

RACINE

(1639-1699)

Works

The Thebaid. 1664
Alexander the Great. 1665
Andromaque. 1667
The Litigants. 1668
Britannicus. 1669
Bérénice. 1670
Bajazet. 1672
Mithridate. 1673
Iphigenia. 1674
Phèdre. 1677
Esther. 1689
Athalie. 1691

Biography

Racine was born in the province of Picardy, in Northern France, in 1639. An orphan at an early age, he went to live with his grandmother, who herself moved into the Jansenist convent of Port Royal, taking her grandchild with her. In the strict learning environment of the convent, Racine absorbed a disciplined classical education—lots of Greek and Latin—and, significantly, a powerful training in Greek and Roman mythology, which would be significant forces in his later dramatic life.

It was expected that Racine would continue on into a career in law, but in fact he took a more bohemian direction, honing his verbal skills in a freer wheeling atmosphere. (Fortunately for him, he caught the attention of the premier literary critic of the time, Nicolas Boileau, whose *Art Poétique* (1674) formulated the dominant classical rules of poetic; Boileau was delighted with the work of Racine). Through the concourse with such as Boileau, Racine found himself drawn into Parisian literary milieu, which in his case meant into the life of the theater.

While Racine's first serious theatrical effort, *The Thebaid* (*The Enemy Brothers*) was a flop, his following work, *Alexander the Great*, was a public success, and led Racine to consider changing to a more successful theater troupe, that which was lodged at the Hotel de Bourgogne. (That troupe was acquiring popularity for its presentation of tragedies; unfortunately, though, Racine's move to this new group meant a serious, and lifetime, break with his rival, Molière, whose troupe he was leaving. Racine put icing on the cake, by seducing the leading actress of Molière's troupe.)

With his move to a new and permanent home, for his tragedies, Racine moved into a period of high creativity—between *Andromaque* (1667) and *Iphigenia* (1677), and including plays like *Britannicus* (1669) and *Bérénice* (1670)—writing steadily and in competition with fellow dramatists like Pierre Corneille and his brother Thomas—who both, like many stage luminaries of the time, competed to write the best version of a play based on a classical theme. (Rival versions of both *Iphigenia* and *Phèdre* came out in the 1670's.)

At this high period of creativity, Racine appears to have been plagued by underconfidence and depression. (Oddly enough, Racine appears to have been the first French author to live off his writings.)

Only a little later, though—quite a cure for depression and underconfidence!—Racine married a pious court lady, with whom he had two sons and five daughters. He also took on a position as royal historiographer to the King. Nor was that the end of his public honors. In 1672 he was elected to the *Académie française*, the most prestigious literary institution in France; not much later he was chosen for the honorary position of ‘treasurer of France,’ and was soon elevated to the role of ‘ordinary gentleman of the king,’ and of secretary to the king, once again an extraordinary honor for even a distinguished playwright.

When once again Racine returned to the theater, in 1689, he began to create in a new vein, religious in tone, and with stories involving Old Testament material: *Esther* (1689) and *Athalie* (1691). These dignified and moral dramas were produced in a private school, the Ecole de Saint Cyr, in Paris, and marked both a decline in dramatic intensity, and even higher levels of prosodic strictness.

Racine died of liver cancer in 1699.

Achievements

Updating. Racine’s dramas adhere to many basic shapes of classical drama—especially Greek—but remodel those dramas for a modern audience, widening the unities of time and space, so that the whole work is not so tightly formed, and applying to ancient themes a new kind of tension—as in *Britannicus* or *Andromaque*—in which the protagonist is placed under quite a ‘modern’ set of excruciating dilemmas.

Stylistics. Racine brings the French classical line, the *alexandrine*, to a perfection of purity, clarity, and completeness, which it has not known before or since. For André Gide, the 20th century French novelist, no line in French literature can beat Racine’s description of Phaedra: ‘la fille de Minos, et de Pasiphae,’ ‘the daughter of Minos and of Pasiphae,’ in which the four syllables of *Pasiphae* are manipulated to exquisite effect.

3 Chastity. Racine imposes a strict chastity on his language. He uses a small vocabulary—some 4000 words—which he puts under high rhetorical stress, eschewing the fireworks of erudite reference. The result of this chastity is intensity, expression replacing reference in many of the most celebrated *crucibles* of the dramas.

