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Pagan heroines versus Christian heroines in four tragedies of Racine

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PAGAN HEROINES VERSUS CHRISTIAN HEROINES
IN FOUR TRAGEDIES OF RACINE

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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Racine is considered one of the greatest writers of French classical tragedy. He brought this genre to its perfection during the second half of the seventeenth century. For the most part, his principal characters are women who allow themselves to be governed by violent passions. He has depicted with depth the passions of political ambition, as with Agrippina in Britannicus, Aman in Esther, or Athalie (in the play named after her), or religious exaltation, as with Joad in Athalie, and of maternal love as shown in Andromaque.

The subject of this thesis is "Pagan Heroines versus Christian Heroines in Four Tragedies of Racine." The study is made with the express intention of disclosing the psychological aspects of the two types of characters in his tragedies, the pagan and the Christian.

The writer's research reveals this aspect of the tragedies of Racine has not been treated to date. It is hoped, therefore, that the contents of this thesis will serve as a contributing factor to the enrichment of studies in the French classical tragedy.

In studying the works of an author, one must bring into focus certain facts which are necessary in broadening his understanding of these works. Therefore the writer deems it necessary to present an analysis of the period in which Racine lived and wrote. The introductory chapter will include such material.

As has been stated, in Racine one finds the classical tragedy at its best. His great creativeness and his success as a dramatist inevitably provoked for him great enmity. He had become the formidable rival of
Comeille. It was at Port Royal that Racine acquired a deep religious sentiment by which he was strongly influenced both in his private life and in his literary works. This influence and other details of his life which may have molded his trend of thought will be presented in Chapter II.

Chapter III will be concerned with the theater of Racine and the evolution of his art with special emphasis on the role of women, and on their predominance in his theater. In Chapter IV, there will be a comparative study of four tragedies of Racine: Andromaque, Phèdre, Esther, and Athalie. In this comparison, the writer proposes to analyze the pagan and the Christian heroines from a psychological point of view, pointing out the motives which moved these characters to action and the depth and nature of love, the most violent and the most tragic of all passions in the heroines of Racine. The conclusion will be based on the findings of this study.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The classical age of French literature is considered to be the seventeenth century. Writers of this period experienced the necessity for discipline, for correcting the impetuous extravagances of their predecessors and for raising art above personal eccentricities. As a result of this desire, the writers infused into literature a new spirit, which had a direct bearing on the French theater.

French dramatic history in the seventeenth century parallels the history of French politics. Under the strict control successively of Richelieu and Mazarin, the Cornelian tragedy appeared. When the success of French arms was temporarily neutralized by the Fronde, the drama suffered. When domestic peace was regained, the drama began to revive, reaching the summit of its achievement by means of the ardent support of Louis XIV. It was during this period of great literary achievement that Racine, the illustrious author with whom this study is concerned, lived and wrote.

Paris, up to 1661, was the capital of classicism. Practically all eminent men of letters were gathered together at court or in literary circles in Paris and wrote for an elite, a chosen public around them. This concentration in a brilliant capital of an enlightened and aristocratic public fostered the development of talents as varied in their essence as in their expression. Thus it happened that the classical ideal of the seventeenth century found its perfect expression in tragedy and in
comedy. To the great works representative of their epoch, the masterpieces of Corneille, Molière, and Racine, the epithet "classic" has been given.

The words "classic" and "classical" are used in various ways. According to C. H. C. Wright:

These words at times relate specifically to the Greeks and Romans, as when we call Virgil a classical author; at times they refer to the best periods of any literature and the authors of those periods, as we term Shakespeare an English classic; at times again, they mean something based upon the best, or what is thought to be the best, as when we speak of the classic style of Addison.¹

Wright later concludes that the foundation of true classicism is:

A sane and clear-sighted intellect, linked with an inborn or trained taste, seeking the inspiration of great masters of past literature who have themselves tried to interpret the universal laws of nature.²

Classicism, according to Seronde and Peyre and other authors who have written on the subject, is a desire for conformity, unity, and order as opposed to the excessive individualism of the preceding centuries. It may then be concluded, therefore, that classicism implies simplicity, order, and balance and is based on the models of Greece and Rome.

The love of antiquity and of its literature had already shown itself at different periods in French literature before the Renaissance of the sixteenth century. The cult had been based on, however, a misunderstood antiquity and not on its best period or manifestations. In discussing the subject of French classicism, it seems perhaps sufficient to go no further back than the Renaissance and to speak of the work of Ronsard, and Du Bellay, and of the theories of the Pléiade.

²Ibid., p. 97.
The French Renaissance may be defined as the period of human history which began as a rebirth of interest in classical (Greek and Roman) literature, art, and learning. This period developed a new spirit of questioning and experimentation in literature, art, science, and commerce.

The most obvious manifestations of the new spirit are readily discernible in the declining prestige of the church, the disintegration of the feudal system, the rise of patriotic nationalism and a greater diffusion of knowledge. Spurred by the desire for preeminence and a new appreciation for earthly gain, the men of the Renaissance began to explore the secular world. In one direction, physical exploration in search of new routes to the Indies broadened the compass of the physical world. In another direction, scholars made persistent efforts to revive and compile the works of ancient Greece and Rome. The latter resulted into the development of humanism which largely dominated the sixteenth century literature. Sensine, in his *Anthologie du Français Classique*, defines humanism as:

> l'ensemble des doctrines issues de l'antiquité et enseignées par les humanistes. Les humanités, qui en sont la création, sont les études fondées sur l'enseignement gréco-latín et considérées comme un moyen excellent d'éducation morale. 

Before the Renaissance, knowledge of the literature of ancient Greece and Rome based on imagination, had been inexact and inaccurate. Now, from a humanistic point of view, this literature was seen at a closer range and with a truer knowledge of its best elements.

The first organized attempt to establish a classical literary school in France was the work of a group of talented young poets led by Pierre de Ronsard. This group, which took the name of Pléiade, was desirous of reviving the literary forms of the ancients and of creating new forms. The manifesto

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of the new school appeared in the *Défense et illustration de la langue française* by Du Bellay. Du Bellay, in his discussion of the ambitious plans of the young poets, defends French as a literary language against the Humanists who were neglecting it in favor of Latin; he indicates how French may be ennobled so as to be worthy of a place beside Greek and Latin. This was to be accomplished first by the formation of a real poetic diction different from that of Prose, and secondly by the substitution of classical verse forms for the older medieval forms of French Poetry.

The principal aims of the Pléiade were: (1) to write under the inspiration of the masterpieces of classical antiquity, without, however, losing the originality of the poet, (2) to treat themes in a general rather than a personal manner, and (3) to follow the dictates of the intelligence rather than those of the emotions. The language was to be deliberately formed by a selection of French words which must avoid extreme colloquialism. By such conscious selectivity and combination of a new language with classic modes, an official distinguished diction and style would be created to vie with the literary language of Greece and of Rome. Such is the doctrine of assimilation which is at the foundation of the language of French classicism.

At the end of the sixteenth century, French thought underwent various transformations. Because of changed social, political and religious conditions, the classicism of the sixteenth century was threatened with extinction. There was a period of chaos and a gradual formation of a new environment for seventeenth century classicism, an epoch of order, conformity, and unity.

Seventeenth century classicism was a movement characterized by both an extension of the Renaissance and a reaction to it. Seventeenth century
classicism retained from the Renaissance the desire to copy and imitate the Latin and Greek classicists. There was, however, a rejection of the extreme individualism into which the Renaissance had allowed itself to be engulfed; to study man in general, to explain the motives which cause him to act, such were the aims of the writers of the seventeenth century.

Since order, conformity and unity were desired, form became of great importance to the seventeenth-century classicist. Correctness of style, of conduct, and of ideas became paramount in his thinking.

