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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

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JEAN RACINE FOUR GREEK PLAYS

ANDROMACHE – IPHIGENIA

PHAEDRA – ATHALIAH

Translated, with introduction and notes by

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Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

General introduction	<i>page</i> vii
Studies on Racine in English	xvi
ANDROMACHE	1
Introduction	1
[Preface of 1668]	3
[Preface of 1676]	5
Genealogical table for <i>Andromache</i> and <i>Iphigenia</i>	7
Dramatis personae	8
Text	9
IPHIGENIA	51
Introduction	51
Preface	53
Dramatis personae	56
Text	57
PHAEDRA	103
Introduction	103
Preface	105
Genealogical table	109
Dramatis personae	110
Text	111
ATHALIAH	153
Introduction	153
Preface (extracts)	156
Genealogical table	159
Dramatis personae	160
Text	161
Notes	211
Pronunciation of proper names	223

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: *Andromache-Iphigenia*,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

These four plays are among the greatest examples of what the French call (or have called) classical tragedy. Three have Greek backgrounds and (in varying measure) Greek sources; and the fourth, biblical in origin, has an affinity with Greek tragedy which, though a little less obvious, is the closest of all. While my choice of title was designed to suggest that this Greekness constitutes a sort of common ground between them, not shared with plays by Racine's contemporaries nor with the rest of his own, it must be admitted that they are not all Greek in the same way. Nor do I insist that their Greekness explains their greatness. It does however, I hope, offer a useful viewpoint for looking at the poet's art and its development, and at his unique position among playwrights of his time.

While Racine was writing, an old and influential literary tradition was at its last gasp — that part of Renaissance doctrine which had taught that all the arts could find themselves, and rise again, only by imitating the works and methods of classical antiquity; with freedom and originality, but in the spirit of admirers and learners. Instead, a new spirit was growing, of self-confidence and self-congratulation before the evidence of recent advances in scientific knowledge, technology, and also literature and art; a complacency far from groundless, but aided by a fading awareness of what had been the greatness of Greece and Rome. The 'Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns' was a long succession of petty cavils and critical skirmishes: of the two pitched battles, in which the Ancients were defeated by their own pedantry and the ignorance of their opponents, one came late in Racine's life and the other after his death. He took his place among the Ancients, but inconspicuously, and no doubt never realised how much of a Modern he was in the nature of things.

For the drama in which he excelled (born of Renaissance imitations of the Latin tragedies of Seneca, with an admixture of the drama of love and adventure, inspired by the modern novel, and in France called *tragi-comedy*) is modern, and has few of the features or the beauties of Attic tragedy. It has great merits of its own, which redeem what the English reader tends to see as considerable constraints. Thus, rigid (but not quite complete) unity of tone forbade comic relief or colloquial language (though not simplicity and directness) to intrude into a fairly sustained nobility of tragic vocabulary and

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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

General introduction

viii

expression. An exalted sense of decorum, which would have seemed exaggerated in any less hierarchical society, excluded the sight of bloodshed, violence and crowd scenes, but led back at the same time to the realisation that drama resides much less in pageantry or any other visual appeal, than in great crises of emotion, shifts of emotion, clashes of wills (or ideas), crucial dilemmas and decisions. The cramping effect of the famous Unities of Time, Place and Action has often been overstressed. The first two were born of a misconceived devotion to 'verisimilitude', taken to mean a hundred per cent illusion of reality in performance instead of the credibility of the story-line; their effect was to eliminate all plots but those which could be played out in a single place and a single burst of activity, based on a situation which had to be explained by, often, a great deal of reference to the past. But they were powerful aids to concentration and intensity; so, even more, was the strict Unity of Action, under which sub-plots were not excluded, but had to be very closely integrated. At the same time a new awareness of 'plot' developed the arts of climax and suspense.

Such was the dramatic form into which Racine infused a poetry and a sense of tragedy (we are still struggling to define those terms) which made his dozen years of writing the apogee of this utterly French genre. (He wrote nine tragedies for the Paris stage, 1664–77, then two in retirement, 1689 and 1691.) Meanwhile in his prefaces, which contain all the ideas he ever expressed on the art of tragedy, he wrote from the beginning as if all the merits of his plays had been due to a return to the examples of Sophocles and Euripides, and the lessons of Aristotle.

True, he had received an exceptionally good grounding in Greek. Yet once he escaped from the rather oppressive atmosphere of his early years, he made every effort, as his letters and his first verse compositions make clear, to turn himself into a fashionable wit. His first play (1664), produced by Molière when Racine was twenty-four, looked as though he had decided this time to exploit his scholarly vein – it was called *La Thébaïde*; it portrayed the quarrel and the deaths of the two sons of Oedipus; it dwelt in several passages on the injustice of the Gods and the inherited curse:

See the high justice of these mighty Gods –
They lead us to the very brink of crime,
Make us commit it, and will not forgive. (608ff.)

