusion caused by the passion of love and makes even the thought of crime as bad as the crime itself. He tried to convince all, and especially the men of Port-Royal, that to paint vice so that it would be recognized and hated was what tragic poets had in mind above everything else.

The year of Phèdre (1677) he was named, with his friend Boileau, court historiographer. This helped to withdraw Racine from the theater. Madame de Sévigné wrote that the King had commanded Racine and Boileau "de tout quitter" in order to apply themselves entirely to history.<sup>8</sup> In June of 1677 he married Catherine de Romanet and settled down to domestic life, which eventually included two sons and five daughters.

He would probably never have written another play if Madame de Maintenon had not asked him to write a religious drama for the girls of the Académie de Saint-Cyr. Madame de Maintenon had charge of the education of the children of Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan. She was married secretly to the King in 1685 after the death of the Queen, Marie-Thérèse. One of her chief interests was the Académie de Saint-Cyr which she had founded for the young daughters

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<sup>8</sup>Paul Mesnard, Œuvres de J. Racine (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1885), Vol. I, p. 102.

of poor nobles. Hoping to give these young ladies a cultural as well as a practical education, she introduced the idea of having them present amateur theatricals. So it was that she asked Racine, in his moments of leisure, to write some kind of moral or historic poem from which love should be entirely banished.<sup>9</sup> Though he had studied the Bible for forty years and knew well the history of the Old Testament, he had never taken a theme from there. After careful consideration, he chose Esther as the personality from the Old Testament about whom he could write a drama pleasing to Madame de Maintenon and the girls of Saint-Cyr. Racine coached the players himself, and the King provided the money for the Persian costumes which were also used by his ballet group. Esther was not played for the general public until some years later, but it was very well received by the King, the court, the clergy, and the patrons of Saint-Cyr.

In 1691, Racine produced his last play, Athalie, also for the girls of Saint-Cyr. This play extolled the Catholic hierarchy and gave a strong warning against absolute rule as Joad explained to Joas a king's duties

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<sup>9</sup>A. F. B. Clark, Jean Racine (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), p. 230.

to his people (Athalie IV, iii, 1389-1405). Louis XIV did not object to these admonitions.

Perhaps it seems, because of his literary battles with the other writers of his time, particularly with Corneille, Molière, and the masters of Port-Royal, that Racine was so egotistical he could not honestly evaluate the work of others. The fact is that he truly admired these adversaries. His treatment of Molière was inept and tactless rather than malicious. Though he fought regularly with Corneille during the latter's lifetime, Racine contested for the honor of giving the address at the Academy's memorial service following Corneille's death. The honor was given the retiring director of the French Academy, and it was not until Corneille's brother was received into the Academy that Racine, as the new director, had the opportunity to express his sincere admiration for his old master and rival. Speaking about his father's eulogy of Corneille in his Mémoires sur la vie de Jean Racine, Louis Racine says:

Il le faisait dans l'effusion de son cœur, parce qu'il était intérieurement persuadé que Corneille valait beaucoup mieux que lui (Œuvres complètes, p. 41).

Though Racine never appreciated the biting criticisms of Corneille and his followers, Racine surely did approve and value Corneille's ability as a writer of tragedy.

The last twenty years of his life, Racine lived as a good Jansenist. He tried to regain the approval of Port-Royal. His children were brought up in an atmosphere so religious that three of his five daughters took the veil, though one of these, for reasons of health, was forced to leave the convent and later married.<sup>10</sup> Besides being historiographer for Louis XIV, Racine worked assiduously on the history of Port-Royal.

In 1698 Racine wrote, at the request of Madame de Maintenon, a statement on the sufferings of the French people. The King discovered the paper, learned the author's name and, feeling that he was being criticized, became very angry. Racine was received thereafter by the King, but never so warmly as before.

Racine died the following year (1699). The central paragraph of his short will was addressed to Port-Royal, begging forgiveness and asking to be buried at the foot of the grave of his teacher, M. Hamon. The King pensioned Racine's widow and children until the death of the last survivor.

In the Latin epitaph which Boileau wrote for Racine he said that, having charmed France with his excellent secular poems, this dramatic poet consecrated his Muses

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<sup>10</sup>Clark, op. cit., p. 230.

to the praise of God. Boileau continued by admonishing those whom devotion would attract to the tomb to remember that Racine requested prayers, not vain eulogies (Mémoires sur la vie de Racine, by Louis Racine, Œuvres complètes, p. 66).

Racine was deeply concerned with the atmosphere of the century in such a way that his works, even those of classical or Biblical settings, were expressions of the life about him. It is, therefore, necessary to study the background of his plays as well as of his century to understand his true value.

## CHAPTER II

### PLAYS WITH MYTHOLOGICAL SOURCES

#### A. LA THÉBAÏDE

Racine, who all his life wrote about passion of one kind or another, chose hatred as the theme of his first play. Some have suggested that Molière directed Racine to the Greek story, but this is unlikely since he started writing it while still in Uzès. Molière's troupe presented La Thebaïde twelve times in 1664 at the Palais Royal, and later at the châteaux of Fontainebleau and Villers-Cotterêts, and at the palace of Versailles.

Æschylus introduced into the theater this Greek legend which Sophocles featured in Œdipus Tyrannus. Euripides was so impressed by the tale that he wrote seven different plays about different phases or characters from it, but only two have come down to us, the Phoenissae and the Suppliants.<sup>11</sup> The Greeks did not criticize Euripides for changing certain details of this familiar story about the deadly quarrel between the two sons of Œdipus and Jocaste, Polynices and Eteocles. For example, the earlier story was that Jocasta had killed herself

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<sup>11</sup>Clark, op. cit., pp. 112-13.

upon learning the background of Œdipus and their incestuous relationship. Euripides has Jocasta live to despair of her grown sons.

Racine took for his major source of La Thébaïde, Euripides' the Phoenissae. Euripides took the name of his play from the chorus which is composed of Phoenician girls on their way to Delphi to become attendants in the temple of Apollo. They are detained in Thebes by the army of Polynices and, since they are not Thebans, the girls in Phoenician costume add color and zest to the play.<sup>12</sup> Racine also drew from the Latin version by Seneca and from the Antigone of Rotrou, a minor French writer of the time.<sup>13</sup>

Racine does not use a chorus at all, but rather has confidants tell the background of the story when necessary and relate the events which happen off stage.

Œdipus had warned his two sons that they would fight for the throne. Fearing this, they decided to rule alternately, one year at a time. But, when the first year of the reign of Étéocles was over, he refused to give up the throne. It is at this point that Racine

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<sup>12</sup>William Bates, Euripides (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1930), pp. 184-85.

<sup>13</sup>Auguste Bailly, Racine (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1949), p. 75.

picked up the tale. Their mother, Jocaste, their sister Antigone, and her fiancé, Hémon, all work for reconciliation, presenting one suggestion after another during the first four acts.

Jocaste wins the sympathy of the audience from the beginning with her motherly love and anxiety over her two sons. She feels confident of success with each new attempt to reconcile the ambitious brothers and sinks lower into despondency after each failure.

Antigone, who since childhood has loved especially her brother, Polynice, tries to help her mother bring about peace. She expresses great disappointment when Polynice does not live up to her expectations:

A peine en sa mémoire ai-je encor quelque rang;  
Il n'aime, il ne se plaît qu'à repandre du sang  
(La Thébaine, act II, scene iii, 509-10).

When Antigone hears the words of the oracle that the last of the royal family must die before there can be peace, it is not her own fate nor even that of the brothers which bothers her, but the fate of Hémon, her beloved and the son of her uncle Créon. She says:

Et ce n'est pas pour moi que je crains leur vengeance.  
Mon innocence, Hémon, serait un faible appui;  
Fille d'Oedipe, il faut que je meure pour lui.  
Je l'attends, cette mort, et je l'attends sans plainte:  
Et, s'il faut avouer le sujet de ma crainte,  
C'est pour vous que je crains; oui, cher Hémon, pour vous  
(La Thébaine, act II, scene ii, 404-09).



This divides the spectators' interest, to a certain extent, between the brothers' struggle for power and the love interest of Hémon and Antigone. In Euripides' play, Eteocles, the elder brother, put Creon, his uncle, in command during his absence and asks that he complete the marriage plans of Haemon, Creon's son, and Antigone.<sup>14</sup> The coming marriage of Antigone is treated more as an aside and does not detract from the conflict for which Eteocles is preparing.

In the meantime, Ménécée, the second son of Créon, also hears the words of the oracle. Thinking the last of the royal family meant the youngest, in a burst of patriotism, he kills himself to bring peace to the family and to Thebes. Sorry as she is, Antigone expresses the hope that the oracle really did mean the youngest and that Ménécée did fulfill the divine purpose when she says to her mother:

.....Ah! madame, en effet  
L'oracle est accompli, le ciel est satisfait  
(La Thébaine, act III, scene iii, 617-18).

But Jocaste makes known her worst fears:

Ainsi, toujours cruel, et toujours en colère  
Il (l'oracle) feint de s'apaiser, et devient plus sévère  
Il n'interrompt ses coups que pour les redoubler,  
Et retire son bras pour me mieux accabler  
(La Thébaine, act III, scene iii, 687-90).

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<sup>14</sup>Bates, op. cit., pp. 169-70.

Probably the persons most difficult to individualize are Etéocle and his brother Polynice because they are alike in some ways. Jocaste tells her confidante that both her sons are faithless, wicked, and murderous (La Thébaïde, act I, scene i, 31-32). But the first appearance of each determines the reaction of the spectators. When Etéocle, the elder and, at the time, the king of Thebes, appears, he is solicitous of his mother (La Thébaïde, act I, scene iii, 45) and anxious to obtain for the city its freedom from the siege of Polynice (La Thébaïde, act I, scene iii, 91-100). Also, Etéocle is able to see good in others (act I, scene vi, 181), but he is certain that Thebes wants him to rule when he says:

Mais ce même pays, qui demandait son sang,  
Demande que je règne.....(act III, scene iv, 737-38).