There were many influencing factors in the environment in which seventeenth-century classicism took form. Only the more dominating influences will be mentioned here. Political factors were important in molding French classicism. Louis XIV, who reigned from 1643 to 1715, had much to do with the conscious realization of French genius in his time. He gave employment to the best architects and artists of the time, and was the personal patron of some of the writers. The age of Louis XIV, in which everything contributed to the glorification of the monarch, was the result of the efforts of earlier ministers. Richelieu, in particular, had increased the prestige of royalty by forcing the Huguenots to give up their special military and political privileges, destroying the castle fortresses of the nobles, creating the post of intendant, appointed by the king, to govern the provinces, and by dimming the power of the Hapsburg (ruling family in Austria) in the Thirty Years' War. But the influence of Richelieu is perhaps greatest with the establishment in 1635 of L'Académie française. Originally an informal gathering of friends, the Academy was, by Richelieu's efforts, transformed into a court which, under his patronage, asserted control over the language and by such documents as the Sentiments sur le Cid, helped to mold the French classical drama. There were other less formal reunions similar in nature.
to that of the Academy. Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet, decided to make her own Hôtel de Rambouillet a center of real culture. Through her efforts la Préciosité, a social and literary movement soon developed; the essence of such movement was distinction. Every aspect of social intercourse must be refined; there must not be the remotest suggestion of anything commonplace or vulgar. The Précieux and the Précieuses strove to feel, think, act and to speak differently from other people. The influence which la Préciosité exercised on the development of French letters was beneficial. Writers learned to cultivate a taste for psychological analysis, a trait so characteristic of classical literature.

The seventeenth century was also the period in which rationalism in philosophy made its greatest strides. Descartes, one of the greatest of all mathematicians, applied the methods of mathematics to philosophical speculations. In his Discours de la Méthode, an exposition of principles is given which served as the point of departure for his philosophy. He rejects conclusions which rely only upon authority, and accepts as truth only what his reason tells him to be true. Beginning with the one axiom that he could accept, Je pense, donc je suis, he proceeded to build intellectually his universe on a purely mechanical basis. By this method he has developed the science of Cartesianism which, as regards French has provided a guideline for lucidity and order.

There was an inner struggle between the man of science and the man of faith with Pascal, who was one of the greatest mathematicians and physicists of his age. Converted to Jansenism, he became involved in a violent controversy in defense of his friends against the Jesuits. His contribution
to the quarrel was *Les Lettres Provinciales*. Suddenly abandoning this controversy, he turned to the preparation of a defense of the Christian religion which was never completed; the result was a collection of fragmentary notes which was later published (after his death) as his *Penseés*. By *Les Lettres Provinciales*, Pascal deserves to be recognized as the first complete prose classicist of the seventeenth century. He has been called by some writers a marvellous literary artist who has treated such a difficult subject as religion with such tactfulness as to appeal to the general intellectual public. All of the movements, literary personages, and events mentioned above contributed to and paralleled the development of the French classical theater.

The tragedy of the seventeenth century is perhaps the genre which best defines the classical spirit of this epoch. The origin of the French theater can be traced back to the mysteries and miracle plays which were born in the shadow of the church of the Middle Ages. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, certain poets had tried to write tragedies, worthy of the Greek tragedies and different from the mysteries and miracle plays of the Middle Age. It was not, however, until the seventeenth century that the creator of the classical tragedy appeared.

The true founding of modern French tragedy in 1636-1637, after the presentation of the *Cid* of Corneille, was preceded by a long formative period, going back to 1552, the date of *Cléopatre* of Jodelle. There were other dramatists before the time of Corneille whose works have contributed to the progress of dramatic art. There were elements of promise especially in Hardy and Mairet. Hardy realized the importance of an action and developed it so as to arouse and maintain the interest of the public. Mairet, having re-introduced the unities from Italy, established in a sort of
permanent manner the rule of the three unities. He produced the first regular tragedy (Sophonisbe) in France in 1634. Hardy and Mairét have thus partially paved the way for the success of Corneille.

Corneille profited, however from the bitter lesson of the querelle du Cid and produced his trilogy of masterpieces, Horace, Cinna, and Polyèucte. These works won great honor and acclaim for their author. The gloire of Corneille began to dissipate with old age. This decline was embittered by the transfer of his popularity to a younger rival, Racine, whose life and theatrical debut will be treated in the following chapter.
CHAPTER II

THE LIFE OF RACINE AND INFLUENCES WHICH MOLDED HIS TREND OF THOUGHT

In order to obtain a true understanding of Racine and his works, it is necessary to view some of the most essential facts of his life and his surroundings in their various aspects. The biographies of Racine are based largely on his correspondences of about two hundred letters, mainly written by him. A few of these letters were, however, written by such correspondents as Boileau, La Fontaine, Vauban and others. According to most authorities, these letters were distributed evenly over the period from 1656 to 1665. Then there is not a single letter until 1676, which means that the flourishing career of Racine as a dramatist is, in correspondence, a blank. There is one letter for 1676 and one for 1678, then nothing until 1681. From 1681 to 1699, the year of his death, there are one hundred and fifty-three letters for this period. The secondary sources for the biography of Racine include some memorialists and letter-writers of his age and the Mémoires sur la Vie de Jean Racine by his younger son, Louis.

Because of the inconsistencies of the details of the life of Racine, the writer feels that a discussion of his life only as it may reveal the genesis and meaning of his works is necessary. The writer has therefore divided his life into four major periods. These periods are (1) 1639, year of his birth, to 1661, the year of his departure from Port Royal, (2) 1661 to 1663, his sojourn in Usès, (3) 1663 to 1677, the beginning and abandonment of his dramatic career, and (4) 1677 to 1699, his post
as historiographer of Louis XIV and his reconciliation with Port Royal.

Jean Racine, the eldest of two children, was born near Soissons at La Ferte-Milon on December 22, 1639. He belonged to a family of the upper bourgeoisie. His mother was Jean Soonin. His father, of the same name as Racine, seemed to have been a solicitor by profession and held the office of contrôleur au grenier à sel. The father of Racine was the son of still another Jean Racine and of Marie Desmoulins. The Desmoulins were ardent Jansenists and they seemed to have influenced all who came in contact with them.

Jean Sconin died in giving birth to the sister of Racine, Marie, when he was little more than a year old, while his father, who married again, died some time after the death of his first wife. Little is known of the stepmother of Racine and Marie. Left without any provisions, Racine and his sister were taken into the home of their grandparents.

When Racine was about ten years old he was sent by his grandmother to the Collège de Beauvais (a grammar school of the town of that name). He entered Port Royal at the age of fifteen or sixteen to continue his studies. Paquet gives the following account of Racine at Port Royal:

C'est là qu'il fit véritablement ses études littéraires, là qu'il prit son grand goût pour la langue et la littérature grecques, là qu'il apprit par cœur des romans grecs (Theagène et Chariclée).

It was perhaps at Port Royal that the character of Racine began to take a particular form, and the experiences there, no doubt, left ineffaceable impressions on his memory.

Port Royal was the celebrated center of Jansenism where learned scholars, called solitaires, lived an austere life of meditation. The

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Jansenists had attempted to restore the doctrine of Saint Augustine. They proclaimed the omnipotence of God, and they denied the freedom of will. They also practiced the most rigorous rules of morality, condemning the social compromises of their opponents, the Jesuits. As a pupil at Port Royal, Racine was strongly influenced by Jansenism. He became equally proficient in acquiring the severe religious precepts of his Jansenist teachers and in reading the Holy Scriptures, and also the masterpieces of pagan literature. He read the Bible, Saint Augustine, Virgil, and especially Greek tragedies. He learned verbatim the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides.

One is able to see the influence of the Jansenist doctrine in the tragedies of Racine. Racine, the Jansenist, has no faith in the power of the will. Man can be saved from his sinful impulses only by the intervention of divine grace. Phèdre, being the victim of the gods, that is, of her heredity, struggles in vain against her guilty passion of illicit love. The famous line of Phedre, "C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée," expresses rather aptly the essential character of the Racinian tragedy. Pessimism is therefore a basic trait of all the tragedies of Racine since most of his heroes and heroines are doomed in advance to be vanquished. Here again is shown the influence of the Jansenist doctrine of predestination.

