

## Racine's "Poor Banished Children of Eve"<sup>1</sup>

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L'homme ne sait à quel rang se mettre. Il est visiblement égaré et tombé de son vrai lieu sans le pouvoir retrouver. Il le cherche partout avec inquiétude et sans succès dans des ténèbres impénétrables. Pascal, *Pensées*.

The originality and depth of Racine's tragedy depends largely upon the way his small vocabulary is made to carry a multiplicity of meaning and the way figure of speech and fact interplay in the interest of rich symbolism.<sup>2</sup> This density owes much also to an additional and certainly related peculiarity, namely the thickness of experience that surrounds the main incident, final in a long story. The sense of this experience is, more often than not, one of past disturbance and of present

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the prayer *Salve Regina*: "Hail Holy Queen ... to thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve."

<sup>2</sup> While the computerized *Concordance du Théâtre et des Poésies de Jean Racine*, edited by Bryant C. Freeman and Alan Batson, 2 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968) is based on the old *Grands Ecrivains de France* edition, it is nonetheless trustworthy in demonstrating what scholars have suspected for quite a while, namely, that Racine's literary vocabulary is tiny indeed. For all his drama and poetry, the total is 4088 words. But the figures for the tragic corpus are truly startling: only 1,109 different words appear in eleven plays, and of these 475 are to be found one time and one time only.

displacement, and the action is then partly about how the pressure of this past finally asserts itself in a concrete and ironic personal disaster. Here, incidentally, the play between actuality and figure can be observed: Oreste, for instance, arrives in Epirus drawn to his love and to his frenzy after a long wandering. The wandering was geographical; it becomes personal. Or again, the errant Thésée comes home to a "famille éperdue" that fears and rejects him. He dispossesses others of their home.

Geographical displacement is in Racine often converted into spiritual displacement—and vice versa: captives, strangers, exiles, wanderers in one sense or in all senses are the characters of his plays. But this is part of a larger and important notion of alienation, estrangement, and isolation that weighs upon us all today.

Racine's handling of the displaced person is impressive in its variety. Let us begin with *Andromaque*, *Bérénice*, and *Monime*. They are all captive princesses and they have in common that their deepest feelings carry in some sense their own reward. Yet they are quite different in background and destiny.

The most striking fact about *Andromaque* is her reduced but concentrated existence. She sees herself in her captivity as identified exclusively with her double duty of remembering Hector and caring for her son. This is her whole present and her whole future, whether she lives or dies. She has no other meaning, but it is meaning enough. It gives her life a center, a basis for choice and decision. So she can say to Pyrrhus:

Captive, toujours triste, importune à moi-même,  
 Pouvez-vous souhaiter qu'Andromaque vous aime?  
 Quels charmes ont pour vous des yeux infortunés  
 Qu'à des pleurs éternels vous avez condamnés. (ll. 301-04)<sup>3</sup>

And when Pyrrhus promises to rebuild Troy, her answer is the answer of many exiles: all that is over and done with. Indeed, in Epirus events touch her too closely still:

Seigneur, C'est un Exil que mes pleurs vous demandent.  
 Souffrez que loin des Grecs et même loin de vous,  
 J'aïlle cacher mon Fils et pleurer mon Époux. (ll. 338-40)

But, finally deciding upon her "innocent stratagème," she imagines that her own death will absorb, in her sacrifice, all the accumulated hatred

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes to Racine's plays are taken from *Racine, Œuvres complètes I*, ed. Georges Forestier. Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

that is the cause of all the trouble. Such seems the meaning of her wonderful lines about Astyanax:

Il est du sang d'Hector, mais il en est le reste;  
 Et pour ce reste, enfin, j'ai moi-même en un jour,  
 Sacrifié mon sang, ma haine et mon amour. (ll. 1126-28)

But, whatever the motivation, no one else in Racine has the steady-ying power, no one else has this ability to carry her homeland with her. Bérénice, however, comes close to this. At first, this Palestinian queen considered her separation from her homeland, her "exile" in a sense, as beneficial, for even though she was "étrangère dans Rome, inconnue à la cour," she still had Titus and this meant the difference between life and death. When she is to lose him, she wishes that he had made his decision *before* becoming emperor:

Mille raisons alors consolait ma misère;  
 Je pouvais de ma mort accuser votre Père,  
 Le Peuple, le Sénat, tout l'Empire Romain,  
 Tout l'Univers, plutôt qu'une si chère main. (ll. 1075-78)

Losing him she loses all and feels herself completely abandoned, for Antiochus means nothing to her, and she rejects the suggestion that she stay in a Rome that rejoices in Titus' decision not to marry her. The reality of her love will produce curious inversions, for now her return home will be in exile since she will be separated from Titus. Even more, Titus, remaining in Rome, imprisoned in his costly *gloire*, will tell his friend Antiochus (himself a stranger, a foreigner in Rome) to express his feelings to Bérénice in just such words:

Ah! Prince, jurez-lui que, toujours trop fidèle,  
 Gémissant dans ma Cour et plus exilé qu'elle,  
 Portant jusqu'au tombeau le nom de son Amant,  
 Mon règne ne sera qu'un long bannissement... (ll. 751-54)

But at least the love was real and reciprocal and it remains even if unsatisfied, which is to say that Titus and Bérénice do not completely lose their center of being. The same may be said of Monime in one of the Racine's "pièces roses," *Mithridate*.

Monime's captivity means mostly the inability to dispose of her own heart, and, at the highest pitch of her grief, she hopes to find her freedom

in her first willed act, suicide. But the theme of exile plays a rather subdued role in *Mithridate*. Monime and Xipharès reveal their mutual love well before the dénouement, so that the play deals with a different kind of estrangement that I shall discuss presently.

Andromaque, Bérénice and Monime are all to a certain extent supported by a requited love. Eriphile in *Iphigénie* is not, and so she is probably the most discontented of Racine's heroines. (Her confidant Doris says, "Je sais que tout déplaît aux yeux d'une Captive," 401). Eriphile is also the most self-pitying and the most ready to exploit her misfortune. She plays upon Iphigénie's natural compassion:

Hélas! A quels soupirs suis-je donc condamnée!  
 Moi qui de mes parents toujours abandonnée  
 Etrangère partout, n'a pas même en naissant,  
 Peut-être reçu d'eux un regard caressant. (ll. 585-88)

Both Iphigénie and Clytemnestre at one point realize that Eriphile's dwelling on her recent captivity and displacement is only a means of talking about her love, Achille. It is an irony that Clytemnestre should say to Achille that he must be lover, husband, and father to Iphigénie, for this is in fact what he has come to mean for Eriphile, the other Iphigénie.

Eriphile stands quite alone, then, but one way she overcomes her isolation is to involve others in her misfortune, and what she does, or plans to do, is done "pour ne pas pleurer seule," as much as for revenge. Yet when she loses hope she will, like Andromaque, ask for further exile, saying to Achille,

Souffrez que, loin du Camp et loin de votre vue  
 Toujours infortunée et toujours inconnue,  
 J'aïlle cacher un sort si digne de pitié,  
 Et dont mes pleurs encor vous taisent la moitié. (ll. 889-92)

So far the people I have mentioned have been actual captives willing or not. But Hermione, while in Epirus by her own consent, is just as captive as Eriphile and far more so than Andromaque or Bérénice. She feels that her heart, events, and even Cléone her *confidante* had betrayed her before she was betrayed by Pyrrhus: "Avant qu'il me trahît, vous m'avez tous trahie" (470). So here she sits, waiting in a foreign land, more profoundly isolated and uprooted than her rival whom she likes to call disdainfully Pyrrhus' "captive." Thus she admits to Pyrrhus,

Je t'ai cherché moi—même au fond de tes provinces.  
 J'y suis encore, malgré tes infidélités,  
 Et malgré tous mes Grecs, honteux de mes bontés. (ll. 1366-68)

Hermione has a special family feeling that is much more than simple filial piety. Her sense of separation involved family, city, and nation and it foreshadows her very last words: her love-voyage having ended in a murder plot and the deed having been done, she cries in a rage to Oreste,

Adieu. Tu peux partir. Je demeure en Epire.  
 Je renonce à la Grèce, à Sparte, à son empire,  
 A toute ma famille . . . (ll. 1601-03)

Only one more stage remains in her journey: her suicide over Pyrrhus' body.