Because of Antigone's early preference for Polynice the audience expects to like him and is disappointed to hear with what irritation he speaks to his mother. His first words on stage are, "Madame, au nom des dieux, cessez de m'arrêter" (La Thébaïde, act II, scene iii, 449).

He expresses disdain for the Thebans when he says:

Le peuple aime un esclave, et craint d'aboïr un maître.  
Mais je croirais trahir la majesté des rois,  
Si je faisais le peuple arbitre de mes droits  
(La Thébaïde, act II, scene iii, 496-98).

Even his sister, Antigone, despairs of him as she says to her mother:

Et l'ingrat, en l'état où son orgueil l'a mis,  
 Nous croit des étrangers, ou bien des ennemis  
 (La Thébaïde, act II, scene iii, 517-18).

Racine gives Créon a much larger role as a wicked person than does Euripides. Racine has Créon instigate the struggle between the brothers, as he tells his confidant, Attale:

D'Etéocle d'abord j'appuyai l'injustice;  
 Je lui fis refuser le trône à Polynice.  
 Tu sais que je pensais dès lors à m'y placer;  
 Et je l'y mis, Attale, afin de l'en chasser  
 (La Thébaïde, act III, scene vi, 851-54).

Later Créon caused the truce to be broken and thereby interrupted one of Jocaste's peace talks. He admits to his friend, Attale:

Enfin, ce même jour, je fais rompre la trêve,  
 J'excite le soldat, tout le camp se soulève  
 (La Thébaïde, act III, scene vi, 867-68).

In the Euripides play, Jocasta hears about the duel between Eteocles and Polynices, calls Antigone, and the two run to stop the fight. They arrive too late, and Jocasta, in complete despair, picks up one of the swords and kills herself.<sup>15</sup> Antigone comes back to the palace with the three bodies and is greeted by Creon who orders services for Eteocles and Jocasta but none for Polynices whose body is to be thrown to the dogs. He also orders Oedipus, whose misdeeds had brought about the family's misfortunes,

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<sup>15</sup>Bates, op. cit., p. 180.

to leave the city. Antigone goes with her father, but says she will be back to bury Polynices.

In Racine's play, Œdipus does not appear at all and the challenge to a duel is given by Polynice and accepted by Étéocle in front of his mother, his sister, Hémon, and Créon. Antigone persuades Hémon to go after the boys to make one more attempt at reconciliation. Jocaste ends her deep despair in suicide, even before the outcome of the duel is learned, and Antigone laments:

Dois-je vivre? dois-je mourir?  
Un amant me retient, une mère m'appelle  
(La Thébaine, act V, scene 1, 1215-16).

When she learns that Hémon has been killed by Étéocle and that her brothers have slain each other, she no longer has a purpose for living. Créon, ecstatic over the success of his plan to gain the throne, proposes to Antigone that she reign with him. He feels confident that she will accept, since in Hémon's death he lost his only rival for her hand. He is so dismayed when he learns she has killed herself that he, too, asks for death. He is supposedly struck by lightning. This unexpected and unexplained event brought about the death of the last of the royal blood.

Racine in the Préface stated:

Le lecteur me permettra de lui demander un peu plus d'indulgence pour cette pièce que pour les autres

qui la suivent; j'étais fort jeune quand je la fis  
(Œuvres complètes, p. 68).

Though the development of the plot may need this indulgence, his verse form and characterizations need no apology. Each person is not only classified but very much personalized. One agrees readily with the dramatist when he says, also in the Préface:

La catastrophe de ma pièce est peut-être un peu trop sanglante; en effet, il n'y paraît presque pas un acteur qui ne meure à la fin: mais aussi c'est la Thébaine, c'est-à-dire le sujet le plus tragique de l'antiquité (Préface of La Thébaine, Œuvres complètes, p. 68).

This tragedy, perhaps, taught Racine that so much ferocity was not an indispensable requisite for tragedy.

## B. ANDROMAQUE

Andromaque vies with Phèdre and Athalie as Racine's masterpiece. In it he put his feelings, his experience, and his understanding of life influenced by passion. He brought to the theater a universal moral philosophy in contrast to the sentimentality of the romanesque period of Louis XIII. As Jules Lemaitre said, it was without any moralizing or preaching that Racine attained the strong impression of truth in his characters.<sup>16</sup> He painted some passions which were not virtuous, but they did not pretend

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<sup>16</sup>Lemaitre, op. cit., p. 135.

to virtue. This honest, direct portrayal is one of the things that pleased Louis XIV about Racine, especially since he remembered that the Fronde, a political struggle which had greatly distressed the childhood of Louis XIV, had favored the romanesque in literature and drama.<sup>17</sup>

In his Seconde Préface (Andromaque in Œuvres complètes, p. 104), Racine gives as his source for Andromaque the third book of Virgil's Aeneid. Virgil locates the story in Epirus on the western shore of Greece,<sup>18</sup> while Euripides places it in Thessaly, a kingdom on the eastern side of Greece.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the kings of Epirus boasted of descent from Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, and that a later Pyrrhus of Epirus was an enemy of Rome, makes Virgil's location logical. But Virgil's story is of a later time in the life of Andromache. He does, however, permit Andromache, in two sentences, to review for Aeneas her life from the fall of Troy to the time of his visit. She was forced to become the concubine of Pyrrhus and bore him a son, Molossus. Later her master was attracted to Hermione and went to Sparta to ask her

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>T. E. Page (ed.), The Aeneid of Virgil (London: Macmillan and Company, 1964), p. 54, line 292.

<sup>19</sup>Bates, op. cit., p. 66.

hand in marriage. But Orestes, a longtime suitor of Hermione, burning with jealous love, killed his rival. Virgil's short account also tells of Andromache's marriage to the Trojan Helenus and the events which made notable the visit of Aeneas. Racine's story takes little from Virgil's, excepting the location. Neither is it like that of Euripides whose chief purpose seems to have been to instigate or increase hostile feelings of the audience toward Sparta and the Spartans during the time of the Peloponnesean War. Euripides characterizes Hermione and her father Menelaus, King of Sparta, as so cruel and arrogant that they certainly fulfill this purpose.

Euripides tells how Astyanax, son of Andromache by Hector, was torn from his mother's arms and thrown from the wall of Troy to his death.<sup>20</sup> Andromache, as the concubine of Pyrrhus, has another son, Molossus. This causes Hermione intense jealousy for, though she is the wife of Pyrrhus, she has no children.

In his Seconde Préface Racine mentions that the ancients themselves often changed the particulars of accepted myths. He quoted a commentator of Sophocles, who remarked:

. . . il ne faut point s'amuser à chicaner les poètes pour quelques changements qu'ils ont pu faire

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 198-99.

dans la fable; mais qu'il faut s'attacher à considérer l'excellent usage qu'ils ont fait de ces changements, et la manière ingénieuse dont ils ont su accommoder la fable à leur sujet ("Seconde Préface" to Andromaque, Œuvres complètes, p. 105).

Thus Racine justifies the fact that he made a very important change which concerns Andromaque and her son, Astyanax. According to Racine, Andromaque saved her son by taking another boy in her arms at the crucial moment at Troy and thus deceiving Ulysses. Also she is presented not as a slave forced to be the mistress of her master, but as a mother whose only loves are for her dead husband, Hector, and for her son, "l'image d'Hector" (Andromaque, act III, scene viii, 1016). She conducts herself always with the dignity and the grace expected of royalty, though she is torn between her desire to be true to Hector and through him to all Trojans, and her desire to save Astyanax. She has to refuse Pyrrhus to accomplish her first desire, but she must accept him to accomplish the second.

In Racine's story, Andromaque's decision influences the lives of Pyrrhus, Hermione, and Oreste. When Andromaque encourages Pyrrhus, or rather when she does not completely discourage him, he rejects Hermione who lives for him alone and has come from Sparta to marry him. When Pyrrhus neglects Hermione, she turns to Oreste. The latter has come to Epirus with a message from the Greek kings to Pyrrhus that Astyanax, son of Hector, must be sacrificed.



Hermione, because she is very jealous of Andromaque, has circulated the idea that Astyanax, son of Hector, is a possible rebuildier of Troy and hence a menace to Greece. She is confident that, the minute Astyanax is disposed of, Andromaque will no longer even consider Pyrrhus, and she thinks that Pyrrhus will not defend a Trojan against the wishes of all the Greeks.

The great love of Andromaque for Hector, Troy, and her son is constantly evident. But another trait less evident is actually first pointed out by Oreste (act I, scene 1, 73-74), when he told how she had deceived Ulysses by yielding to him the son of another for Astyanax. This type of deception is seen again when she tries to decide how to solve her problem with Pyrrhus. Her idea is to consent to marry him, but to kill herself immediately afterwards. Thus she will have his promise to bring up Astyanax as a son, and she will remain true to Hector. This plan suggests the uprightness and trustworthiness of Pyrrhus. Andromaque has no doubt that he will keep his part of the bargain, although she plans to keep hers only superficially.

In the Première Préface Racine admits "toute la liberté que j'ai prise, c'a été d'adoucir un peu la férocité de Pyrrhus. . . ." ("Première Préface" to Andromaque, Œuvres complètes, p. 104). Even so, some spectators complained

that Pyrrhus was sometimes ill-tempered with Andromaque and did not know perfect love as did Céladon, hero of a current novel. To them Racine responded in the same

Préface:

Pyrrhus n'avait pas lu nos romans, il était violent de son naturel, et tous les héros ne sont pas faits pour être des Céladons ("Première Préface" to Andromaque, Œuvres complètes, p. 104).

So, although Pyrrhus means to be guided by his love for Andromaque, he becomes furious and vengeful at times.

