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Phèdre (et Hippolyte): Taboo, Transgression, and the Birth of Democracy?

Phèdre is generally considered Racine's greatest, most searing tragedy. Despite their different critical, theoretical, or ideological approaches, most modern commentators agree that *Phèdre* represents the apogee of French neoclassical tragedy; it stands as the culmination of Racine's oeuvre.¹ At the same time the play stands out as quite possibly the single most symbolic achievement in the annals of French literature. Few works can rival *Phèdre*'s place in the French canon, and few have the quasi mythical/mystical relation to French culture as this last profane tragedy of Racine. Racine himself, we are told in the biography penned by his son Louis, would agree with his critics in finding this his most perfect play, the one he was most proud of having written:

Il a cependant été toujours convaincu, que s'il avait fait quelque chose de parfait, c'était *Phèdre*; et sa prédilection pour cette pièce était fondée sur des raisons très fortes. Car, quoique l'action d'*Athalie* soit bien plus grande, le caractère de Phèdre est comme celui d'Oedipe, ou de ces sujets rares qui ne sont pas l'ouvrage des poètes et qu'il faut que la fable ou l'histoire leur fournissent.²

He was always convinced that if he had created one perfect thing it was *Phèdre*; and his predilection for this play was based on very important reasons. For, although the plot of *Athalie* is much grander, the character

of Phèdre is like Oedipus' or those uncommon subjects that are not the creation of poets but rather must be supplied by either myth (legend) or history.

While contemporary historians and biographers of Racine tend to dismiss Louis' narrative of his father's life and career as unreliable, he did seem, as the citation shows, to have had at least one acute insight into the fascination *Phèdre* has maintained over generations of audiences. On one hand, he opines, Phèdre, like Oedipus, is an exceptional ("rare") character insofar as neither can be said to be the invention of an individual (author) but rather both come to the poet out of the obscure mists of mythology ("fable"), garbed in all the accretions across centuries of repeated legends and their subsequent reworkings by generations of authors.³ On the other hand, the comparison of Phèdre to Oedipus is also, on Louis Racine's part, a stroke of genial intuition (probably a unique instance for Louis), prefiguring as it does Freud's own attempt at explaining the universal hold he attributes to Sophocle's *Oedipus Tyrannos*: "If *Oedipus Rex* moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one, the explanation can only be that its effect does not lie in the contrast between destiny and human will, but is to be looked for in the particular nature of the material on which that contrast is exemplified."⁴ In other words, it is the matter of the tragedy, passion, calumny, and murder committed in the tightly restricted confines of the family that continues to resonate across the centuries and despite enormous social and political changes in the dark heart of contemporary audiences. Finally, the coupling of Phèdre with Oedipus in Louis Racine's comments reveals, most probably unbeknownst to him, an insight into a particular underlying dynamics of sexuality and politics that constitutes the tragic knot at the center of the play's drama and whose hold on the audience, relayed by some of the most sensual verse in French, exerts an affective pull that carries us into the same whirlwind of passion and death that consumes and destroys the two eponymous characters of this tragedy, Phèdre and Hippolyte.

Phèdre et Hippolyte, we should recall, was the original title of Racine's tragedy, the two victims joined from the beginning by a grammatical formula the very impossibility of which the entire play, its drama and its tragedy, will seek to confirm. This impossible relation, impossible because taboo, because incestuous, nevertheless was underlined by Racine in

the title he gave his play and by which it continued to be known during the first ten years of its existence. The tragedy became simply *Phèdre* only in its second printed version of 1687. By changing the play's title Racine effectively eclipses the role of Hippolyte and by the same token signals that from then on Phèdre is to take her place alongside Andromaque, Bérénice, and Iphigénie in his feminocentric pantheon.⁵ There, with her suffering sisters, Phèdre becomes the absolute icon of feminine passion, a victim of love and lust, a woman undone by forces she believes to be beyond her control; she is a slave to a curse that has undone all the women in her family and that now wreaks its greatest havoc on her.

Although we will probably never know what change of heart led Racine to rebaptize his most famous tragedy, it does strike me as a curious and significant redirection of attention away from the young hero/victim and onto the passion of this other, female victim with interesting consequences for the political and sexual dynamics of the Oedipal scenario that we have been following, sometimes more, sometimes less overtly, in the overarching ideological framework of Racine's theater. Certainly the importance, even the centrality, of Hippolyte as a character has been insisted on by both Mauron and Barthes in their readings of the play. Barthes reminds us, "So it is actually Hippolytus who is the exemplary character in *Phèdre* (though not the principal one); he is truly the propitiatory victim."⁶ Mauron, for his part, claims that Hippolyte is the pivotal character in the play: "In *Phèdre* it is Hippolyte who occupies the center: loved by Phèdre, lover of Aricis, accused of incest by his father, he is situated at the intersection of the three principal dramatic relations that structure the play, and, nevertheless, he appears weak—he is the always endangered center threatened with dismemberment by the fragmenting passions so characteristic of the Racinian universe."⁷ And it is Hippolyte, I might add, who in this play incarnates in perhaps the most direct way both the political promise and the Oedipal threat that the young prince must negotiate in order to be able to slay the monster and take the father's place, that is, to become king. *Phèdre* develops in the most constricted and lethal of scenarios the defeat of this quest and shows how not only the prince but an entire world order can be undone by the untamed havoc of sexuality gone wild ("Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachée. / C'est Venus toute entière à sa proie attachée" [It's no mere passion tingling in my veins: / It's Venus

tense extended on her prey!]). It is here, in this complicated scenario of passion, politics, and sacrifice, that for the first and only time in Racine's dramatic career we are witness to the actual immolation of the child/son by the father, a father who too quickly believes and accepts accusations of violent incest and whose revenge has untold consequences for the future of Athenian (that is, Western) polity.

From the beginning of Racine's tragic career, from *Andromaque*, the question of the sacrifice of the child has been the single most powerful plot device for advancing the dramatic action of his tragedies. Of all the innocent victims in Racine (Astyanax, Britannicus, Xipharès, Iphigénie, Joas) Hippolyte is surely the most pathetic. While in *Andromaque* the danger represented by Astyanax is perceived by the Greeks to be a purely political threat (they fear his revenge for the sack and destruction of Troy), by *Phèdre* this same danger has become so internalized in the Oedipal conflict of the characters that politics and sexuality seamlessly coalesce. All the characters are entrapped in a reciprocity of desire in which each, by mirroring the desire of the others, becomes for those others a monster:⁸

OENONE: Mais, ne me trompez point, vous est-il cher encore?
De quel oeil voyez-vous ce prince audacieux?

PHÈDRE: Je le vois comme un monstre effroyable à mes yeux.

OENONE: But tell me true, is he still dear to you?
How do you look upon this haughty prince?

PHÈDRE: I look upon him like some monstrous fiend.
(3.3.88–84)

THÉSÉE TO HIPPOLYTE:

Perfide! Oses-tu te montrer devant moi?
Monstre, qu'à trop longtemps épargné le tonnerre,
Reste impur des brigands dont j'ai purgé la Terre.
Après que le transport d'un amour plein d'horreur
Jusqu'au lit de ton Père a porté la fureur
Tu m'oses présenter une tête ennemie!

