Jean Racine

Iphigenia, Phaedra and Athaliah

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IPHIGENIA · PHAEDRA · ATHALIAH

JEAN RACINE was born in 1639 at La Ferté Milon, sixty miles east of Paris. Orphaned at an early age, he was educated at the Little Schools of Port Royal and the pro-Jansenist College of Beauvais. He soon reacted against his austere mentors and by 1660 he had begun to write for the theatre and had been introduced to the court of Louis XIV. In 1677, when he had ten plays to his credit and was high in favour with both the court and the public, he abandoned the theatre, which was regarded as far from respectable by the Church, and joined the Establishment as Royal Historiographer. It was only after a silence of twelve years that he wrote his last two plays (both on religious subjects), *Esther* and *Athaliah*. He died in 1699.

JOHN CAIRNCROSS was educated at Glasgow University, at the Sorbonne, and at Trinity College, Cambridge. After a period in the British Civil Service, he settled in Rome, but worked for a time as Chief Editor in the United Nations (ESCSP) in Bangkok. Later, he was Head of the Department of Romance Languages at Western Reserve University, Cleveland. He afterwards moved to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome. He has also translated another volume of Racine's tragedies, *Andromacbe and Other Plays*, together with Corneille's *Polyeuctus, The Liar and Nicomedes* and *The Cid, Cinna and The Theatrical Illusion* for Penguin Classics, as well as La Fontaine's *Fables* (a selection) and other poems. He is also the author of *Molière bourgeois et libertin, After Polygamy was Made a Sin* and *L'humanité de Molière*.

JEAN RACINE

Iphigenia · Phaedra Athaliah

Translated and Introduced by
JOHN CAIRNCROSS

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

This translation first published 1963
Reprinted with revised Foreword 1970
Reprinted with new Further Reading 2004
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EISBN: 978–0–141–90934–9

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD TO THE 1970 EDITION

THE present reprint of *Iphigenia, Phaedra* and *Athaliah* offers a suitable opportunity to take stock of the essential problems inherent in the translation of Racine.

The various modern versions of *Phaedra* and other Racinian plays and the critics' reactions to my own version have confirmed me in my belief that Racine should be rendered as literally as possible, that the rendering should be in unrhymed verses of five syllables (i.e. blank verse) and that the major aim within these limitations should be to try to reproduce in English the poetry of the greatest of French tragedians, and, in particular, as I expressed it in my earlier Foreword, his 'subtle, taut and exquisite verse'.

These various considerations represent in fact the different facets of a single thesis. In other words, if a version of, say, *Phaedra* does not convey at least something of the play's grandeur, it is simply a bad translation. If, on the contrary, it does, there is surely every reason to prefer to let Racine speak for himself, rather than adapt the work, as Lowell has done in the case of *Phaedra*. To quote a review by John Weightman of that version, the work 'glints and sparkles in a manner quite foreign to the Racinian mode, as [the author] himself is the first to admit.… As English poetry, Mr Lowell's version is very successful indeed in many passages. Unfortunately, the success is Romantic, not neo-classical, so that it will leave the English reader as unacquainted with the flavour of Racine as before…. By following Racine more or less, Mr Lowell blurs the effects; he over-energizes the less important details and adds a lot more of his own, while under-energizing the great moments. The puzzle is: why should a poet of his ability want to remain tethered to Racine at all?' Why indeed?

If fidelity is to be preferred to recasting, then 'translation of Racine means transposition into the nearest corresponding English metre. [And, since the couplet] has never been a great success on the English stage… for the translator of Racine, there is no real alternative to blank verse'* or, to use the felicitous expression of another critic,† to unrhymed couplets. This effect is facilitated by the combination of ' the variety of the English metre with the speed and drive of Racine's alexandrines'.*
Hence, the present translation 'does not sound like a minor Jacobean play or a contemporary writer's attempt at verse drama.… It is plainly a translation of Racine and draws its strength from the original.'

In the same spirit, I am convinced that, unless the translator is to some extent able to recreate Racine's poetry, his version can only serve as a literal crib. Whether, or how far, I have succeeded in my aim must be left to the informed reader to judge. But I am greatly encouraged by the authoritative verdict that 'so much of Racine comes through that it will never be possible again to describe him as "untranslatable"'.

Rome, 1970 JOHN CAIRNCROSS

JEAN RACINE

RACINE, quoting Aristotle, calls Euripides, whom he admired so much 'the most tragic of all poets'. And the words can be applied with equal felicity to Racine himself. Yet, by origin and upbringing, he seemed an unlikely candidate for the tragic muse.