Fall. Racine manages to preserve a powerful element of Greek tragedy—an element Aristotle presented as essential to the genre of tragedy—by concentrating in each tragedy—*Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Phèdre*, *Iphigenia*—on the tragic web that brings down the protagonist. Racine achieves this sense of impending doom, while providing the characters enough freedom to earn their suffering. A modern reader might want to compare the dark tragedies of Eugene O’Neill, like *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956; first publication.)

Themes

Unity. The unities of space, time, and action have remained—thanks to Aristotle’s *Poetics*—key terms for considering the values of great drama. Those terms, as Aristotle saw it, applied especially to the work of Sophocles, in whom the action of a single day, in a single place, and around a single theme, made the ideal setting for a tragedy. These unities are not rigorously attended to in Racine, yet in spirit he respects them consistently, taking from them the impulse to chastity of event and action, which characterizes his tragedy.

Fatalism. A certain fatalism goes, in Racine, with the strictness of his version of the unities. Intense and concentrated rhetorics of dialogue provide the central energy of all these plays, and bring out what we want to have known among the characters. In that setting the old adage, that *character is fate*, insists on itself. *Britannicus*, being what he is, cannot fail to abandon his sweetheart.,

Fall. Fall, of course, goes with fatalism. As Racine attends to the Greek notion of dramatic fate, he invariably looks to characters whose fall will fulfil the grave maxims of fate. The characters he

employs, not surprisingly, are chosen from among the great, those, of either gender, who have the power and responsibility to take a part of the world down with them when they drop.

Love. Love is a moving force in many of Racine's dramatic actions: in *Britannicus* love (of one sort) forces people apart; in *Phèdre*, physical passion causes fatal counter-response; in *Esther*, love shows up as the force that saves a nation. Love is a directive power throughout Racine's drama, but the effects of this emotion are different depending upon the circumstances.

Characters

Women, as our examples show, play a commanding role in Racine's dramatic expressions of himself. It is as though he finds, in the dilemmas and heroisms of women's lives, room to develop his own precocious sensitivity to values.

One male character faces us, **Agamemnon**, in *Iphigénie*. This commander in chief of the Greek forces is a bureaucrat and a bumbler, a slightly exaggerated form of the images of this same leader in classical Greek literature, where he always comes off second to the divine Achilles. In **Iphigénie**, Agamemnon is faced with the command to sacrifice his daughter, in order to activate the winds and sail the Greek fleet to Troy.

Racine's drama illustrates the worst possible choices that Agamemnon makes. Is Racine talking about himself? All the credit he takes from Agamemnon he gives in turn to Iphigénie, who is all obedience and cool, as she accepts her father's orders to join the army camp in Aulis, then discovers too late that he has subsequently tried to rescind those orders.

Three of Racine's most fascinating female characters come to their flowering by interrelating with affairs of state on the highest level, and by maintaining honor and value under those conditions. **Bérénice** faces the cruelest dilemma romance can generate. Her great love, Titus, becomes Emperor of Rome, a position which precludes marriage to a foreigner—which Bérénice is. Deeply in love with Bérénice, Titus must explain to her that their love cannot come to fruit; a blow with which Bérénice copes with queenly dignity. **Esther**, married into the Persian court, becomes aware of a court plot against the Jews in Persia, her people, and with tact and courage she persuades her husband, the Persian ruler, to guarantee a permanent amnesty to the Jews in his kingdom. **Andromaque**, widow of the Trojan hero Hector, finds herself, and her small son, a prisoner in the court of the Greek king Pyrrhus. In order to save her son, she must marry Pyrrhus, which means infidelity to her dead husband, an insult she cannot envision. The bind is excruciating; she decides to go through with the marriage ceremony, thus saving her son, but to commit suicide immediately after the marriage ceremony, thus preserving her fidelity to Hector.

Phaedra creates, rather than solving, crises, lest we think Racine exaggerates his praise of women. A foreigner in the court of Theseus, Phaedra falls wildly for Theseus' woman-scorning son, Hippolytus. Hippolytus refuses her, and her viciousness goes farther, as she tries to convince her returning husband that Hippolytus has tried to rape her. Once again, Racine is using woman as his vehicle of commentary on human nature, but this time it is the men who are crushed by events.