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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Chapter 1*The context of *Phèdre***Introduction: versions of a legend**

Phèdre represents the culmination of seventeenth-century French classical tragedy and can be fully understood only against the background of seventeenth-century French political, social, and literary history, of which we provide a brief sketch. It should not be supposed, however, that some evolutionary process was at work from which Racine's greatest tragedy emerged by an inherent logic. It is the highly individual work of an original genius, a play organically related to his previous plays, but not their inevitable outcome, and still less that of the creations of his French predecessors who, like himself, were indebted to Seneca and, indirectly at least, to Euripides.

Euripides' *Hippolytus* (429 BC) is the story of the revenge of Aphrodite, goddess of love, on Hippolytus for neglecting her in favour of Artemis, goddess of chastity. Hippolytus is the son of Theseus and stepson of Phaedra, Theseus' second wife. While Theseus is away, Phaedra falls in love with Hippolytus, and her nurse reveals her feelings to him. He rejects her advances. Phaedra hangs herself, leaving tablets denouncing Hippolytus as her seducer. Theseus banishes Hippolytus and calls upon Poseidon to punish him. A monstrous bull sent from the sea terrifies his horses and he is dragged to his death. Theseus learns belatedly of his misjudgement from Artemis. In a final exchange with his dying son, Theseus is forgiven by him.

In the *Phaedra* (c. AD 50) of Seneca, it is Phaedra herself who reveals her love to Hippolytus, seizes his sword, which he drops after threatening to kill her, and produces it in evidence when she accuses him of assault. When Hippolytus has died a

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violent death following his father's curse, Phaedra confesses her guilt and commits suicide in despair. Apart from Neptune, the gods have no role in the play, which has become a drama of human passion.

In his *Phèdre* (1677), Racine adapts the ancient tale to contemporary French taste with immense skill and to powerful effect. The austere celibate Hippolytus of myth is transformed into a young lover, the object of his affections being the partially invented figure of Aricie, offspring of an enemy dynasty and potential pretender to the throne of Athens. Phèdre's anguished love for Hippolyte, which Venus has inflicted upon her, is exacerbated by intense jealousy when she learns that he loves another. She does not herself accuse Hippolyte of rape, but does acquiesce in Cœnone's resolve to do so. Filled with remorse, she takes a lethal poison, only to be utterly consumed by her sense of guilt on learning of the destruction of Hippolyte by a sea-monster, and dies in despair and self-loathing.

Four or five predecessors of Racine composed plays on the theme of Phaedra's love for her stepson Hippolytus, but they mostly followed Seneca too closely to have had much to offer which was not already present in the Latin dramatist. Only the *Hippolyte* (1573) of the gifted sixteenth-century dramatist Robert Garnier may give some foretaste of the poetry of Racine's tragedy. The *Bellérophon* (1672) of Philippe Quinault, on the love of Stheneboea, wife of the king of Argos, for the eponymous hero, introduces a rival for his love, as does the *Hippolyte* (1675) of Bidar, and Racine may well have owed something to the *Ariane* (1672) of Thomas Corneille, which depicts Phèdre's jealousy of her sister. But all the seventeenth-century predecessors of Racine flinch from depicting an incestuous relationship, and Phèdre and Thésée are represented as fiancés, not as man and wife. In Gilbert's play of 1646, Hippolyte is even shown in love with Phèdre. Needless to say, such adaptations of the legend deprive it of the sense of tragic guilt which gives Racine's play its special force.

Racinian tragedy reflects the somewhat oppressive and enclosed atmosphere of the salon and court culture of his time,

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disillusioned concerning human ideals, generating its own self-destructive passions, and inclined to a fatalistic pessimism not uncongenial to an autocratic political regime. It was an age, also, when cracks were about to appear in the triumphal façade of apparently timeless classical values. To have captured the grandeur and the self-doubts of high classicism in a play on a Euripidean mythological theme, enriched by Senecan moral insight and by the poetry of Virgil and Ovid, yet creating a majestic poetry of its own, is a unique achievement, for the society and the ethos from which it emerged were on the brink – or in the process – of change into something like our own bourgeois-utilitarian world in which high tragedy is remote from our experience, relegated, in fact, to the realm of literary artifice. Yet Racine's allegory of the struggle of conscience and desire retains its power to awaken echoes in our own sensibility and has continued in succeeding generations to stimulate creative minds throughout Europe to refashion in their turn, and in the image of their own obsessions and anxieties, Racine's transmutation of an ancient theme.