He was born in 1639 at the small depressing township of La Ferté Milon, which, though only some sixty miles east of Paris, was regarded as buried in the depth of the provinces. He was orphaned at a tender age, and had to be brought up on charity. His relatives belonged to the Puritanical Catholic sect known as Jansenists, and for them, as for all strict churchmen in France of the time, the stage and all its works were of the devil. Nevertheless, it was to the Jansenists that Racine owed his initiation to literature. The Little Schools of Port Royal (the famous abbey which was the spiritual centre of the sect) provided an education famous for its soundness and thoroughness. In particular, it included an excellent grounding in Greek – a most unusual practice at the time. After he left these masters in 1653, Racine spent two years at the college of Beauvais, which was entirely under Jansenist influence.

But Racine was not long in reacting against his austere mentors. By 1660, his vocation for the theatre revealed itself, and he was hard at work on a play (of which nothing is known but the title). The following year he was hobnobbing in Paris with the notorious freethinker and Epicurean La Fontaine (who was later to compose his celebrated *Fables*). The young man in his own words was 'running with the wolves'.

Port Royal not only gave Racine the schooling that he was to turn to account in his plays; it also introduced him to the aristocratic circles that were to give him his entrée to the Court of the young Louis XIV. The duc de Luynes, formerly a Jansenist sympathizer, had appointed to his service a cousin of Racine's who had risen to the dignity of chief steward. But de Luynes, for personal reasons, turned his back on the Jansenists, who were never popular at Court, and rallied to Louis' support. The Duke, soon smiled on by the King, smoothed the path of the ambitious and gifted young poet. How well he profited from the opportunity may be seen from the select list of names of the patrons to whom he dedicated his plays. *The Thebaid*, his first work (1664), bears the name of the duc de Saint Aignan (the organizer of Louis' colourful Court fêtes). The Duke is followed by the King himself, Henrietta of England (the King's sister-in-law), the duc de Chevreuse (the duc de Luynes' son), and lastly the great Colbert, who was the main instrument of Louis' policy and was in effect the Minister for Culture. Gratifications, honours, and applause all came Racine's way in a steady stream. But this success was due at least as much to his ability and tact as a courtier as to his literary genius. By 1677, he had ten plays to his credit (see list on p. 29) and was basking in the King's favour. He had achieved the rare feat of winning the approval of the general public and the esteem of the Court and learned circles.

It was at this point that Racine was reconciled with religion and abandoned the theatre. The information on the reasons for the change is scanty and controversial (see Introduction to *Phaedra*), for the poet's sons took good care to destroy any material that might present their father in an unedifying light. In particular, practically the

whole of Racine's correspondence for the period from *The Thebaid* to *Phaedra* (1664 to 1677) has gone astray. There is a hint in a contemporary ditty that he was supplanted in his mistress's affections just before his conversion. But we know almost nothing of the poet's feelings at that time. The guilt-laden atmosphere and terrible sensuality of *Phaedra*, however, point to a crisis. It is not impossible that his disappointment in love is linked with the return of his religious convictions.

Outwardly, Racine's 'conversion' differed little from what would now be termed 'settling down', and in no way implied a flight from the world; it was in line with the general trend towards sobriety and orthodoxy observable at Court. Racine abjured the stage and actresses. He made a marriage in which, according to his son Louis, 'love had no part', but which brought him considerable material advantages. In the same year, thanks to the support of the sister of Madame de Maintenon (the King's mistress), he was appointed, jointly with Boileau, to the coveted post of royal historiographer. This honour marked a substantial move up the social ladder, and made the commoner Racine the envy of many an aristocrat.

After a silence of twelve years, at the request of Madame de Maintenon, he composed *Esther* (1689) for the young ladies of a boarding school run by her at Saint Cyr. The play was a tremendous success, and he was encouraged to write another work on the Old Testament subject of Athaliah (1691). Ironically, the play was attacked by those bigots who would not tolerate the stage in any form whatever. And Racine, discouraged, let his pen drop for good, except for a few minor works. In 1699 he died, high in the royal favour and deep in piety.

Racine was a writer of the *avant-garde*. His plays are of a ruthlessness, an extremism, an amorality, which, in his own day, shocked the conservatives, mystified the average theatre-goers, and appealed to the radicals. Louis XIV, in particular, was an enthusiastic admirer. If Racine carried the day against the entrenched opposition of the supporters of his great rival, Corneille (then, it is true, long past his prime), his success was in large measure due to the firm backing of the King. The link between the two men was by no means accidental. Louis and Racine, each in different ways, made a sharp break with the hitherto prevailing ethos of the feudal aristocracy that may conveniently be referred to as baroque.* On assuming personal charge of affairs in 1661 (three years before the performance of Racine's first play), Louis set out to bring the nobility, and indeed all the other privileged and unproductive sections of the nation, under the control of a strong central administration. The emphasis was laid on the expansion of trade and industry, by state intervention if need be; and religious intolerance was not allowed to stand in the way of the achievement of these aims.