What traitor! You dare show yourself before me?
Foul monster, whom too long Jove's thunder spares,
Fell brigand, who still soil the earth I cleansed.
After your fiendish passion spurred you wildly
To desecrate the bed of your own father,
You dare to show to me a face I hate!

(4.2.1044–49)

ARICIE TO THÉSÉE:

Prenez garde, seigneur: vos invincibles mains
 Ont de monsters sans nombre affranchi les humains;
 Mais tout n'est pas détruit, et vous en laissez vivre
 Un . . .

Take care, my lord. Your ever-conquering hands
 Have freed humanity of countless monsters;
 But all are not destroyed and you let live
 One . . .

(5.3.1443–46)

At the end of Racine's career, politics and sexuality only reiterate, in ever more tightly constructed scenarios, the essential violence inherent in the Oedipal structure that was already present in his first tragedy. Sexuality, as Leo Bersani has written, in its most fundamental aspect is always incestuous and thus always inimical to society at large, to the family as produced by that society, and finally to the very subject formed at their conjuncture.⁹ In other words, it is sexuality that is monstrous and that produces the monsters of which society must rid itself in order not to descend into chaos and fragmentation and in order not to live sullied (the idea of "souillure," to which I will return). This sexual monstrosity is the always present threat of the return of what society, in the person of the father and his law, has had to suppress in order to become civilized. But this suppression requires a constantly exercised violence in order to assure against its return. Society is united precisely because individual desire has in some way—in many different ways—been channeled into collective enterprise, into societal living. What this means is that the sacrifice of individual desire is relayed into a communality of mutually held ideals of which the father is the vehicle. At the very beginnings of community, in the first collective gesture, lies the renouncement of a portion of individual pleasure, a sacrifice of one's own desire. Sexuality is corralled into law and politics, as the distribution of power among contiguous individuals is born. At the same time, this containment is never totally successful; the repressed returns in those figures of otherness that patriarchy cannot entirely subdue—the haunting fear of female sexuality, the woman as passion, and the equally mistrusted image of the child, the potential rebel, who has not as yet been brought into line. And this, of course, is where in *Phèdre* the two main characters in opposition and in harmony enter into a very dangerous antagonism

with the father, with Thésée, and all that he has come to represent. The theme of monstrosity will be relayed throughout this play as a metaphor for all that is uncivilized, all that threatens the polis, all, that is, that seems contrary to the rule of law put into place with so much difficulty by Thésée. At the same time, we cannot help but think, given the intuition of Louis Racine, of that other slayer of monsters, Oedipus, who also thought that he had driven chaos from his city and established a viable civil society by his slaying of the monstrous, sexually appetitive Sphinx. But as we have seen, the Sphinx seems to spring up with each new iteration of Oedipus and his legend to finally arrive, having migrated from the gates of Thebes, at Athens, or rather now more precisely at Trézène, where Phèdre, the latest incarnation of the Racinian Sphinx, pines away with lust for her stepson, the “superbe” Hippolyte.

It comes as no surprise that the Oedipus complex, even inverted, is quite obvious in the plot of *Phèdre*.¹⁰ What perhaps is less obvious is the political dimension of the Oedipal scenario, which in this play is represented on several levels, most prominently by Theseus, who has had, at least in legend, the only direct contact with the incestuous, parricidal king of Thebes. Oedipus, exhausted from his wanderings and at the end of a life exemplary for its tragic misprisions, comes to the city of Athens. Rather than being met with opprobrium, he is greeted by the king of that city, Theseus, with hospitality, which restores to him the humanity of which he himself had declared himself unworthy. Welcomed by Theseus, Oedipus, in gratitude and just before disappearing forever into the grove of the Eumenides, bestows on him the “secret of kingship.”¹¹ This secret becomes Theseus’s own legacy, which he is to transmit to his own heir, forming a new genealogy of rulers. At the same time and concomitantly we cannot forget, as Didier Anzieu reminds us, of the other overlapping similarities that exist between the myths of Oedipus and Theseus—of, that is, the intermingling of politics and sexuality that forms, in different registers, the opposing valences of civilization and desire, of life and death, that cohabit in their ambivalent intermeshing demands, the parameters of human subjectivity. Anzieu tells us that the myth of Theseus is analogous to the Oedipus legend:

Like Oedipus, Theseus goes looking for his father and kills him, but from the beginning he knows who his father is, and it is indirectly that he provokes his death. In the same way Theseus’s incest is displaced from his mother to his sister-in-law while Phèdre’s is displaced from her son

to her stepson. In Theseus's fate the Oedipus complex will be expressed by approximations.¹²

Anzieu calls Theseus “un Oedipe en demi-teinte” (a toned-down Oedipus). In other words, the two legends complete and complement each other.¹³ The two heroes share in different, attenuated versions (for Theseus) a common subtext wherein sexuality and politics are inextricably interwoven in a narration that presents both the pleasures and, more important, the dangers of life in the polis, a life led supposedly under the light of reason. At the same time and by the same legends, we also learn that this reason, the rule of law, exists only in the bright light of day when the lurking forces of the id are restrained. Under the cover of darkness, real and metaphorical, civilization tends to fade away while the passions erupt in violence.¹⁴

It is this uncontrollable id, that is, her lust for Hippolyte, that Phèdre claims Venus has ignited in her blood to devastating effect:

Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue.
Un trouble s'éleva dans mon âme éperdue.
Mes yeux ne voyaient plus, je ne pouvais parler,
Je sentis tout mon corps et transir et brûler.
Je reconnus Venus, et ses feux redoutables,
D'un sang qu'elle poursuit tourments inévitables.¹⁵

I saw, I blushed, I paled at the sight of him;
A strange disquiet seized my stricken soul;
My eyes could see no more, I could not speak;
I felt my body burn and freeze in turn
I recognized the fearful sting of Venus
The destined torments of the blood she hunts.
(1.3.273–78)

The violence of her desire is met with the equal intensity of the law, which Phèdre, as a civilized being, has internalized; the restrictions of society, her position as wife and queen, and the demands of respectability are what she struggles to maintain, even as she acknowledges, litotically, how close she is by her heritage to the murkier, prehuman passions that constantly drag her family back away from culture and into nature:

Ô haine de Vénus! Ô fatale colère!
Dans quels égarements l'amour jeta ma Mère!

