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Racine, *Phèdre*, and the French Classical Stage

N I C H O L A S P A I G E

For English-speaking readers, one tragedy alone has escaped the shipwreck of what is usually called French classicism: Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677). The fussy austerity of "classicism" itself, a word that is often made more forbidding still by the addition of the prefix "neo-," may go some way to explaining why we have let the rest of the production—with a few exceptions—sink. If Racine and the rest of the period's dramatists all signed on to the same stony manifesto, packed with prescriptive rules and a set of rationalized formal constraints—well then, it's hardly any surprise that the works don't speak to a post-Romantic age. *Phèdre* is the tragedy we can keep around, the classical play that gives the lie to classicism by smuggling in, in the breast of its heroine, a desire so monstrous that measure, reason, and rules don't stand a chance.

We keep it around, but even *Phèdre* is not an easy sell nowadays. Anglophones might assume that they are simply on the other side of a cultural and linguistic divide: surely the French instinctively understand those "rules" and grasp the arcane and untranslatable beauties of the twelve-syllable rhyming couplets—alexandrine verse—used by dramatists of the time. In fact, the French will tell you as readily as anyone else: Racine, *Phèdre* included, is difficult to stage. And it's not just our postmodern world that's to blame. Already, in the early part of the nineteenth century, far closer to Racine in time than he is to us now, Stendhal was saying much the same thing in his Romantic manifesto *Racine et Shakespeare*. Racine was a Romantic in his day, claimed Stendhal, but time has made him classical; if he returned to 1820s France, and made use of modern rules, he would have everyone dis-

solving in tears, locked in delicious illusion, instead of inspiring merely the “rather cold feeling” of admiration.¹

So *Phèdre* is perennial, but also, maybe for two centuries now, historically estranged. What has happened? Have we simply misplaced the mindset of Racine’s contemporaries? Perhaps we moderns lack the “ancient tragic sense of life” that playwrights used to tap into, and that the noted critic George Steiner once saw disappearing after *Phèdre*. Maybe our bourgeois world demands grit and realism, whereas aristocratic audiences of the time expected entertainments more ceremonial, more stylized, disciplined by classical doctrine. Yet Racine’s situation is considerably more complicated. Stendhal was right, in that the dramatist was indeed considered modern in his day—an innovator celebrated for the unsurpassed naturalism of his representations of human passion. But somewhat in the manner of religious reformers of the time, he packaged his innovations as a return to a better past.² Which is to say that Racine’s plays, rather than being manifestations of a coherent and discrete mindset to which we no longer have easy access, are historically heterogeneous, built of materials we sometimes recognize and sometimes do not. Such is their particular challenge: not quite foreign enough to forget about or exoticize, and not quite modern enough to embrace.

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Phèdre opened in Paris on New Year’s Day 1677. In retrospect, the play takes on the aura of the capstone, as it turned out to be Racine’s last tragedy for the public stage: soon after, Louis XIV named him royal historiographer, a glory that far outshone even the reputation he had earned as France’s foremost tragedian. But it’s also right to say that even at the time the play was intended as something of a *summum*, a deliberately major literary event. For in the mid-1670s, tragedy was on the defensive. It was hemmed in on the one side by Molière’s new brand of urbane comedy, which rejected the stock plots of farce and held instead a mirror to the upper classes, avid for what we would now call relevance. And it was threatened on the other side by the fashion for French opera, the rapidly developing genre of “lyric” tragedy that that relied on song to pull heartstrings and on

stagecraft to dazzle the eyes. The twin threats, comedy and opera, explain why in these years Racine started to fish for subject matter with extra tragic gravitas. Turning away from the more or less historical plots that had been tragedy's mainstay since the 1630s, he found what he needed in myth.

And what he needed was gods. In 1674, he adapted the story of Agamemnon's appeasing sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia; and then it was the turn of Phaedra and Hippolytus, victims of Venus's mischief and Neptune's wrath.³ Steiner might say that Racine's tapping into the tragic sense of life of the ancients was a last gasp before the unstoppable encroachment of the secular in Western culture spelled "the death of tragedy." But Steiner himself recognized that conjuring the gods did not come naturally to Racine, who bathed in a literary culture that was already secularized. Drama had to be believable: "No belief, no feeling," repeated the period's theorists, who found support for their conviction in the work of Aristotle and Horace; accordingly, the vast majority of the period's tragedies featured historical subject matter. The pagan gods, from such a perspective, could only be problematic subjects: Tragic with a capital T, certainly; but dangerously unmodern, because seventeenth-century Christians did not share the superstitions of the ancients. In *Iphigénie* and *Phèdre*, then, Racine needed to steer a difficult path, tapping the sublime subject matter for an appropriate dose of awe while keeping divine agency thoroughly in check.