Before the young King took over, the nobility had dominated France, and their outlook had shaped French literature. For the baroque writers, the king was merely the first of the feudal lords. He was their equal, not their ruler. Any attempt to exercise the supreme power was regarded as tyranny, and was usually represented as being directed to base or selfish ends.

Racine's plays, on the contrary, reflect the attitude to statecraft visible in Louis' radical new policies. The dramatist shows his kings as usually all-powerful, and surrounds them with an aura of majesty. A monarch is great and respected only if he

rules firmly and effectively. If Athaliah, the Old Testament queen, can boast that her reign has been glorious, it is because she:

> … fell upon her startled enemies,
> And never let the crucial moment pass.   (873–4)

Decisiveness and ruthlessness, rather than generosity, are prerequisites of stable rule. The interests of the state, which are broadly equated with those of the throne, must take absolute precedence over the rights or interests of the individual. The origin of this attitude is clear. It derives straight from Machiavelli, the great Florentine thinker of the Renaissance, who was, generally speaking, the delight of the freethinkers and anathema to the Church. For him, as for Racine, statecraft was a science, not a moral philosophy, and its laws could be defied only at the risk of downfall or death. This is the theory preached by such 'realists' as Acomat, the Grand Vizier in *Bajazet*, or Ulysses in *Iphigenia*. The former reminds Bajazet that the Turkish sultans regarded

> The interest of the state [as] their only law

while the latter,

> … jealous of the honour of our [i.e. Greek] arms,

is quite prepared to press for Iphigenia to be sacrificed if that is the price of victory.

In *Iphigenia*, it is true, the 'realists' are defeated, but only at the last moment and with the aid of a good deal of luck. The play in any case is exceptional. It was written at a time (1674) when the force of Louis' drive to alter the social structure was weakening. The wars in which he was entangled compelled him to suspend his reforms and to lean more and more heavily on the nobility who captained his armies. The baroque ideas, naturally enough, staged a comeback.

In respects other than statecraft, Racine's divergence from the baroque is equally clear. The plays, while observing the proprieties, are by no means moral, for the good are not rewarded, and crime is not punished. Providence does not watch over the hero. The baroque drama, on the contrary, usually saw to it that the characters received their deserts, and concluded with a vote of thanks to the powers that had steered the plot to a happy ending. Racine's readiness to break with this convention may not seem very daring nowadays. It was a bold move in the 1660s.

The point is made with great force and brilliance by Butler in his *Classicisme et baroque dans I'œuvre de Racine* (p. 290). Racine's 'impatience at the outdated truths of the baroque, the passion with which [he] strips it of its masks and trappings, his anti-Corneille manifestoes, this is the form that the love of truth takes in his case. There is in Racine a sort of intellectual Puritanism – or Jansenism – which, in the same way as moral Puritanism, distrusts everything that can cause us too much pleasure and regards *a priori* as suspect any proposition that flatters or suits us.… The fine gallantry, the noble fictions, and the becoming poses that have taken the place of the battle between man and woman, these he casts aside. He is unwearying in his efforts to

undermine the idea of a paternal and reassuring providence, placed like a stage setting in front of the dread forces which govern the universe and the state of man. All the hallowed prejudices of the baroque, all its comforting illusions, all the themes of its resounding eloquence appear in his plays, only to be brilliantly disposed of.'

But Louis and the enlightened minority around him were not dismayed by this revolutionary approach to literature. It was, after all, in this decade that the King supported Molière against the bigots, and finally (in 1669) authorized the public performance of the violently anti-clerical comedy of *Tartuffe*.

If the modern reader (especially outside France) is no longer struck by the savage realism of Racine's psychology, the reason is to be sought partly in the prevailing proprieties which banned crudity of language and physical action, but even more in the survival of certain baroque elements. The constant insistence on title – Princess, my Lord, my Lady – the preoccupation with rank, with certain caste conventions, and with theatrical declamatory gestures: they can all be met with at some point in the plays. And they strike the reader who is not steeped in French classical tragedy as pompous and stilted.

Yet they occur mainly in the later *Iphigenia* and *Phaedra*, written when the power of the nobility had revived, and with it the feudal ways of thought that had for a time been relegated to the background. *Iphigenia*, in particular, is borne along on a flood tide of martial enthusiasm. And the fiery warrior Achilles defies the overlord Agamemnon as a feudal lord might have challenged a 'tyrannical' sovereign. Iphigenia herself shows an absolute submission to her father's will, even when he is sending her to death. His grief at her fate is equalled only by his concern that his daughter shall prove worthy of her breeding and her birth when the priest's knife strikes home. Morality, as in the baroque writers, tends to be equated with social origin.

