

RACINE, JEAN

Racine the man and the early work. Jean Racine (1639-1699) Racine was born in Aisnes, in the province of Picardy, in the north of France. Orphaned at the age of four, by the death of both his parents, his grandmother moved, with him, to the Convent of Port-Royal, the stronghold of Jansenist faith and culture. (The Jansenists constituted an influential and highly controversial group within the Catholic Church, insisting on predestination, original sin, and man's incapacity to form his own destiny. Racine remained under the influence of this perspective all his life.) Brought up, like Molière, in the center of Paris--which is where the Port Royal convent was located--Racine however was of high middle class background, and at an early age, in the schools of Port Royal, he received the most thorough classical education available, coming especially into a mastery of Greek, which was to be a major source of inspiration throughout his dramatic career. (The Greeks, rather than the Romans, were becoming the inspiration of choice in the French theater of the time.) After an unsuccessful attempt to study theology, which did not interest him, Racine returned from seminary to Paris, and once more embraced the excitement of urban life, making influential and agreeable friendships, with the fable writer La Fontaine, and soon with Molière and Boileau. Racine's first tragedy was published in 1664.

Racine in full career. There followed a period of pain and growth for Racine, as his masters of religious instruction, from whom he had learned so much at seminary, published their strong disapproval of his devotion to the stage, a slur which brought sharp response from Racine, and a firm new decision to commit his life to the theater. Already his first efforts on the Parisian stage were met with strong approval from the critic par excellence, Boileau, the author of the doctrinal masterpiece *L'Art Poétique*, with its brilliantly expressed obeisance to Aristotle. With the superb play *Andromaque* (1667) Racine initiated a series of masterpieces—*Britannicus*, *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre*—which would establish for French tragedy, as Molière did for comedy, a world wide pre eminence. It comes to us as a shock that at the height of his powers and fame, with *Phèdre* in 1677, Racine virtually abandons the theater, marries a woman who has never read a line of his work, reconciles with his Port Royal masters, and devotes himself henceforth to God, king, and family.

The remaking of the ancient Classics. Montaigne and Rabelais were both steeped in the texts of Ancient Greece and Rome. Racine, creating a century later, reinterprets those same ancient texts for the stage, and in so doing must bring his new vision to a living audience with its own contemporary tastes. Take a small example of the new sensibility Racine introduces. In the play of Euripides, from which Racine's *Phedre* derives, Phedre herself is not on stage when she receives the tragic news of the death of Hippolytus. In Racine's play Phèdre remains on stage, to absorb the full brunt of the news. Can you see the sensational vivacity Racine is driving at, which contrasts with the reticence of the Greek playwright?

The nature of Racinian tragedy. Racine is a psychologist, at his best dissecting the intense emotions of passionate, vengeful, and introspective women. His sense of structure is faultless in his finest plays, like *Phèdre*, and mounts to a purifyingly tragic climax, handled with infinite verbal subtlety, in the consummate French classical blend.

Reading

Primary source reading

Racine, *Phedre*, trans. Wilson, 1987.

Secondary source reading

Butler, Philip, *Racine: A Study*, 1974.

Further reading

Moriarty, M., *Early modern French Thought*, 2003.

Original language reading

Forster, Georges, *Jean Racine*, 2006.

Suggested paper topics

It is roughly true that Racine takes his greatest inspiration from the ancient Greeks, while Corneille takes his from the Romans. Evaluate that perception. Do, say, Britannicus and Iphigenie provide good examples of the point? What kind of inspiration does the Greek matrix provide?

Does Racine, at his best, provide the kind of shock and awe that the greatest of Greek dramas, like *Oedipus the King*, provide? Or does the modern, courtly setting, of Racine limit its fundamental power?

Excerpt <http://archive.org/stream/phaedra01977gut/phrdr10.txt>

HIPPOLYTUS My mind is settled, dear Theramenes, And I can stay no more in lovely Troezen. In doubt that racks my soul with mortal anguish, I grow ashamed of such long idleness. Six months and more my father has been gone, And what may have befallen one so dear I know not, nor what corner of the earth Hides him. THERAMENES And where, prince, will you look for him? Already, to content your just alarm, Have I not cross'd the seas on either side of Corinth, ask'd if aught were known of Theseus where Acheron is lost among the Shades, visited Elis, doubled Toenarus, and sail'd into the sea that saw the fall Of Icarus? Inspired with what new hope, under what favour'd skies think you to trace His footsteps? Who knows if the King, your father, wishes the secret of his absence known? Perchance, while we are trembling for his life, The hero calmly plots some fresh intrigue, And only waits till the deluded fair--
HIPPOLYTUS Cease, dear Theramenes, respect the name Of Theseus. Youthful errors have been left behind, and no unworthy obstacle Detains him. Phaedra long has fix'd a heart Inconstant once, nor need she fear a rival. In seeking him I shall but do my duty, And leave a place I dare no longer see.
THERAMENES Indeed! When, prince, did you begin to dread these peaceful haunts, so dear to happy childhood, Where I have seen you oft prefer to stay, rather than meet the tumult and the pomp of Athens and the court? What danger shun you, Or shall I say what grief? HIPPOLYTUS That happy time is gone, and all is changed, since to these shores The gods sent Phaedra. THERAMENES I perceive the cause of your distress. It is the queen whose sight offends you. With a step-dame's spite she schemed your exile soon as she set eyes on you. But if her hatred is not wholly vanish'd, It has at least taken a milder aspect. Besides, what danger can a dying woman, one too who longs for death, bring on your head? Can Phaedra, sick'ning of a dire disease of which she will not speak, weary of life And of herself, form any plots against you? HIPPOLYTUS It is not her vain enmity I fear, Another foe alarms Hippolytus. I fly, it must be own'd, from young Aricia, The sole survivor of an impious race...