O hate of Venus! Spite implacable!
 To what perversions love drove my mother!
 (1.1.249–50)

Phèdre declines an entire female genealogy (her mother, Pasiphaë; her sister, Ariane; and herself) of woman undone by the pull of perverted desire. Venus, as we know, infuriated by being revealed by the Sun's indiscreet rays in flagrante delicto with her lover Mars, takes revenge on this trespass by condemning all the female members of the Sun's family to fatal, unnatural passion. Phèdre is the last in this accursed line. And, she claims, the most perverse:

Puisque Vénus le veut, de ce sang déplorable
 Je péris la dernière, et la plus misérable.
 Since Venus wills it, of this wretched blood
 I die the last and most forlorn by far.
 (1.1.257–58)

But Phèdre, although more passionately vocal about her uncontrollable desire, is not the only character on whom Venus has been casting her spell. Hippolyte, too, we learn from the beginning of the play, has fallen prey to Venus:

HIPPOLYTE: Hippolyte en partant fuit une autre Ennemie.
 Je fuis, je l'avouerais, cette jeune Aricie,
 Reste d'un sang fatal conjuré contre nous.
 THERAMÈNE: Quoi vous-même, Seigneur, la persécutez-vous?
 Jamais l'aimable Soeur des cruels Pallantides
 Trempa-t-elle aux complots de ses Frères perfides?
 Et devez-vous haïr ses innocents appas
 HIPPOLYTE: Si je la haïssais, je ne la fuirais pas.
 HIPPOLYTE: It is another enemy I flee:
 I flee, I must confess, Aricia,
 Remnant of a doomed breed that schemed against us.
 THERAMÈNE: What, my lord? Will you too persecute her?
 Did the harsh Pallantids' fair sister ever
 Take part in her perfidious brothers' plots?
 And must you hate her charming innocence?
 HIPPOLYTE: Ah! If I hated her, I would not flee her.
 (1.1.49–56)

It is obvious, therefore, from the very beginning of the play that Racine has introduced us immediately into a world of violence and passion

where each of the two main characters admits to a love that is marked as taboo. Despite their great differences, both of the title characters are smitten by a passion that is articulated as being outside the law of the father. Phèdre's passion for her stepson, Hippolyte, is clearly marked as incestuous.¹⁶ Hippolyte, who has never before ventured into the thickets of love, does so now, against the explicit interdictions of his father ("Mon Père la réprouve, et par des lois sévères / Il défend de donner des Neveux à ses Frères" [My father frowns on her; and by strict laws / Bans issue from her to succeed her brothers]). Aricie, Hippolyte's newfound love, has been condemned by Theseus for political reasons to a sexless existence.

We know that Racine, fearing the ridicule of his contemporaries, decided not to follow Euripides' depiction of Hippolytus as averse to women (that is, homosexual) but instead chose to have his character, although decidedly more chaste than his father, fall in love with one special but unfortunately politically compromised woman. In *Phèdre*, the threat of the female, so present in all Racine as inherently "a-polis," is doubly articulated in its passive and aggressive variants by the two leading female protagonists, Phèdre and Aricie. Using the recent studies of the phantasmatic aspects of female sexuality by several French women analysts, Eugène Enriquez offers an explanation of why the place and status of female sexuality seems to pose a threat to masculine notions of political stability. Emphasizing the specter of the archaic mother as destabilizing for both men and women, Enriquez's (classically Freudian) point seems particularly suggestive for understanding the dynamics at work in the tragic vision presented by both Phèdre's and Hippolyte's transgressive choices. For Enriquez:

The social order is founded on symbolization and repression. There can be no order without words that prohibit and words that represent, no order without taboos and safe havens. But woman (either mother or daughter) threatens the social when she enunciates the primacy of pleasure, of bodily relations, of the double relation, of reality over words, representations and mediated relations.

Man can only be fascinated and terrorized by the threat that a precocious femininity poses to the realm of law and order. All the more so because it is never simply a question of "women left to themselves," the young man also . . . can fall victim to this impossibility of freeing himself from the archaic mother.¹⁷

In *Phèdre* this threat to the civilizing process is countered by Thésée. Thésée represents for the play, for his wife, and for his son the ultimate hero of Greek culture precisely because his prodigious feats have imposed social order on the primeval chaos of mythological Greece. He has slain countless monsters and brigands and seduced as many women met along the way. The two sides of the heroic equation are made to coalesce to the point that “woman” and “monster” become inseparable, especially in Hippolyte’s brooding over his father’s exploits and his own inability to imitate them. Theseus’s feats have left an indelible impression on his son, who can only repeat them to himself as a litany of what he has not accomplished, of what he is not:

Attaché près de moi par un zèle sincère
 Tu me contais alors l’histoire de mon Père.
 Tu sais combien mon âme attentive à ta voix
 S’échauffait au récit de ses nobles exploits;
 Quand tu me dépeignais ce Héros intrépide
 Consolant les Mortels de l’absence d’Alcide;
 Les Monstres étouffés, et les brigands punis,
 Procuste, Cercyon, et Scirron, et Sinnis,
 Et les os dispersés du Géant d’Epidaure,
 Et la Crète fumant du sang du Minotauro . . .

In your sincere devotion to my welfare,
 You used to tell me then my father’s story.
 You know how much my soul, all ears to you,
 Glowed at the tale of his resounding deeds,
 When you depicted my heroic sire
 Consoling mankind for Alcides’ absence;
 So many monsters smothered, brigands smitten,
 Procrustes, Sceiron, Sinis, Cercyon,
 And Epidaurus’ giant’s bones, wide-scattered,
 And Crete with blood of Minotaur bespattered . . .

(1.1.73–79)

The slaying of monsters is, as we know, only half of the story. Unfortunately for him, Hippolyte, ashamed and embarrassed, refuses to listen to the other half:

Mais quand tu récitais des faits moins glorieux,
 Sa foi partout offerte, et reçue en cent lieux;
 Hélène à ses parents dans Sparte dérobée,
 Salamine témoin des pleurs de Péribée,

Tant d'autres, dont les noms lui sont même échappés,
 Trop crédules esprits que sa flamme a trompés;
 Ariane aux rochers contant ses injustices,
 Phèdre enlevée enfin sous de meilleurs auspices;
 Tu sais comme à regret écoutant ce discours,
 Je te pressais souvent d'en abréger le cours,
 Heureux! Si j'avais pu ravir à la Mémoire
 Cette indigne moitié d'une si belle Histoire.

But when you told of deeds less glorious,
 His proffered heart a hundred times accepted;
 In Sparta Helen stolen from her parents;
 In Salamis pale Periboea in tears;
 So many more, whose very names escape him,
 Poor trusting creatures whom his passion snared:
 Sad Ariadne wailing to the rocks,
 And lastly, Phaedra, won with better grace.
 You know how painful to me were your tales,
 How often I would beg you cut them short.
 Happy if I might blot out from my mind
 This tarnished half of such a shining story.
 (1.1.83–94)

Hippolyte wants only half a father. He refuses to recognize his father's sexuality, going so far as to express (obliquely, it is true) an aggressive desire to "castrate" Thésée ("si j'avais pu ravir à la Mémoire / Cette indigne moitié" [Happy if I might blot out from my mind / This tarnished half of such a shining story]). Hippolyte has a resistance to the father's sexuality:

Cher Theramène, arrête, et respecte Thésée.
 De ses jeunes erreurs désormais revenue
 Par un indigne obstacle il n'est point retenu.

 Pray, stop, Theramenes, respect my father.
 Free now from al his youthful aberrations.
 He is not in base dalliance detained.
 (1.1.22–24)

From the very beginning this resistance creates what appears to be Hippolyte's tragic double bind. On the one hand, he wants to be a hero like his father. On the other, refusing the sexual prowess that is an integral part of this heroism, he is trapped in his own asexual nature. He can never come into the place of the father because that place demands a

sexuality that by Hippolyte's very bisexual inheritance is denied him. Hippolyte's dilemma is the quandary of all Racine's tragic characters who long for the absolute but are unable to attain an ideal that is out of their grasp because of an internal division that they ignore but that sunders their being, reminding them always that they are, in fact, not one, not absolute, but two.

