

BERENICE

Racine

Overview Jean Racine (1639—1699) was educated at the Jansenist Seminary of Port Royal in Paris, where he received a thorough training in classical languages and literature. In this case this meant a superb training ground in prosody, grammar, and theological reasoning, traits which were of central value to his dramatic writing. His first highly successful effort on stage was *Andromaque*, composed when he was 27, but this work was soon followed by others—*Britannicus*, *Phedre*, *Bérénice*, *Iphigénie en Aulide*—before he made the step, at the the age of 38, of retiring altogether from the theater.

Story Racine excels in the tightly screwed tragic drama, and *Berenice* almost exceeds *Andromaque*, *Phedre*, or *Iphigénie* in this concision of entrapment. The source of the present drama is a line from the Roman historian Suetonius, stating that *the Roman Emperor Titus dismissed Queen Berenice from Rome, he unwilling, she unwilling*. How does this nub of meaning unfold?

The Roman Emperor Titus, newly proclaimed Emperor, must give up his true passion for Bérénice, because as a foreigner she is not acceptable to the Roman people; although everyone in the kingdom assumed that, his father having died, Titus as Emperor would be able to marry whom he wished. He sends Berenice his decision—that he must give up his beloved-- by way of Antiochus. This however was a serious mistake, for Antiochus loves Berenice, and must now convey the amazing information that she, Berenice, can no longer be considered as Queen of Rome. She will have to leave Titus, whom she loves as much as he does her. She must leave the land, for she is an obstruction to the new Emperor, and cares too much for his future to put herself in his way.

Antiochus must leave too, both her and the land. In fact, having learned the truth through the message he was required to convey, Antiochus is eager to get out of town, for the erotic tangle of Rome is leading into a disciplinary solution which is ruthless. All three disciplined royal figures—for Antiochus too is 'of the blood'--must deny themselves what they desire, in the name of propriety and duty and respect for their circumstances.

Berenice epitomizes a world in which care for duty and responsibility is immaculate and holy. Antiochus is of the sense that, knowing Berenice's rejection by Titus, it would be unacceptable for him to continue pressing his case with the lady. Berenice herself is unswervably royal, and instantly grasps the priority, of the Roman kingship regulations, over her own love. Titus, 'unwilling' as Berenice was 'unwilling,' felt he had to send Berenice away even though he loved her. He did not in fact 'send her away,' at all, in the tender sense of the expression, but at first begged her to stay in Roman, though in fact with no hope that she would agree.

Critics wondering at the mysterious power of the personal decisions at work here, have frequently lighted on a dramatic condition, of the present play, which makes the decisions of its protagonists particularly powerful. The royal events which surround the romantic action of the play—the inauguration of a new emperor, threatening enemies on the borders--could have presented conditions under which it was mandatory for Berenice and Antiochus, separately, to flee the city. However, Racine chose to describe the world around our three protagonists to be of such a sort, that only individual decisions, of the three protagonists, would suffice to unlock the disciplinary-tragic events of the play.

In the preface to the play, Racine confesses that the art he displays, in *Berenice*, is the art of making something out of nothing—as it were, a mathematical structure fleshed out as a play. Aren't we at the historical moment, here, of Descartes and Pascal, mathematicians famously concerned with the constructions possible to pure math?

Themes

Passion All three of the protagonists are seriously in love, from before the start of the play. Their passions are a given.

Duty Each individual has to deal with his or her unique reasons for not giving in to his/her passions. The play turns around the distinctive ways each major character discovers his or her duty. The suffering involved in this almost Asian spectacle of renunciation is most potently summed up in the way Antiochus finds himself designated to bear a self-destroying message to Berenice, by which he notifies her of the King's decision.

Characters

Berenice is a queenly lady, fit to be the new Empress of Rome, but she is kept from that destiny by the feeling of the Roman people, that they do not want a foreigner, which she is, in their ruling line. Her immediate decision to remove herself is characteristically royal.

Titus rivals Berenice in his sensitivity to his social situation. All he needs, is to hear his people muttering about the impropriety of a foreigner at the helm of Rome, and his mind is clear; his duty comes first, and his duty obliges him to put his country first.