In reference to Port Royal, A. F. B. Clark states that:

The combination of an extremely austere moral tone and an ill-concealed love of humane letters is the distinguishing mark of Port Royal's education, and the paradox went deep into Racine's nature.¹

In 1661 Racine left Port Royal and went to Paris. He finished his studies at the Collège d'Harcourt. He wrote verse, frequented the theater

and became acquainted with prominent men of letters, especially La Fontaine and Molière. He believed that literature was his true vocation. This interest in literature was by no means propitious in the opinion of his relatives and his friends at Port Royal; they looked upon his literary interest as contradictory to the Jansenist teachings.

Racine had become a favorite at the court of Louis XIV. He composed several odes in honor of the King. This acquaintance with the King was perhaps the first step to the literary success and fame. At the same time he was making some tentative moves toward his ultimate goal in the theater. These early dramatic attempts brought Racine in direct contact with the theater. The actors and especially the actresses thus appeared early in his life. Mlle. Roste, an actress of the Marais and Mlle. Beachateau, an actress of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, encouraged him in the writing of his first two plays, Amasie and Les Amours d'Ovide. The first play was finished in 1660 but it was rejected by the actors of the Marais, and it is not certain that the second play was ever finished.

Racine was soon induced by his uncle the Père Sconin to make a sojourn in Uzès in an attempt to turn him away from his life of pleasure and to rid him of the desire to write for the stage. Racine remained in Uzès for three years and by the end of 1663 he had returned to Paris. He then composed two other odes: one on the recovery of Louis XIV from a slight illness which probably secured for him the promise of a pension; in his second ode he thanked the King for his presents. Through the latter he is said to have been introduced to Boileau of whom he later became a disciple. Racine respected and followed the advice of Boileau, a critic of poets of his period.

Unfortunately, upon his return to Paris, the correspondence of Racine
ceases and his life becomes simply the history of his plays extending over the period from 1663 to 1667. The first two plays by which Racine is known are **La Thébaide** and **Alexandre** (1664-1665); both are fairly well constructed but revealed the inexperience of the author. These plays were produced by Molière and his troupe, who were partially responsible for procuring Racine his first public successes. The series of his dramatic triumphs began with his first masterpiece **Andromaque** and ended with the last and most unfortunate, **Phèdre**. With **Andromaque** (1667) he is considered the greatest dramatic poet of his age. For the next ten years he composed a series of tragic masterpieces which are the glory of the French stage: **Britannicus** (1669), **Bérénice** (1670), **Bajazet** (1672), **Mithridate** (1673), **Iphigénie en Aulide** (1674), and **Phèdre** (1677). The Duchess of Bouillon, a powerful woman of the nobility, had encouraged Pradon, a second-rate writer, to treat the same theme as Racine had treated in **Phèdre**. She is accused of having bought up all tickets for the two theaters for the first six nights of performances. As a result of this unjust cabal the play of Pradon was a success while that of Racine was a complete failure. After **Phèdre** Racine abandoned the theater, and returned twelve years later at the request of Madame de Maintenon to write the biblical tragedies, **Esther** and **Athalie**, for the young women at Saint-Cyr (the school of Madame de Maintenon).

Racine had been, during his early manhood, a libertine in morals and in religion; he, now married, settled down to a quiet domestic life. He reconciled himself with Port Royal and was made historiographer of the court of Louis XIV. He died on April 21, 1699. He is, however, remembered for the outstanding traits of his tragedies; the simplicity of construction
the violence and tenderness of sentiments; the great delicacy and sensitiveness of the painting of passion; and the harmony of his verse. This aspect of the Racinian tragedy will be discussed in Chapter III.
CHAPTER III

THE THEATER OF RACINE

It has been pointed out in the preceding chapter that the dramatic success of Racine began with his tragedy *Andromaque*. He took the dramatic form which had been established by Corneille and made it his greatest instrument for writing. Unlike Corneille, however, he was more subtle in his preparations and made his drama unfold with a seeming naturalness and simplicity. He accepted without discussion the unities, the classical alexandrine, the five acts, and the noble characters. He chose his subjects from ancient history, but preferred Greece to Rome. Racine, in his second préface de Britannicus, states: "J'avais copié mes personnages, d'après le plus grand peintre de l'antiquité, . . ."¹ For his last two tragedies, *Esther* and *Athalie*, his source of inspiration came from the Bible.

The presuppositions of Racine as to the nature and signification of drama and its forms are found in the prefaces to his individual works, especially that of *Bérénice*. In order then to obtain an accurate knowledge of the basic traits of the theater of Racine, it seems only natural to rely on the prefaces written by the author himself.

In the preface to *Bérénice*, Racine states that the aim of dramatic art is to give pleasure as well as incite the emotions: "La principale règle est de plaire et de toucher."² He chose his subject for the sake


of the violent emotional crisis it contained, revealing realistic psychological analysis of human character: the jealous Hermione, the scheming Arippine, and the criminal Phèdre.

Cette action est très fameuse dans l'histoire; et je l'ai trouvée très propre pour le théâtre, par la violence des passions qu'elle y pouvait exciter.

Racine does not strive to evoke admiration of superhuman heroes as did Corneille; he only attempts to incite pity because his heroes are all hopeless victims of love.

Love, which is the most touching and the most tragic of all passions, is the principal theme of the tragedies of Racine. Andromaque must remain faithful to the memory of her husband, Hector, either by repulsing Pyrrhus or by sacrificing her son, the soul of Phèdre is disorganized by a "passion illégitime" for her stepson, Hippolyte, Hermione, possessed of jealousy, and Oreste, driven by fate, are each responsible for the other's fate--suicide and insanity.

Racine then develops the idea that pleasure can be given only by vraisemblance. "Il n'y a que le vraisemblable qui touche dans la tragédie." It is not likely, he says, that a crowd of varied actions could be naturally compressed within the compass of a single drama. He was thus impelled to see that great breadth and variety of action are incompatible with the unities.

Racine has simplified the action within his tragedies by modifying an original story and by banishing all supernatural elements. He focuses attention on one or two of his characters which results in an inner conflict.

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1Ibid., p. 359.

2Ibid., p. 361.
This inner conflict may be well illustrated by the decisions that stem from a complex involvement of certain characters in *Andromaque*. *Andromaque* has to make a decision either to guard the memory of her husband or to sacrifice her son; everything depends on her answer to Pyrrhus who wishes to marry her. Hermione's fate depends on Pyrrhus, the fate of Oreste depends on Hermione, and bound to Oreste is the faithful Pylade. Here one detects the absence of carnage on the stage; only sentiments and passions. In his *Préface de Bérénice* Racine states:

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Ce n'est point une nécessité qu'il y ait du sang et des morts dans une tragédie; il suffit que l'action en soit grande, que les acteurs en soient héroïques, que les passions y soient excitées . . .
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This simplicity of action which Racine has so well mastered facilitates his observance of the three unities as established by Aristotle. His plots reveal a single crisis so that the action is concentrated and brief, and the unities of time and of place present no obstacles. This does not mean, however, that the Racinian tragedy is void of action, for he states in his *première préface de Britannicus*:

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Pour moi, j'ai toujours compris que la tragédie étant l'imitation d'une action complète, où plusieurs personnes concourent, cette action n'est point finie que l'on ne sache en quelle situation elle laisse ces mêmes personnes.
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Racine attempts to effect an action which is personal and original; his theory of invention was faire quelque chose de rien. His point of departure was in an état d'âme of some character or characters. At the beginning of his tragedies, his principal characters have already reached a certain peak, prior to the rising of the curtains, thus creating a situation

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1. Ibid., p. 360.
which demands immediate decisions. The action then moves swiftly toward an inevitable denouement which in the case of the characters of Racine is murder, suicide or insanity.

The Racinian tragedies are concerned with a psychological realism which was characteristic of his epoch. La Bruyère states in Les Caractères (Des œuvres de l'esprit): "Corneille est plus moral, Racine plus naturel." How is Racine more natural?

Il faut donc, qu'ils aient une bonté médiocre, c'est-à-dire une vertu capable de faiblesse, et qu'ils tombent dans le malheur par quelque faute qui les fasse plaindre sans les faire détester.