In *Phaedra*, the same tendency is noticeable, although it is completely subordinated to the Jansenist anguish that suffuses the play. Thus, in his *Preface*, Racine expresses the view that 'calumny was somewhat too low and foul to be put in the mouth of a princess whose sentiments were otherwise so noble and virtuous. This baseness seemed to me more appropriate to a nurse, who might well have more slave-like inclinations…' It has rightly been pointed out that Phaedra might tremble on the verge of incest and adultery, but could never be guilty of an affair with a stableboy.

Yet, whether in these or in the earlier plays, the baroque traits in Racine are always tempered by a restraint, an ease and naturalness of tone, that sets them apart from the declamatory and grandiose style of the earlier dramatists. We are already in the modern world, with its sobriety, its understatement, its realization that the cruel complexities of life are not to be disposed of by eloquence, theatrical gestures, and emotional clichés.

Louis' support and the new climate of tolerance created by his policies not only made it possible for Racine's amoralism to find its audience, but also provided an opening for the poet's tragic vision to assert itself in an age that had been brought up on a diet of tragi-comedies – that is, plays on elevated subjects but with a happy ending. As Butler has observed (op. cit., p. 210), there is a profound incompatibility between baroque and tragedy. For the baroque writers, the powers that governed the

world were just, and it was sacrilege to complain. Animated by this conviction, Corneille had succeeded in making almost a tragi-comedy out of the sombre stuff of the legend of Oedipus. Racine lived and moved in another climate. In his plays, passion, circumstance, and the Gods combine to send the main protagonists to their downfall. Even in *Berenice*, where the young Emperor Titus and the foreign queen who gives her name to the play are passionately in love with each other, the two ultimately feel obliged to part, condemned to a lifetime of despair. ‘A mad play’, it was termed, understandably enough, by that ardent admirer of Corneille, Madame de Sévigné.

But why did Racine have to compose tragedies in a highly untragic age? Neither Louis’ policies nor Racine’s personal situation provided the slightest grounds for such pessimism. Nor is it enough to assert that Racine preferred to write tragedies. The explanation lies elsewhere. The passage from Butler quoted above on Racine’s love of the truth gives us a clue. It is defined as ‘a form of… intellectual Jansenism’, and, Butler goes on (pp. 290–1), it usually appears as a concern to present things in their worst light, as a strange determination to close every way of escape.

And this is not all. The only other tragic writer of roughly the same period is Pascal. And Pascal, it will be remembered, was a Jansenist, though an unorthodox one. Can it be just a coincidence that Racine, too, was brought up as a Jansenist, even though he soon fell out with his masters? A closer look at the dogmas of this sect reveals its close connexions with the world of tragedy. The Jansenists regarded man as fundamentally corrupt, whereas the baroque writers, basically optimists, took a positive view of humanity, or, more exactly, regarded the nobility (which was the only section of society that counted) as not only socially but morally noble. If God’s grace was lacking, the desire for virtue and the human will were but a weak bulwark against the lures of the flesh and the world. The Jansenists may have denied that they believed in predestination. But they were obsessed with the concept, and their whole outlook inevitably drove them close to a position in which men and women were damned or saved for all eternity. Nevertheless, someWhat inconsistently, every believer was expected to conform to the most severe moral standards, and, in the view of the extremists, to retire altogether from an utterly wicked world.

The Jansenists disliked Louis’ policies, and even more his love of pleasure, women, and fêtes, including theatrical performances; and their dislike was heartily reciprocated. But the sect was even more bitterly at odds with the optimism of the feudal outlook. It was not therefore necessary for the anti-baroque Racine to jettison everything that he had learned at Port Royal in order to achieve greatness in tragedy. On the contrary, the theory that man had small chance of salvation if unaided by divine grace was admirably suited to that art form.

It has been objected that the poet had lost his faith before he started to compose his plays and indeed, since Jansenism was so fiercely opposed to the stage, could not have become Racine without doing so. But there is surely no lack of men in any age who have been brought up in a severe faith, have drifted away from it but retained its imprint, and in some cases (as in that of Racine himself) have eventually returned to the fold. It is quite possible, therefore, that Racine retained certain habits of thought imprinted on his mind at an early, impressionable age and not basically inconsistent

with his new ideas.

Naturally, it is pointless to look for a systematic exposition of the dramatist's attitude to his former faith in his plays. A work of art is not a religious tract. In any case, he was to a great extent debarred, either by his new, presumably sceptical beliefs, or by the contemporary conventions, from dealing with Christian dogma openly and critically.