With Oreste, whose isolation like Hermione's caps a quest, the emphasis on wandering is explicit from the start. The first scene of the play is between two men, Oreste and Pylade, who have been tossed across the seas by forces beyond their control. Oreste, (like Antiochus), captive of his melancholy, is condemned to "Traîner de Mers en Mers ma chaîne et mes ennuis" (44), until at last, politics intervening, he is led by destiny to seek out the love he had been trying to forget, and, full of dark doubts, he gives himself over to his quest that had always been and continues to be his own death. So he says to Hermione in a burst of self-abasement,

J'ai mendié la Mort chez les Peuples cruels  
 Qui n'apaisaient leurs Dieux que du sang des Mortels;  
  
 Ils m'ont fermé leur Temple, et ces Peuples barbares  
 De mon sang prodigué sont devenu avarés.  
 Enfin je viens à vous, et je me vois réduit  
 A chercher dans vos yeux une mort qui me fuit. (ll. 491-96)

This is only one of many *précieux* conceits that in Racine are all too literal, although it is true that the fulfillment of Oreste's quest will itself be figurative. As his plans form, more and more alone, like Eriphile he needs to draw someone else into the field of his disaster: "C'est trop gémir tout seul" (765). But finally like the others, he tells Pylade to leave him, saying that he must carry on by himself, and begs his pardon for being a wretch "Que tout le Monde hait et qui se hait lui-même" (802). Hermione's

prodding pushes him further and further from a position that a kinder destiny might have allowed him, and at the end, having lost Hermione, he is himself lost and loses his reason. He is condemned to be the perpetual stranger and to wander forever, physically alive, mentally dead.

In *Phèdre* even more than in *Andromaque* one is conscious of the background of wandering and of searching. Hippolyte is about to seek his father, that great vagabond of antiquity. Thérémène has already done so, and this fact gives rise to much mention of "bords" and "rivages" and those so fateful "mers" with which indeed the whole play is full. It is hard not to associate the "bords dangereux" of Trézène with those "bords où l'on voit l'Achéron se perdre chez les Morts, (12)" or the "bords qu'on passe sans retour" (388), which Thésée is supposed to have seen and which Phèdre and Oenone and Hippolyte are soon to see. For, Phèdre's voyage from Crete and Athens to "l'aimable Trézène" (whither, we remember she had already banished Hippolyte) will bring her at last to her death-bearing love. But at the same time she represents, much like Hermione, Bérénice, Eriphile and Oreste, the stranger who comes to those shores, bringing with her disturbance or the disaster that is his/her heritage. Hippolyte, in answer to Thérémène's description of Trézène as "ces paisibles lieux, si chers à votre Enfance" (30) says,

Cet heureux temps n'est plus. Tout a changé de face  
Depuis que sur ces bords les Dieux ont envoyé  
La fille de Minos de Pasiphaé. (ll. 34-36)

Along with Phèdre has come Oenone who does not let her forget that "Mon Pays, mes Enfants, pour vous j'ai tout quitté" (253). In this one sentence is expressed the progressive pull away from the center, or what ought to be the center, of the lives of Racine's people. As the pole becomes greater, all direction is lost, aims are confused and motives clouded. Hermione says "Errante sans dessein je cours dans ce Palais" (1403). Agamemnon scarcely knows if he acts from love or from pique. Eriphile cannot tell whether her object is "vengeant ma prison"—an act against society, or "troubler un hymen odieux"—a purely personal matter. Phèdre appears in this state at near death, in total isolation with her guilty secret as the only and yet impossible center of her existence.