So what might appear at first glance as a sensitivity to sacred dread—supposedly now lost to a modern audience—was the result of a calculated choice. Racine was performing a balancing act, turning belief in divine agency into something that his protagonists subscribe to but that his audience need not. *Phèdre* certainly has a lot to say about the gods. Where is her *raison* (her "senses"), she rhetorically asks her nurse, Oenone, toward the start of her opening scene. She answers her own question: "Je l'ai perdue. Les Dieux m'en ont ravi l'usage." (They are lost: the Gods have spoiled me of their use.) A few lines later, as the avowal of her desire for Hippolyte sticks in her throat, she accuses one goddess in particular of a multigenerational grudge: "O haine de Vénus! O fatale colère! / Dans quels égarements l'amour jeta ma Mère." (O enmity of Venus! Fatal anger! / Into what

errors love impelled my mother!) (The reference is to her mother Pasiphae's mating with Zeus in the form of a bull.) Then finally, when the cat's out of the bag, she delivers one of the play's most famous couplets, describing in the historical present the beginnings of her infatuation for her stepson: "Ce n'est plus une ardeur en mes veines cachée / C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée." (No more an ardor in my veins concealed, / it is Venus, wholly fastened on her prey.) Of course, mythologically speaking, all this is right. Venus is all to blame. Such is the plot as given to us by Euripides. There, Aphrodite herself announces at the play's start that she intends to use Phaedra to destroy the hero Hippolytus, for the latter has spurned the goddess of love and chastely dedicated himself to the service of Artemis. But no goddess prefaces Racine's version with claims of responsibility for the coming calamity. And so as far as Venus's enmity is concerned, we have only Phèdre's word to go on. Sacred dread there is, but it is experienced by spectators only through the prism of the heroine and other characters.

Yet how often we hear about the crushing weight of "destiny," with respect both to this particular tragedy and—by extension—to classical tragedy in general. G.W.F. Hegel, no fan of Racine for doubtless many reasons, claimed that his Phaedra made for a bad tragic character because she had no agency, and generations of critics who have not necessarily seconded Hegel's blanket dismissal of the French playwright have been happy to sign on to the idea that human volition has no place in this universe. In a particularly famous reading from the 1950s, descended from Hegel via György Lukács, Lucien Goldmann claimed that Racine's view of the human will followed from his Jansenist upbringing—the Jansenists being the heterodox sect whose main tenet was the inability of believers to advance the cause of their own salvation, which instead depended on divine grace. Tragedy, by this reckoning, became the expression of an entire metaphysical worldview in which individuals could only cower under the gaze of an inscrutable hidden deity. Goldmann's attempt to read Racine's oeuvre through the doctrine and experience of the Jansenists is much more subtle than many accounts of the playwright's so-called fatalism, but it does not square any better with the basic fact that seventeenth-century French tragedy generally tried to steer well

clear of deities, hidden or otherwise. It was a genre that was all about human choices. Which is why, moreover, Racine's choice of subject for his 1677 play was such a bold one, as we can see from an analysis published just days after *Phèdre's* own appearance in print. There, an anonymous critic opined that the heroine's incestuous desire was particularly problematic on the modern stage because audiences could no longer believe that she was tyrannized by a pagan divinity: "attributing vice to the will of the criminal alone, [we moderns] can find no pretext, no mask, and no excuse for this horrible act." The myth of Pheadra was a bad one for a modern tragedy, then, precisely because it did not allow for the free exercise of human will.

Racine recognized the danger, certainly, which is why he constructed the play as he did, cannily allowing us to have our gods and our reason too. On the one hand, the pagan characters believed in their pagan divinities, and their dread suffused the play with a tragic awe. On the other, Racine did all he could to make that belief the very subject of his tragedy. Racine's careful work is particularly evident in the tragic denouement, recounted by the messenger Théràmène. The inherited myth runs as follows. Theseus, believing his son to have made incestuous advances on his wife, calls upon Neptune to avenge the insult; immediately thereafter, Hippolytus, trying to escape his father's wrath, is attacked at sea's edge by a monster from the deep; the master horseman is dragged to death by his own coursers. Even Seneca's version, in which the nurse can already be found warning Phaedra that men use the gods as an alibi for their lust, gives us a monster with a divine mission: the beast hotly pursues the hero and his frightened horses, which finally throw their master down. By contrast, Racine's monster has morphed into something more like a public menace, one that happens to frighten off everyone but the hero. Hippolyte alone steps forward to fight, mortally wounding the creature. Unfortunately, the beast's terrific death throes—spurts of fire, blood, smoke—then frighten the team of horses. We wonder: mightn't this be an example of wrong-time-wrong-place coincidence? Of course, the monster does come ashore right after Thésée's imprecations: one must ask if this can only be bad luck. But that's just it: divine agency becomes a question—one that Racine encourages us to entertain with another detail present only in Théràmène's de-

scription of the uncontrollable horses: “On dit qu’on a vu même en ce désordre affreux / Un Dieu, qui d’aiguillons pressait leur flanc poudreux.” (Some say / one could even see, in the dread hurly-burly, / a God stabbing with goads their dusty flanks.) Some say, yes: some always claim to see the supernatural. Racine’s is thus a delicate rationalization of the myth, one that leaves us suspended between the world of the characters and a more modern, disenchanting frame of reference.