Politics, society, and drama in seventeenth-century France

The appearance of monumental grandeur and simplicity which attaches to the age of Louis XIV during which Racine wrote all his plays must be set against a historical background of political and social disorder. The reign of the cardinal de Richelieu as chief counsellor to Marie de Medici and Louis XIII, which saw the founding of the French Academy and coincided very largely with the creation of Pierre Corneille's most original or most powerful plays, was a period of turbulence and at first of conspiracies and rebellions. Rebellions among the nobility were severely repressed and their powers as provincial governors were restricted by the presence of the state administrative officers known as *intendants*. The conspiracies of unruly nobles and their conflicts with their rulers which Corneille depicts in his great tragedies of the thirties and forties can be seen as reflecting in a stylised way the realities of that age.

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The last and decisively disastrous attempt of the nobles to assert their independence, however, came with the civil wars known as the Frondes in the late 1640s and early 1650s, at the time of the Regency of Anne of Austria and under the young King Louis XIV and his minister Mazarin. The collapse of the Frondes marked the end of any serious threat to the authority of the central administration and heralded an age of systematic reduction of the nobility to political impotence by a determinedly autocratic ruler who never forgot the humiliation inflicted on him in early adolescence by the Frondes. In 1660, Louis inaugurated his personal reign, and Mazarin died the year after. Louis was to pursue a repressive policy within and a policy of wars of expansion without. The Jansenist community of Port-Royal by which Racine had been educated, but which the King suspected of having supported the Frondes, was brought under central control in 1661, and an uneasy 'Peace of the Church' with the Jansenists prevailed from 1668 to 1679, coinciding with the middle years of Racine's dramatic career. Abroad, Louis waged war against Holland, and if he did not achieve the crushing victory that he had intended, he secured French frontiers to north and east by treaties of 1678 and 1679, and demonstrated the dominant role of France in Europe. At the same time he succeeded in imposing on opinion inside and outside France an image of French political and cultural superiority and prestige.

If the heroic dramas of Corneille with their ancient or legendary settings reflected the conflicts of interest and principle which lay behind the political struggles of the the 1640s, the heroic novel of the time, modelled on the ancient epic, depicted the martial and amorous exploits of the heroes of antiquity adapted to a modern taste and resembling or presaging the romantic posturings of the aristocratic *frondeurs*. But a transition is evident in the long novels of the *précieuse* Madeleine de Scudéry, published in the 1650s, which, from a romanticised and sentimentalised depiction of ancient heroes in *Artamène, ou Le grand Cyrus*, pass in *Clélie* to an evocation, still under ancient names, of the conversations and discussions of those who frequented her salon. The preoccupation of

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Mademoiselle de Scudéry, and of the preciosity which she favoured, with the emancipation of women and with their emotional life made a deep impression on the literature of the age of high classicism in France. Even Corneille, who had seemed to lose his touch with his miserably unsuccessful tragedy *Pertharite* (1652) on an episode from the history of the Goths, returned to the stage in 1659 with his *Œdipe*, adding love interest by way of a secondary plot which overshadows the great tragic theme bequeathed by Sophocles.

Audiences in the age of high classicism were above all concerned to be entertained. Romance and gallantry figured largely in the plays of Philippe Quinault in the 1660s and 1670s, which were pervaded by sensibility: even 'I hate you' being said tenderly, as Boileau ironically observed. But Quinault acquired particularly a reputation as a librettist for the operas of Lully, many of which had mythological plots. These too were essentially for entertainment and spectacle. Scenery and machinery were especially appreciated. The vogue of sensibility and taste for lavish entertainment and spectacle were congenial to an autocratic regime which sought to encourage the creation of a culture of brilliance and prestige, and preferred to have the nobility harmlessly occupied at court rather than plotting in their domains. On the other hand, their confined existence, with its intrigues, frustrations, and suppressed emotional violence, created a climate of disillusion akin to that evoked in Madame de La Fayette's ostensibly historical novel, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1675). To this climate of disillusion, the religious pessimism of writers within and without the Jansenist fold made its own contribution. The tragedies of Racine, however, apart from the two late plays, *Esther* and *Athalie*, are essentially pagan in character and in any case problematic rather than doctrinaire.