This naturalness which reveals itself in relation to what is common to humanity tends not only to show simplicity, but to show definite artistic form in expression. Racine is thus regarded by French critics as the epitome of perfection of the classical poetical style. His poetic art reveals the same qualities that distinguish him as a dramatist: simplicity, naturalness, and concentration. "... j'ai tâché de conserver la vraisemblance de l'histoire, sans rien perdre des ornements de la fable, qui fournissent extrêmement à la poésie," states Racine in his Préface de Phèdre. In his two sacred tragedies, Esther and Athalie, Racine uses a different approach from that of his previous tragedies. Instead of a tragedy in which tormented souls are prevalent, he develops an idyllic drama. He revives the chorus through which lyricism is attained throughout the two tragedies.

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2 Jean Racine, "La première Préface d'Andromaque," op. cit., p. 33.

3 Jean Racine, "La Préface de Phèdre," op. cit., pp. 767-68.
Racine has depicted in his tragedies passionate beings, especially women. His theater is therefore essentially feminine. For instance, in Phédre, as compared to the original story, critics have pointed out that Hippolyte has become a secondary figure which allows all attention to be focused on Phédre. The violent, unrestrained or the modest and sensitive heroines of Racine are without the strong will of those of Corneille. Basically responsible for the destruction of other characters, they themselves become victims of their passions. In Racine we see a great dramatist, a great poet, and a great psychologist. He, as a psychologist, has analyzed pagan and Christian characters. To analyze generally the pagan and Christian characters was not however the ultimate aim of Racine. He has placed them in particular situations and from this point he involves them in various dilemmas.

In the following chapter, there will be a psychological study of these characters in an attempt to point out, compare, and contrast the origin, the development and the results of the motives which move them to action.
In this chapter, an attempt will be made to study the pagan and the Christian heroines as they reveal themselves in action: their evolution, their motives, and the secret recesses of their minds. Andromaque, inspired by Greek legends, was first performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The tragedy begins with an allusion to past events in the conversation of Oreste and Pylade.

After the Trojan War, Andromaque and her son, Astyanax, were taken as captives of Pyrrhus, King of Épire. Hector, gallant Trojan and husband of Andromaque, had fallen at the hands of Achilles, father of Pyrrhus. As a result of the Trojan War and the death of Hector, Astyanax, the legitimate heir to the rights of his father, becomes a dreaded foe of the Greeks. Possessed of this fear, they send Oreste to Épire as ambassador to claim Astyanax from Pyrrhus. This mission also enables Oreste to see again Hermione with whom he is in love. Hermione is however, the betrothed of Pyrrhus, who is in love with Andromaque. Pyrrhus, who at first refuses to surrender Astyanax, is angered by Andromaque's refusal of him. He, therefore, decides to marry Hermione instead, and surrender Astyanax to Oreste. Whereupon, Andromaque agrees to marry Pyrrhus in return for his promise to protect her son. She intends to commit suicide immediately after the marriage. The marriage takes place and Oreste, urged on by the jealous Hermione, orders his soldiers to murder Pyrrhus. Hermione commits suicide at the altar by her dead betrothed's side, and Oreste is driven to insanity.
Andromaque and her son survive. One notes from the resume of the tragedy that an unrequited love is felt by Oreste for Hermione, Hermione for Pyrrhus, and Pyrrhus for Andromaque, on whom depends the course of events in the tragedy. As Andromaque reflects on past events, one is able to see the origin of the motive which actuates her:

Dois-je oublier Hector privé de funérailles,  
Et trainé sans honneur autour de nos murailles:

Figure-toi Pyrrhus les yeux étincelants,  
Entrant à la lueur de nos palais brûlants,
Sur tous mes frères morts se faisant un passage,  
Ahi de quel souvenir viens-tu frapper mon âme!
Quoi! Céphise, j'irai voir expirer encor  
Ce fils, ma seule joie et l'image d'Hector!1

Deeming it her duty to remain faithful to the memory of her husband, she repulses Pyrrhus. This sense of duty is intensified by the recollection of the last words of her husband as he prepared to leave for the war:

"Chère épouse, dit-il en essuyant mes larmes,  
J'ignore quel succès le sort garde à mes armes;  
Je te laisse mon fils pour gage de ma foi:  
S'il me perd, je pretends qu'il me retrouve en toi.  
Si d'un heureux hymen la mémoire t'est chère,  
Montre au fils à quel point tu cherissais le père."2

The struggle with which Andromaque contends is not one between passion and will, but one in which she attempts to conduct the actions of Pyrrhus, thus showing exaltation of duty. Pyrrhus, who is now able to bargain Astyanax for the love of his captive, warns her that Greece will give her reason for more tears. In a bitter ironical tone, she asks: "Et quelle est cette peur dont leur cœur est frappé, Seigneur? Quelque Troyen vous

1Jean Racine, "Andromaque," Oeuvres (9 vols.; Paris: Hachette, 1865), II, 90-91. All future reference will be made to this edition, which will be identified in the notes as "Oeuvres."

2Ibid., p. 91.
est-il échappé?" One notes a change in the character of Andromaque when she learns from Pyrrhus that Greece asks for the destruction of her son. The once calm heroine now cries out in anger:

Et vous prononcerez un arrêt si cruel?

... . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Il m'aurait tenu lieu d'un père et d'un époux;
Mais il me faut tout perdre, et toujours par vous coups.²

She knows that she must now use her greatest weapons to save the life of her son. Her maternal qualities are thus manifested when she states:

Faut-il qu'un si grand cœur montre tant de faiblesse
Voulez-vous qu'un dessein si beau, si généreux,
Passe pour le transport d'un esprit amoureux?

... . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Non, non, d'un ennemi respecter la misère,
Sauver des malheureux, rendre un fils à sa mère.³

When Pyrrhus ignores her pleas, she approaches Hermione with hopes that the latter will intervene in favor of her son. She explains to her that she comes not as a jealous rival, but as a mother. She is extremely tactful in order to incite sympathy and to appeal to the feminine heart of Hermione as she states:

Je ne viens point ici, par de jalouses larmes,

... . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Ma flamme par Hector fut jadis allumée;
Avec lui dans la tombe elle s'est enfermée.
Mais il me reste un fils. Vous saurez quelque jour,
Madame, pour un fils jusqu'où va notre amour;
Mais vous ne saurez pas, du moins je le souhaite,
En quel trouble mortel son intérêt nous jette,
Lorsque de tant de biens qui pouvaient nous flatter,
C'est le seul qui nous reste et qu'on veut nous l'ôter.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 54.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 55-56.

⁴Ibid., p. 83.
Andromaque presses her point further by reminding Hermione that Hector, at her request, had saved her mother's life during the Trojan War. She now asks that the same favor be rendered to her son. She attempts to make Hermione believe that she has the same power over Pyrrhus as she, Andromaque, had over Hector. After the refusal of Hermione to aid her, Andromaque again appeals to Pyrrhus and during these crucial moments of her life, she is forced to humble her pride:

Pardonnez à l'éclat d'une illustre fortune
Ce reste de fierté qui craint d'être importune;
Vous ne l'ignorez pas: Andromaque sans vous
N'aurait jamais d'un maître embrasse les genoux.¹

As the action of the tragedy progresses, one is able to detect some vacillation in the character of Andromaque. Her maternal qualities have been pointed out. She wishes to save the life of her son, it is true, but she also desires to remain faithful to her husband's memory. When Pyrrhus threatens the life of her son, she replies: "Hélas! il mourra donc! . . . /Sa mort avancera la fin de mes ennuis."² Pyrrhus himself describes the action of his captive. He thinks that her fears should be aroused and that she should yield for the sake of her baby. He finds in her, however, no signs of weakness as she insists that her son must die.

Up to this point, Andromaque has been able to exert some influence on Pyrrhus. She knows her power over him, and by constantly relating to him her misfortunes, she is able to incite the sympathy of her captor. When Pyrrhus shows indifference towards her, she exclaims in a state of anxiety to Céphise:

¹ Ibid., p. 87.
² Ibid., p. 58.
Et je puis voir répandre un sang si précieux?
Et je laisse avec lui périr tous ses aieux?
.................................
Non, tu ne mourras point: je ne le puis souffrir.
Allons trouver Pyrrhus. Mais non, chère Cephise
Va le trouver pour moi.¹

She will marry Pyrrhus. The ceremony alone will be a breach of loyalty to
Hector, and she will die at once to expiate it.