In such circumstances, the obvious vehicle for the treatment of the tragic issues of life was Greek mythology, and the obvious models were the ancient Greek playwrights – Sophocles and Euripides. By a fortunate chance, Racine had enjoyed a thorough grounding in these masters' language. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that his first play, *The Thebaid*, deals with a Greek subject – the trials of the children of Oedipus. Racine's work, as Butler has shown (op. cit., pp. 215–16), goes far beyond his sources (Greek or French) in its grim horror. The two sons of Oedipus (already punished for his involuntary incest) hate each other even in their mother's womb – a detail, like most other particularly appalling touches in Racine, invented by the author himself. This hatred, 'the outward sign of divine malediction' (Butler), drives them to war against each other and finally to kill each other. Even Oedipus's innocent daughter, and indeed her fiancé as well, are caught up in the general contagion, and they too expire before the final curtain. Small wonder that Jocasta (Oedipus's widow) declaims against the Gods who have decreed this massacre:

> This is the justice of the mighty gods:
> They lead us to the edge of the abyss;
> They make us sin, but do not pardon us.

This conception of the viciously and arbitrarily cruel gods (working, however, against a chosen family), and of the revolt on the part of their victims, is new in French literature. But it can easily be traced back to Jansenism, even if it betrays a note of hostility towards the poet's erstwhile faith. The central theme is that the cruel gods incline men to crime, and then make them pay for it. Moreover, the sins of the fathers are visited on the children and even on their fiancés. The latter doctrine (minus the fiancés) clearly stems from the Old Testament, although misfortunes run in certain families in the Greek legend too. As to the central idea of the play, Racine, while retaining the Jansenist idea of man's inherent weakness, has omitted divine grace as a remedial feature, and made God directly responsible for human sinfulness, whereas, for the believers, it was the fruit of 'man's first disobedience' in the garden of Eden. The cruel gods are pilloried. Yet they are to reappear, with the doctrines underlying *The Thebaid*, in *Phaedra*, written when Racine was groping his way back to his religion, and even in *Athaliah*, when he had been practising his faith devoutly for fourteen years.

In the plays immediately following *The Thebaid*, fate becomes anonymous and is ensconced in the hearts of men. But it is none the less vindictive. If we omit *Alexander*, the weakest of his plays, we come to *Andromache*, the work in which the real Racine emerges. The tragedy unfolds within a triangle of absolute political power, irresistible passion, and another absolute – death. In this terrifying scheme of things, there is no respite from the hounds of destiny, no margin for compromise, no way out

of the fatal labyrinth in which the predestined victims of the tragedy are trapped.

Yet in *Andromache*, the first of his great tragedies, Racine hesitated to apply his grim formula in full. In his later works, the disaster was to derive from the initial situation with rigorous precision. In *Andromache,* the poet is not quite so merciless. Orestes loves Hermione, who loves Pyrrhus, who loves Andromache, who loves her dead Hector. But Andromache is prepared to compromise. To save her infant son, the widow devises ‘an innocent stratagem’ whereby she will marry Pyrrhus, but kill herself after leaving the altar. As it turns out, this stratagem does not save the situation. It touches off a murder: Orestes kills Pyrrhus and goes mad as a result. Later, Racine was to rule out any suggestion of ‘transigence’ in his main characters. Everything was devised solely to give a further turn of the screw to the instruments of catastrophe.

But the tragic outcome is already ensured by the basic ingredients of his formula. The kings and queens are all-powerful. And they are usually savage, ruthless, or imprudent. Roxana has but to say one word to send Bajazet to a horrible death at the hands of the deaf-mutes. Nero can casually issue instructions for the poisoning of Britannicus, in the certainty that he will be obeyed. And Theseus, even better equipped, can call on the services of the seagod Neptune to rid the world of his son Hippolytus.

The evils of absolute power are redoubled by absolute love. For the baroque writers, passion was noble and ennobling. The knight was obliged to conform to his lady’s will and to perform great deeds in order to win her favour. Pyrrhus (and the same could be said of most of Racine’s characters) ‘had not read our [highly romantic] novels. He was violent by nature.’ Thus Racine, in the Preface to *Andromache*. Pyrrhus in fact is prepared to blackmail the woman he loves into marrying him on pain of seeing her son surrendered to the Greeks, and almost certainly put to death. Mithridates has no hesitation in stooping to deceit in order to extract from his fiancée, Monime, the secret of her love for Xiphares, Mithridates’ son. The gentle Atalide naïvely admits to Bajazet that she would at times prefer to see him dead than married to another. And Roxana, having discovered that Bajazet does not love *her*, but Atalide, revels in the thought of confronting him with the dead body of his sweetheart.