The conditions under which French classical drama was normally staged were restrictive. Plays were performed in converted indoor tennis-courts or, more rarely, in theatres built on the same plan as these. The chief Paris theatre for the performance of tragedy, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where Racine's major secular plays were staged, was such a theatre,

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purpose-built in 1548. The rectangular structure of the tennis-court or theatre afforded only limited visibility to the spectators. These sat along the sides of the court, opposite one another rather than facing the raised stage, or stood massed in the pit (*parterre*), where vision largely depended on one's being able to see between, or over the heads of, others. Privileged spectators sat on the stage itself, and, besides inconveniencing actors, were themselves too close to the action to follow it with ease. Costumes were rich, an amalgam of ancient and contemporary French dress, but scenery was simple, making use of standard sets, the indication 'palais à volonté' meaning any available scenery representing a palace. Racine, however, seems to have prescribed more precise settings for his plays, as, for instance, the vaulted palace of *Phèdre* (line 854). Lighting was by fitful candle-flames, which may have lent themselves to lighting effects of sorts but must also have made recognition of facial expression and body language difficult. In fact, the visual appeal in Racine is made more widely to the mind's eye and to the imagination through the medium of language. For the delivery of the lines, Racine seems to have favoured a moderately rhetorical style of declamation, exploiting variation of vocal pitch and loudness for dramatic effect. (See D. Maskell, *Racine. A Theatrical Reading* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 9–125.)

Principles of French classical tragedy

French classical dramatic theory is deeply indebted to the interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics* by Renaissance scholars. The publication in 1498 of Giorgio Valla's Latin translation of that work prompted a whole series of editions, translations, and commentaries, of which Lodovico Castelvetro's *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* (*Aristotle's Poetics Vernacularized and Expounded*) of 1570 is among the most notable. Castelvetro argues that his predecessors in translating the *Poetics* had not realised that Aristotle's work was a rough draft for a two-volume treatise. He proposed, therefore, to expand and enlarge the *Poetics* so as to make of it a substitute

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for Aristotle's lost treatise. The resulting work is probably twenty times the length of Aristotle's brief and incomplete outline. Castelvetro, who is not a faithful follower of Aristotle and does not hesitate to distort or reject his views, is the chief source of the French classical doctrine of the three unities of action, time, and place (a single action in a single place and lasting no more than a single day), a fact which is not without irony, since Castelvetro appears to have favoured realism in the theatre, whereas the unities have come to be seen as the height of artifice. Nevertheless, Castelvetro saw them as closer to reality than settings requiring the audience to transport themselves in time and space.

Racine's great seventeenth-century predecessor Pierre Corneille, who was born in 1606, was writing for the theatre before the classical rules were well established in France, but his early plays, apart from the first, belong to the 1630s, the period when the debate over the rules was at its height. While soon showing himself to be largely in tune with classical conceptions of dramatic technique, he also displayed a great independence of mind, equal to that of Castelvetro, to whom he was indebted, as well as the creative imagination to impose his own artistic vision on the drama of his age. The performance of Corneille's *Le Cid* in 1637 prompted the French Academy's critique (*Les Sentiments de l'Académie sur 'Le Cid'*, 1638) which spurred Corneille to closer conformity to classical conventions.

Corneille's finest tragedies belong chiefly to the first half of the century. As a playwright of established reputation he published in 1660 three *Discours* on the principles of drama. It seems likely that he was at least in part concerned to reply to *La Pratique du théâtre* (1657, but written perhaps in the 1640s) of the Abbé d'Aubignac, an influential work of theory and practice. D'Aubignac championed the principle of verisimilitude in the theatre, and is also notable for his insistence that the unities are not simply decreed by authority but are founded in reason – a major reason being their contribution to verisimilitude. Corneille's *Discours* are in fact concerned with the two questions of whether a play has to be morally useful and whether it has to be probable or plausible.

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Inevitably, Corneille quotes Aristotle's prescription for the tragic hero, requiring that he should not be wholly virtuous, since the downfall of such a man would provoke moral indignation, nor wholly evil, for that downfall would then be his just desert. But Corneille disagrees with Aristotle, pointing to heroes or heroines of his own plays who are successful tragic figures in spite of being examples of types of which Aristotle disapproves.

In his discussion of the sources of tragic feeling, Corneille concerns himself with the question of whether, or how far, it is permissible to change anything in subjects taken from legend or history. He quotes Aristotle as saying that traditional subjects should not be altered and that Clytemnestra should not be killed by anyone other than her son Orestes, and so on. On this Corneille comments that while the traditional *outcome* of the story must be maintained, the way in which the outcome is arrived at is open to modification. He cites the different ways in which the death of Clytemnestra was treated by Sophocles and Euripides. It is at once obvious that Racine could offer the same justification for his own treatment of the Hippolytus legend. But whereas Corneille seeks tragic subjects in attested extraordinary characters and incidents, French classical principles, and Racine following them, require conformity to the demands of 'vraisemblance'. This will cause problems for Racine himself when he turns to myth for tragic themes.