Oreste is pictured after he avenges on his mother the death of his father so that his temperament can be partly explained by the torment of the Furies, spoken of in Virgil's Aeneid.<sup>21</sup> He is a weaker personality than the others, but not essentially bad. He knows it would be wrong to kill Pyrrhus, he debates about it for some time, but it seems the only way to win Hermione's affection. Oreste has long loved Hermione and receives no love in return, only an occasional pretense of love to spite Pyrrhus. Having gone from the ecstasy of being received on his arrival by Hermione to the despair of rejection, and then to the great expectation of love's reward again, Oreste behaves as would be expected when Hermione, after blaming him for carrying out her orders, kills herself.

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<sup>21</sup>Page, op. cit., p. 306, note 331.

Oreste reviews all his own crimes, blames himself for his many weaknesses, becomes unbalanced mentally, and makes it necessary for his confidant, Pylade, to lead him away.

The most complex personality of all is that of Hermione. Euripides makes Hermione the wife of Pyrrhus, and has her, because of jealousy, plan the death of her husband's concubine and their son. Though foiled in her plans, she fears her husband's reaction, should he hear of them, so she leaves Thessaly with Orestes.

Racine keeps this young beauty, daughter of Helen, a vain, selfish girl whose actions and words are determined by her emotions of the moment. When angry, she wants her anger to be worthy of her and exclaims:

Ah! laisse à ma fureur le temps de croître encore!  
(Andromaque, act II, scene 1, 418)

When disappointed in her expectations, she hopes to destroy another's happiness. She says:

Demeurons toutefois pour troubler leur fortune;  
Prenons quelque plaisir à leur être importune  
(Andromaque, act II, scene 1, 441-42).

It is her vehement fury, when she learns that Pyrrhus will marry Andromaque, which brings about her determination to have him killed and afterwards forces her to condemn Oreste for carrying out her orders:

Ah! fallait-il en croire une amante insensée?  
Ne devais-tu pas lire au fond de ma pensée?  
Et ne voyais-tu pas, dans mes emportements

Que mon coeur démentait ma bouche à tous moments?  
 (Andromaque, act V, scene iii, 1545-48)

Pylade, Oreste's friend, calls Hermione une furie who will always detest Oreste (Andromaque, act III, scene i, 753-54). Her fury takes the form of a vicious rage which ends in suicide, while that of Oreste causes a loss of control of his mental processes and leaves him in a dreary dream world. Euripides makes of Hermione a weaker person who, in the end, flees with Orestes. Orestes, in contrast to Racine's Oreste, is a stronger personality. He initiates the plan for flight with Hermione and he kills Pyrrhus at the altar, instead of having it done by his followers.

Excepting for Hermione, who seems to have no saving grace, the characters of Racine are neither all good, nor all bad. They have, much more than their mythological counterparts, the virtues and the vices, the thoughts and the feelings of every man. Racine preserved the intense feelings of the ancients, but they were often covered with the sense of decorum of his own age. No wonder Andromaque was received with such great enthusiasm and is still, for many, the favorite of all of Racine's tragedies.

### C. IPHIGÉNIE

Following four quite original plays based on historical facts or fabrication, Britannicus (1669), Bérénice (1670), Bajazet (1672), and Mithradite (1673), Racine went again to Greek mythology for the basis of Iphigénie. Louis XIV had sent the Prince de Condé against Holland at the time, and France was at war; therefore Racine chose a period of enthusiasm for conquest among the ancients, the preparation for the Trojan War, for his theme.

The basis for Iphigénie is Iphigenia at Aulis by Euripides. For this play, more than for any other, Racine adapted the details from his Greek sources. In fact, many lines are almost directly translated from the Greek tragedy.<sup>22</sup>

Euripides tells the story of the need to sacrifice Iphigenia to Artemis (Diana) in order that the winds should be sent to carry the fleet to Troy. For some time Agamemnon vacillates between love for his daughter and patriotism. All the time he is being goaded by Menelaus and Ulysses to make the sacrifice so that the conquest of Troy can be undertaken. Finally Agamemnon sends word

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<sup>22</sup>Clark, op. cit., p. 192.

to Clytaemnestra, his wife, and to Iphigenia, their daughter, that they should come to camp because Achilles wishes to marry Iphigenia; and he, Agamemnon, has consented. Though neither Iphigenia nor Clytaemnestra know Achilles, they have heard of him as a great warrior and a direct descendant of Zeus. This ruse of Agamemnon is to get Iphigenia to Aulis without her knowing the true nature of the journey. Agamemnon felt safe in mentioning Achilles because the latter had gone home with his army to assist his father in curbing a rebellion. Agamemnon believes that he will not return for some time. But Achilles accomplishes his purpose and returns to camp the day Iphigenia arrives with her mother.

Agamemnon, in the meantime, repents of his decision to sacrifice Iphigenia and tries to send a second letter to keep her from the camp. The slave with this letter is waylaid by Menelaus, husband of Helen, for whose sake the Trojan War is being undertaken. Menelaus reads the letter and soundly berates his brother, Agamemnon, for failing to appease the gods and thus delaying or even abandoning the conquest of Troy. Iphigenia and her mother then arrive in the camp.

When Achilles learns the story of his approaching marriage, and then the fact that it was a ruse to bring the beautiful Iphigenia to her death, he is outraged that

his name would be used for such a shameful purpose. Being galant, he does consent, at the request of Clytaemnestra, to defend Iphigenia at all costs. Clytaemnestra then upbraids Agamemnon for considering such a thing and insists it will be done only over her dead body.

With her little brother clinging silently to her hand and thus increasing the pathos of the situation, Iphigenia laments, then acquiesces to the sacrifice, for love of her father and of her country. She finds something ennobling in the idea that the whole conquest of Troy is dependent on her sacrifice. Having decided that it is her duty to accept the sacrifice bravely, Iphigenia refuses to let Achilles risk his life for her and marches to her death. Soon a messenger comes to tell Clytaemnestra that, at the time of the sacrifice, everyone had eyes on the ground; and, when they looked up again, they noted that Iphigenia had been snatched away in a cloud and a deer was seen slaughtered on the altar.

As has been mentioned before,<sup>23</sup> Racine adapted the plots of the Greeks to the seventeenth-century scene. But how could he make plausible to his contemporaries the idea of human sacrifice? In his Préface to Iphigénie Racine admits that the miracle described by Euripides

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<sup>23</sup>cf. avant, p. 15.

"serait trop absurde et trop incroyable parmi nous" (Œuvres complètes, p. 225). Was not this an absurd plot to have chosen as a basis for a play to which Racine wished to give contemporary significance? However, propitiatory sacrifice is basic in Christianity as it was in Judaism. The Old Testament tells the stories of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22: 1-13) and of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11: 30-40).

Racine is trying to show a ruler's responsibility to God. Agamemnon has a conflict within himself. For awhile, he questions the gods' interest in and power over human affairs. He realizes that the sacrifice of Iphigénie will bring great power to him among all the Greeks, but it seems unjust that the gods would demand such an innocent victim as an appeasement offering.

Racine had to make certain alterations in the Greek plot. Children were not permitted on the seventeenth-century stage, so Orestes was omitted. To make Achille's involvement more acceptable to his audience, Racine represents him and Iphigénie as having been betrothed for some time. Iphigénie is delighted to learn that Achille wants an immediate marriage ceremony, and Clytemnestre agrees happily.

There are two choruses in Euripides' play. The first is of Greek women from Chalcis who have come to



Aulis on the mainland to see the sights of a Greek camp. Later a male chorus, made up of the attendants of Clytaemnestra, chants. Instead of the chorus, Racine uses guards who report the actions and the opinions of l'armée and tout le camp. It is the opinion of this army which helps to force the will of Menelaus and Ulysses on Agamemnon.

Another innovation of Racine's is Eriphile, who does not know that she is the daughter of H el ene and Th es ee, nor does she know her real name. She wishes to come to camp because she has been ordered by an unknown voice to ask her origin from Calchas, the Greek priest who presides at an oracle near the campsite. Eriphile and her confidante Doris are captives of Achille, and have been left with Iphig enie, who treats Eriphile as a sister. Eriphile wants to come to the camp because she loves Achille and seeks every possible means to replace Iphig enie in his affection. When Agamemnon finally decides to save Iphig enie from the sacrifice and to send her with Clytemnestre away from the camp in the care of two guards, he discusses this plan in the presence of Eriphile. The jealous Eriphile then discloses these plans to Calchas, the priest, who alerts the army. The army, as Eriphile knew, would not permit Iphig enie's escape, for they can not sail to Troy until a girl with the same blood as

Hélène has been sacrificed. Since Clytemnestre and Hélène are sisters, either girl, Iphigénie or Eriphile, would serve for the sacrifice. Eriphile's desire to prevent the marriage of Iphigénie and Achille brings about her own downfall.<sup>24</sup>

The Greek as well as the French play uses the altar to signify both life and death. It is the place for the marriage ceremony indicating the continuation of life, but also it is the place for sacrifice, indicating death. Racine uses the word l'autel to bring to the minds of the spectators, all during the play, the idea of sacrifice. The characters, however, do not consider this significance during the first half of the play. Clytemnestre, for instance, criticizes Agamemnon for not allowing her to accompany Iphigénie to the altar:

D'où vient que d'un soin si cruel  
L'injuste Agamemnon m'écarte de l'autel?  
(Iphigénie, act III, scene ii, 819-20)

Achille also thinks of the altar as a place for marriage as he says to Iphigénie, "Votre père à l'autel vous destine un époux" (Iphigénie, act III, scene iv, 852). Finally, Arcas, a servant of Agamemnon, discloses the intention of his master to use the altar as a place of sacrifice. And, in a very dramatic moment, he reveals to Iphigénie,

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<sup>24</sup>cf. post, p. 38.

Achille, Clytemnestre, Eriphile, and Doris that the sacrificial victim is to be Iphigénie.