Hippolyte is the tainted product of the cross between nature and culture, between the world of the father, of politics, of Athens, and the savage universe of Antiope, his Amazon mother. From Antiope, we are told, comes his aversion to sexuality. But with such an antecedent this aversion can only be interpreted as the refusal of the sexuality of the father, the refusal to assume a sexuality that is already inscribed in a patriarchal political network of absolute ideality. It is for this reason that Hippolyte is figured as always being on the point of leaving the scene of the tragedy to follow in his father's footsteps and yet forever remaining. The reasons for his remaining are not as strange as they might at first appear. Actually, given his conflicted ascendancy, Hippolyte has nowhere to go. He says he wants to leave to become like his father, to do what his father has done. Yet his bivalent nature never permits him to enter wholly into that world. Hippolyte always remains on the far side of the sexuality that defines Thésée's dominion over the world, always also within a sexuality that is other. When Hippolyte falls in love with Aricie this love only relays his bisexual nature; he falls in love outside paternal sexuality. His passion is transgressive because the only object it can find is out of bounds, outside his father's law.

Phèdre is, of course, in sexual reversal, the mirror image of Hippolyte. It may first strike us as odd, if not perverse, to see Phèdre and Hippolyte as but two differently gendered variations of the same, that is, a bisexual figuration, a two-headed monster of recalcitrant sexuality, but because of the very obvious differences in the plot of the tragedy these differences should not blind us to the structural similarities that ally them to each other as victims of the familial order that will destroy them both.¹⁸ Both are condemned to the role of the victim by the internal, inalienable difference that they bear as children of a tainted, dual lineage. Phèdre's predisposition to victimization is double: daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, she is torn between light and darkness, day and night; from her mother she descends directly from the Sun, and from her father's chthonian nature she inherits an affection for the shadowy realms of

forests and dim interiors. From her mother she is heir to the curse Venus has placed on all the females in her lineage, and from her father, “juge aux Enfers” (judge in Hades), a conscience that hounds her. To all this must be added her position of outsider; she has been brought to Athens from Crete, Athens’s traditional enemy whose exaction of a terrible tribute from the Athenians was finally ended by Theseus’s slaying of her half-brother, the Minotaur.

It is a sign of Racine’s particular genius that he was able to re-create an entire mythological tradition, inherited from archaic Greece, in a tragedy that is in essence so radically modern. Racine musters with the particularly acute erotic charge of his verse the compelling genealogies of his protagonists; he creates what is the mark of his (and our) modernity, a tragedy where his heroes struggle not so much with a dramatic situation that has been imposed from without (as do, for instance, the protagonists of Corneille’s dramas) but rather with their own internal contradictions. The tragedy of *Phèdre* is the drama of the divided self, the tragedy of a being (of beings) whose existence is torn apart not by the impingements of the world but by the conflicting demands of unconscious desire and guilt, which we are given to understand by the constant references to mythological lineages that are allegorical representations of these contradictory forces.¹⁹

This is not to say that Racine’s characters or his tragedies exist as asocial or asocietal creations in a fantasy universe with no relation to the real of the world in which they live. On the contrary, the suffering of his characters, their tragedy and tragic fate, is precisely a symptom of their society.²⁰ It is perhaps as symptom that Racinian tragedy as a form of representation is most intimately reflective of its social context, of the context not so much of a sociology of seventeenth-century France (or more precisely of the world of a rather limited but influential circle of theologians, artists, and economic and political figures circling the royal court) as of the dominant strains of an ideology that is as elusive as it is hegemonic. What is really at stake, I would argue, in the hermeneutics of the Racinian corpus is not so much determining the exact correspondences between his immediate social milieu(s) and his texts as understanding the ways in which his plays, and here most acutely *Phèdre*, express the desires of that or those milieu(s). The tragic “socius,” to borrow a term from Pierre Bourdieu, whose outlines, desires, and fears Racine’s dramaturgy traces, corresponds to certain political, economic,

and libidinal strategies, delineating, perhaps unbeknownst to itself, a being subject and subjected to the centralizing tenets of evolving absolutism.

As I have argued in the introduction to this volume, absolutism, always an evolving, never actually achieved monarchical ideal, is a complex geopolitical strategy that is, in essence, patriarchal and that establishes an exclusionary model of the state, overarched by a theologically based metaphorical chain that equates God the Father to the king, father of his people, and to the father, head of each individual household.²¹ In this model, the dominant figure of the father is exclusionary and unitary. Just as the emblem Louis XIV chose for himself, the sun, is a self-contained exclusive (one might say narcissistic) symbol of self-sufficiency, difference, in its diverse forms, must be suppressed in order not to destabilize the political edifice that is being so painstakingly put into place.

The dichotomization of subjectivity that we have been exploring in the main protagonists of *Phèdre*, Phèdre and Hippolyte, and in their internal contradictions, therefore places them irrevocably at odds with the ambient social structures that enfold and define them. Their internal split, their difference within, could be seen, on one level at least, as representing the battleground where an impossible desire for an integrity of being precisely forecloses its realization as anything other than a fantasy. The invisible Oedipal parameters informing subjectivity as an impossible plenitude of being fluctuate in Racine between two more archaic—one might call them pre-Oedipal—poles that are immediately gendered: on the one hand, the haunting guilt, an original debt to the father whose love can be won only by suffering and death (the sadistic spectacle of that suffering), and on the other, the alternative of a dispersion, either as the aphanisis of the subject in a suffocating embrace or in its violent sundering in a murderous attack of the mother (the masochistic, because passive, pole).²² In either case, what we have is an archaic fantasy of a destructive, devouring, merciless parent—a father/mother—in whose gaze stands, or rather trembles, the child.²³

The irony of this compelling fantasy of the absolute is that in order to attain the father, that is, to have him acknowledge the existence of his offspring, the child must first risk the passage through castration (sacrifice) and death. It is this desire that inheres in all the protagonists of Racine's world and that in *Phèdre* defines Hippolyte's dilemma, pushes them, in their drive for totality, against themselves. In a perverse fashion

this is exactly what, because they desire it, proves itself to be forever beyond their grasp, forever an ideal that drives them on, that sunders them in their very being, and that, despite their own subservience to that desire/God, can do nothing other than produce the monsters that crush them.

While Racine's dramatic plots focus on the tragic predicament of his protagonists, torn apart as they are by their internal contradictions, this predicament is always brought to the foreground by a political crisis. All the tragedies are situated on the fault line separating the death of an old political regime and the birth of another, as yet unfocused, order. This crisis, internalized in the Racinian hero as a passionate, guilt-ridden rift in his/her own emotional world, is exacerbated by being presented against a background of impending political chaos. What we hear echoing across the Racinian world, and more precisely here in *Phèdre*, is that something in the order of that world has been irrevocably changed: "Cet heureux temps n'est plus. Tout a changé de face" (Those happy days are over. All has changed) declares Hippolyte at the beginning of *Phèdre*.