In the end, this rationalization helps explain why this play is now known as *Phèdre*, and why we think of it as its heroine’s tragedy. Euripides didn’t write a *Phaedra*; he wrote a *Hippolytus*, whose main tragic action was the destruction of the titular hero. Seneca in his version did a lot to develop the role of Phaedra, so much so that manuscripts come down to us under the titles of both the queen and her stepson; but the Latin poet’s imitators in the Renaissance reverted to prioritizing, in their titles, the fate of Hippolytus. Surely there was some difficulty in making Phaedra the center of the play, given what legend provided poets to work with: she was, after all, but a cruelly used tool of a goddess’s revenge; the tragic “fault” was Hippolytus’s, that is, his public and ill-considered disdain for Aphrodite. But once Aphrodite’s overt intervention was removed, the queen herself could become a suitably Aristotelian tragic heroine—“not quite guilty, not quite innocent,” says Racine in his preface to the play, and therefore able to excite our compassion and horror in the manner claimed by the *Poetics*.

The playwright points, in this preface, to one of his efforts on Phèdre’s behalf: whereas previous versions had her denouncing Hippolytus’s advances directly to her husband, Racine spares her such base calumny by attributing it to Oenone’s initiative. But beyond this scapegoating of a plebian Machiavel—a common tactic for relieving tragic princesses and princes of responsibility for heinous acts—Racine makes Phèdre herself dramatically interesting through sustained attention to the heroine’s attempts to contain or repress her desire. “To speak or not to speak?” This, for Roland Barthes, in his famous book *On Racine*, was the question of *Phèdre*. Indeed, speaking is at the center of this purportedly mythological tragedy, which is at the same time a purely human drama of avowal, of words that cannot

be stifled and that once proffered cannot be recalled. Phèdre confesses her desire first to her nurse, then to the man she loves, and finally, after having poisoned herself, to her husband. Only the last of the avowals, the purifying one, is forthrightly executed: “Les moments me sont chers, écoutez-moi, Thésée” (Moments are precious to me. Listen, Theseus), she says, before taking ownership of her actions: “C’est moi qui sur ce fils chaste et respectueux / osai jeter un oeil profane, incestueux” (I myself dared to cast upon that chaste, / respectful son, profane, incestuous eyes). (Ambiguous ownership, perhaps, since she follows the admission with a displacement of guilt toward “heaven” [*le Ciel*] and Oenone.) The other admissions are oblique, partial insinuations that must be midwived by interlocutors savvy enough to fill in the words that she cannot pronounce. Her first periphrastic reference to the object of her love is the stuff of anthologies:

OENONE: Aimez-vous?

PHÈDRE: De l’amour j’ai toutes les fureurs.

OENONE: Pour qui?

PHÈDRE: Tu vas ouïr le comble des horreurs.

J’aime . . . à ce nom fatal je tremble, je frissonne.

J’aime . . .

OENONE: Qui?

PHÈDRE: Tu connais ce fils de l’Amazone,

Ce prince si longtemps par moi-même opprimé?

OENONE: Hippolyte? Grands dieux!

PHÈDRE: C’est toi qui l’as nommé.

(OENONE: Are you in love?)

PHÈDRE: I have love’s total fury.

OENONE: For whom?

PHÈDRE: Now you will hear the peak of horrors.

I love—at that fatal name, I am cold, I quake—

I love—

OENONE: Whom?

PHÈDRE: You know that son of the Amazon,

That prince so long, now, by myself oppressed?

OENONE: Hippolytus? Great Gods!
 PHÈDRE: It was you that named him.)

Racine did not invent this passage: Euripides had already shown his Phaedra tip-toeing around the feared name in just this way, and the last hemistich, arguably the most famous six syllables in all of French classical drama, is in fact lifted verbatim from a French predecessor's version of the tragedy (Gabriel Gilbert's *Hippolyte*). But Racine takes what he finds in tradition and spins it into a thematic web. There's Phèdre's confession to Hippolyte, which starts as a confession of love for his father—"Oui, Prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée" (Yes, Prince, I am burning, languishing for Theseus)—before veering disturbingly off-track in a way that leaves her interlocutor searching awkwardly for an innocent interpretation of her words. "Ah! Cruel, tu m'as trop entendue" (Ah, cruel, you have understood me too well), she says, making further denial impossible. And we should note that Hippolyte too struggles to speak of his own love for the pure Aricie—once before his tutor, Thérémène; again before Aricie herself; and a third time before his father. On the whole, he does a more direct job than his stepmother, but like her, he cannot quite come out with everything that must be said. His last words to his father, who has just accused him of lust for his stepmother, are a masterpiece of innuendo.