At the close of the Greek play, Agamemnon enters and tells Clytaemnestra of the honor which has come to them through Iphigenia and then urges her to take Orestes home. The choir chants the farewell and expresses hope for a successful return from Troy. In Racine's play, Agamemnon does not appear in the last act. It is Ulysse, who first had insisted on the sacrifice of Iphigénie, who now reports the altar scene to Clytemnestre. He extols Achille and his defense of Iphigénie, he tells how Calchas, the priest, came to reveal the other Iphigénie, daughter of Héléne. This is Eriphile who came to the priest with the escape plans of Iphigénie and with the inquiry about her own origin.<sup>25</sup> After Calchas had explained to the Greeks that, having the blood of Héléne and the true name of Iphigénie, she would be acceptable to Artemis for sacrifice, the army turned against her. Immediately, Eriphile picks up the blade and takes her own life, and Iphigénie is the only one to weep for her. After telling all this, Ulysse hurries with Clytemnestre to the altar where Agamemnon, Achille, and Iphigénie await her for the wedding.

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<sup>25</sup>cf. ante, p. 35.

During Racine's play Agamemnon is distraught and vacillating. He recognizes the power of the gods, he knows the Greeks will not sail and there will be no conquest of Troy unless he sacrifices Iphigénie. He tries several times to save Iphigénie, but he does not dare turn back the Greeks, even for love of his daughter. The kings, who look to him for leadership, all expect to gain renown in the process of conquering Troy. Achille also recognizes the divine forces; but, at the same time, he insists on the right of his individual will, saying:

Les dieux sont de nos jours les maîtres souverains;  
 Mais, seigneur, notre gloire est dans nos propres mains  
 (Iphigénie, act I, scene ii, 259-60).

In the last scene again he defends his beliefs. He loves Iphigénie and does not think the gods would require the life of an innocent girl, so he readies himself to fight off the priest's blade. All the while, Agamemnon hides under his cloak (Iphigénie, act V, scene v, 1709), not daring to show approval, not wanting to see the carnage, nor to show his tears. The last-minute intervention of the oracle, then, finds Achille victorious and seems to endorse his action.

Eriphile, who at first was a person deserving sympathy, became worthy of repugnance after her vengeful<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>cf. ante, p. 36.

act of betrayal. Thus Racine defends the idea that virtue must not be punished and that certainly the gods will provide a way to protect the innocent and punish the guilty.

#### D. PHÈDRE

Phèdre brings together not only the ancient and the seventeenth-century civilization, but also the pagan and the Christian. The basic plot for Phèdre came from Euripides with certain variations from the Roman poet Seneca. But, as Mongin observes, Racine treats the characters borrowed from Euripides, as Sophocles<sup>27</sup> would have done, in a more apperceptient manner than Euripides. He establishes a close relationship between lack of psychological insight and misfortune. Euripides was a skeptic by nature and especially lacked belief in the omnipotence of the gods. Will Durant asserts, "The fortunes of men, Euripides thinks, are the result of natural causes, they are not the work of supernatural beings."<sup>28</sup> Euripides

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<sup>27</sup>John A. Stone, Sophocles and Racine (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1964), p. 78, citing Suzanne Mongin, "Un rapprochement entre Racine et Sophocle," Culture, 1939, p. 70.

<sup>28</sup>Will Durant, The Life of Greece (Part II of The Story of Civilization, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), p. 402.

was, however, a very practical dramatist who used a deity, especially in the prologue, to introduce a situation, because he knew this would be welcomed by his audience.<sup>29</sup>

So it was that Euripides has the goddess Aphrodite (Venus) give the prologue of Hippolytus Crowned before the palace at Troezen in the Peloponnesus where Phaedra, Theseus, and Hippolytus, son of Theseus and an Amazon, live.<sup>30</sup> Aphrodite explains that, since Hippolytus has only scorn for her, the goddess of Love, while he adores Artemis, goddess of the Hunt, she, Aphrodite, intends to punish him by having his step-mother fall in love with him. As she leaves, the young Hippolytus enters with a group of chanting huntsmen. This is not the regular chorus, which is of women, but a supplementary one. An old slave warns Hippolytus that he should worship and honor Aphrodite as well as Artemis, but Hippolytus disregards the advice and takes his friends in to dinner. The real chorus comes then, telling, to music, of the illness of Phaedra about whose health they inquire.

Phaedra comes from the palace leaning heavily on the arm of an old nurse. The leader of the chorus asks

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<sup>29</sup>Bates, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>30</sup>Moses Hadas (trans.), The Plays of Euripides (New York: The Dial Press, 1936), 107-52.

many questions which the nurse cannot answer. The nurse, in turn, implores Phaedra to explain her illness. Phaedra babbles on about the mountains, woods, hunting-dogs, the weight of her jewels, and the brightness of the sun. Then she admits her love for Hippolytus and her desire to die rather than disclose it. The chorus and the nurse are horrified, but the nurse is convinced that her duty is to save her mistress. Saying she has an antidote for love, the nurse leaves and the chorus comes forward to sing of love. Soon it is evident the nurse has revealed all to Hippolytus, who bursts from the palace cursing all women and praying that they be removed from earth and that the human race be propagated otherwise. He cannot tell of this to Theseus, his father and Phaedra's husband, because he had promised the nurse, before she revealed Phaedra's love, that he would not speak of it. In his loathing, he threatens to break his word saying that it was the tongue that swore, not the mind.<sup>31</sup> Though later it costs him his life, he keeps his promise. Phaedra is overcome with humiliation that her secret has been revealed to Hippolytus; but, at the same time, she fears that Hippolytus will tell his father and that she will be disgraced. She blames the old nurse for her troubles

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<sup>31</sup>Bates, op. cit., p. 113, line 612.

and the latter, sympathizing with her mistress, swears the chorus to silence on the affair. The chorus, preferring to laud and enhance the name of the King and his household than to degrade it, agrees to silence on this matter but chants words of foreboding. Suddenly the nurse shrieks for help saying that her mistress has hanged herself. At this moment Theseus arrives, the doors of the palace are opened, and the body of Phaedra surrounded by wailing domestics is revealed. Theseus, overcome with grief, notices that Phaedra holds a letter in her hand. He breaks the seal and reads her accusation of Hippolytus. Theseus, from the depth of his sorrow and anger, calls on Poseidon (Neptune) to grant one of three promised curses to put an end to Hippolytus. Knowing the true situation, the chorus wishes to dissuade him, not by telling the true circumstances, but rather by lauding Hippolytus and his many virtues. Hippolytus himself now enters to discover the cause of the turmoil and is bitterly assailed by Theseus. Hippolytus swears his innocence but is not believed by his father, who bans him from the kingdom. Hippolytus still keeps his promise and does not accuse Phaedra. As he leaves the scene, the chorus chants of life and its changing aspects. The women of the chorus are joined by the huntsmen who call for an intelligent Providence, when a messenger arrives to tell



Theseus that his son has been killed. He was driving along the shore on the way out of the country when a great wave cast a bull upon the shore. The terrified horses overturned the chariot and dragged Hippolytus, entangled in the reins. Theseus orders that the mortally wounded Hippolytus be brought back and the goddess, Artemis, appears to tell Theseus the truth about Hippolytus' innocence and his inability to explain because of his promise to the nurse. Theseus is filled with remorse. Artemis promises to take revenge on some favorite of Aphrodite and also promises to have the people of Troezen honor Hippolytus after his death. The latter forgives his father and dies.

The Roman, Seneca,<sup>32</sup> who sets the scene of his Hippolytus in Athens, has Phaedra herself declare her love to Hippolytus and has her also live to hear of his death. He describes the bull spewed up by the waves as much more of a monster whose eyes dart flames and whose hind parts are joined into an overpowering dragon-like shape which is scaly. All the herds in nearby fields flee. Only Hippolytus, remembering his father's great exploits, remains calm and for some time keeps his horses

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<sup>32</sup>Frank Justus Miller (trans.) Seneca's Tragedies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), Vol. I, pp. 318-423.

under control. Finally they break the yoke and throw Hippolytus to the rocky road and death. Phaedra admits to Theseus the innocence of Hippolytus and her own guilt. She then kills herself and leaves Theseus mourning. He calls all Athens to mourn with him.

Racine does not use the goddesses as persons on stage either to set the scene or to close the story as Euripides did by using Aphrodite and Artemis. Instead Hippolyte and his preceptor, Thèramène, open the play discussing (1) the plan of Hippolyte to hunt for his father, (2) the change in his boyhood home at Troezen since Theseus brought his wife Phèdre there, (3) Phèdre's supposed hatred of her step-son, Hippolyte, and finally (4) Aricie, the captive sister of the young men who once tried to usurp the throne of Athens. Aricie is the one girl Hippolyte finds it hard not to love. Racine continues the use of a confidante as Phèdre and her nurse, Cènone, appear and discuss at length Phèdre's illness. Cènone is the same type of character as the nurse in the Greek play, her only wish is to assist her mistress, but with each attempt she increases the distress.

Phèdre is motivated by a devastating love for Hippolyte and wishes to die rather than admit this shame. She has refused food for three days. She is not completely guilty in her love, nor completely innocent, as Racine

says in the preface; and with true Jansenist philosophy, he continues, "son crime est plutôt une punition des dieux qu'un mouvement de sa volonté" ("Préface" to Phèdre, Œuvres complètes, p. 246). Phèdre, a descendent of the Sun by way of her mother, explains to Œnone her yearning to see the sun once more:

Noble et brillant auteur d'une triste famille,  
 Toi, dont ma mère osait se vanter d'être fille,  
 .....  
 Soleil, je te viens voir pour la dernière fois!  
 (Phèdre, act I, scene iii, 169-70, 172)

Perhaps this is also the psychological reason for her great attraction to Hippolyte, this bright and pure young man. Phèdre is horrified by her passion but finds herself unable to control it. Her greatest desire is to hide it in her own heart; but, after constant urging, she discloses her deepest feelings to Œnone, the nurse. Although this makes her still more guilty in her own eyes, it also feeds her passion so that she must continue talking about it.