Racine gives to Andromaque, the widow and mother, many of the character-
istics of a Cornelian heroine. She exalts duty above all else. Her char-
acter however, is more subtle. Although fluctuating at times, the heroine
shows unswerving loyalty to the memory of Hector and complete devotion to
her son. She has led Pyrrhus on in such a manner that he has become more
and more attached to her. To evoke his jealousy, she has kept constantly
the memory of Hector alive. "C'ent fois le nom d'Hector est sorti de sa
bouche," states Pyrrhus. As a result of his violent passion for Andromaque,
he almost completely ignores Hermione, who is in love with him. Her
obstacle, of course, is Andromaque. "Je veux qu'on vienne encore lui
demander la mère. /Rendons-lui les tourments qu'elle me fait souffrir/,"²
states Hermione bitterly. Racine has depicted Hermione with a bewildering
feminine complexity of character. She is motivated by the passion of love.
As the tragedy unfolds, one notes that her love is embittered by jealousy
which is transformed into hatred, and which finally drives her to murderous
violence.

Hermione shows, by her conversation with Cléone, her confidante, her
sensitivity to the wounds which have been inflicted upon her womanly pride.
Cléone tries to persuade Hermione to leave Épire and to return to Greece.

¹Ibid., pp. 91-92.
²Ibid., p. 62.
Hermione seemingly invents a false pretext for remaining near Pyrrhus as she states:

Ah! laisse a ma fureur le temps de croître encore;
Contre mon ennemi laisse-moi m'assurer:
Cléoné, avec horreur je m'en veux séparer.
Il n'y travaillera que trop bien, l'infidèle!  

In her irrational inconsistencies and blind self-delusion, she expresses her reason for remaining in Épire:

Tu veux que je le fuie. Hé bien! rien ne m'arrête:
Allons. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . mais l'ingrat ne veut que m'outrager.
Demeurons toutefois pour troubler leur fortune; 
Prenons quelque plaisir à leur être importune.  

When Oreste relates to Hermione that some strange power moves Pyrrhus to defend the son of Hector, Hermione, in a fit of jealousy, exclaims: Songez quelle honte pour nous si d'une Phrygienne il devenait l'époux!  

Prevailing upon Oreste, she uses him in an attempt to win back the heart of Pyrrhus. She does not love Oreste, but her feminine pride is flattered by the unreserved devotion of such a constant lover. To avoid discouraging him, she does not confess openly that she loves Pyrrhus; rather she pretends that, as a duty, she must obey the orders of her father, who has betrothed her to the king.

Non père l'ordonnait. Mais qui sait si depuis
Je n'ai point en secret partagé vos ennuis?
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Enfin qui vous a dit que malgré mon devoir
Je n'ai pas quelquefois souhaité de vous voir?  

1Ibid., p. 61.
2Ibid., p. 62.
3Ibid., p. 68.
4Ibid., p. 66.
The initial plots of Hermione to destroy the love of Pyrrhus for Andromaque are halted when she learns that he is wedding her instead of his captive. Hence, her attitude, depending on the decision of Pyrrhus, changes. Expressing her joy, she naively idealizes the man she loves:

*Sais-tu quel est Pyrrhus? T'as-tu fait raconter Le nombre des exploits. Mais qui les peut compter? Intrépide, et partout suivi de la victoire, Charmant, fidèle enfin, rien ne manque à sa gloire.*

She forgets the sorrow of Orestes:

*Il veut tout ce qu'il fait; et s'il m'épouse, il m'aime. Mais qu'Oreste à son gré m'impute ses douleurs: N'avons-nous d'entretien que celui de ses pleurs?*

Hermione, proud and exultant, shows no sympathy for Andromaque who begs for her help in saving the life of her son. Her reply is cold and disdainful: *"Je conçois vos douleurs; mais un devoir austère, /Quand mon père a parlé, m'ordonne de me taire."*

With the final decision of Andromaque to marry Pyrrhus, the course of events takes a definite pattern. The silent wrath of Hermione announces tragic consequences; she seeks revenge. Racine depicts her in a succession of sudden, moving impulses. There are moments of questioning and hesitation, of ardent feeling and reaction. She sends for Oreste and bluntly asks: *"Je veux savoir, seigneur, si vous m'aimez/vengez-moi..."* She knows how to persuade him and how to secure his support, even in the midst of her passion. Fearing that her love might yet triumph over her resentment,

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she exclaims:

Mais, si vous me vengez, vengez-moi dans une heure
Ah! courez, et craignez que je ne vous rappelle.
S'il ne meurt aujourd'hui, je puis l'aimer demain.

Racine is incomparable in depicting different moods in the same speech as is manifested in the monologue which represents all the possible transitions of Hermione between love, jealousy and hatred.

Ah! ne puis-je savoir si j'aime, ou si je hais?

There is a sudden change of her mood:

Le cruel! de quel oeil il m'a congédité!

Mon cœur, mon lâche cœur s'intéresse pour lui?
Je tremble au seul penser du coup qui le menace?
Et prête à me venger, je lui fais déjà grâce?
Non, ne revoyons point l'arrêt de mon courroux:
Qu'il périsse!

Upon the death of Pyrrhus, Hermione is even more vacillating. She forgets her hatred for the King, scorns Oreste for executing her orders and finally she kills herself over the dead body of the King. We have seen the origin, development, and results of the motives which actuated Andromaque and Hermione. Andromaque, for the most part, maintains moral control, while the latter, infuriated by an insurmountable obstacle, shows lack of human strength and, as a result, is driven to her death.

Racine also depicts Phèdre, as Hermione, in a struggle against a superior force in which fate triumphs, but the passion which motivates Phèdre is one which the gods have forced upon her. Unlike Hermione, she is the prey of an environment in which determinism reigns; her will power is inferior to the strength of hereditary impulses. The dramatic interest of the tragedy, inspired by Hippolytus of Euripides and Phèdre of Seneca,

1 Ibid., pp. 99-100.
2 Ibid., p. 111.
is found in the constant struggle between passion, loyalty and remorse. Phèdre, the principal personage, is the victim of a passion which is more deadly than any which overwhelms any other of the Racinian heroines. Her exaltation reveals a confused condition of the mind; she struggles in vain and is overcome by the tragic consequences of love.

At the beginning of the tragedy, Hippolyte and Théramène, through a conversation, reveal a tableau of past events, thus preparing skillfully for the future presentation of the heroine. Having slain the Minotaur, the hero, Thésée, has married Phèdre, daughter of the King of Crete. She, in spite of her own will, has fallen in love with Hippolyte, son of Thésée by a previous marriage. In order to conceal her passion, she has been hostile to her stepson. The motive for her hostility has not yet been revealed. This is evident as Hippolyte speaks:

Cet heureux temps n'est plus. Tout a changé de face,
Depuis que sur ces bords les Dieux ont envoyé
La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé.
Sa vaine inimitié n'est pas ce que je crains.
Hippolyte en partant fuit une autre ennemie:
Je fuis, je l'avouerai, cette, jeune Aricie,
Reste d'un sang fatal conjuré contre nous.  

Hippolyte confesses to Théramène, his tutor, that he wishes to avoid both his stepmother and Aricie, the Athenian princess, whom he loves. He then prepares to leave Trézène in search of his father, who may have perished in some expedition. Meanwhile, Phèdre confesses to her nurse, Oenone, that she has an uncontrollable passion for Hippolyte, and she explains the reason for her hostile conduct towards him. The origin, growth, and effects of her passion for Hippolyte can perhaps best be seen in the monologue in which she reveals her secret. Phèdre, newly wed to Thésée,

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thinks that she is quite happy but she states:

Mon mal vient de plus loin. A peine au fils d'Egee
Sous les lois de l'hymen je m'étais engageée,
Mon repos, mon bonheur semblait être affermi;
Athenes me montre mon superbe ennemi. 1

Love has thus taken possession of her; body and soul. She gives a
description of her love as it is manifested through its physical effects:

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. 2

She struggles against this passion and seeks to appease Venus with prayers,
offerings, and sacrifices. She avoids Hippolyte, but to no avail:

Je reconnus Vénus et ses feux redoutables
D'un sang qu'elle poursuit tourments inevitables.
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
En vain sur les autels ma main brûlait l'encens:
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Mes yeux le retrouvaient dans les traits de son père. 3

Finally, thinking that she has solved the problem, she causes Hippolyte
to be exiled; she then experiences temporary peace, but in bitter grief.
Soon she becomes again the prey of Venus when she sees Hippolyte in Trézène.