Vous me parlez toujours d'inceste et d'adultère?
 Je me tais. Cependant Phèdre sort d'une mère,
 Phèdre est d'un sang, Seigneur, vous le savez trop bien,
 De toutes ces horreurs plus rempli que le mien.

(You speak still of adultery and incest?
 I will not reply. Yet as her mother's child
 Phaedra is of a blood, you know too well,
 More plentiful in all those horrors than mine.)

Obliquity ends up finding its mark once again, and a furious Thésée is immediately spurred to request Neptune's intercession. The king's invocation of the god is as confident and spontaneous as the other pro-

tagonists' avowals have been indecisive. But if Thésée is the only one here to speak with authority, it does not buy him anything more than stammering gets the others. The tragedy of speaking is universal.

"Racinian characters are never lower on the scale of human grandeur than when they are moved to make a rational argument," wrote Paul Bénichou in a classic analysis, meaning that their attempts at reasoning with others are usually but thin rationalizations, barely keeping a lid on the craziness boiling underneath. This is in direct contradistinction to the heroes of Racine's elder rival Pierre Corneille—heroes who both know what they want and possess the rhetorical know-how to advocate for it. Corneille's protagonists like to use the first-person pronoun, often coupled with words such as "want" or "must"; their will is in synch with their acts, and it is always and endlessly declared. Corneille's choice was an innovation: resisting his contemporaries' Aristotelian love of so-called recognition plots, where the poet retains crucial bits of information from both characters and audience until the climax (Jocasta is Oedipus's mother!), Corneille reasoned that such bursts of surprise could produce pleasure only once and not on repeat viewings. Instead, it was the sustained dilemma facing characters who evaluate head-on all their irreconcilable options that produced real tragic emotion. The audience participated in this dilemma, and then took pleasure in the hero's resolution of it—a pleasure he termed admiration.

Not knowing just what one should say, or saying more than one intends, clues us into a break with Cornelian heroism and by extension with an entire conception of tragedy. Racine's heroes didn't behave heroically. They were, in a word, "natural." And this word was used very early on to qualify Racine's work—used by the playwright himself, by his supporters, and even by his detractors. Detractors said: legendary heroes had their own nature, they weren't like us; and at any rate, tainting heroic subject matter with more mediocre motivations (such as love) could only, by definition, destroy the elevated dignity that tragedy depended on. Defenders, meanwhile, reasoned that Racine was doing just what he said, which was aiming for the very Aristotelian effects of "horror and pity," produced when bad things happen to decent (but not perfect) people, and that the audi-

ence's pleasure depended on a kind of commonality between viewers and characters.

Such insistence on Racine's naturalness may seem strange given what is surely the governing modern commonplace about French classical theater—its extreme artifice, its ascetic devotion to decorum, its elimination of anything that breathes. But it's our modern commonplace that is strange. For their part, seventeenth-century theorists of the stage, who did indeed propose and parse rules for dramatic production, did so to enhance the believability of the spectacle. When one went to the theater, the experience was ideally felt to be that of finding oneself before the actual people portrayed—in our case, Theseus and his unhappy family. Thus theorists continually tried to jettison practices felt to be overly artificial and consequently destructive of the spectator's illusion of experiencing the reality depicted. For example, anyone with a passing knowledge of French classicism recognizes “No blood on stage” as one of its cardinal rules. From there we extrapolate the squeamishness of an upper-class audience unwilling to be shocked by representations of violence, cocooned in their denial of reality itself. In fact, theorists offered a number of sometimes contradictory justifications for the proscription against spilling blood on stage, and a major one, lifted from Italian Renaissance theory, was simply that represented violence was unconvincing and thus ridiculous. Likewise, the three famous “unities”—of time, place, and action—were commonly justified not as tools to stifle the eruption of anything arbitrary or unplanned, but as necessities of illusion: a spectator transported between acts from France to Denmark would be so cognitively disturbed that the dramatic spell would be broken; ideally, some maintained, a play should even be in “real time.”