Œnone, stunned at first, is almost relieved when an attendant comes to announce the death of Theseus. Œnone encourages Phèdre to confront Hippolyte with the truth since her love now is legitimate. Phèdre has no intention of confessing to Hippolyte; but she tries, instead, to ask him for help in getting her son accepted as the heir of Theseus to the Athenian throne. However,

she becomes so distraught facing Hippolyte that she confesses the true situation. Hippolyte, who has great pride in his chastity, purity, and virtuousness, is, naturally, outraged. Seeing the disbelief, disgust, and loathing in his eyes Phèdre again considers death, but cannot yet accept it. Throughout the play she is seen as complaining and debating her fate along with her confidante and accomplice, Œnone. Her one moment of cool composure is when she repulses Thésée's happy greeting by telling him, at Œnone's suggestion, that his honor has been offended:

...Arrêtez, Thésée,  
 Et ne profanez point des transports si charmants:  
 Je ne mérite plus ces doux empressements;  
 Vous êtes offensé. . .  
 (Phèdre, act III, scene iv, 914-17).

Phèdre speaks the truth when she says "Vous êtes offensé;" but Thésée understands, as she hopes he will, that it is not Phèdre who is at fault but some third party. The only respect in which Phèdre is less objectionable than Euripides' Phaedra, as Racine explains ("Préface" to Phèdre, Œuvres complètes, p. 246), is in the accusation against Hippolyte to Thésée. Instead of Phèdre confronting her husband personally, it is Œnone who reveals to Thésée the identity of that third party. After Œnone convinces Phèdre that it is best to accuse Hippolyte before he has time to accuse her, Phèdre says:

Fais ce que tu voudras, je m'abandonne à toi.  
 Dans le trouble où je suis, je ne puis rien pour moi  
 (Phèdre, act III, scene iii, 911-12).

Her accusation is not so harsh as Phaedra's for Hippolyte is accused only of having wished to violate her. This concession to the character of Phèdre may have been made to reduce any possible offense which might have been taken by the court of Louis XIV. It reflects again Racine's doctrine of decorum: a queen may suffer from an intolerable passion, but she would not do anything odious. Phèdre easily accepts Œnone's expedient plans, until near the end of the play when she rebukes the nurse so that the latter drowns herself.

When Phèdre hears Thésée call on Neptune to destroy Hippolyte, she realizes that innocent blood will be shed for her guilt, and she goes to confess to Thésée. Before she begins her admission she learns of the love between Hippolyte and Aricie. She becomes so jealous she does not confess in time to save Hippolyte. Finally, only after she hears of his death, does she first take poison to assure her own death, and then go to clear Hippolyte's name, saying to Thésée:

Non, Thésée, il faut rompre un injuste silence;  
 Il faut à votre fils rendre son innocence:  
 Il n'était point coupable . . . (Phèdre, act V,  
 scene vi, 1617-19).

She then accepts her guilt, but with a sort of detachment. One gets the idea that she is standing proudly with no feeling of degradation. She speaks as if she were bestowing a blessing. The use of the words rendre son innocence lends a giftlike quality to the confession.<sup>33</sup> The situation, following Œnone's death, is such that only Phèdre could tell where the guilt lay. This gives greater significance to her confession. It presents a spiritual aspect of Phèdre never before seen. When fear and self-delusion are gone, when she no longer needs to appear something she is not, she can express herself, or perhaps it is her love which can express itself, in this one act of purification, the sacrifice of her life.

Hippolyte is, in some respects, like the Hippolytus of Euripides. He is chaste and virtuous, his interests are sports, friends, and the adoration of Artemis (Diana). Racine, however, humanizes him by having him love Aricie. He surprises himself completely by confessing his love to Aricie. Actually this very natural love makes Hippolyte much more likeable than was Euripides' Hippolytus with his self-righteousness and his condemnations of womankind. At the same time, this love makes him guilty in the eyes of his father because Aricie is the sister of the six

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<sup>33</sup>Stone, op. cit., p. 76.

young men who tried to usurp the throne of Athens. After killing them, Theseus had declared their sister, Aricie, should never marry and produce another pretender to the throne (Phèdre, act II, scene i, 421-30).

In the humanity of Hippolyte, Racine is true to the Sophoclean philosophy that lack of psychological insight is a factor which contributes to a person's downfall.<sup>34</sup> One should never introduce virtuous men only to see them fall without cause from a state of happiness to one of unhappiness. Rather, one should create a man who through his own fault becomes unhappy.<sup>35</sup> There was no forewarning nor foreseeable cause for the tragic death of the Hippolytus of Euripides, but Hippolyte, though deeply respectful of his father's feelings, is lacking in discernment. It is this underestimation of Phèdre's character and of her desire for vengeance, which brings about his banishment. Being virtuous, Hippolyte sees virtue in others, while Phèdre, on the other hand, does not consider it possible that Hippolyte will not immediately accuse her before Thésée. Thésée believes the nurse who explains the cause of Phèdre's shrinking away from him

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<sup>34</sup>Stone, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>35</sup>Lacy Lockert, Best Plays of Racine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), n. 5, p. 293.

after many months of absence, and therefore he sends Hippolyte away with the curse of Neptune called down on him.

Aricie, whom Hippolyte loves, is an innovation of Racine's. In the preface to Phèdre (OEuvres complètes, p. 247), Racine explains that he did not invent her, that several authors, including Virgil, said Hippolyte had married a young Athenian of noble birth who was called Aricie. Racine realized, too, that in the seventeenth century, to have allowed Hippolyte to remain scornful of all women would have immediately cast suspicion on his normality.<sup>36</sup>

Thésée is represented in Racine, as in the classical dramas, as a brave adventurer as well as a man of many loves. Hippolyte recalls to Théràmène, his preceptor:

Tu sais combien mon âme, attentive à ta voix,  
S'échauffait aux récits de ses nobles exploits,  
Quand tu me dépeignais ce héros intrepide  
Consolant les mortels de l'absence d'Alcide,  
Les monstres étouffés, et les brigands punis,  
Procuste, Cercyon, et Scirron, et Sinis,  
Et les os disperses du géant d'Epidaure,  
Et la Crète fumant du sang du Minotaure  
(Phèdre, act I, scene i, 75-82).

and "tant d'autres, dont les noms lui sont même échappés"  
(Phèdre, act I, scene i, 87). One never knows where

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<sup>36</sup> Jean Pommier, Aspects of Racine (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1954), p. 187.



Thésée will go nor when he will return. When he comes home this time, he is shocked, and his pride is wounded, that Hippolyte would betray him; that Hippolyte would display a kind of love he reserved for himself.<sup>37</sup> After his display of anger when he banishes Hippolyte from all his states (Phèdre, act IV, scene ii, 1063-64), Thésée begins to question the justice of his condemnation as he talks to Aricie and later learns of the death of Oenone, his informant. This is almost a confirmation of his doubts. Then Phèdre, after taking poison, confesses and dies in the arms of attendants. Thésée, in his grief and remorse, requests that the memory of Phèdre's crime die with her. In order to atone as much as he can for his unjust treatment of his son, he accepts Aricie, in spite of the exploits of her brothers, as a daughter (Phèdre, act V, scene vi, 1654).

Although ordinarily Racine's plots use natural causes to bring about a dénouement with suspense and surprise, in Phèdre he makes use of the same supernatural intervention as did Euripides. It is evident that neither Phèdre nor Thésée will kill this youth so beloved by each one, and Hippolyte himself is by no means a silent,

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<sup>37</sup>Henry Lancaster, A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1940), Part IV, Vol. I, p. 108.

moody sort of person who might commit suicide. An accidental death would be completely out of the question here as anywhere in poetry.<sup>38</sup> Racine did not, however, bring the spectators to this point of supernatural intervention without proper preparation. He refers to gods and goddesses throughout the play. Phèdre was descended, through her mother, from the Sun<sup>39</sup> and her father, descended from Zeus, is now the inflexible judge of the dead. She tells OEnone:

Le ciel, tout l'univers est plein de mes aïeux.  
Où me cacher? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale.  
Mais que dis-je? mon père y tient l'urne fatale;  
Le sort, dit-on, l'a mise en ses sévères mains:  
Minos juge aux enfers tous les pâles humains  
(Phèdre, act V, scene 1, 1276-80).

Aricie, Phèdre's rival, is descended through Pallas and Erectheus from the Earth (Phèdre, act II, scene i, 421-22). Hippolyte reminds Phèdre that Neptune is Thésée's guardian when he says:

Neptune le protège, et ce dieu tutélaire  
Ne sera pas en vain imploré par mon père  
(Phèdre, act II, scene v, 621-22).

The walls of Athens are "les superbes remparts que Minerve a bâtis" (Phèdre, act I, scene v, 360). All of these dieties mentioned throughout the play suggest an atmosphere

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<sup>38</sup>Bernard Weinberg, The Art of Jean Racine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 271.

<sup>39</sup>cf. ante, p. 45.

in which the extraordinary becomes ordinary, and makes it possible to insinuate a supernatural event into the action of the play itself.

Racine also brings monsters into several conversations, intimating the kind of intervention which can be expected. While talking to Théràmène, Hippolyte lists his father's deeds,<sup>40</sup> and laments "qu'aucuns monstres par moi comptés jusqu'aujourd'hui ne m'ont acquis le droit de faillir comme lui" (Phèdre, act I, scene i, 99-100). Phèdre speaks of the Minotaur, the monster half man and half bull which Thésée slew (Phèdre, act II, scene v, 649-50). In relating his most recent adventures, Thésée refers to monsters (Phèdre, act III, scene v, 962-66). Then Hippolyte expresses again his ardent wish to find monsters to conquer, saying:

Souffrez que mon courage ose enfin s'occuper:  
Souffrez, si quelque monstre a pu vous échapper,  
Que j'apporte à vos pieds sa dépouille honorable  
(Phèdre, act V, scene v, 947-49).