In a sense, following the model of Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Racine constructs his tragedy so that we are plunged from the start into a familial crisis that is also a political turning point threatening the entire world order of the play.²⁴ Quickly, however, Racine moves from the political instability of the outer world into the psychological turmoil of the play's protagonist. In an extremely subtle play of inversions, the tragic plot works itself out resolving the political crisis by and through the sacrifice of the tragic hero. In a sense, therefore, Racine moves from the larger political stage of an empire in crisis to the narrower, but analogous, ferment of the tragic hero who, becoming the victim of the world's crisis, is immolated to expiate the sins of society and, by so doing, restores order to it.

In *Phèdre* the political crisis is precipitated by Theseus's absence. His disappearance has profound emotional and political consequences for all the main characters. In the most elementary sense the king's decision to join Pirithoos on a new adventure prompted the removal of Phèdre, Aricie, and the "court" from Athens to Troezen, shifting the erotic balance of power that had, unbeknownst to him, created a reasonable modus vivendi for his desirous wife. Phèdre, overcome by her passion for Hippolyte and fearing his presence, had schemed to have him leave the court, leave Athens, and remain in Troezen:

Pour bannir l'Ennemi dont j'étais idolâtre,
 J'affectai les chagrins d'une injuste Marâtre,
 Je pressai son exil, et mes cris éternels
 L'arrachèrent du sein, et des bras paternels.
 Je respirais, Oenone. Et depuis son absence
 Mes jours moins agités coulaient dans l'innocence.
 Soumis à mon Epoux, et cachant mes ennuis,
 De son fatal hymen je cultivais les fruits.

To exile him, the foe I idolized,
 I postured as a cruel stepmother;
 Despatched him from his fathers' warm embrace.
 I breathed once more, Oenone, in his absence,
 In innocence my calmer days flowed on.
 A faithful wife, I hid my secret grief,
 And raised the fruits of my unhappy marriage.
 (1.3.293–300)

Their sojourn in Troezen changes all that, and not only for Phèdre. For Hippolyte, as well, Theseus's radical realignment of his family, their removal from Athens to Troezen, not only brings Phèdre into a promiscuous proximity to Hippolyte but also conveys the captive Aricie into his presence with the deleterious consequences Theramène has noticed:

Avouez-le, tout change. Et depuis quelques jours
 On vous voit moins souvent, orgueilleux, et sauvage,
 Tantôt faire voler un char sur le rivage,
 Tantôt savant dans l'art par Neptune inventé,
 Rendre docile au frein un Coursier indompté.
 Les forêts de nos cris moins souvent retentissent.
 Chargés d'un feu secret vos yeux s'appesantissent.

Admit the change in you; for some time now
 You are less often seen, proud and untamed,
 Driving a chariot furious on the shore,
 Or, expert in the art that Neptune fashioned,
 Breaking a champing, rearing charger in.
 Less often with our shouts the woods re-echo:
 Charged with a hidden fire, your eyes grow heavy.
 (1.1.128–34)

In other words, the father's disappearance from the scene, which signals his vanishing from polity, immediately implies the eruption of desire. It is as if with the father gone, the hold of his law, the force of civilizing repression, loses its grip on the protagonists, allowing passion to burst

forth, unleashing its monsters in the midst of this displaced family. But it is his announced death that effectively sends this world spinning out of control. In a strategically placed *coup de théâtre*, just after Phèdre has revealed her incestuous desire and guilt to Oenone, we are told that the long-vanished king, who until now has been presumed missing, is actually dead:

La mort vous a ravi votre invincible Epoux,
Et ce Malheur n'est plus ignoré que de vous.

Death has deprived you of your dauntless consort,
And only you are unaware of it.

(1.4.319–20)

The immediate effect of the revelation of this death is a political crisis: who is to inherit the throne, who will govern Athens? In turn this political crisis only exacerbates desire by bringing all the protagonists into more direct contact. It is with the pretense of appealing for Hippolyte's protection of her still-underage son ("Mon Fils n'a plus de Père . . . Vous seul pouvez / . . . embrasser sa défense" [My son is fatherless . . . / . . . You only can espouse his cause]) that Phèdre engages him in a conversation that quickly dissolves into her passionate declaration of love:

Oui, Prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée.
Je l'aime, non point tel que l'ont vu les Enfers,
Volage adorateur de mille objets divers,
Qui va du Dieu des Morts déshonorer la couche;
Mais fidèle, mais fier, et même un peu farouche,
Charmant, jeune, traînant tous les coeurs après soi,
Tel qu'on dépeint nos Dieux, ou tel que je vous vois.

Yes, prince, I languish and I burn for Theseus.
I love him, not as he appeared in Hades,
Most fickle lover of a thousand women,
About to stain the bed of the god of Death;
But faithful, proud, a little shy perhaps,
Engaging, young, bewitching every heart,
Just as they carve our gods, just as I see you.

(2.5.634–40)

Undone by her irrepressible passion, what begins as a political plea ends with Phèdre's metaphorical descent into a labyrinth of desire where, lost in her erotic reveries, she has given herself the role of her sister Ariane, playing the accomplice of a Hippolyte who has replaced Thésée:

C'est moi, Prince, c'est moi dont l'utile secours
 Vous eût du Labyrinthe, enseigné les détours.
 Que de soins m'eût coûtés cette Tête charmante!
 Un fil n'eût point assez rassuré votre Amante.
 Compagne du péril qu'il vous fallait chercher,
 Moi-même devant vous j'aurais voulu marcher,
 Et Phèdre au Labyrinthe avec vous descendue,
 Se serait avec vous retrouvée, ou perdue.

I, Prince, alone, my vital help alone
 Would have taught you the Labyrinth's twists and turns.
 How many cares your dear head would have cost me!
 A thread would not have satisfied your lover.
 Companion in the risk you had to brave,
 I would myself have run ahead of you;
 And Phaedra, down with you in the Labyrinth,
 Would have returned with you or with you perished.
 (2.5.655–62)

The confusion and startled rejection of this scenario by Hippolyte is interesting for more than one reason:

Dieux! Qu'est-ce j'entends? Madame, oubliez-vous
 Que Thésée est mon Père, et qu'il est votre Epoux?
 Gods, strike me deaf! Madam, do you forget
 Theseus my father is, and is your husband?
 (2.5.663–64)

His panicked denial of what he has heard not only underlines his surprise at the highly erotic, barely disguised fantasy that Phèdre has seductively elaborated for him; with his emphasis on “father” and “husband” he also underlines both the incestuous nature of this fantasy and, perhaps more tellingly for him, its maternal, inhibiting subtext. Not only has Phèdre, in this fantasy, taken the place of Ariane, she has also taken the place of Thésée: it is she who, unable to let the lover become the hero he wishes to be by confronting and slaying the monster, reinforces the image of the possessive, devouring lover/mother whose passion does not allow any separation between herself and her lover/son, thus depriving him of any chance at being the man he so desperately wants to become. Phèdre's erotic reverie represents, for Hippolyte, her monstrous, Sphinx-like being. Instead of answering her riddle, Hippolyte flees and seeks solace with Aricie.

