

Characters in Racine

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.

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.

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 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.

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?