Yet the Greek appearance is partly illusory. There is a very human love-interest. The brothers think only of their human

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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

General introduction

ix

passions and interests. And Creon is a cynical traitor who stokes up their hatred for his own ends. The literary influences are more French than Latin, and more Latin than Greek.

No doubt if a modern theatre public is to be interested in a mythological subject, it is almost necessary to interpret it in modern terms, or to overlay it with some action having modern appeal. In seventeenth-century practice this meant the superimposition of a love-plot in the contemporary mode, and of a conflict of what can broadly be called political interests. It has been done clumsily here, but Racine, like his contemporaries, always does it, with increasing subtlety; the join is visible to us, because we can see the manners and thought of two periods, neither of which is our own. In *Phèdre* alone of his 'Greek' plays the political conflict is hardly noticeable, but it exists.

The next play — a success as *La Thébaïde* was not — was *Alexandre le Grand* (1665), quite unmythological and only partly historical. The next was *Andromaque* (1667).

It would be wrong to belittle the Greek element in *Andromaque*, for it certainly does as much as any other element to give the play the atmosphere it has. But what we find is a set of characters connected with the Trojan war, put into a modern situation which is worked out according to modern patterns of sentiment and plot. The ideas of Destiny, the will of the Gods, the divine curse incurred by wickedness, are all expressed, but what determines the fate of the characters is their own passions. This is a tragedy of love, with all its consequences of hate, treachery, irresolution and moral degradation, and a play of mirrors or echoes as each of three characters passes through similar phases of emotion and treats the others with similar indifference or cruelty. This major Racinian theme would never be more central or more thoroughly treated in any of his works.

He next wrote four tragedies, three (*Britannicus* 1669, *Bérénice* 1670, *Mithridate* 1673) on themes from ancient Roman history (a very popular setting at the time), and one drawn from a recent event in Constantinople (*Bajazet* 1672). Then, for reasons not clearly known, he turned to Greek tragedy with more serious attention than ever before. It looks as though some of the study we know he devoted to the three Attic tragedians (in their own language) dated from this period. Certainly in the preface to *Iphigénie* (1674, published 1675) he shows himself more conscious even than before of the prestige to be gained by playing on this indebtedness, which none of his rivals could claim.

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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

General introduction

x

This tragedy and *Phèdre*, which followed it (1677), used not merely Greek legend, but the situations and plots of two actual Greek plays (though with necessary modifications and the intermingling of other influences). The author of both was Euripides: Racine never used Aeschylus, who was out of favour, and never directly imitated Sophocles, who had the highest reputation of the three. Euripides draws character with more profundity, more complexity and more pathetic effect, which may be what attracted the French playwright. He also has an ironic, irreverent, questioning mind; his attitude to his people's Gods is not simple rejection, but it can be corrosive and devastating. The plays Racine chose to use show Diana demanding a human sacrifice, and Venus drawing Phaedra into sin by irresistible temptation. The first of these situations Euripides tried to save by a last-minute happy ending (discussed adversely in Racine's preface) – in the version that has come down to us, at all events, though this is possibly a recasting. But the second, if we take the mythology seriously, sets us in a horrifying world of divine injustice and oppression.

It had in any case become very hard for a tragic playwright in France to take the Greek Gods seriously (or the Roman Gods: the seventeenth century sees no difference between them and uses the Latin names as 'translations' of the Greek). No modern, of course, believed in them. As traditional ornaments of poetry, they might be referred to allegorically or symbolically; otherwise they stood for the justice or the providence of the God of Christian belief – and it is remarkable how the monotheistically minded French writer tends to allude collectively to 'Heaven' or 'the Gods' *en bloc*, rather than, even in *Iphigénie* or *Phèdre*, to Diana or Venus. But here arose the problem. For if a divinity took an active part in a tragedy (unseen of course: tragedy, unlike opera, never brought them on the stage), it had to be either by helping or by harming a mortal hero. The first solution would create a happy ending, for which the hero, moreover, lost the credit; and this was precisely the *deus ex machina* that Aristotle had condemned. But, according to another principle in the *Poetics* to which Racine appeals in three of the five prefaces translated in this volume, a hero who falls into misfortune must not be so entirely wicked as to forfeit our sympathy; so a God who causes that downfall must be to some extent an unjust God.