So when words stick in Phèdre's throat, they do so as part of this larger quest for characters we can believe in. The way dramatic characters should be made to speak was the object of considerable thought at the time. The earliest French tragedies, from the second half of the sixteenth century, were made up largely of lamentations—extended feats of eloquence in which characters bemoaned cruel fate. (Not created for the professional stage, which did not exist yet in France, such works obeyed the conventions of poetic practice more than those of

drama.) Much critical energy was expended in the following century to distance tragedy from anything that smacked of the rhetorical arts. Speech was pushed to be less flowery and overtly sententious: extended metaphors and comparisons, everywhere in Renaissance tragedies, became unwelcome markers of the poet's voice; and playwrights were warned to instruct through the drama itself, not by filling characters' mouths with maxims. Monologues and asides, meanwhile, needed to be deployed judiciously and motivated by the circumstances of the play, lest we feel their artifice. A common thread runs through these observations and others: poetic eloquence moves us, but it is at the same time the enemy of feeling, because people who are truly in the grip of passion simply don't talk like poets. On the contrary, real emotion may well be anything but wordy: "Often true passions, when really intense, remain mute, or are expressed confusedly."

Such was the observation of Hiliare-Bernard de Longepierre, the first to attempt the soon-to-be-unavoidable comparison between Corneille and Racine. And on the matter of emotional speech, which was for Longepierre the only matter that counted, Racine won hands down. Some brute statistics, drawn from the work of Sabine Chaouche, hint at how this effect was achieved. In Corneille's generation, plays were made up of approximately 86 percent affirmative declarations, 3.5 percent exclamations, and 11 percent questions. In Racine's mature plays (*Andromaque* to *Phèdre*), the numbers are 77 percent, 4.5 percent, and 18.5 percent. Measurably, then, *Phèdre* belongs to a larger family of characters who are not sure of themselves. (One monologue in *Bérénice* [1670] consists of 64 percent interrogations; another, in *Bajazet* [1672], tops out at 73 percent.) Similarly, the playwright uses about three times the number of interjections ("Ah!") as his rival Corneille. And another scholar, Marie-Lynn Flowers, has calculated that Racine's sentences are roughly half as long as those of his contemporaries—both easier to follow, therefore, and less obviously rhetorical constructions. Those sentences, meanwhile, are often left unfinished, as characters trail off or are interrupted. The technical name for the device is aposiopesis, and it is indeed a device, a poetical "figure." But unlike a figure such as reversion—ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country—it is designed to be self-effacing.

Self-effacing: that is, pointing not to the words, not even to the words' "meaning," but to what the words cannot say, to the hidden passion that cannot talk straight. Words here are not a window onto the soul; they are the emergent part of the human iceberg. It used to be that the period scholars now commonly call early modern (roughly 1500 to 1750) was held to demonstrate the triumph of the individual—a moment in which, in Jacob Burckhardt's pioneering formulation, man was no longer "conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation," but became instead "complete," which is to say, cosmopolitan and of universal aspirations. Lately, and in part under the influence of Michel Foucault, scholars have taken to speaking of the early modern constitution of a rather less resplendent being, a "deep" individual whose inner recesses became the object of scrutiny, much of it hostile. For Foucault, sex was at the root of this transformation, that is, sex seen no longer as a practice subject to variation and modification, but as an identity, a secret bent that defines each of us and that we are urged to confess, be it to priest, psychoanalyst, or talk-show host. Racine's theater in particular seems of a piece with such a development: in it, amorous passion, shorn of chivalric and Neoplatonic nobility, becomes something more like an instinct, something that you are not responsible for, that you cannot master, and that gets in the way of everything else you should be doing. And something that, at least in *Phèdre*, as Foucault predicts, you want desperately to confess, so as to, again, "Rend[re] au jour . . . toute sa pureté" (give back to the light . . . its purity).

Of course, all manner of uncontrollable lust had spilled onto the tragic stage before Racine. It was, however, safely quarantined within reprehensible characters—bad examples, or more accurately negative exemplars, whom we could look upon in moral horror, and who in any event had little trouble articulating the evil in their breast. ("How archaic a character like Edmund in *King Lear* sounds, with his unmediated access to his own wickedness," writes the critic Thomas Pavel.) Racine's instinctually driven protagonists, by contrast, and in the parlance of today's undergraduates, are "relatable": even the unalloyed tyrant Nero is depicted, in *Britannicus*, on the cusp of his passage over to the dark side, so that we can still feel his

obsessive love for the young Junie as, well, something like love. Surely the power of a character like Phèdre—the way she takes over a myth in which she was originally but one player among many—owes a lot to Racine’s ability to let us see things from her point of view. If many readers have come away with the feeling that hostile fate is to blame for Phèdre’s woes, only part of this comes from our preconceptions about tragic destiny: the rest is the result of the persuasive intensity the playwright has brought to the case the protagonist makes for her helplessness.