Bérénice (Conscientious)

Character Just as the play is strict, so the verbal source of it is tight and limited. That source is a line from the Roman historian Suetonius, stating that *the Emperor Titus dismissed Queen Berenice from Rome, he unwilling, she unwilling*. Titus, newly proclaimed Emperor, must give up his true passion for Bérénice, because as a foreigner she is not acceptable to the Roman people. He sends his decision to Berenice by way of Antiochus, who loves her, and who now realizes that she loves the new king. She must leave the land, for she is an obstruction to the new Emperor, and cares too much for his future to put herself in his way. And Antiochus must leave too, both her and the land. All three disciplined royal figures must deny themselves what they desire, in the name of propriety and duty. Berenice epitomizes a world in which care for the other's needs determines all.

Parallels Classical literature offers sharp examples of the exercise of discipline among literary characters. Beautiful examples occur in Homer's *Odyssey*; Odysseus, trapped in Polyphemus' cave with his men, obliges them to be silent, so they won't be discovered; in the land of the lotus eaters Odysseus Implores his men not to eat the lotus plant, a narcotic which would render them apathetic and woozy—and they desist from the temptation. Aeneas, in Virgil's *Aeneid* (19 B.C.), exercises exemplary (and cruel) self-discipline, by refusing to yield to Dido's passionate desire for him; Aeneas sails on, with his men, to the Italy fate has destined him to settle. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in 'Self-Reliance,' 1841, presents a modern but timeless case for the discipline of taking responsibility for yourself, forming your own opinions, and following your own star.

Illustrative moments

Pride Bérénice believes she will become queen to the newly chosen Roman emperor. She is proud, though she knows she is about to have to tell Antiochus, who loves her as she loves Titus, that she must leave him. Her incomplete understanding of the political issues facing Titus, like Antiochus' similar ignorance of what was going on in her emotions, forms the stuff of this strict bare play. One might add that Titus himself, now swamped with sudden new coronation duties, finds himself tortured by the need to explain his situation to Berenice, who is still under the illusion of being Titus' lover.

Doubt Bérénice begins to question Titus' interest in her, for in the midst of the ceremonies of becoming Emperor, he finds himself deeply distracted.

'A sigh, a glance, one word from your lips: this is the whole ambition of a heart like mine,' she says to him. She is ignorant of the huge secret he is withholding from her—that he must dump her-- and which he

should—she tells him amply—have confided in her when first they fell in love; that the Roman people, and their laws, will never permit their Emperor to marry a foreign Queen. Bérénice mistakenly takes her fiancé's gloominess for general preoccupation over the recent death of his father.

Fury Bérénice pulls out all the stops, in her effort to persuade Titus, who is also in misery with their personal crisis, to assert their love. When Titus remarks that if he cannot maintain Roman laws, he is not a candidate for ruler of that state, he receives the answer: 'you count for nothing the tears of Bérénice...for unjust laws, which you could change, you will now plunge yourself in everlasting grief.' In a follow up attack she stresses that she will no longer request his love, but will allow his inner remorse to plague him forever, as a symbol of the love they knew.

Resignation In a final scene, the three principals gather to release one another from the knot of their mutual involvements. Having assured Antiochus that she is leaving Titus, as well as him, and having assured Titus that she is determined to go on living, Berenice formulates the future: Titus and she, though bound in love, will abandon each other for good, nor ever see each other again; Antiochus will live by their examples, taking his sighs and his chains far from her sight.

Discussion questions

What seems to be Racine's own attitude toward the strict discipline governing all three main characters? Does he see a fault in the thought or behavior of any of those characters?

What exactly is the position of Antiochus in the play? Has he any way to come out of his own loss gracefully, except by taking inspiration from the self-abnegation of the Emperor and Bérénice?

This drama plays out among the rulers of mankind, on a princely level. That, Aristotle thought, was the way a tragedy should be constructed. Only great figures, performing powerful actions, are worth experiencing as models of the tragic. Your opinion?

Reading [//archive.org/details/berenicetragedy00raciiala](http://archive.org/details/berenicetragedy00raciiala)