Now it is very important to remember that beyond a certain point this loss of center means loss of identity. Hermione, Oreste, Mithridate, Phèdre all express this sense of *self*-alienation that can be summed up in Oreste's "Est-ce Pyrrhus qui meurt, et suis-je Oreste enfin?" (1612). The

lack of power to be or to remain one's self is as distinctly Racinian as the power of integrity is distinctly Cornelian, and the question was vital to the century. In *Bajazet*, Atalide for one moment thought she possessed this power: "Oui, je me reconnais, je suis toujours le même" (825), she says after she has persuaded Bajazet to humor Roxanne. But of course she cannot hold to her own dissimulating role, and it is she who ultimately takes upon herself the responsibility for the tragedy. Even Hippolyte is not exempt from this kind of dislocation:

Dieux! Que dira le Roi? Quel funeste poison  
L'amour a répandu sur toute la Maison!  
Moi-même, plein d'un feu que sa haine réprouve,  
Quel il m'a vu jadis, et quel il me retrouve!  
De noirs pressentiments viennent m'épouvanter. (Il. 991-95)

And precisely there had been something prophetic in his earlier attempt to describe his love to Aricie:

Moi, qui, contre l'Amour fièrement revolté  
Aux fers de ses Captifs si longtemps insulté  
Qui des faibles mortels déplorant les naufrages  
Pensait toujours du bord contempler les orages,  
Asservi maintenant sous la commune loi,  
Par quel trouble me vois-je emporté loin de moi? (Il. 531-36)

And again, he claims that he does not recognize himself:

Moi-même, pour tout fruit de mes soins superflus  
Maintenant je me cherche et ne me trouve plus.  
Mon arc, mes javelots, mon char, tout m'importune.  
Je ne me souviens plus des leçons de Neptune.  
Mes seuls gémisséments font retentir les bois,  
Et mes coursiers oisifs ont oublié *ma voix*. (Il. 547-52)

Almost every line of these passages finds an echo in the "Récit de Théràmène," and, precisely due to his dismemberment, Hippolyte becomes, *in grisly fact*, unrecognizable (*The Illiad*, Book 24, 273-75).

Let us broaden our scope for a moment. In the history of literature, the role of displacement is long and impressive. From the beginning, narrative and drama weave an extraordinary web of wandering, separation, abduc-

tion, and exile. The Bible and Homer are full of what this displacement means socially and psychologically; one thinks right off of Ruth sick for home, and of Helen:

Wherefore I wail alike for thee and for my hapless self with grief at heart; for no longer have I anyone beside in broad Troy that is gentle to me or kind; but all men shudder at me (Corneille 359-62).

So Helen grieved at the death of Hector. Furthermore all this wandering has to do with change, which is to say action and so the term "displacement," if used broadly enough, could be made to apply to practically any work of literature. These points granted, I think we may still be permitted to see in all this voyaging and seeking, in all this loss and this homelessness, the reflection of a persistent human need to express in a particular way the consciousness of being, and this is through a sense of individuality that requires separateness to be sure, but that at the same time feels the urge to unite or to reunite with some sort of otherness. It begins with Adam and Eve, the first exiles.

It appears that Racine understood especially well this notion. *Exile*, *stranger*, *captive*, and *slave* as he treats them become total realities. They transcend their primary meanings as, in many cases, the voyage to the land of death progressively consumes, as it were, the sense of belonging, and alters both this status of the person and their personality itself to such a degree that finally the character stands alone and lost, all his energies either narrowed to a crime or utterly dispersed. It is perhaps worth remarking too that this narrowing is accompanied by a corresponding spatial and temporal limitation, for the plays represent what is, in fact, the last day of a life, the end of the journey.

In some cases, of course, this destruction does not take place, as I suggested when describing the couple of lovers in *Mithridate*, and this observation leads me into my final development. I would insist on the variety with which Racine treated the theme of displacement. For him, there is no single type of "captive princess" or "mysterious stranger." Nevertheless, these people all have one thing in common: they love. By itself, of course, this means nothing, but taken in the context of our discussion it means that once again, it would seem, the interchange of figure and actuality is at work. For love in Racine cannot be taken to mean simply one aspect of what draws human beings together. Nor can it be taken in the Cornelian sense where as in the lines from *Rodgune*,

Il est des nœuds secrets, il est des sympathies  
 Dont par le doux rapport des âmes assorties  
 S'attachent l'une à l'autre et se laissent piquer  
 Par ce je ne sais quoi qu'on ne peut expliquer (ll. 359-62).