She now resolves to end her torment by death:

C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée.
J'ai conçu pour mon crime une juste terreur;
J'ai pris la vie en haine, et ma flamme en horreur
Je voulais en mourant prendre soin de ma gloire. 4

With this final resolution the emotional outbursts of Phèdre subside. At
this moment an unexpected report alters the situation. The news comes

1 Ibid., p. 323.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., pp. 323-24.
4 Ibid., p. 325.
that Thésée is dead. Cenone promptly points out to Phèdre that now she must protect the interests of both her son and Hippolyte from another heir. She follows the advice of her nurse and she appeals to Hippolyte to help protect the interests of the rightful heir, her son. Hippolyte attempts to comfort her with the possibility that Thésée may still be alive, but Phèdre replies:

On ne voit point deux fois le rivage des morts,
Seigneur. Puisque Thésée a vu les sombres bords,
En vain vous espérez qu'un Dieu vous le renvoie;
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Que dis-je? Il n'est point mort puisqu'il respire en vous.
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Seigneur, ma folle ardeur malgré moi se déclare. 1

Phèdre denies that Thésée may still be alive; indeed this is wishful thinking. She confesses indirectly her love for Hippolyte; the latter rather overwhelmed, pretends not to understand when finally Phèdre, incensed by his indifferent replies, exclaims:

Ah, cruel! tu m'as trop entendue.
Je t'en ai dit assez pour te tirer d'erreur.
He bien! conçois donc Phèdre et tout sa fureur.
J'aime... 2

Phèdre is no longer the innocent woman, struggling against her passion; she prays that the goddess of love will make Hippolyte her lover, and she uses every device to win him. Hence there is a transition in her character from remorse and self-respect to treachery and crime. Another unexpected occurrence alters the course of events; Thésée returns home. Phèdre is now in terror, fearing that Hippolyte will expose her, or that she will betray herself even should Hippolyte keep silent. She hopes

1 Ibid., p. 340.
2 Ibid., p. 343.
again for death, but her faithful nurse designs a plot whereby Hippolyte will die instead. Phèdre recoils at the thought of slandering an innocent man, but she allows Oenone to accuse him. Thésée, believing the nurse, summons Hippolyte and condemns him.

Perfide, oses-tu bien te montrer devant moi? Monstre, qui a 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 sa fureur, Et toi, Neptune, et toi, ... ... ... ... ... ... venge un malheureux père.¹

Hippolyte dares not grieve his father by revealing the shameful conduct of Phèdre. He does, however, ask him to consider the innocence of his life and the series of criminal love affairs in the family of Phèdre.

Phèdre, overhearing the conversation between her husband and her stepson, has weakened to a point of pity and remorse: "S'il en est temps encore, épargnez votre race, /Respectez votre sang, j'ose vous en prier."² But when she learns from her husband that Hippolyte is in love with Aricie, there is a sudden change in her emotions. All of her past torments are revived and are intensified by this new and greater pain—jealousy. In an outburst of rage she exclaims:

Ils s'aient! Par quel charme ont-ils trompé mes yeux? Comment se sont-ils vus? depuis quand? dans quels lieux? Il faut perdre Aricie; Il faut de mon époux Contre un sang odieux reveiller le courroux.³

Oenone attempts to persuade Phèdre that her criminal love had, after all, an excuse in the action of the gods. Phèdre, blinded by passion, repudiated with scorn, and dismissed the nurse whose every act had been

¹Ibid., p. 364.
²Ibid., p. 372.
³Ibid., p. 375.
motivated by loyalty and devotion to her mistress. Rejected and despised, Oenone commits suicide. Hippolyte, in his attempt to escape from the wrath of his father, is destroyed by a gigantic wave and a sea monster. Hearing of his death, Phèdre confesses her guilty passions to her husband.

Les moments me sont chers, écoutez-moi Thésée.
C'est moi qui sur ce fils chaste et respectueux,
Osa jeter un œil profane, incestueux.
Le ciel mit dans mon sein une flamme funeste;
La detestable Oenone a conduit tout le reste.

J'ai pris, j'ai fait couler dans mes brûlantes veines
Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes.¹

She expires.

We have seen that these two secular tragedies of Racine are animated by the same central theme: the revelation of love in the feminine heart, unrequited and embittered by jealousy. Although Andromaque is the first of Racine's secular tragedies and Phèdre is his last, the two may serve as examples in which the characters, Andromaque, Hermione, and Phèdre, exemplify typical characteristics of the pagan heroines of Racine. With Phèdre, Racine ended thirteen years of unbroken success. He withdrew from the theater, and after a long absence, returned to compose his two religious tragedies, Esther and Athalie. Upon his return to the theater, his conception of drama was quite different from that of his secular tragedies. Instead of a tragedy involving a love crisis, there is a conflict of good and evil in which the good overpowers the latter.

The tragedy, Esther begins with a prologue in which la Piété gives praises to Louis XIV. The principal personage is Esther, a Jew, who is married to Assuerus, King of Persia. She relates to her confidante, Élise,

¹Ibid., p. 377.
how she had been chosen queen by Assuerus. The King, not knowing that
his wife is a Jew, has ordered the extermination of all Jews in his king-
dom. The act was instigated by Aman, minister of the King and enemy of
the Jews. Mardocheé, the uncle of Esther, asks her to prevent the massa-
cre of Israel; he urges her to confess her religion to the King and ask
freedom for her people. After some hesitation, Esther agrees and she
prays that God will help her in her task.

Aman, in the midst of his power and wealth, feels that all subjects
should honor him. He is provoked, however, by the insolent pride of
Mardocheé, who refuses to acknowledge him. Thus, he orders that Mardocheé
be hanged. In the meantime, the King, restless and sleepless, remembers
with gratitude how Mardocheé once saved his life. He sends for Aman and
orders him to bestow the highest honors on Mardocheé. This, of course,
angers Aman. Esther now appears before the King and explains the motive
of her visit. At a feast, she reveals the secret schemes of Aman, con-
fesses her Jewish origin, and implores the King's mercy for the Jews.
Her request is granted, Aman is hanged and the King appoints Mardocheé as
his minister.

Racine has depicted Esther as an ideal representative of the Jewish
people in a struggle with Aman, a hypocrite and a traitor. Esther is
motivated by a deep love for her people and a devotion to her religious
faith. The origin of her motive may be detected in a conversation with
Elise in which she laments the persecution of her people:

Toi qui de Benjamin comme moi descendue,
Fus de mes premiers ans la compagne assidue,
Et qui, d'un meme joug souffrant l'oppression,
M'aaidais a soupirer les malheurs de Sion.
Combien ce temps encore est cher a ma memoire!

She continues by relating the extent of festivities which the King had given in her honor. Yet, in the midst of these grandeurs, she is sad:

Hélas! durant ces jours de joie et de festins,
Quelle était en secret ma honte et mes chagrins!
"Esther, disais-je, Esther dans la pourpre est assise,
La moitié de la terre à son sceptre est soumise,
Et de Jérusalem l'herbe cache les murs!
Sion, repaire affreux de reptiles impurs,
Voit de son temple saint les pierres dispersées,
Et du Dieu d'Israël les fêtes sont cessées!"¹

Esther further manifests her love for her people by filling the palace with daughters of Sion. In order to forget the honor of being a queen, and to remain humble before God, she interests herself in the instruction of these children.