In a considerably less heated dialogue, Hippolyte also uses the contradictory political messages he has received on the death of his father as an excuse to see Aricie. In his initial conversation with her he not only frees her from the isolation into which she had been placed by Thésée but restores her to her rightful place on the Athenian throne:

Je vous cède, ou plutôt je vous rends une place
Un Sceptre, que jadis vos Aïeux ont reçu
De ce fameux Mortel que la Terre a conçu.
.....
Athènes dans ses murs maintenant vous rappelle.

I yield or rather give you back a place,
A scepter handed to your ancestors
By that heroic son whom Earth had borne.
.....
Athens now calls you back within her walls.
(2.2.494–501)

No sooner, however, does Hippolyte speak of politics than politics reveals itself to be a poor substitute for speaking of love:²⁵

Moi, vous haïr, Madame?
Avec quelques couleurs qu'on ait peint ma fierté,
Croit-on que dans ses flancs un Monstre m'ait porté?
Quelles sauvages moeurs, quelle haine endurcie
Pourrait en vous voyant, n'être point adoucie?
Ai-je pu résister au charme décevant . . .

.....
Je me suis engagé trop avant.
Je vois que la raison cède à la violence.
Puisque j'ai commencé de rompre le silence,
Madame, il faut poursuivre. Il faut vous informer
D'un secret, que mon coeur ne peut plus renfermer.

I hate you, Lady?
However boorish I might be depicted,
You think a monster bore me in her womb?
What barbarous manners, no, what hardened heart
Would not soon melt away at sight of you?
How could I combat the seductive spell . . . ?

.....
I fear I've gone too far.
I see my passion sweeps aside my reason.
Since I, my lady, now have broken silence,

I must continue and confess to you
 A secret that is bursting from my heart.
 (2.2.51–28)

What we see so masterfully orchestrated in the scenes where each protagonist in turn, Hippolyte and Phèdre, declare his/her love is the downward spiral of tragedy, the inextricable interweave where the political releases from within itself the libidinal that has been repressed but not suppressed, and which in turn exacerbates the decomposition of civil society. Once this rift has been opened, once, that is, the monster of sexuality reemerges, the world is thrown into disarray, and this confusion, a crisis of polity, calls out for the protective presence of a leader, a hero who can destroy the monster and return order to a society where chaos threatens.

The sexual/political crisis in *Phèdre*—but also, I would argue, in the general dramatic plots of Racine’s oeuvre—represents a generalized malaise that lies beneath the polished surface structures not only of Louis XIV’s France, a nation never quite free from the memories and fantasies of more than a century of political and religious upheaval, but of contemporary world affairs, too. Across France, and indeed Europe, the seventeenth century witnessed wars, plagues, and the terror and scourge of witch hunts. There was hardly a space of more than four years during this entire period when wars (local, national, or international) were not ravaging some corner of the European continent.²⁶ In 1643, for instance, the English preacher Jeremiah Whittaker tells the House of Commons that “these are days of shaking and this shaking is universal: the Palatinate, Bohemia, Germania, Catalonia, Portugal, Ireland and England.”²⁷ Louis XIV, in his *Mémoires*, describes for the dauphin the state in which he found France upon ascending the throne:

But you must try to picture for yourself the prevailing conditions: formidable insurrections throughout the realm both before and after my majority; a foreign war where because of these internal troubles France had lost considerable advantages, a prince of my own blood and of an illustrious family leading my enemies; countless plots in the Realm; the *parlements* having acquired a taste for it, still hung on to a usurped authority; at my own court there was very little disinterested loyalty, and because of that those of my subjects who appeared the most submissive were as worrisome to me and as feared as the most rebellious.²⁸

The fear of chaos, especially in societies whose past had precisely been grounded in rigid hierarchical structures, is obviously exacerbated in periods of great social change. Nevertheless, this fear, although inflamed by the experience of social unrest, reaches well beyond the actuality of a particular historical event and finds its terrifying power in the most archaic strata of the human psyche. Those political theorists influenced by the work of Freud have pointed to this fear of chaos as constitutive of the dialectical relation all civilizations maintain with their own internal contradictions:

All civilization is a struggle against chaos. Not against chaos as it might or might not have actually existed in prehistoric times, but against the phantasms of a primordial chaos, of a primeval disorder, of an imixture, of the undifferentiated, against an ordinary violence. Culture turns back into its opposite, chaos . . . In any case, chaos always points to the same danger: a world without guideposts, without restraints, where anything could happen and where “the worst is always a certainty.” Chaos is the constantly retreating horizon in front of which all social organization and institutions are constructed. It returns us to our ancestral fear. We embrace any and all protection against it.²⁹

Beneath the premonitions of social chaos we can detect an ambivalent message, both a fear and a desire. Fear, of course, of total societal anarchy but also a desire to make themselves heard for a cessation of the whirling anarchy, for the imposition of order upon chaos, for a leader, a new emperor, who, subsuming disparity in his own body, the shining body royal, imposes unity on difference.³⁰ Beneath the horror and fascination with dispersion lurks an appeal to a stable unity: the monarch, in his own person and persona, is made to incarnate the contradictory hopes and desires of his people—the desire of and appeal to the absolute.³¹

That these two apparently opposite forces, centrifugal vectors of dispersion and centripetal pressures of cohesion, coexist and are represented in both comic and tragic representation should not surprise us: any cultural sphere is always a space of mediation, a space in which contradictory drive, forces of progress and forces of conservation, and vestiges of the past and indefinable aspirations of the future are constantly jockeying for control.³² What is perhaps more difficult to understand is the enormous attraction absolutism had for the great masses of the European populace. “Absolutism,” writes Roland Mousnier, “was ardently desired

by the masses who saw their only chance of salvation in the concentration of all power in the hands of a single man, the embodiment of the kingdom, the living symbol of desired order and unity.”³³ This new leader becomes, in the words of Nannerl Keohane, “the ordering principle of all social life, the ultimate source of authority and energy within the state.”³⁴

Thésée returns to play just such a role for the imploding society of *Phèdre*. He returns as the hero/king, to assume the punishing role that, as we’ve seen, has been his defining function from the start and that he will now have to take on once again. Only this time the monsters he is called on to vanquish are not hiding in the wastelands or waterways of Greece but are present in the very heart of his own family. In times of crisis, in times when the fear of social anarchy becomes an overriding anxiety, the need for a sacrificial victim, for the appeasing blood of the sacrifice, becomes overwhelming.³⁵ Hippolyte, by his innocence, by his refusal to speak, to expose to his father’s sight the adultery of his wife (“Ai-je dû mettre au jour l’opprobre de son lit?” [Was I to shout the opprobrium of his bed?]), but also, and more tellingly, by his own transgressive love, has unknowingly become for his father the symbolic monster that he must extirpate from society in order for that society to regain a semblance of stability.