Rather it must be taken to include and go beyond all of this, and so to be identical at its best with the very fulfillment of being, at its worst with death. Since accepting the throne means giving up Bérénice, Titus equates the throne with death: “Mais il ne s'agit plus de vivre, il faut régner” (1102). Monime on the other hand expresses the sense of wholeness in true love when she says to Xipharès that she knows, “Que je verrai mon âme, en secret déchirée, / Revoler vers le bien dont elle est séparée” (731-32).

Racine's characters fight for what they consider to be their very existence. Thus the emptiness of Eriphile's life, with no past, no home, no family could have been filled with Achilles's love. But she, like Hermione and Phèdre, is doomed, and so she will find the object of her quest, which is her own *self* (and which she identifies with her love of Achilles), only in death.

There are those who remain whole, either alive or dead. They are so because their love is of the sort that transcends its earthly reward. Iphigénie, for example, represents a different kind of selfless attachment where actually the self is preserved, as it should be, in the sense of togetherness with the beloved. Even Bérénice comes close to this: if she is condemned to live without Titus, and if this is a sort of death, still the love remains and so the humanity remains. The converse may be said of Oreste and Néron who remain alive but lost, no longer human. Only suicide as expiation or as the last willed act of an otherwise totally alienated being can redeem something of this lost humanity.

If it is true that the fullness of humanity depends upon a selfless union with the beloved, it is also true that where the love is selfish, there is death and disintegration. The most striking of Racine's characters are victims of this kind of love. Oreste, Hermione, Néron, Roxane, Eriphile, Phèdre—all want to fix their love where in truth it cannot abide. And this fact only serves to emphasize the sense of dislocation that permeates the plays. But here a special cruelty enters in: along with these characters, Racine imagined also a whole string of unfortunate pairs of innocent lovers for whom love, as it turned out, meant death instead of life because it got in the way of a perverse and selfish desire (in other words, a misplaced love), a desire that was death-dealing instead of life-giving.

In such alchemy, love is absorbed and even seems to participate in the cosmic hatred that prevails.

In this way, Racine provides us with concrete instances of what Pascal meant when he said, "L'esprit croît naturellement, et la volonté aime naturellement. De sorte qu'à faute des vrais objets, il faut qu'ils s'attachent aux faux" (Pascal 285). Obviously Pascal meant something more universal than the instances of which I speak, if we take them at their factual level. But if we take them as figurative, we can see that Phèdre and Thésée, for instance, approach such universality as they utter the most expressive cries of total exile in all Racine. Phèdre's is often quoted. Raging in her new-found jealousy, she refers to herself as the "triste rebut de la nature entire" (1241), and in her final speech she represents herself as outraging the heavens and defiling the purity of the universe. Her displacement, geographical to begin with, then social and psychological, ends in being cosmic. Thésée is equally explicit. When he hears the description of Hippolyte's death, he asks of Phèdre the (now familiar) favor, "Laissez-moi, loin de vous et loin de ce Rivage / De mon Fils déchiré fuir la sanglante image" (1605-06). But then he follows with, "Confus, persécuté d'un mortel souvenir / De l'univers entier je voudrais me bannir" (1607-08).

One does not have to have taken sides in the eternal debate about the Jansenist inspiration of Racine's tragedies to suspect in all of this some sort of religious dimension, not necessarily Jansenist but simply Christian. There is the whole idea of the Fall, there are the wandering and the seeking, of which the Scriptures are full. Finally, one might see in a religious connection the difference between the seventeenth-century conception and the Romantic conception of *isolement*. But that too is a vast and complex question. In any event, after Pascal and Racine, French literature would not again, until the Romantic era, understand so well the psychology of spiritual disorientation and homelessness—the sense of life as exile.

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