Love is at bottom represented as more akin to hate than to devotion or affection. ‘Can I not know whether I love or hate?’ asks Hermione in *Andromache*; and most of the characters in love swing violently and irresolutely between these two poles, largely because passion in Racine is almost always unreciprocated. But, even when (as in *Berenice*) there is no emotional obstacle, outside forces come between the lovers. There are, it is true, a few couples that escape the final holocaust – Achilles and Iphigenia, Xiphares and Monime. Hippolytus and Aricia are less fortunate. And it is certainly not true that Racine could conceive only of a brutishly sensual and possessive type of love. Yet he does seem to have been at case only when his lovers are unhappy, inhibited, or placed under the shadow of death. Hippolytus and Aricia, who lack some of these qualifications, are for most of the time colourless and precious. The poet’s gifts called for more sombre stuff.

For him, the vanity of love and its darker sides are matched by an insistence on its intensity which at times reaches almost religious fervour. When Roxana pleads with Bajazet

On you my joy, my happiness depends, (556)

the line raises strange echoes of Tartuffe's pseudo-religious courtship:

> On you my suffering or my bliss depends.

And one is reminded of Madame de Sévigné's quip that, after his conversion, 'Racine loved God as he loved his mistresses' – and hence, one assumes, that, before he was touched by grace, he had loved his mistresses with fervent devotion. Not for nothing did Boileau define his friend's character as 'mocking, uneasy, jealous, and voluptuous'. Is it being too fanciful to suggest that Racine, an orphan from his earliest years, and endowed with a quivering sensitiveness, brought to love a particular intensity, sharpened by the transfer of a lost religious faith to earthly objects? Whatever the truth of the matter, Venus is usually in Racine 'the goddess of love and death', to use his own words.

But circumstance, too, makes its contribution to the final disaster. It may be a compromising letter found in Atalide's bosom when she faints (*Bajazet*), the unexpected return of Theseus after a false report of his death (*Phaedra*), or (in *Iphigenia*) the failure of the mission undertaken by Arcas, sent out by Agamemnon to warn the King's daughter to return home, since death awaits her at the Greek army's camp in Aulis. Whatever the means chosen, all roads lead to death. The dice are weighted against humanity from the start. The only difference between this new type of fate and the gods of *The Thebaid* is that there is no equation between crime and punishment. Indeed, one can say that the innocent or guileless fall most readily. And when Narcissus, Nero's crafty adviser, is done to death in *Britannicus*, we can be sure that the episode is added merely to satisfy the conventional need for retribution. These plays are in a word amoral.

In *Iphigenia* (1674), Racine turned to Euripides and Greek mythology for inspiration, and the gods return. They are just as cruel as in *The Thebaid*, though not, this time, the avengers of crime. On the contrary, King Agamemnon emphasizes that he does not know why the gods are angry. (Yet there was a simple explanation in the Greek original.) All that is clear is that Diana, by an oracle, demands the blood of a human sacrifice if she is to allow the winds to carry the Greek fleet to Troy. And in fact a victim is sacrificed (though not the one thought to be designated by the oracle), and the winds blow immediately. The outcome is not tragic, though it might easily have been so. Racine was beginning a new cycle, and, as in the case of *Andromache* which began the previous series, the first play in it shows signs of hesitation.

With *Phaedra* (1677), on the contrary, he takes the decisive step. This time, the play is profoundly and utterly tragic. And it is the gods who drive the action forward. Venus makes Hippolytus inspire a guilty passion in the heroine's heart, and again, as in *Iphigenia*, no reason is given for the goddess's hatred. Thus, the gods incline men to sin – just as in *The Thebaid*. And, just as in that play, they punish the sinner. Only, in *Phaedra*, punishment does not consist in death, but in dishonour, and above all in the torments of the afterworld, where the heroine's own ancestor, Minos, will sit in judgement on her. From being the final curtain in the tragedy, death has become a factor in a moral drama. The whole play is pivoted on the fierce struggle raging in Phaedra's soul. However, her heroic resistance to temptation, her obsession with guilt

(new in Racine) avail her nothing. She is defeated by the combined forces of Venus and a malicious fate which weights the scales against her even more heartlessly than in the earlier plays. No wonder she was defined by an eminent Jansenist theologian as 'one of the just to whom grace was not vouchsafed'. The play is a perfect demonstration of the Jansenist doctrine that the human will, unaided, can never stand up to temptation. But, if grace is absent (as it had been hitherto in Racine), there is no trace of revolt (as in *The Thebaid*). The poet was moving towards Jansenism, not away from it.