In fact Racine directs as much attention as he can on his human actors. When he introduces a supernatural intervention, we shall see that as often as possible he leaves his audience or readers free to reject it if they prefer. Phaedra, in particular,

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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athalie

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

General introduction

xi

falls into an incestuous love by whatever fatality it is that does sometimes cause such things to happen, as we all know: *she* sees in it the personal hatred of Venus, but even the other characters are not aware of this, and we do not have to accept her word. Whatever explanation we choose, her consciousness of helpless guilt and her aspiration towards innocence – in which she stands alone among Racinian characters – make her the richest and most poetic figure of them all.

No further approximation to Attic tragedy was possible to a poet writing for the Paris stage. But this Racine ceased to do precisely at this point; and in a new life as a staid married man and a protégé of the King he must have thought his playwright's career was closed. He may indeed have mused at times on ways in which, by a return to Greek models, his art could have been purged of the worldly features that had brought it into disfavour in strict religious circles (cf. the ending of the preface to *Phèdre*, written while he was contemplating the break). Sophocles and Euripides had known nothing of the love-interest his century would not do without, or the conventions under which it was forced to operate; they could and did express moral and religious ideas; they had a complete art-form, in which poetry joined with music and dance – a form of which the opera, adapted for Paris from its Italian origins by Lully, was giving a notion (in the Académie royale de Musique from 1672), though Racine cannot have approved of its moral tone or its frivolous use of classical mythology.

Then a commission which must have been quite unexpected gave him the opportunity to put some of these aspirations into practice, and compose two tragedies with singing choruses (*Esther* 1689, *Athalie* 1691 – the first may be considered little more than a trial shot) which were Greek by their inner spirit but biblical in subject, and where the God of the Jews and Christians directed the action for his own ends, upheld the virtuous characters and punished the wicked.

In his use of divinities in dramatic action, Racine therefore passed through three stages, with *Phèdre* occupying the turning-point between the tragedies of human passion and the tragedies of divine vengeance and salvation.

The poetic style of the writer appears to follow a similar course, with *Phèdre* still in the midway position. The 'poetic diction' of the early group relies, since the taste of the age rejected archaism, on the same fairly restricted gamut of images used by all his contemporaries – laurels or trophies (for military glory), blood (with perpetual play between the two connotations of 'slaughter' and 'dynasty'); in the domain

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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athalie

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

General introduction

xii

of love-making, the post-Petrarchan metaphors of flames, wounds and bonds; and the preference for metonymies (heart, arm, hand, eyes) over personal nouns or pronouns. Clichés all, or in the process of becoming clichés — only we must beware when we speak of clichés, for these were simply the successful turns of expression favoured, because of their known power to communicate the sense of poetry, until the moment when over-familiarity caused distaste; but while they were as widely current as they were in Racine's day, that moment had clearly not come. In *Athalie*, at the other end of the poet's career, the lovers' language is necessarily absent, and the new elements are a little of the directness, even brutality, of the Old Testament narrative, and a poetry relying on unfamiliar and stronger images drawn from the psalmists and the prophets — a reflection of Hebrew poetry which Racine was alone among the French poets of his day to love or even recognise, even though here he had to use translations. Among the thematic images of the play are those of growth and withering (from the same source); and the often rather stiff dialogue is relieved with the lyricism of the choruses.

In this also, *Phèdre* comes between the two groups, in that the lovers' language has a new depth and reality — love's fires and wounds are real torment, its bondage, real humiliation. The tone is often moral, almost religious. Here too the evocative use of legendary names and mythological allusions becomes, more than in *Andromaque* or even *Iphigénie*, a conscious poetic resource; and it is perhaps to Euripides' figure of Hippolytus, hunting in the thickets or driving his chariot along the seashore, that Racine owes a powerful recurrent imagery, or symbolism, of light and shadow.

If even now I have not mentioned the principal beauty of Racine — the sheer music of his verse, equalled in his own century only at rare moments by Malherbe and sometimes by La Fontaine, and never in the next — it is because a translator does better not to dwell on it. It depends on vowels and consonants, speech rhythms, metrical and intonation patterns, which are French and not English. Here has always been the barrier to recognition of Racine in English-speaking countries. Perhaps the barrier is insurmountable. Each translator does what he can to find some sort of equivalents. Here I will explain what I have tried to do, rather than why I could not do better.

The metrical form itself cannot be reproduced; French and English are too different in their ways of applying stress and

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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

General introduction

xiii

therefore creating rhythm. Only by the number of syllables (twelve) does Shelley's alexandrine in the *Skylark* ode, or Byron's in *Childe Harold*, resemble the French alexandrine. So, like most or all other English translators, I take our traditional English line for serious verse, the decasyllable; but I do not attempt rhyme, for one thing because English is poor in rhymes and it would be too difficult to reconcile rhyme with tolerable fidelity to sense, but also because the couplets of Dryden, Racine's contemporary, to say nothing of those of Pope, are not perhaps more often endstopt or more neatly balanced than Racine's, but being shorter they are more evidently so. But my blank verse is less irregular than much of Shakespeare's, is never mixed with prose, and has no incomplete lines. For all specific effects – pauses, phrasing, climax, *accelerando* and *rallentando* – I try to find equivalents.