On the unities we need note only two remarks on those of time and place. Corneille asserts that the unity of time is necessary on the grounds of realism, but that the exact duration of the action need not be indicated if probability is somewhat forced. Of the unity of place, he remarks that if it is unavoidable to have the action in more than one place, then these places should not have need of different scenery and in no circumstances should they be named, only the general location in which they are contained. What Corneille is proposing is a unity of place achieved by an illusion. The action is to take place in a single but undefined location. It is a single location but represents or may represent a plurality of

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its kind. Corneille operates with a much more restricted form of illusion than does Shakespeare, whose plays range over a variety of imagined historical settings. On the other hand, although French classical principles may confine the characters physically in a conventional room or palace, they impose no restrictions on the minds or imaginations of the characters, which may wander far and wide in space and time.

Corneille's plays and theoretical writings offer important models for Racine to imitate or reject. Racine was exceptional, however, in having a competent knowledge of Greek and in his direct study of Greek tragedies, on which he has left some notes, and of Aristotle's *Poetics*, of which he translated certain portions. These last give a clue to the direction of his interests, although the date of their writing is uncertain. It no doubt lies between that of the *Discours* (1660) of Corneille and that of his own *Phèdre* (1677). No less interesting, but quite different in character, are the prefaces to his plays, which, as was common in seventeenth-century France, were apologetic in character, defending his plays against not always well-intentioned criticism, or passing over to attack on his critics. He was particularly exposed to accusations of infringement, real or imaginary, of classical rules or conventions, and vigorously asserted the conformity of his practice to that favoured by critical authorities – notably Aristotle.

The first of Racine's prefaces, that to his second play, *Alexandre le Grand* (1665), reveals the areas in which a playwright might be exposed to critical attack. Racine insists on the technical orthodoxy of his play: all his scenes are well filled, they are firmly and coherently linked to one another, no actor comes on stage without the reason for his appearance being clearly indicated. More significantly for his own individual mode of writing, he claims to have kept his critics interested, perhaps in spite of themselves, from beginning to end of a play containing few incidents and little matter.

This already points to the 'inwardness' of the Racinian play – the concentration on psychological conflict rather than on physical action and events. The conception culminates in *Bérénice* (1670) in the preface to which Racine observes that

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invention consists in making something out of nothing. The contrary view, which attaches value to multiplicity of incident, offends against the principle of 'vraisemblance', since the unity of time does not admit of the occurrence of many events in the restricted time of the action of the play. This is surely directed against Corneille or his supporters, and Racine taunts dramatists who fill their plays with incident with lacking the fertility and the power to keep the interest of the audience during five acts through an action which is simple, sustained by the power of the passions, the beauty of the sentiments, and the elegance of the expression. There is a significant difference here from the concerns or at any rate the characteristics of the Cornelian play, which is marked rather by energy and epigrammatic force of expression, loftiness of sentiments, and imperiousness of personalities.

Already in the preface to *Alexandre le Grand* Racine is wrangling with the critics over his portrayal of his heroes: Taxile, they say, lacks integrity – or he is unjustly treated; Alexandre is too amorous – or he is insufficiently amorous. This is not merely Racine's use of the familiar polemical device of setting critics against one another, it reveals disagreement over the moral concerns of literary works and over the role of the love interest in serious drama. In the prefaces to *Andromaque* (1667), a play evocative of the Trojan War and its aftermath, Racine answers critics of his depiction of his protagonists by declaring stoutly that they are so famous in antiquity that he could not change their characters. If he has toned down the ferocity of Pyrrhus a little, he cannot make of him an amorous hero after the manner of seventeenth-century romances, which, Racine remarks ironically, Pyrrhus had not read. As he will continue to do thereafter, Racine draws attention to Aristotle's principle that tragic characters should not be entirely good nor entirely evil, but should display a middling goodness of character, that is to say a virtue capable of weakness, and that they should fall into misfortune by some error of conduct which elicits compassion rather than abhorrence. In his Preface to *Phèdre*, Racine applies the principle not only to the heroine, but also to Hippolyte, whose failing is