Cependant mon amour pour notre nation
A rempli ce palais de filles de Sion,

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Je mets à les former mon étude ...
Et c'est là que fuyant l'orgueil du diadème
Lasse de vains honneurs, ...
Aux pieds de l'Éternel je viens m'humilier
Et goûter le plaisir de me faire oublier.²

Meanwhile, Mardocheé has learned that Aman has made preparations for the massacre of Israel. He appeals to Esther to prevent this horrible act by interceding for her people: "En vous est tout l'espoir de vos malheureux frères: Il faut les secourir: ..."³ Esther, at first, hesitates because no one is to approach the King unless he is sent for. Mardocheé continues:

... votre vie, Esther, est-elle à vous?
N'est-elle pas au sang dont vous êtes issue?

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Et vous, qui n'avez point accepté cette grâce,
Vous périrez peut-être, et toute votre race."⁴

¹Ibid., p. 470.
² Ibid., pp. 471-72.
³ Ibid., p. 478.
⁴ Ibid., p. 479.
Partially motivated by the approach of her uncle, Esther promises to confer with the King the following day:

Demain, quand le soleil rallumera le jour,
Contente de périr, s'il faut que je périsse,
J'irai pour mon pays m'offrir en sacrifice
Qu'on s'éloigne un moment.  

She prays that God will aid her in this task. As a sort of confession, Esther scorns the revels of the King. She terminates her prayer by saying:

C'est pour toi que je marche. Accompagne mes pas
Devant ce fier lion qui ne connaît pas:
Commande en me voyant que son courroux s'apaise,
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Tourne enfin sa fureur contre nos ennemis.  

After deciding on this course of action, Esther experiences moments of emotional anxiety. She quickly recovers her self-control, however, and clearly reveals her firm resolution. Resigned and submissive before the King, she tells of the persecution of the Jews and she skillfully presents the King's cause as being the same as that of Israel:

Dans le fond de la Thrace un barbare enfante
Est venu dans ces lieux souffler la cruauté
Un ministre ennemi de votre propre gloire ...  

Esther continues with:

Notre ennemi cruel devant vous se déclare:
C'est lui. C'est ce ministre infidèle et barbare,
Qui d'un zèle trompeur à vos yeux revêtu,
Contre notre innocence arma votre vertu.  

Aman tries to save himself by begging Esther for forgiveness. "Savez

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1. Ibid., p. 481.
2. Ibid., p. 484.
3. Ibid., p. 529.
4. Ibid., p. 530.
Aman, qui tremble à vos sacres genoux.\textsuperscript{1} Esther appears haughty and cruel, yet exhibiting a Christian spirit when she answers the enemy of her race:

\textit{Va trahire, laisse-moi.}

\textit{Les Juifs n'attendennent rien d'un méchant tel que toi.}
\textit{Misérable, le Dieu vengeur de l'innocence,}
\textit{Tout prêt à te juger, tient déjà sa balance.}\textsuperscript{2}

Esther has thus proven her love and devotion for her religion and for her people by her boldness in revealing her Jewish origin to her husband, thus enabling her to expose the persecution of an innocent people. Throughout the tragedy, she has exhibited the qualities which Assuerus himself attributes to her. That which she does for her husband could very well be for her people also:

\textit{Je ne trouve qu'en vous je ne sais quelle grâce}
\textit{qui me charme toujours et jamais ne me lasse.}
\textit{De l'aimable vertu doux et puissants attrait}
\textit{Tout respire en Esther l'innocence et la paix}
\textit{Du chagrin le plus noir elle écarte les ombres,}
\textit{Et fait des jours sereins de mes jours les plus sombres.}\textsuperscript{3}

Esther does not seek glorification as does Athalie, but rather, she has, as Andromaque, Hermione and Phèdre, exhibited the passion of love, but a love for a persecuted people. She, like Andromaque, has exalted duty above all else.

The subject of \textit{Athalie}, as of \textit{Esther}, is taken from the Holy Scriptures. The piety and earnest religious convictions of Racine found ample scope for expression in these last two tragedies. \textit{Athalie}, the last of Racine's tragedies, relates how Joas triumphs over his enemies—the enemies of

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., p. 533.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 507.
church and state including the frenzied and heretical Athalie. The tragedy begins with preparations to celebrate the famous Jewish Pentecost. Although Athalie, the heroine, does not appear until the second act, her nature and character are revealed very early in the tragedy. The background in Athalie is the sacred temple. There, lingers the memory of the great days when the nation as one people worshipped the one God. In the days of persecution and blasphemy there is still to be found the sense of a Divine Spirit which controls the destinies of the people.

Athalie, desiring to seize all power to herself, has arranged to have all of her children and grandchildren killed. Young Joas, however, has escaped and has been brought up in the temple by the High-Priest, Joad and his wife, Josabeth. Joad informs his wife that he intends to have Joas crowned so that Athalie can be dethroned. The Queen, because of a dream, comes to the temple, speaks to the young prince, and attempts to take him away with her. She is not successful in this ruse, and Joas is crowned. The Levites, the priestly caste, are prepared to defend with arms his claims. When Athalie re-enters the temple, she is murdered.

The origin and the initial development of the motive of Athalie can perhaps be seen in her imprecations and ungodliness as revealed by Abner when he speaks to the High Priest:

Des longtemps elle hait cette fermeté rare
Qui rehausse en Joad l'éclat de la tiare:
Des longtemps votre amour pour la religion
Est traité de révolte et de sédition.
Du mérite éclatant cette reine jalouse
Hait surtout Josabeth, votre fidèle épouse.¹

Abner further states:

Je l'observais hier, et je voyais ses yeux
Lancer sur le lieu saint des regards furieux;
Comme si, dans le fond de ce vaste édifice,
Dieu cachait un vengeur arme pour son supplice.¹

All is now in readiness for the celebration in the temple. Athalie, by her sudden entrance into the temple, quickens the action. After the horrible vision of her mother, Jezebel, she is impelled by instinct to enter the temple: "Dans le temple de Juifs un instinct m'a poussé."² She believes to recognize Joas as the child who, in her dream, had stabbed her in the heart. As she describes this incident to Mathan, Chief Priest of Baal, one notes the rapid development of her motive.

J'ai vu ce même enfant dont je suis menacée,
Tel qu'un songe effrayant l'a peint à ma pensée.
Je l'ai vu, son même air, son même habit de lin,
Sa demarche, ses yeux, et tous ses traits enfin;
C'est lui-même.

Voilà quel trouble ici m'oblige à m'arrêter,
Que presage, Mathan, ce prodige incroyable?³

Hence, suspicion mounts. Athalie desires to know: "Quel est-il? de quel sang? et de quelle tribu?"⁴ It is believed by Mardochee and Athalie that a kingly life is sheltered in the temple. When Athalie converses with Joas, she learns that the temple is the background of his life. In one of his replies to her, he says: "Ce temple est mon pays."⁵ She is amazed at his

¹Ibid., p. 608.
²Ibid., p. 634.
³Ibid., p. 635.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., p. 641.
courtesy, religious training, and alertness. With mixed emotions, she
explains:

   Quel prodige nouveau me trouble et m'embarrasse?
   La douceur de sa voix, son enfance, sa grâce,
   Font insensiblement à mon inimité
   Succéder... Je serais sensible à la pitié.¹

Seeing how well Joas has been trained, she attempts to associate herself
with this goodness; hence Athalie follows with:

   J'aime à voir comme vous l'instruisez.
   Enfin, Éliacin, vous avez su me plaire;
   Vous n'êtes point sans doute un enfant ordinaire.
   Vous voyez, je suis reine, et n'ai point d'héritier.
   Laissez-la cet habit, quittez ce vil métier;
   Je veux vous faire part de toutes mes richesses;
   Essayez dès ce jour l'effet de mes promesses.
   A ma table, partout, à mes côtés assis,
   Je prétends vous traiter comme mon propre fils.²

Joas quickly replies: "Quel père je quitterais! Et pour quelle mère!³

Athalie, in a violent outburst, accuses the High Priest and his wife of
the corruption of this youth. The haggard old queen, corrupted equally
by her power and by her crimes, is now face to face with innocence. Dur-
ing the course of the conversation with young Joas, one notes changes in
the attitude of Athalie. She approaches the young prince with suspicion.
Admiring his courtesy and intelligent responses to her questions, her fear
and hostility gradually transform into love. But suddenly when Joas, per-
haps innocently, reveals his hatred for her, she is angered and again
hostile.