It is this continual intermingling of the supernatural and natural elements which makes the story about the death of Hippolyte, as told by Théràmène, credible.

In the overall picture, Hippolytus Crowned by Euripides is more concise than Phèdre because it has

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<sup>40</sup>cf. ante, p. 50.

fewer characters and more singleness of plot. It lacks the dramatic tension which the audience feels during Racine's play for, in the prologue, the goddess, Aphrodite (Venus), tells all that will happen and to whom. In the interest of propriety, the violence which occurs takes place off stage. The play, however, reaches its climactic moment all too soon, for Phaedra takes her life in the middle of the play, even before Theseus arrives home. Thus the dénouement seems a bit long with too much conversation and philosophical asides interpolated by the chorus.

Racine's plot is more full of incidents, and it is a longer play. The situation and delineation of character are presented in the conversation between Hippolyte and Thérémène and between Phèdre and Œnone.

Probably the most significant difference between Euripides and Racine is not in their themes nor in the presentation of the plot, but in their character interpretations. Hippolytus, in the Greek play, with his self-righteousness and vanity, earns dislike rather than sympathy from the audience. Hippolyte, because of his human warmth, wins the spectators' pity and compassion. Phaedra, ashamed, humiliated and afraid, dies blaming the innocent Hippolytus. Phèdre, on the other hand, accepts the blame herself and clears Hippolyte, so that, though she is not completely

forgiven by the audience, she is pitied as a truly tragic figure.

## CHAPTER III

### PLAYS WITH BIBLICAL SOURCES

#### A. ESTHER

During his retirement from the theater following Phèdre (1677), Racine's time was spent at the court, writing the history of the times, and with his family, directing the children's educational and religious training. His life was much simpler and more serene than before 1677. In 1688, he received the request of Madame de Maintenon to write a play without passion for the girls of Saint-Cyr, something "qui, sans les détourner de leur travail et de leurs exercices ordinaires, les instruisent en les divertissant" (Préface to Esther, Œuvres complètes, p. 265). Saint Cyr was a school for the daughters of the less affluent nobles, established and directed, so far as policy was concerned, by Madame de Maintenon, secret wife of Louis XIV. Racine had never written a play without passion, and it had been eleven years since he had composed any drama. He questioned the form such a play should take and he questioned his ability to fulfill the requirements.

But Racine could not resist the pleasure of writing and started searching the Bible stories for the proper

subject material. Of all the women in the Bible, surely Esther, the young queen who had saved her people, would be the most appealing! The book of Esther relates the story of Ahasuerus, King of Persia and ruler over all the land from India to Ethiopia. After spending many days exhibiting the wealth and produce of the empire, Ahasuerus provided a seven-day feast for the princes of his one hundred twenty-seven provinces. He then ordered Vashti, the queen, to present herself so that all might see her beauty. Her refusal to do so was taken as an insult to the king and to all the princes present (Esther I: 16). She was therefore deposed and another queen chosen in her place. The manner of choosing the new queen provided Mordecai, a captive Jew, the opportunity of presenting his cousin among the candidates. At the end of a year of purification, the candidates were presented to the King, one at a time, and Esther won his favor by her beauty and grace. In the meantime, the Jewish Mordecai saved the King's life, after hearing two Persians plan his assassination (Esther II: 21-23). During this same year, Haman, prince of Amalek, won the King's favor and came to be second in command of the kingdom (Esther III: 1). Haman's wrath against Mordecai for not bowing as he passed, prompted him to make a proclamation that all

Jews throughout the kingdom should be killed on a certain day (Esther III: 9-10).

At this crisis, Racine's play opens and all these facts, save the last, are disclosed in a conversation between Esther and her confidante, Elise. Suddenly Mardochee is heard to enter the queen's apartment, though in the Bible story, only those messengers named by the King are permitted. In answer to Elise's surprise at this intrusion Esther replies:

Son amitié pour moi le rend ingénieux.  
Absent je le consulte, et ses réponses sages  
Pour venir jusqu'à moi trouvent mille passages:  
Un père a moins de soin du salut de son fils  
(Esther, act I, scene 1, 94-97).

Mardochee then tells Esther of Aman's authorization, obtained from Assuérus, to kill all the Jews. He asks her, at the peril of her life, to intercede for her people. This direct confrontation between Mardochee and Esther adds much color and emotional tension to this scene which, in the Bible story, is carried out through messengers (Esther IV).

Esther moves quickly to fulfill Mardochee's request. The Biblical Esther was received immediately by King Ahasuerus although she came unannounced (Esther V: 2). But to dramatize Esther's impropriety, almost impertinence, in appearing before the King uninvited, Racine has Assuérus, when he first hears the approaching footsteps, demand



identification in such a tone of voice that Esther faints (Esther, act II, scene vi, 632-35). Upon seeing this, the King becomes gentleness itself, admits her, and promises her any request up to half of his kingdom. At this her only request is that he and Aman honor her by dining with her the next evening.

That night King Assuérus cannot sleep, so has the history of his reign read to him. He is thus reminded that he has not recompensed Mardochée for saving his life. The next morning the King asks Aman what should be done for a man he wishes to honor. Aman, thinking the man must be himself, recommends extravagant honors and is completely chagrined to learn he himself must pay these honors to Mardochée, the Jew whom he hates the most. Both accounts relate this scene vividly. Afterwards, however, the vexed Biblical Haman returns home in mourning with his head covered (Esther VI: 12), while Racine's Aman and his wife, Zarès, discuss the irritating situation and consider fleeing the country, especially for the children's sake (Esther, act III, scene 1, 890-901).

At this point the King's chamberlain calls Haman to the queen's banquet. In Racine's play, the same chamberlain, Hydaspes, takes time to reassure Aman, noting that he alone has been honored with an invitation to dine with the King and Queen and suggesting that he will

have Esther's support (Esther, act III, scene ii, 918-19).

Again at the feast, Assuérus promises Esther any wish up to half of his kingdom. Esther, while revealing her Jewish ancestry, a surprise to both Assuérus and Aman, asks only that the Jews be pardoned. She tells something of the history of the Jews, denounces Aman for his plans to kill them, and praises Mardochee. Assuérus leaves to summon Mardochee and returns to find Aman at Esther's feet begging her to intercede for him. The King orders Aman killed immediately, gives Aman's wealth and power to Mardochee, revokes his order concerning the death of the Jews, and orders that the Jews be restored to a position of honor, equal to that of the Persians. On this great climax, the choir, chanting praises, brings the play to an end.

This short three-act play, sometimes called a sacred elegy, intersperses song with recitation. Racine uses a choir with Esther's confidante, Elise, as leader, to acquaint the audience with the feelings, fears, and hopes of the Jewish people, as well as their prayers of praise and petitions to God. This, plus the first conversation with Elise presenting the situation, and the fact that the last orders or edicts of Assuérus, though expressed, are not carried out in the play, provides the

means whereby Racine keeps the unity of time. One might say that the unity of place is maintained by saying that the action all took place at the palace of Assuérus, though the first scene occurs in the apartment of Esther, the second in the throne room, and the third in the garden of Queen Esther's apartment.

Racine changed the Bible story to tone down discreetly the brutality of the original. Especially is this evident in the character of Esther. The Bible suggests her excitement in the presence of the King, speaks of her devotion to Mordecai and her people, but stresses her unforgiving vindictiveness toward Haman and the enemies of the Jews. This vindictiveness brought about the death throughout the Empire of some 8,300 oppressors of the Jews (Esther 9: 6, 12, 15, 16). On the other hand, Racine continually tells of her sentiments. She seems pensive, gentle, and sad. When the King crowned her and honored her above all others, her only feeling was one of sadness for her people:

Hélas; durant ces jours de joie et de festins,  
 Quelle était en secret ma honte et mes chagrins!  
 Esther, disais-je, Esther dans le pourpre est assise,  
 La moitié de la terre à son sceptre est soumise,  
 Et de Jérusalem l'herbe cache les murs!  
 Sion, repaire affreux de reptiles impurs,  
 Voit de son temple saint les pierres dispersées,  
 Et du Dieu d'Israël les fêtes sont cessées!  
 (Esther, act I, scene 1, 81-88)

Because of her love for her people she has filled the palace with Jewish maidens whom she describes to her confidante, Elise:

Jeunes et tendres fleurs par le sort agitées,  
Sous un ciel étranger comme moi transplantées  
(Esther, act I, scene 1, 103-04).

Besides expressing the feelings of the Jews, the choir is used to prepare the King for the forthcoming request of Esther, and to soften him with inferred compliments:

J'admire un roi victorieux,  
Que sa valeur conduit triomphant en tous lieux;  
Mais un roi sage et qui hait l'injustice,  
Qui sous la loi du riche impérieux  
Ne souffre point que le pauvre gémissé,  
Est le plus beau présent des cieux.  
La veuve en sa défense espère.  
De l'orphelin il est le père.  
Et les larmes du juste implorant son appui  
Sont précieuses devant lui  
(Esther, act III, scene iii, 989-98).

Though there is no choir in the Bible story, Racine uses one after the Greek example to express the awakening of the Jewish girls to the realities of the life about them:

Tout Israël périt. Pleurez, mes tristes yeux:  
Il ne fut jamais sous les cieux  
Un si juste sujet de larmes (Esther, act I, scene v,  
297-300).

But later after the order for the execution of all Jews is reversed, their debt to Esther and to God is acknowledged by the choir which chants:

Comment s'est calmé l'orage?  
Quelle main salutaire a chassé le nuage?  
L'aimable Esther a fait ce grand ouvrage.  
De l'amour de son Dieu son cœur s'est embrasé;

Au péril d'une mort funeste,  
 Son zèle ardent s'est exposé:  
 Elle a parlé; le ciel a fait le reste (Esther,  
 act III, scene ix, 1221-27).