After his conversion, the picture naturally changes. The Jansenist God is no longer concealed behind the Greek façade. In *Athaliah* (1691), the 'cruel Jewish God' tracks down the old pagan queen, just as Venus had encompassed Phaedra's downfall. But, as against this, Jehovah not only strikes down his enemies, he also raises up those whom he has chosen as his instruments. Even the chosen ones, however, are corrupt – just as much as the 'wicked' pagans. The absolute corruption of mankind is only equalled by the unwavering fanaticism of Jehoiada, the high priest of Jehovah – a faith which we can be fairly certain was not too dissimilar from Racine's own. Only in one respect does the play fall short of being the perfect exemplar of Jansenism. And this weakness is due precisely to Racine's excess of devotion. The miracles through which God weakens Athaliah are very palpably such, whereas Jansenist doctrine demanded that they should appear natural to the sceptic, and their supernatural origin be clear only to the orthodox. From this point of view, *Phaedra* is much more in line with the pure doctrine. For there the spectator has no difficulty in believing that the heroine's infatuation has been caused by the physical splendour of the young ephebus, Hippolytus, and not necessarily only by divine intervention.

Such, then, is the curve of Racine's plays, which follows closely that of his waning and waxing faith. This evaluation would seem to follow four main phases. First, in *The Thebaid*, the attitude is one of conscious revolt. Then come the middle plays, where religion is dormant. Thirdly, in *Phaedra*, it awakens. And in *Athaliah*, after his conversion, it is full-blooded and explicit.

It should be clear, therefore, that there is no dichotomy, as is so often alleged, between Racine the man and Racine the writer. The fallacy goes back to an essay of Giraudoux.[*] That piece of analysis is magnificent, but it is not serious criticism. In part, too, the view rests on the curious romantic belief that a work of art must be either a personal declaration of faith or a purely technical construction. For, it is argued, Racine is such a conscious, consummate craftsman, he subordinates his personal feelings so completely to the exigencies of play writing, that it is pointless to look for the man in his work. On the contrary, the spirit that informs his tragedies and that makes them so different from those of his contemporaries tallies exactly with what little is known of his outlook and character. His close association with Louis and Colbert and with their anti-feudal policy, his intellectual ruthlessness, his Jansenist-inspired pessimism, and, it would seem, his conception of love – all these are common to both the plays and the poet. If we go further, we can add a cruelty towards his characters amounting almost to sadism. This may be equated with his pessimism, an overwrought sensitiveness, especially to criticism, a savageness towards his enemies

in his epigrams and in his Prefaces, and a brilliance both as a courtier and as a business man who knew the value of money. All these suggest a character that would be able to construct a technically perfect but poetically intense tragedy in which all the main aspects of life were searchingly examined and in which, perhaps with a certain detached pleasure, the author scanned the depths of human passion, frailty, and folly.

The technical mastery of Racine's work is so palpable that it is almost superfluous to describe it. Supreme economy of means is combined with extreme care in their selection, and the details are put together in such a way that every move can be seen to have been prepared and rendered plausible. Suspense is rapidly built up to an almost unbearable degree, and simultaneously a moving depth of tragedy is achieved.

Much has been made of the proprieties as a deadening factor in Racine's work. And it is true that no one screams or gesticulates in these plays. Action is only described, and nothing is allowed to ruffle the surface of formal politeness. For a modern audience, used to naturalist excesses and 'frankness', such restraint is unsettling. Yet it is an integral part of the fabric, and not merely a pointless convention imposed on Racine by the age. His tragedies are played out at Court, where dissimulation is essential, not only for success but also for survival. Given the dangers which can arise from a situation where the king wields absolute power, one revelation (such as that A loves B) is enough to launch a disastrous series of catastrophes. Not for nothing do the words 'stratagem', 'conceal', 'hide', 'declare', 'reveal', 'break silence', 'burst out' crop up at every turn of his plays. Agrippina's plan (in *Britannicus*) to recover the control of her errant son, Nero, might well serve as a motto of the playwright's works:

Bare, if we can, the secrets of his soul. (127)

Given this framework, it is inevitable that the force driving most of the plays forward should be the disclosure of firmly held secrets.

In the same way, language is often used to allow the truth to be guessed at rather than to express it directly. There is a constant tension between the hidden feelings of the characters and their spoken words. In such circumstances, it is natural that irony should be a frequent weapon in Racine's armoury. Thus, in *Iphigenia*, when the heroine asks her father whether the whole family is to be at the forthcoming sacrifice, he replies to his daughter (who is, though she does not realize it, to be the person sacrificed):

… Yes. You will be there. (578)

Nor is the secret of Racine's craftsmanship to be sought in the famous unities of time, place, and subject. His great rule was, as he said himself, 'to please'. No doubt the concentration of the action into the space of one day (the daylight, that is, and not twenty-four hours) contributes powerfully to the sense of urgency that drives the action headlong down the slope to death. The place always has its significance. For example, it is a camp in the war play, *Iphigenia*, and the harem of the Sultan in *Bajazet*. But the real tragedy is performed in the hearts of the protagonists. When Giraudoux tells us that the characters are all piled on top of one another in the same house and therefore get on each other's nerves, that the same sounds echo in their dreams and that their linen goes to the same laundry, he is talking nonsense. For there are no sleeping apartments or arrangements, no laundries in Racine – in fact none of

the ordinary activities such as letter writing or settling bills which might distract the characters from the only business in hand, which is how to go to disaster as rapidly as possible in the five acts allowed them.