There is, however, something dramatically troubling by Thésée’s immediate and obstinate acceptance of Oenone’s accusation of his son. Returning from death, Thésée, instead of being greeted by the warm embrace of his family, is met with embarrassed silence, half-uttered excuses, and a family in flight from his presence. Distressed by this strange homecoming, Thésée quickly acquiesces to Oenone’s tale of attempted rape. His response is instantaneous and unequivocal:

Ah! Qu’est-ce que j’entends! Un Traître, un Téméraire
 Préparait cet outrage à l’honneur de son Père?
 Avec quelle rigueur, Destin, tu me poursuis!
 Je ne sais où je vais, je ne sais où je suis.
 O tendresse! O bonté trop mal récompensée!
 Projet audacieux! Détestable pensée.
 Pour parvenir au but de ses noirs amours
 L’insolent de la force empruntait le secours.
 J’ai reconnu le fer, instrument de sa rage;
 Ce fer dont je l’armai pour un plus noble usage.
 Tous les liens du sang n’ont pu le retenir?

What do I hear? Could such a wanton rogue
 Attempt this outrage on his father's honour?
 O fate, how mercilessly thou pursuest me!
 I know not where I go, nor where I am.
 O love, paternal goodness, ill rewarded!
 Outrageous plan! Abominable thought!
 To achieve his black and most lascivious end
 The dastard even had recourse to force!
 I recognized the sword, his fury's tool,
 The sword I gave him for a nobler use.
 Could all the ties of blood not hold him back?

(4.1.1002–11)

Thésée's outburst, his rage, and his subsequent desire for revenge are strikingly emblematic of a wounded narcissism that reveals more about his own self-centered view of the world than it does of any concern for either his son or his wife. Although Thésée is likely to strike a modern audience more as a bombastic fool than as a hero, I think that his reaction is symptomatic for what it reveals about the unconscious fears that lurk in the shadows of even the most brilliant sun/king in a patriarchal society, fears that cannot be so easily conquered when the object of those fears is not simply another female but his own son and heir.

As I mentioned earlier, Charles Mauron has defined *Phèdre* as an inverted Oedipus. By "inverted" he means that in this case it is the mother who lusts after the son and the father who kills him. This reading is perfectly justifiable within the terms of Mauron's (kleinian) frame, but it strikes me that it makes short shrift of what I see as the more perverse consequences of an Oedipal crisis that pits the father against the son (and vice versa) insofar as this antagonism is so often overlooked, or better yet, repressed, when the political dynamics of patriarchal absolutism go unexplored.

As recent ethnographers and psychoanalytically informed sociologists have remarked, the father-son relation in most societies is marked by ambivalently weighted feelings of love, antagonism, and aggression:

Every father in every society knows that he can be killed by his son and
 this is why he will attempt to foil this plot by prohibiting his son from
 becoming autonomous by sacrificing him. But at the same time every
 father knows that he is a father only by accepting that his son will one

day repudiate him as genitor and will instate him as a subject by an act of his will.³⁶

While Hippolyte has been spending his time preparing to become like his father, his father has been off on yet another adventure that tests his virility and confirms his heroic stature. That heroism, we learn, was severely put to the test. His companion in this new adventure is fed to the dog(s) and he himself imprisoned:

Moi-même il m'enferma dans des Cavernes sombres,
Lieux profonds, et voisins de l'Empire des Ombres.
Les Dieux après six mois enfin m'ont regardé.
J'ai su tromper les yeux par qui j'étais gardé.
D'un perfide Ennemi j'ai purgé la Nature.
A ses monsters lui-même a servi de pâture.

And as for me, he entombed me in dark caverns,
Deep regions, bordering on the realm of shades.
After six months, the gods at last paid heed;
I managed to elude my jailor's eyes:
Cleansed Nature of a faithless enemy,
And carved him up, himself, to feed his monsters.
(3.5.965–70)

His escape and return to hearth and home finds him confronted with a charge and a change that would signal a generational revolution: the (supposed) sexual attempt by the son to accede to the father's place. In other words, what the accusation of incest really reveals is the insecurity of male dominance, of the need to constantly defend one's hierarchical position, of the necessity of the primal father to reassert his unique authority by castrating the young male (son) who attempts a sexual, but also political, revolution. We should remember that Theseus solved his own generational problem by eliminating (inadvertently!) his own father Aegeus, king of Athens. While returning from his victory over the Minotaur, Theseus forgot the agreed-on promise he had made to his father to hoist, in the case of the successful accomplishment of his mission, the white sail of triumph so that his father, seeing the sail from afar, would be relieved by the news of his son's success. Theseus, however, in his excitement, fails to remember this promise and does not display the white sail. Seeing the ship return without the agreed-on

signal, his father, in an excess of grief and disappointment, leaps into the sea to his death.

Just as Hippolyte refuses to acknowledge the sexuality of his father, Thésée projects a sexuality onto his son that is, one can speculate, a reflection of his own desire. In either case these misprisions prove deadly for both. Hippolyte wants to believe the father is not sexual, not a potent force to be recognized and reckoned with. In this Hippolyte can be seen as acceding, as he does in the rest of his behavior, to the virginal, asexual side of his nature inherited from Antiope. In the son's fantasy, Thésée's body, too powerful, too seductive, has been eliminated. Yet this fantasized castration of the father returns to haunt and eventually destroy the son. Thésée has gone through death—"il m'enferma dans des cavernes sombres / Lieux profonds et voisins de l'empire des ombres" (he entombed me in dark caverns / Deep regions, bordering on the realm of shades)—and reemerged on its far side, more threateningly potent as the incarnation of the law. He thus enters the universe of the play, a doubly guilty world, ready to punish, blindly and arbitrarily, any who are suspected of sinning against the father, of encroaching on his prerogatives, and of breaching his laws. Thésée returns to the world as the primal father incarnate—absolute, judgmental, and punishing. And Hippolyte, of course, is the most notable victim, the sacrificial victim who, despite all his protests to the contrary, is guilty. He is guilty of lusting after the (always prohibited) woman, be that woman Phèdre or Aricie. Hippolytes' fate in the masculine dynamics of kingship and sexuality is to be the sacred (guilty/innocent) victim of patriarchy. There is no other possible position available to him in the world of mythic devolution. The son, by acceding to the woman (the taboo object of paternal prerogative), threatens the rule of the father and must therefore either (as both Oedipus and Theseus have done before him) remove the father and take his place or die.