Racine was not alone in seeking to craft characters whose manifest imperfections do not inhibit but in fact encourage the development of what was at the time called pity, compassion, or interest, and what at least resembles—I will come back to this—what we now call identification. Indeed, his tragedies are part of a broader generational shift, and the passage from Corneille to Racine in tragedy resembles what we can observe in the domain of the novel. Madeleine de Scudéry, a contemporary of Corneille, was the most celebrated novelist of the 1640s and 1650s; her episodic, multivolume works, called heroic romances, were full of willful characters whose walk matched their talk. The Comtesse de Lafayette, who came on the literary scene just as this brand of heroic romance was going out of style in the early 1660s, played Racine to Scudéry’s Corneille. Lafayette’s novels—her enduringly famous *Princesse de Clèves* (*The Princess of Clèves*, 1678) but also her unjustly forgotten *Zayde* (1670–71)—were full of characters struggling, sometimes successfully, often not, to bring their unruly passions into line. Moreover, her readers reported many of the same effects that Racine’s commentators described, foremost a particular sort of bonding with beings whose predicaments had some measure of conformity with their own. Even the revolution in comedy wrought by Molière can arguably be understood in this context—as an attempt not only to put contemporary society and its ridicules on stage, but also to invent characters whose comic blindness and obstinacy do not keep us from partially viewing the world through their eyes. (The best example, though not the only one, is *Le misanthrope*’s Alceste, praised by a critic of the time, Donneau de Visé, as a creation that was both “to some extent ridiculous” and yet also able to “say quite sensible things.”)

One frequent interpretation of this shift in what was valued in a literary character is loosely sociological: the new breed of unhappy heroes is a sign of the political pessimism of the aristocracy in the 1660s and 1670s. The Fronde, the midcentury revolt against the authority of Louis XIV's regent, Anne d'Autriche, and her minister, Mazarin, had sources in both the new aristocracy of the robe (essentially legal professionals) and the landed aristocracy of the sword; the eventual crushing of the Fronde, and subsequent solidification of Louis XIV's absolutist rule starting with the death of Mazarin in 1661, deprived French nobles of their former independence and importance. Given such context, it is not hard to see why Cornelian heroism, focused on the military exploits of the highest nobility, would be replaced by the heroes of Racine, who have trouble doing much of anything against an increasingly tyrannical royal power, and who instead content themselves with the more mundane matters of the heart. There is probably much truth to this: why indeed would a dramatist bother to craft meditations on the intricacies of governance and war for an essentially disenfranchised audience?

A second explanation for what Bénichou called the "destruction of the hero" finds a cause in Jansenism and its deep spiritual pessimism: for some critics, the doctrine can be detected not only in Racine, who as a child actually attended the famous Jansenist school at Port-Royal, but also in the work of people whose biographical links to the sect are more tenuous—in *La Princesse de Clèves*, but also in the *Maxims* (*Maxims*, 1665) of Lafayette's friend the Duc de La Rochefoucauld. Yet studying what actual readers of the period said they liked in Racine and Lafayette reveals something other than an interest in the condemnation of fallen humankind and its uncontrollable passions. If readers did not want characters to admire, this was because people could not simply do what they decided, for all the right reasons, to do: the human heart was a recess of unknowable desires and motivations, and the writer's task was to open up that interiority. Longepierre thus describes the heart as Racine's true subject, which was putty in his hands: "He manipulates it as he wishes, he unfolds its every crease, he sounds its deepest point; he pierces its twists and turns, and not one corner of this dark and impenetrable labyrinth escapes his penetration." Yet in virtually the same breath, Longepierre expands enthusi-

astically on the pleasure Racine's audience takes in the display of a heart that is not so much devious and vice-ridden as beatingly alive before us, a swirling locus of emotions—"faintness, ardor, transport, fear, ruse, artifice, anxiety, anger, languor, delicacy, and more." If it was indeed Racine's intention to offer his audience a sour mirror in which to recognize their own sinful nature, he would seem to have failed: notwithstanding its destructiveness, passion here is described as completely seductive. Love, not simply a prime subject of Racine's tragedies, ends up being something like the feeling that passes between audience and characters: "How can a heart that recognizes its own image in these animated and lively portraits not be touched by them? It is thus that [the viewer's heart] has no power to resist." In such phrases, Longepierre goes well beyond the traditional Aristotelian language of pity to stress the identificatory bond between viewer and character.

Identification may be well and good in novels and comedy, one might allow; but how can it be compatible with tragedy—a genre that, like epic, is almost by definition peopled with larger-than-life legends, men and women occupying the highest reaches of political and military power? The objection is sound, at least historically, for it goes back to Racine's detractors at the time. But this was what Racine took as his challenge—to stretch the bounds of tragedy, to open it to the values that someone like Longepierre articulates, while at the same time keeping it truly tragic. And the formula he would exploit was to make passion itself tragic. That is, it was not that the personal and the political were tragically opposed, that heroic aspirations were pitted against the heart's siren call. This was more or less Corneille's formula, one that inevitably made love subordinate to what the dramatist called the "male" passions of ambition and revenge. Racine's approach, by contrast, was to make amorous passion unruly, destructive, something that we might want to call not so much by the noble name of "love" but by the more pathological term "desire." Desire did not stand in a tragic face-off with the masculine political passions; rather, it infected everything, to the point where any action, no matter how rational the alibi, always had it as its secret wellspring. There wasn't hard action on the one hand and soft love on the other—a dialectic that epics from the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* to Torquato Tasso's

Jerusalem Delivered (1581) had consecrated by thematizing heroism's resistance to erotic temptation. There was simply this consuming desire, which served as a perverse and universal human motivator. Such was modern tragedy for Racine: a tragedy his audience could relate to.