The picture of Racine would not be complete without a word, however inadequate, on his incredible mastery of language. His style is simple, but concentrated, direct, and vigorous. In his Greek plays, where he draws skilfully on the rich storehouse of ancient mythology and legend, it is superbly evocative. But there are lines which, across three centuries, would still pass unnoticed in an everyday conversation:

My daughter? And who says she’s coming here? (*Iphigenia*, 179)

or:

And who asked you to mind my family? (*Iphigenia*, 1349)

The secret of the greatness of Racine as a poet, as of all great art, is probably that the style reflects the power, subtlety, and insight that form the strands of his work. Only a genius could produce tragedies that reach into the deepest corners of the human heart with such an incredibly restricted and simple vocabulary, such constant restraint, such an absence of facile effects.

Such, then, is Racine. This outline gives only the general picture of the man and his achievement. To appreciate to the full his richness and variety, the reader must turn to the more detailed analysis prefaced to each of the plays.

NOTE ON THE TERMS 'ROMANESQUE' AND 'BAROQUE'

'ROMANESQUE' is the term employed by French critics to describe a type of non-classical literature current in the seventeenth century, whereas *romantique* is associated with the Romantic school of the nineteenth. Romanesque literature specialized in romances and in fanciful and complicated tales. Its ethos was chivalrous, and its favourite subjects were martial prowess and courtly love.

The term *baroque* has been widely applied in critical writing to literature as well as painting. It connotes a love of the grandiose, of the theatrical, and of high-flown oratory and violent gesture. It is associated broadly with the Counter-Reformation and with the revival of the nobility's influence.

RACINE'S PLAYS

The Thebaid	1664
Alexander	1665
Andromache	1667
The Litigants	1668
Britannicus	1669
Berenice	1670
Bajazet	1672
Mithridates	1673
lphigenia	1674
Phaedra	1677
Esther	1689
Athaliah	1691

IPHIGENIA

A Tragedy

INTRODUCTION TO *IPHIGENIA*

IPHIGENIA is the drama of a king placed in an impossible position – and saved by a miracle at the last moment. The formula – maximum suspense with a happy ending – was by no means new in Racine’s day, nor has its popularity diminished with the advent of the cinema and television. It goes far to explain why *Iphigenia* was Racine’s most popular play in his own day.

The suspense centres on the fate of King Agamemnon’s daughter – Iphigenia, whose life is demanded by an oracle. Will she die, or will she somehow escape? Her father is the overlord of the vast Greek armada assembled, at the port of Aulis, to sail against Troy on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea. He might therefore be expected to defend his daughter effectively. But the force is a heterogeneous one – made up of some twenty kings and their followers. And Agamemnon is merely the elective commander. His nomination, as usual in such cases, has aroused bitter jealousies among the unsuccessful candidates. His power rests, therefore, as he occasionally admits, on a precarious basis.

But this is not all. Most of the princelings taking part in the expedition do so because they are bound by an oath. For the aim of the armada is to recapture Helen, the beautiful wife of Menelaus (Agamemnon’s brother) whom Paris, son of Priam (King of Troy), has abducted. As suitors for Helen’s hand, these princelings had formerly sworn to avenge any insult to the honour of the successful wooer. But no such oath was taken by young Achilles, one of the most powerful of the Greek leaders. He has joined the campaign only because he has been promised the hand of Iphigenia. If there is any hitch in the projected marriage, Achilles’ loyalty, too, will become uncertain. And this is exactly what happens.

Even a man of iron would quail when urged to sign his daughter’s death sentence; and Agamemnon is, on the contrary, weak, wavering, and easily influenced. His natural inclination is to save his flesh and blood. But, just to make sure that he does not call off the expedition, he is flanked by two formidable figures for whom he is no match. These two are Ulysses and Calchas, and they form, so to speak, the war party. They are determined to maintain the honour of the Greek arms, even at the cost of Iphigenia’s life. Agamemnon is as putty when exposed to the eloquence of the wily Ulysses, while Calchas, the high priest, is known to possess the power to rouse the army to a frenzy against its titular commander.

Even before the curtain rises, the king has been torn this way and that by the conflicting forces of ambition and paternal love. His first impulse, on learning of the oracle, is to ‘curse the gods’,