Hippolyte dies condemned by his father and his world. His death is a sacrifice of the child to the order of Oedipal patriarchy, and it is predestined from the very beginning by the law that presides over the world of absolutism. In a world that wants the rule of the integral, Hippolyte, like Phèdre, is an anomaly, a dual being, a cross between nature and culture in the world of the father, the world of politics, and the savage universe of his mother. As Lucien Goldmann has suggested,

sovereignty in Racine is unable to tolerate any compromise.³⁷ Desire and its movements are absolute. It would nevertheless be an error, I feel, to see *Phèdre* as an unequivocal celebration of that absolutism. Although we know that on one level Racine's own career in society was based almost exclusively on his desire to be recognized by the monarchy, that he was most satisfied the closer he came to the monarch, his tragedies play out the ambivalence of this unifocal drive by uncovering precisely what in this monolithic ideology is occulted.³⁸

The sacrifice that is central to Racine's entire opus turns on ridding the community of the monstrous within itself. Concomitantly this monstrous is represented by both the aggressivity of female sexuality and by the untamed duality of the child. In a world of sovereignty, the woman, but even more so the child, because always double, always the product of two, represents what is most inimical to an ideology that desires the absolute. Although the duality of being inheres in all children, in fact, in all of us, undermining any ideology of the One, this same ideology must ignore this contradiction. It must (unconsciously, of course) present the seamless image of an uncompromised, integral icon: the shining body of the leader/king as the symbol of the integrity of being, of the flight away from fragmentation and disunity that this uncorrupted, seamless (masculine) body represents. It is therefore a particularly aggressive counter-attack by patriarchy on its descendants who threaten that image that Racine's theater plays out by offering them up in diversely perverted sacrifices. At the same time, however, this acting out reveals the hidden ambivalence of all sacrifice, for by attacking its children, patriarchy, in a very obvious (masochistic) sense, is shown to be obliged to always turn in and attack itself. Thésée's sacrifice of Hippolyte will prove to be also the sacrifice of Thésée, his tragedy. His jealous outrage will deprive him of the son whose existence confirms him in his role as father, that most powerfully overdetermined sociopolitical role in patriarchy: with Hippolyte dead, Thésée has no future as a father ("Ô mon Fils! Cher espoir que je me suis ravi! [O son, dear hope, that I myself have blasted!]); his status of king is threatened and little hope remains for seeing his line perpetuated throughout eternity.³⁹

After Thésée's prayers to Neptune are answered, after we have learned of Hippolyte's last act of courage, his slaying of the "bull from the sea" sent by Neptune, the monster he had always dreamt of defeat-

ing, and after he has been dragged by his own team of horses to his death, that other monster, Phèdre, appears on stage for the last time to inform Thésée of her guilt and to die. Cursed by Venus, misled by her “mother” Oenone, Phèdre can claim she was innocent, unable to fight against forces so much more powerful than a “faible mortelle.” Innocent, that is, in her own eyes, until she was overcome by that other monster, the green monster of jealousy:

Hippolyte est sensible, et ne sent rien pour moi!
 Aricie a son coeur! Aricie a sa foi!
 Ah Dieux! Lorsqu'à mes vœux l'Ingrat inexorable
 S'armait d'un œil si fier, d'un front si redoutable,
 Je pensais qu'à l'amour son coeur toujours fermé
 Fût contre tout mon sexe également armé.
 Une autre cependant a flechi son audace.
 Devant ses yeux cruels une autre a trouvé grâce.

Hippolytus can feel, but not for me!
 Aricia wins him, heart and soul, Aricia!
 Ah gods! When the inexorable villain
 Against my longing stood so proudly proof,
 I thought his heart, still adamant to love
 Was likewise proof against my entire sex.
 And yet another's made his hard heart quiver;
 In his fierce eyes, another has found favour.

(4.5.1203–10)

At this point Phèdre, overcome by jealousy, becomes responsible. By not revealing, as she had first intended, her guilt to Thésée, Phèdre is now alone with her guilt. She can no longer blame the gods, Oenone, or her lineage. She alone is responsible for not speaking the truth, for allowing Oenone's calumny of Hippolyte to go unchallenged; and thus she becomes guilty for his death. Her entire existence (in this play) has been a slow descent into death interrupted only long enough for her incestuous passion to condemn an innocent victim and to create a political crisis that at the end of the play has left the state bereft of a future.

Phèdre kills herself by taking a poison, which, she announces, “Médée apporta dans Athènes” (was brought by Medea to Athens). Aligning herself in death with Medea, the infanticidal sorceress, only underlines Phèdre's monstrous nature with its close ties to a primitive, prehuman sexuality that defies the attempts of men to construct a restrictive but

sustainable polis. The poison allows her just enough time to disculpate Hippolyte and, more important to her, to cleanse the world sullied by her presence in it:

J'ai pris, j'ai fait couler dans mes brulantes veines
 Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes.
 Déjà jusqu'à mon coeur le venin parvenu
 Dans ce coeur expirant jette un froid inconnu,
 Déjà je ne vois plus qu'à travers un nuage
 Et le Ciel, et l'Époux que ma présence outrage.
 Et la Mort à mes yeux derobant la clarté
 Rend au jour, qu'ils souillaient, toute sa pureté.

I've taken, poured into my burning veins,
 A poison that Medea brought to Athens.
 The venom now has reached my very heart,
 Seizing this failing heart with a strange cold;
 I now can see no more, save through a haze,
 Heaven and my husband, whom my presence stains;
 And Death, snuffing the luster from my eyes
 Repurifies the sunlight they defiled.

(5, scène dernière, 1636–44)

Is there at the end of this most poignant of Racine's tragedies any future for Thésée, for Athens? Any future, that is, for Western society? The final verses of the play have always struck a strange chord in its critical reception. Should the play simply have ended with the "pureté" of the world restored by Phèdre's suicide/sacrifice? What is the interest, or the relevance, for Thésée's sudden decision to appease the shades of his son by adopting Aricie ("me tienne lieu de Fille" [shall my daughter be])? What are the political consequences of this act for a king who has lost his son and wife?⁴⁰

Although the tragedy of *Phèdre (et Hippolyte)*, following Euripides, represented only a small slice of the legend of Theseus and his family, we know that Racine had read more widely. Particularly, he asserts, "J'ai même suivi l'histoire de Thésée telle qu'elle est dans Plutarque" (I've even followed the story of Theseus as it is recounted in Plutarch).⁴¹ In that history, as we have seen, besides his heroic deeds Plutarch tells us that Theseus was responsible for establishing democracy in Athens, that is, for instituting the political system for which Athens was to become the ideal model in the West's imagination throughout the centuries.

This shift, according to Plutarch, was orchestrated by Theseus himself as he establishes a government in which he renounces his own kingship in favor of the first model democracy. Along with his legendary prowess in ridding the Greek world of the monsters and brigands that bedeviled it, Plutarch tells us, Theseus was also responsible for organizing Athens into a model polis.⁴² In other words, Theseus's political trajectory takes him from being a hero (his legendary status as slayer of monsters and womanizer) who makes Greece safe, cleansing it of polluters, to king and finally to the first democrat of Athens. In a sense we could offer the hypothesis that the sacrifice of Hippolyte was the tragic but necessary immolation of not only the son but, as we've seen, an entire system of male devolution. By sacrificing his son, Thésée also radically alters his own investments in a system that both exults and destroys him. At the end of the play, Thésée, by adopting Aricie, revalidates the memory of the band of brothers (the Pallantides) he has slaughtered to become king. Thésée, through this reinsertion of Aricie's fraternal heritage, divests himself of the monarchy and from his place of primal father metamorphoses into but one member in a fraternal democracy. Thésée radically redirects the fate of Athens by allying himself to Aricie and to her brothers, becoming himself transformed from an absolute ruler to a modern subject, from a figure of mythology to the architect of democracy. By the sacrifice of the son and by the suicide of the incestuous, polluting wife, the entire history of Athens is transformed. A new world emerges, unsullied, from the corrupting mists of mythology. We might even say that the revolution that is *Phèdre's* final promise moves us from the world of myth into the realm of history, into, that is, the world that we claim as our own.