Athalie, once a stern and bold queen, begins to change perceptibly in
character. This is pointed out by Mathan as he speaks to his confidant:

¹Ibid., p. 642.
²Ibid., pp. 644-45.
³Ibid., p. 645.
Ami, depuis deux jours je ne la connais plus.
Ce n'est plus cette reine éclairée, intrepide,
Élevée au-dessus de son sexe timide,
Qui d'abord accablait ses ennemis surpris
Et d'un instant perdu connaissait tout le prix.
La peur d'un vain remords trouble cette grande âme;
Elle flotte, elle hésite; en un mot, elle est femme.

Hence, it seems that her visit with Joas has produced an outburst of maternal love, that which she has formerly repressed. The weakness which blinds and destroys her is the pity and love which she thought that she had suppressed in herself.

The action now moves to a swift denouement. Athalie demands from Joas the treasure of David and the boy Eliacin (Joas). She threatens to destroy the temple if her demands are refused. What she thinks will be her final triumph over Jehovah turns out to be His final triumph over her. She discovers that the treasure of David is Joas himself, as she sees him seated on a makeshift throne, crowned and attended in the stately manner of a king. Athalie finally recognizes the truth as she states:

Dieu des Juifs, tu l'emportes!
Oui, c'est Joas; je cherche en vain à me tromper.
Je vois d'Ochozias et le port et le geste;
Tout me retrace enfin un sang que je déteste.

Impitoyable Dieu, toi seul as tout conduit.

She immediately realizes that her own empire has been shattered, as her troops are defeated in the temple. Before being murdered, the Queen exclaims:

Qu'il règne donc ce fils, ton soin et ton ouvrage;
Et que, pour signaler son empire nouveau,
On lui fasse en mon action enfoncer le couteau!

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1 Ibid., p. 655.

2 Ibid., p. 701.
Voici ce qu'en mourant lui souhaite sa mère;
Que dis-je, souhaiter! Je me flatte, j'espère
Qu'indocile à ton joug, fatigué de ta loi,
Fidèle au sang d'Achab qu'il a reçu de moi,
Conformé à son aïeul, à son père semblable,
On verra de David l'héritier détestable. 1

Throughout the tragedy, there is a contrast and a struggle between
the worldly glory of the court and the service of righteousness in the
temple; between the low standards of morality accepted by the worshippers
of Baal, and the righteousness demanded by the worshippers of Jehovah,
with a triumphant assertion of right. Racine has depicted Athalie as a
representative of evil. Desiring to be all powerful, she resorts to
murderous acts. From time to time, one notes, however, a weakness in her
stern character. This occurs especially when she detects the gentleness,
the goodness, and the innocence of Joas.

1 Ibid., pp. 701-02.
Racine terminated his literary career with his last religious tragedy, Athalie. One readily notes from the study which the writer has attempted to make that there was a marked transition of ideals from the Racinian secular tragedies to that of his religious tragedies. His characters, both in his secular and religious tragedies, encounter some obstacle which prevents them from easily attaining their goal. These obstacles, however, present themselves in various forms. For example, Hermione and Phèdre are both motivated by love which is embittered by jealousy. The obstacle which Hermione encounters is Andromaque, while Phèdre is impeded by Hippolyte himself. The wicked Athalie, motivated by her desire for glorification, is faced with a representative of goodness. The modest Esther, manifesting a love for her people, successfully struggles with Aman and his evil deeds. Andromaque derives all her interest from the tragic situation in which she is placed. She exhibits love, but for Hector and her son. She is actuated not by passion but by duty. Even though Andromaque represents one of the Racinian pagan heroines, one notes a similarity in her character and that of the Christian heroine, Esther. Both deserve equal admiration for their firm resolutions and their superb mastery of their will power.

Among the secular tragedies one also notes a similarity in the character of Hermione and Phèdre. They are both unrestrained and violent in their passions, deviating in character, decisions and moods which affect other personages. Oreste, by the order of Hermione, murders Pyrrhus. After the deed has been done, he returns to Hermione, sure of her hand in marriage.
Hermione instead is contemptuous of him for what he has done.

... de son sort qui t'a rendu l'arbitre?
Pourquoi l'assassiner? Qu'a-t-il fait? A quel titre?
qui te l'a dit?

Phèdre, in a similar situation as that of Hermione, accuses her nurse for having unjustly counseled her:

... Quels conseils ose-t-on me donner?
Ainsi donc jusqu'au bout tu veux m'impoisonner
Malheureuse? Viola comme tu m'as perdue.
Au jour que je fuyais c'est toi qui m'as rendue.
Tes prières m'ont fait oublier mon devoir.
J'évitais Hippolyte, et tu me l'as fait voir.
De quoi te chargeais-tu? Pourquoi ta bouche, impie
A-t-elle, en l'accusant, ose noircir sa vie?

Both, who accuse others of their crimes, represent the illogical reasoning of passionate women. Although Phèdre exhibits qualities similar to those of Hermione, the dilemma of the two is quite different. It is this fact which distinguishes her from other Racinian heroines. She is a victim of the gods and is not responsible for her passion.

Phèdre has been depicted not without sympathy, but is not Athalie also capable of evoking an equal degree of sympathy? The long feud between the family of Athalie and the priests makes her an inevitable victim of circumstances. We are constantly reminded of the savage way in which her mother had been murdered. In a dream, the mother of Athalie appears to her and warns her that the God of the Jews will soon prevail over her. This dream readily evokes sympathy. Although both Biblical tragedies of Racine illustrate the actions of Providence, it has been said that he found in Athalie a fate more pitiless than that of the ancients. Instead

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1Racine, "Andromaque," Oeuvres, II, 97.

of the Greek destiny which he had used in Andromaque and Phedre, he showed a Jehovah who ordained a precise destiny for man. If we were to compare the pagan and Christian heroines of Racine, according to character, it would perhaps seem justifiable to group Hermione and Athalie in the same category, in that both are violent and unreserved in their actions. Andromaque and Esther may readily be described as the modest, sensitive, and gentle heroines.

Which of Racine's tragedies may be called his masterpieces is difficult to determine. His was a tempered genius, lacking in those ups and downs which mark the works of Corneille. Some critics have pointed out that Andromaque, Britannicus and Athalie undoubtedly come nearer to perfection than Phedre; and yet it is Phedre which today stirs the public most deeply. Esther, the first religious tragedy of Racine, was preliminary to the great Athalie. The break with the conventions of secular tragedies is not yet so complete as Athalie well shows. Esther dispenses with a love story and with the language of gallantry, but still makes use of the confidant.

Great as Athalie is as a tragedy, it represents not the natural culmination of the work of Racine, but rather an achievement in a totally new field of drama. Because of his source of inspiration, the tragedy is of universal importance; a precious manifesto in the evolution of human history. Many critics have maintained that Athalie justifies a higher estimate of the genius of Racine. For it is by all means his most original work. In structure too, it is peculiarly his own. His secular tragedies substantially adhere to the dramatic form current in his day, though they were distinguished by less intricacy of plot and by subtler and more human characterization. But in Athalie, Racine achieved a fusion of the French
classical tragedy with that of ancient Greek, re-introduced the chorus, but bringing it into the acts only to punctuate with lyric interludes, the uninterrupted progress of the action. Athalie is void of any love interest thus the language of gallantry is conspicuously absent. The tragedy excels in poetical expression and in "local color." Hence, in accordance with the points mentioned above, many critics have placed Athalie above all other of Racine's tragedies.

Although Athalie has attained a distinguished position among the tragedies of Racine, it does not necessarily follow that Athalie is a greater personage than other heroines created by the dramatist. From the evidence presented in this study one may admire the pagan heroines of good character as well as the Christian heroines who possess the same virtuous traits. On the other hand, the evil Christian heroines are as despicable as the evil pagan heroines. We may therefore conclude that Racine was not biased in the treatment of his Christian or pagan heroines. Both types are depicted with all of the universal, human traits which transcend religious beliefs.
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