Filled with love and adoration, the chorus closes the play chanting:

Que son nom soit béni; que son nom soit chanté;  
 Que l'on célèbre ses ouvrages  
 Au-delà des temps et des âges,  
 Au-delà de l'éternité! (Esther, act III,  
 scene ix, 1283-86)

There are a number of minor differences between the two accounts. For example, the Biblical Esther is the cousin of Mordecai. The Bible says, "And he brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter" (Esther II: 7), and "Esther, daughter of Abihail, uncle of Mordecai . . ." (Esther II: 15). Racine, on the other hand, identifies her as Mardochee's niece (Esther, act I, scene i, 47). The Bible describes Mordecai's character by explaining that he accepts the responsibility of Esther when her parents die, and he is constantly devoted to the welfare of the Jews. In Racine's Esther, Mardochee becomes le sage Mardochee (Esther, act I, scene i, 44), whom Assuérus recognizes as a man of true zeal (Esther, act II, scene iii, 549), a man who has a faithful interest in the King's glory (Esther, act II, scene iii, 550), one whose virtue forgets self (Esther, act II, scene iii, 563), and finally as a man cherished by Heaven whom he, the King, invites

to come "briller près de moi dans le rang qui t'est dû" (Esther, act III, scene vii, 1179).

The most evident object lesson for the spectator is the life of Aman, called Haman in the Bible. The Jewish choir in their first appearance call him l'impie Aman (Esther, act I, scene v, 313), as he prepares their horrible death. Later, at Esther's table, the girls of the choir chant of the pride and disdain in Aman's face (Esther, act III, scene iii, 939). They wonder what food and wine will be prepared for him, and suggest the blood of orphans and the tears of the unhappy (Esther, act III, scene iii, 952-53). Aman is that fierce monster whose calumny, fury, vengeance, and deception are disclosed by the choir (Esther, act III, scene iii, 969-81). The first suggestion of Aman's downfall comes when he is ordered by Assuérus to give to Mardochee the honor he hoped for himself. This mortification seems less damaging when he is invited to the Queen's table. Expecting glory, Aman reaches the end of hope and of life when Esther discloses to Assuérus that Aman is a foe to the King's own glory (Esther, act III, scene iv, 1088), and blames him for the condemnation of the Jews and the proposed execution of Mardochee. Assuérus immediately orders the death of Aman.

Mardochee and Aman represent two kinds of men, the first, pious and unselfish, goes from a very low to

a very high station in life, while Aman, both impious and selfish, moves from the high to the very low station, even to death.

Thus does this sacred elegy, which expresses personality by means of poetry and music, present its moral lesson, that the hand of God directs man's destiny.

#### B. ATHALIE

Athalie (1691), the second religious play and the last of Racine's dramas, did not receive the plaudits given Esther. The probable reason was not that it was a lesser play, for in later years it came to be rated with Phèdre as his greatest, but that it was played with no scenery, stage properties, or costumes. This, in an era when splendor and pomp were essential to excellence and worth, devitalized and impoverished it to such an extent that its true value was not recognized for some time.

Athalie affirms the need for one God in the universe and the fact that man cannot foresee the results of his actions without a communion with that one God. This play, which portrays the struggle between the worshippers of the one God and the worshippers of Baal, suggests the need for scrutinizing the religious and political situation in France at the close of the seventeenth century.

The play concludes that the assurance of law and order is dependent on a union of church and state.

The Bible stories (II Kings, chapter 11, and II Chronicles, chapters 22 and 23) relate the usurpation of the throne by Athaliah, called Athalie in Racine's version. At the death of her son, Ahaziah, Athaliah killed her grandsons so that she alone might rule. But one baby, Joas, was saved and reared in the temple. During the years of Athaliah's reign, the High Priest not only taught the boy, now known as Eliacin, the things he should know as the future king, but prepared the Levites for the day when the rule should be retaken from Athaliah.

Racine was never a slave to his sources. He saved the essentials of the primary account, but he added or subtracted characters and events to suit the needs of drama. For example, in the first scene of his Athalie, Abner, the chief officer of the Queen's guard, speaks to Joad, the High Priest. Abner is an invention of Racine, a very logical invention, for the Queen no doubt had a captain of the guard, though neither Bible story mentions him. Abner, while serving the Queen, feels himself also to be serving the true God. This might have made of him a very despicable person had he not been completely honest in his attempt to "render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's and unto God the things which be God's" (Luke,



Chapter 20, verse 25). He is needed in the play to mediate between the Queen and the High Priest. Abner, speaking with Joad, expresses the doubts and fears of the people (Athalie, act I, scene i, 15-16), and warns Joad of mounting difficulties with Athalie. He discloses the evil influence on the Queen of Mathan, the priest of Baal (Athalie, act I, scene i, 35-36). He opposes Mathan and the Queen in their desire to bring Joas to the palace (Athalie, act II, scene v, 559-62). Abner also pleads for Joad with Athalie saying that in expelling the Queen from the temple Joad is only doing his duty (Athalie, act II, scene v, 439-49). The arrival of the Queen at the temple at a crucial moment makes Abner's assent to the plot against her unnecessary; but, upon learning the identity of the young king, he gives his allegiance to the new ruler (Athalie, act V, scene v, 1740).

Abner's counterpart on the side of Baal and the Queen is Mathan, who is mentioned in the Biblical story only at the time of his death in the temple of Baal. Racine makes of him a constant attendant upon the Queen, whom he encourages in selfish action, knowing he himself will benefit. He invents a story about gold, "des trésors par David amassés" (Athalie, act I, scene i, 49-50), being hidden in the temple of God to encourage the Queen's desire to obtain it by destroying the temple. He adds great

significance to Athalie's dream to increase her anxiety and displeasure with the Levites and especially with Joad (Athalie, act II, scene v, 557-59). Mathan even admits to Nabal, his confident, who serves neither Baal nor the God of Isreal, his aptitude for flattery, for profiting from expedience, for lying and for ruthlessness (Athalie, act III, scene iii, 935-44). He explains his motives as "l'amour des grandeurs, la soif de commander" (Athalie, act III, scene iii, 925), and admits he would still be a minister of God if such motives could be accommodated under God's rule (Athalie, act III, scene iii, 926).

Joas, or Eliacin, does not appear often in the play, though all the action centers around him and his ascension to the throne. When he does appear, he is an intelligent, confident boy of nine or ten years. Racine mentions in his Préface to Athalie that he accepts the word of Sévère Sulpice, author of the Abrégé de l'histoire sacré (Œuvres complètes, p. 283), that Athalie reigned for eight years instead of only six, as stated in the Bible. The added two years make the competent responses of Joas to the Queen more possible. Joas is so discreet, likeable, and unafraid in his conversation with the Queen that he melts her heart and brings about her one moment of human kindness as she says:

Enfin, Eliacin, vous avez su me plaire;  
 Vous n'êtes point sans doute un enfant ordinaire.  
 Vous voyez, je suis reine et n'ai point d'héritier;  
 Laissez là cet habit, quittez ce vil métier;  
 Je veux vous faire part de toutes mes richesses;  
 Essayez dès ce jour l'effet de mes promesses.  
 A ma table, partout à mes côtés assis,  
 Je prétends vous traiter comme mon propre fils  
 (Athalie, act II, scene vii, 692-98).

Actually, Joas, hidden under the name of Eliacin, is a young reflection of the character of Joad, the High Priest. He has courage, for he could not be lacking in courage and still be worthy of the throne. He is as devout and confident in the will of God as Joad, so that he excites no feeling of anxiety or suspense in the audience, a feeling necessary for a good play. It is, therefore, the prerogative of those around him to create and develop anxiety for him.

Josabeth, wife of the High Priest, who discovered the child and hid him all these years from Athalie, is the natural person to express these ever-increasing fears. In the short Biblical account, Jehosheba (Josabeth) is mentioned only once as she saves the babe from death. Racine, on the other hand, throughout each of the eight scenes in which she appears, emphasizes and increases her fears for Joas. She worries for fear the identity of Joas will be inadvertently disclosed too soon, she worries for fear the Levites will not be strong enough to protect Joas and the temple (Athalie, act I, scene ii,

235-40). She is so worried that she wants Joad to delay the coronation and let her escape with Joas to a safe place (Athalie, act III, scene vi, 1055-56). Though not once does she change the course of events, she does provide the anxiety needed to build up the desired suspense.

The two strongest characters in the play, Joad and Athalie, represent the epitome of good and of evil. Athalie, as mentioned in the short summary above,<sup>41</sup> is wickedness itself, as was her mother, Jezebel, before her (I Kings 18:4, 19:2, and I Kings 21). After obtaining the crown by murdering the possible heirs, Athalie set up the worship of Baal, even going so far as to build a temple to Baal in Jerusalem, the Holy City. In fact, she is determined that unless the High Priest, Joad, gives up Joas and the imagined hidden treasure, the temple of God will be destroyed (Athalie, act III, scene i, 989-90). Joad describes her as lawless and impious (Athalie, act I, scene i, 71-72). Josabeth, his wife, calls her the "implacable Athalie" (Athalie, act I, scene ii, 244), while Mathan, her trusted priest of Baal, speaks of her vigorous manly qualities:

...cette reine éclairée, intrépide,  
Elevée au-dessus de son sexe timide,  
Qui d'abord accablait ses ennemis surpris,  
Et d'un instant perdu connaissait tout le prix  
(Athalie, act III, scene iii, 871-74).

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<sup>41</sup>cf. ante, p. 66.