So what could have happened in the intervening centuries to make these works seem so distant? In the 1820s, as we have seen, all Stendhal could muster for Racine was cool admiration, not the tears earlier audiences had shed. Roland Barthes, surveying postwar productions of *Phèdre*, concluded bleakly: "I am not sure that it is still possible to stage Racine today." Is this state of affairs explainable through anything else besides the truism that time lays all convention bare, and that one season's naturalness is the next's affectation? Barthes's diagnosis was that Racine's theater was an uneasy mixture of the properly tragic—themes of guilt and destiny and the gods—and a distinctly more modern and bourgeois aesthetic in which characters became psychological individuals, motivated by purely human desires. Twentieth-century productions, he found, accentuated this psychological dimension, drawing the work further toward bourgeois drama, further from what it contained of true tragedy. The only possible remedy was to attempt to distance Racine, notably through a type of antipsychological diction that would avoid falling into the trap of assuming that words must be a kind of translation of thought; instead of trying to motivate psychologically each utterance, actors would do better to embrace the rigor imposed by the alexandrine verse. But precisely because Racine's tragedy is at bottom heterogeneous, Barthes did not seem sure that this would work. The problem was not simply that we now project a psychology onto work that is not psychological. It is that Racine is a meeting point where, according to Barthes, "elements of true tragedy mix inharmoniously with the seeds, already growing, of the bourgeois theater of the future." Barthes thinks it is better to estrange the work than to modernize it; but he also recognizes that in fact Racine is every bit as modern as he is archaic.

Barthes's diagnosis was intended as polemical, and as such it contains much that is debatable, sometimes even plain wrong. (For instance, to say that the alexandrine was intended to impose distance

directly contradicts what people at the time said—that, on the contrary, it was the form of verse that most resembled ordinary human speech.) But he does grapple seriously with the real question hiding under the truism that “tastes change”: why should plays with their contemporary reputation for naturalness be so hard to put on today? For Barthes, the reason lies in the historical hybridity of Racine, who has one foot stuck in true tragedy of the past and the other in a bourgeois drama to come: his modernity is incomplete, and so our efforts to treat him as if he were fully modern can only backfire. But I would suggest two other possibilities.

The first is that Barthes may be overestimating the extent to which Racine’s “language of the heart” marks an incursion of specifically bourgeois values into literature. It is understandable why one might want to trace an arrow from Racine (or from a novelist like Lafayette) to the effusive bourgeois sentimentality of the next century, and there is a certain logic in assuming that identificatory relations between character and consumer must be the mark of a bourgeois public, whose ideology is that of the Everyman. Even in the absence of a good history of identification—a reading mode denigrated by professional critics, and thus understudied—it seems dubious to suggest that all discourses of fellow-feeling can be reduced to a common bourgeois cause. In his fifth-century BCE *Defense of Helen*, Gorgias wrote, “Those who hear poetry feel the shudders of fear, the tears of pity, the longings of grief. Through the words, the soul experiences its own reaction to successes and misfortunes in the affairs and persons of others”; surely he could not already have been expressing a “bourgeois” aesthetic. To understand Racine’s passions, maybe instead of looking forward we should look *back*—back, say, to Renaissance debates on the proper manner of depicting emotion, debates that can be chased further upstream still, to their various Greco-Roman sources. From this point of view, modern Western literary history would present a series of competing techniques for presenting interiority: the sonnet, the tragic monologue, autobiography, the epistolary novel, free indirect discourse, stream-of-consciousness. The types of plots Racine developed, and the verse he wrote, were part of this long history, rather than a symptom of epochal change.

The second possibility, not unrelated, is that the ideological assumptions underwriting this interiority are in fact many and distinct. It is no doubt true that Racine wanted to craft “relatable” characters; but it is equally true that relatability for him meant something it no longer does. If we follow the critic Raymond Williams, for example, our current view of tragedy is determined by the fact that modern literature is inescapably a literature of the individual: “Our most common received interpretations of life put the highest value and significance on the individual and his development, but it is indeed inescapable that the individual dies. . . . Tragedy, for us, has been mainly the conflict between an individual and the forces that destroy him.” As doomed individuals, we relate to the situations represented individuals find themselves in and the emotions that arise out of those situations. “We think of tragedy as what happens *to* the hero,” continues Williams, but in much of the Western (Aristotelian) tradition, “the ordinary tragic action is what happens *through* the hero” (my emphasis). Admittedly, *Phèdre*, via the centrality of Phèdre, allows us to read it according to our modern obsession with the individual. Yet we should weigh this against the fact that, as a playwright steeped in the Aristotelian tradition, Racine viewed Hippolyte’s death as the tragic action, an action that the poet needed to produce through a concatenation of factors of which Phèdre’s desire (like Oenone’s counsel) is but one. Her desire is not, to be precise, tragic; it is the means by which the tragic action is precipitated. To see here a meditation on the human condition as such is thus something of an optical illusion, generated by our historically peculiar vantage point.