In one place I have thrown over these principles and aimed at reproducing Racine's own rhythms exactly: in the choral songs of *Athalie*, which – I say this with confidence thanks to the expert checking of my friend Mrs Allison Walker-Morecroft, LRAM, LTCL, LGSM – can be sung to the original score composed for the play by J.-B. Moreau, and reproduced in the music album attached to the eight-volume edition of Racine's complete works in the Grands Ecrivains series.¹ The composer took delight in emphasising the rhythmical variety to be found in his text; my renderings therefore may appear exceedingly irregular by English metrical conventions. The alexandrines I could only make to look like verse at all by cutting each of them into two hexasyllables.

The vocabulary of Racine's tragedies is restricted to some 2,000 words, some of which, because of the relative scarcity of available synonyms, have taken on great richness of meaning. In a more copious language I could not imitate this, though I have respected his use of theme-words as much as I could, together with his avoidance of low or inelegant turns of speech, and some of the dead metaphors of lovers' language which I have described as clichés – but not those too obviously dead; by trying to find how we today might express the same concepts I hoped to recover some of the freshness that they must have had once.

I have respected some of Racine's linguistic conventions – for instance that by which all high-born characters address each other normally as *Seigneur* or *Madame*, or occasionally, for a little more familiarity (strange as it may seem) as *Prince* or *Princesse*. Other such conventions were hard to reproduce – those adjectives (used as nouns) of hyperbolic denunci-

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978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

General introduction

xiv

ation which English no longer possesses, *cruel, inhumain, barbare, perfide, infidèle, ingrat* (in either gender); and that supremely useful resource which our language has long lost, of dropping from the civil *vous* to the *tu* of superiority or overpowering emotion.

Two particular details in these translations may need comment.

Unity of Place in Racine's time means that the whole of each tragedy is played in the same set, representing the same location: so, within an act, there cannot be changes of scene in the English sense. But French publishers have retained a convention according to which any entrance or exit, with few exceptions, gives rise to a new 'scene'. I have kept such scene-numbers out of my text (as Dryden did in *All for Love*, which keeps Unity of Place), but noted them in the pageheadings for the convenience of those who may wish to consult a French text, or find a reference.

The proper names appear, in the first three plays, in the English forms corresponding to Racine's, which often go back to Latin, not Greek. These English forms came to us through French, but subsequently developed within the normal development of English sound-values. They were universally accepted by English speakers until (I think) about 1920, when the 'restored' pronunciation of Latin, quite rightly introduced into schools for the study of that language, created a confusion from which we have not recovered. My translations retain in all cases the older traditional forms we still use in such names as Jesus, Plato, Euripides, Caesar, as against Crayon, Fydra, I-neigh-ass. Vowels matter so much in verse — and even more, of course, the proper placing of stress — that I have added a glossary of proper names, which I beg and pray everyone to consult before reading aloud, and especially before acting, these translations.

To that glossary I have added the less familiar Old Testament names of *Athaliah*, which have the forms and pronunciations used in English-speaking churches, based on the Authorised Version ('King James Bible'). Two exceptions made for special reasons (Trozen, Josabeth) are explained in notes to the plays in which they appear.

The translation of *Phèdre* published here dates from 1945, and was published in 1971 by the Edinburgh University Press, by whose kind permission it is reprinted, with very slight revisions. The others are new, and I would express my warmest gratitude to the friends who have helped me with their comments,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

General introduction

xv

especially to Miss Margaret Tillett, Mrs Dilys Jenkins and Mr
Neville Masterman, who have read every line critically, and Mrs
Allison Walker-Morecroft, whose work on the music of *Athalie*
I have already mentioned.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28676-3 - Jean Racine Four Greek Plays: Andromache-Iphigenia,
Phaedra-Athaliah

R. C. Knight

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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- John Lough, *Seventeenth-Century French Drama: the Background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979)

For recent French studies, including what has become known as 'la nouvelle critique', see R.C. Knight, *Racine* (above), pp. 11–14 and bibliography. Of these, only Lucien Goldmann has appeared in English: *Le dieu caché* (1955), translated by Philip Thody as *The Hidden God* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964); and *Racine* (1966), translated by Alastair Hamilton (Cambridge: Rivers Press, 1972).