Athalie has a terrifying dream which changes her noticeably. In the dream she first sees her mother who warns her of impending death, then she sees a young boy in white whom she later identifies as the boy in the temple. She becomes so indecisive and vacillating that even Nabal, Mathan's friend, remarks: "D'où naît dans ses conseils cette confusion?" (Athalie, act III, scene iii, 863) Athalie herself admits her trouble when she says, "Non, je ne puis: tu vois mon trouble et ma faiblesse" (Athalie, act II, scene iii, 435). Joad believes her confusion is God's answer to his supplication:

Livre en mes faibles mains ses puissants ennemis;  
 Confonds dans ses conseils une reine cruelle:  
 Daigne, daigne, mon Dieu, sur Mathan et sur elle  
 Répandre cet esprit d'imprudence et d'erreur,  
 De la chute des rois funeste avant-coureur!  
 (Athalie, act I, scene iii, 290-94)

Later he rejoices, saying: "Déjà ce Dieu vengeur commence à la troubler" (Athalie, act IV, scene iii, 1343).

Her irresolution is as strange to her as the near gentleness with which she questions Joas. His replies make her exclaim:

Quel prodige nouveau me trouble et m'embarrasse!  
 La douceur de sa voix, son enfance, sa grâce,  
 Font insensiblement à mon inimitié  
 Succéder. . . Je serais sensible à la pitié!  
 (Athalie, act II, scene vii, 651-54)

She continues questioning Joas about his pastimes and teachings, and concludes by asking him to live at the

palace with her (Athalie, act II, scene vii, 696-99). Joas refuses and, after a short interchange with Josabet, Athalie leaves saying, "Je sors contente: J'ai voulu voir, j'ai vu" (Athalie, act II, scene vii, 736-37). But she is not content and sends Mathan back for Joas. After his abrupt dismissal by Joad, she sends Abner, and finally she herself, with guards, goes to the temple to investigate. The minute she crosses the threshold this time the doors are closed, the trumpets sound, and the newly crowned king is saluted. Abner decides to serve the king chosen by God, and Athalie, at long last, recognizes the power of God and blames Him for her downfall:

Impitoyable Dieu, toi seul as tout conduit!  
 C'est toi qui, me flattant d'une vengeance aisée,  
 M'as vingt fois en un jour à moi-même opposée:  
 Tantôt pour un enfant excitant mes remords,  
 Tantôt m'éblouissant de tes riches trésors,  
 Que j'ai craint de livrer aux flammes, au pillage  
 (Athalie, act V, scene vi, 1774-79).

Joad constantly expresses his faith in and devotion to God. While Josabeth feebly doubts God's ability to save Joas and defeat the queen's army with only the Levites to assist (Athalie, act I, scene ii, 221-25), Joad proclaims his complete faith in the victory of God's people:

Et comptez-vous pour rien Dieu qui combat pour nous?  
 Dieu, qui de l'orphelin protège l'innocence,  
 Et fait dans la faiblesse éclater sa puissance  
 (Athalie, act I, scene ii, 226-28).

Being the High Priest does not make Joad gentle and meek. Rather he is capable of intense anger as when he drives the Queen from the interior of the temple. The incident is reported by his son, Zacharie:

Mon père. . . Ah! quel courroux animait ses regards!  
Moïse à Pharaon parut moins formidable! (Athalie,  
act I, scene iv, 402-03)

Mathan, also, was driven from the temple when he came to request Joas, and Joad exclaims:

Sors donc de devant moi, monstre d'impiété.  
De toutes tes horreurs, va, comble la mesure.  
Dieu s'apprête à te joindre à la race parjure,  
Aïron et Dathan, Doëg, Achitophel:  
Les chiens, à qui son bras a livré Jézabel,  
Attendant que sur toi sa fureur se déploie,  
Déjà sont à ta porte, et demandent leur proie  
(Athalie, act III, scene iv, 1034-40).

Mathan was so disturbed by the wrath displayed by Joad that he could not find the door. Nabal said:

...Où vous égarez-vous?  
De vos sens étonnés quel désordre s'empare?  
Voilà votre chemin (Athalie, act III, scene v,  
1042-44).

Besides being an outstanding spiritual leader, Joad must have the qualities of a general to direct the defense of the temple and of David's heir, Joas. Because Joad must win against Athalie, he must have a personality stronger than hers. It is for him to bring about the fulfillment of God's will that a descendant of David, the progenitor of the promised Redeemer, should reign in Jerusalem.

News of the destruction of the temple of Baal and the slaughter of Mathan, of the death of the Queen, of the rout of her army, of the trumpets sounding to proclaim King Joas, all announce the triumph of God and his people.

The chorus appears much less often in Athalie than in Esther and is used to comment on the major acts and to sing the praises of God. As in the Greek plays which Racine admired so much, the choir in Athalie provides the interlude between acts, so there is no actual division. It contributes much to creating the proper atmosphere of the Old Testament time and place, since the kings, and prophets as well, often called for music for relaxation, or to express their feelings of the moment.

Some contemporaries of Racine saw Bossuet, the tutor of the Dauphin and director of the religious policy of the state, as Joad. Racine in his Préface to Athalie (Œuvres complètes) suggests an analogy between Joas and the youthful Duc de Bourgogne, while others felt Joas pictured Racine himself, orphaned in infancy and reared at Port-Royal.

Readers marvel that during those many years of silence Racine had lost none of his imagination, inventiveness or poetic skill, and could bring to life this



Bible story with beauty, gentleness, and truth. Voltaire praised Athalie by saying:<sup>42</sup>

La France se glorifie d'Athalie; c'est le chef-d'œuvre de notre théâtre. C'est peut-être le chef-d'œuvre de esprit humain.

.....

C'est Racine qui est véritablement grand, et d'autant plus grand qu'il ne paraît jamais chercher à l'être; c'est l'auteur d'Athalie qui est l'homme parfait. Je vous confie qu'en commentant Corneille je deviens idolâtre de Racine. Je ne peux plus souffrir le boursoufflé et une grandeur hors de nature.

Voltaire's enthusiasm for Racine may or may not have been influenced by the fact that Racine had the courage and resolution to suggest the dangers of absolute powers invested in a king.

The play suggests the triumph of religion and the reconstruction of the state. Racine has, in this play, Athalie, satisfied both the representatives of the state and those of religion, both Versailles and Port-Royal.

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<sup>42</sup>Theodore Besterman (ed.) "Voltaire à Claude Henri de Fuzée de Voisenon" from Voltaire's Correspondence (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1959), Vol. LI, p. 191.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS

There were many Jean Racines. There was first the Racine of his contemporaries who either hated or loved him. No one was indifferent to his work, with the possible exception of his wife, who had not read his plays. There was Racine the courtier who felt that serving Louis XIV was one way to serve God. There was the religious Racine who regretted during all his later years having ever displeased the men of Port-Royal. There was Racine the student who, having gained an unquenchable interest in the classics, continued during his lifetime his study and enjoyment of them. And there is the Racine whose works contain timeless qualities which make him contemporary to all ages.

It is Racine, the great admirer of the Greek classics, who has dominated this discussion. Were his mythological and Biblical dramas mere French imitations of the Greek and Old Testament counterparts? Rather than imitate these stories, Racine adapted the mythological or Biblical character to the contemporary age. He knew that with some purely superficial changes, man, whether with a Greek, Roman, or Biblical name, is basically the same; and that from the beginning of time, in all climes, certain

passions have dominated man and those same passions trouble him still.

Undoubtedly, at certain moments, each spectator may identify himself with one of the characters in Racine's plays. For example, in Iphigénie, there is the father figure, Agamemnon, who would sacrifice anything to his ambition, and the mother who works first on wedding plans and later on every possible scheme to save her daughter from disaster. Andromaque (Andromaque) emphasizes again the mother symbol who sacrifices all for her son. Wicked politicians are exemplified by Mathan (Athalie) and Aman (Esther). Many young women may see themselves in Hermione (Andromaque) who cries, "Je ne t'ai point aimé, cruel? Qu'ai-je donc fait?" (Andromaque, act IV, scene v, 1356). Then there are those governed by passion; perhaps by the passion of hate as Etéocle and Polynice in La Thébaiide, or by passionate love as Phèdre in Phèdre or Oreste in Andromaque, or by the passion of jealousy as Eriphile in Iphigénie. Or perhaps the spectator sees himself as one of the lovers such as Hippolyte and Ericie in Phèdre, or Iphigénie and Achille in Iphigénie. Definitely Racine turns the thoughts of spectators to the mysteries of the heart.

Racine's poetry is the epitome of melody and harmony. The Alexandrine has strength and smoothness, as when Joad speaks to Abner of God:

Scumis avec respect à sa volonté sainte,  
Je crains Dieu, cher Abner, et n'ai point d'autre crainte.  
(Athalie, act I, scene i, 63-64).

or, as Esther tells Elise:

Dieu tient le cœur des rois entre ses mains puissantes;  
Il fait que tout prospère aux âmes innocentes  
(Esther, act I, scene i, 67-68).

Only the chorus chants in verse other than the Alexandrine:

O douce paix!  
O lumière éternelle!  
Beauté toujours nouvelle!  
Heureux le cœur épris de tes attraits!  
O douce paix!  
O lumière éternelle!  
Heureux le cœur qui ne te perd jamais!  
(Esther, act II, scene ix, 802-08)

Even in anger, such as Thésée shows after having heard his son accused, the Alexandrine flows easily. Thésée laments:

Ah! qu'est-ce que j'entends? Un traître, un téméraire  
Préparait cet outrage à l'honneur de son père!  
Avec quelle rigueur, destin, tu me poursuis!  
Je ne sais où je vais, je ne sais où je suis!  
(Phèdre, act IV, scene i, 1001-04)

Racine desired to portray, in beautiful poetry, what he considered the essential qualities of civilized man by presenting to his contemporaries their cultural ancestors.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Lancaster, op. cit., p. 127.

His themes, despite the remoteness of the time in which the events took place, are close to ordinary experience. His tragedies are satisfying because they express everyone's thoughts and dreams.

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