From the vantage point of Racine’s audience, Phèdre acted as a host for the viewers’ identification by having passions they could share—quite literally. The job of the dramatist was to bring before that audience passionate heroes; with skill, those passions would be felt by the audience. Variations existed in the way theorists of the time thought about this transfer of emotion; and as they did before and have since, people puzzled over Aristotle’s cryptic remarks on catharsis and over the paradox Sir Philip Sidney summed up as “sweet violence” (how do we take pleasure from the representation of sometimes unpleasurable emotions?). Racine himself had given a formu-

lation of that paradox in his introduction to *Bérénice*, where he speaks of “majestic sadness” as being the sought-after product of the tragic poet’s art—the “majesty” being the *je ne sais quoi* that distinguished it from just plain sadness, which no one would want. Small differences aside, however, the general opinion did not vary a lot: we did not go to the theater to see meditations on humankind’s fate; we went to have our emotions aroused by seeing heroes and heroines who were similarly aroused. (If this sounds a little unsavory, it’s because in the wake of the new brand of aesthetic philosophy introduced by Immanuel Kant and Hegel, this type of explanation for the emotions produced by art went downmarket, applying only to supposedly debased genres like horror and pornography.) Moderns might say that we identify with Phèdre because, caught in a no-exit snare, she represents the dilemma of the human condition. But for someone like Longepierre, what is marvelous about Racine is his ability to so accurately represent the labyrinth of human emotions that we are “touched” by them. Arguably, both formulations are types of identification, but they do not describe the same reading experience. In one (Longepierre), you recognize your own feelings in a character; in the other, you imaginatively enter into a character’s situation. A small difference, perhaps—but enough to explain why Racine’s vaunted naturalness no longer quite comes across.

Such are two explanations for Racine’s apparent distance that at least have the advantage of resisting the idea of some crystalline classical aesthetic, now inaccessible. And we should also resist the idea that *Phèdre*’s relatively happy fate—it’s still staged and translated, and still on a lot of reading lists and course syllabi—is entirely based on misconceptions. Initially called *Phèdre et Hippolyte* (*Phaedra and Hippolytus*), the tragedy was, after all, rebaptized *Phèdre* by none other than its creator on the occasion of the play’s second edition in 1687: this would seem an acknowledgment that in the end it *is* Phèdre’s not quite unavowable desire that constitutes the real heart of the tragedy. And if this is so, then surely it can’t be too wide of the mark to conclude that when Racine comes upon the formula for making tragedy out of amorous passion gone wrong, he also invents, with the same stroke, a tragic vision of human desire. For us to pronounce Racine difficult to stage, we first have to want to stage him; that is, a play like

Phèdre beckons to us before it pushes us away. Unquestionably, Racine is of a different age; but he is just as unquestionably part of a history from which we are not, in fact, separate. The fact is that French classicism is nearer to us than we usually think, even if it remains a little too far away for total comfort.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.
2. This is why the playwright could both be appreciated for his modernity and, in the “battle of the books” that pitted Ancients against Moderns, find himself in the Ancient camp.
3. I use accepted English spellings of figures of ancient myth and history when referring to the figures generally, and French spellings in reference to Racine’s own characters.

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Readers have a number of English translations of *Phèdre* to explore, from the sober Dillon version I quote from here to Richard Wilbur's rhyming couplets (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986) and Ted Hughes's "amplification"-translation (London: Faber and Faber, 1998). For most purposes, there are no significant differences between available French texts of the plays. Georges Forestier's critical French edition of Racine's works, *Oeuvres complètes I: Théâtre-poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999) is a mine of historical information on the plays and their literary and cultural context.

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Mimesis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), sees classical theater (Racine, but also Molière) as a rejection of serious realism. A representative cross-section of more recent criticism can be found in Edric Caldicott and Derval Conroy, eds., *Racine: The Power and the Pleasure* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001). For a bracing and contrarian tour of scholarship old and new, see John Campbell, *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). For wider studies of French classicism, see Christopher Gossip, *An Introduction to French Classical Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1981) and John Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999); the latter is the best English-language study of classical “doctrine.” And in *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), George Steiner situates Racine’s work both in the local context of French classicism and with respect to the Western tradition of tragedy in general.