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JEAN RACINE was born in 1639 at La Ferté Milon, sixty miles east of Paris. Orphaned at an early age, he was educated at the Little Schools of Port Royal and the pro-Jansenist College of Beauvais. He soon reacted against his austere mentors and by 1660 he had begun to write for the theatre and had been introduced to the court of Louis XIV. In 1677, when he had ten plays to his credit and was high in favour with both the court and the public, he abandoned the theatre, which was regarded as far from respectable by the Church, and joined the Establishment as Royal Historiographer. It was only after a silence of twelve years that he wrote his last two plays (both on religious subjects), *Esther* and *Athalie*. He died in 1699.

JOHN CAIRNCROSS was educated at Glasgow University, at the Sorbonne, and at Trinity College, Cambridge. He served in the British Civil Service until 1952, then went to live in Rome, working as correspondent for the *Observer*, the *Economist*, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Since 1957 he has worked for the United Nations, first in Bangkok and now in Rome. John Cairncross has also translated Racine's *Andromache*, *Britannicus* and *Berenice* for the Penguin Classics, and he is the author of *Molière*, *Bourgeois et Libertin*, and *By a Lonely Sea*, a volume of poetry translations.

Jean Racine

IPHIGENIA · PHAEDRA
ATHALIAH

Translated and Introduced by
JOHN CAIRNCROSS



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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD TO THE 1970 EDITION

THE present reprint of *Iphigenia*, *Phaedra* and *Athalieh* offers a suitable opportunity to take stock of the essential problems inherent in the translation of Racine.

The various modern versions of *Phaedra* and other Racinian plays and the critics' reactions to my own version have confirmed me in my belief that Racine should be rendered as literally as possible, that the rendering should be in unrhymed verses of five syllables (i.e. blank verse) and that the major aim within these limitations should be to try to reproduce in English the poetry of the greatest of French tragedians, and, in particular, as I expressed it in my earlier Foreword, his 'subtle, taut and exquisite verse'.

These various considerations represent in fact the different facets of a single thesis. In other words, if a version of, say, *Phaedra* does not convey at least something of the play's grandeur, it is simply a bad translation. If, on the contrary, it does, there is surely every reason to prefer to let Racine speak for himself, rather than adapt the work, as Lowell has done in the case of *Phaedra*. To quote a review by John Weightman of that version, the work 'glints and sparkles in a manner quite foreign to the Racinian mode, as [the author] himself is the first to admit. . . . As English poetry, Mr Lowell's version is very successful indeed in many passages. Unfortunately, the success is Romantic, not neo-classical, so that it will leave the English reader as unacquainted with the flavour of Racine as before. . . . By following Racine more or less, Mr Lowell blurs the effects; he over-energizes the less important details and adds a lot more of his own, while under-energizing the great moments. The puzzle is: why should a poet of his ability want to remain tethered to Racine at all?' Why indeed?

If fidelity is to be preferred to recasting, then 'translation of

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Racine means transposition into the nearest corresponding English metre. [And, since the couplet] has never been a great success on the English stage . . . for the translator of Racine, there is no real alternative to blank verse'* or, to use the felicitous expression of another critic,† to unrhymed couplets. This effect is facilitated by the combination of 'the variety of the English metre with the speed and drive of Racine's alexandrines'.* Hence, the present translation 'does not sound like a minor Jacobean play or a contemporary writer's attempt at verse drama. . . . It is plainly a translation of Racine and draws its strength from the original.'

In the same spirit, I am convinced that, unless the translator is to some extent able to recreate Racine's poetry, his version can only serve as a literal crib. Whether, or how far, I have succeeded in my aim must be left to the informed reader to judge. But I am greatly encouraged by the authoritative verdict that 'so much of Racine comes through that it will never be possible again to describe him as "untranslatable"'.
Rome, 1970

JOHN CAIRNCROSS

* Review of this volume in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 26 December, 1963.

† Review of this volume in the *New Statesman* of 3 January, 1964.

JEAN RACINE

RACINE, quoting Aristotle, calls Euripides, whom he admired so much 'the most tragic of all poets'. And the words can be applied with equal felicity to Racine himself. Yet, by origin and upbringing, he seemed an unlikely candidate for the tragic muse.

He was born in 1639 at the small depressing township of La Ferté Milon, which, though only some sixty miles east of Paris, was regarded as buried in the depth of the provinces. He was orphaned at a tender age, and had to be brought up on charity. His relatives belonged to the Puritanical Catholic sect known as Jansenists, and for them, as for all strict churchmen in France of the time, the stage and all its works were of the devil. Nevertheless, it was to the Jansenists that Racine owed his initiation to literature. The Little Schools of Port Royal (the famous abbey which was the spiritual centre of the sect) provided an education famous for its soundness and thoroughness. In particular, it included an excellent grounding in Greek – a most unusual practice at the time. After he left these masters in 1653, Racine spent two years at the college of Beauvais, which was entirely under Jansenist influence.

But Racine was not long in reacting against his austere mentors. By 1660, his vocation for the theatre revealed itself, and he was hard at work on a play (of which nothing is known but the title). The following year he was hobnobbing in Paris with the notorious freethinker and Epicurean La Fontaine (who was later to compose his celebrated *Fables*). The young man in his own words was 'running with the wolves'.

Port Royal not only gave Racine the schooling that he was to turn to account in his plays; it also introduced him to the aristocratic circles that were to give him his entrée to the Court of the young Louis XIV. The duc de Luynes, formerly a Jansenist sympathizer, had appointed to his service a cousin of Racine's who had risen to the dignity of chief steward.

But de Luynes, for personal reasons, turned his back on the Jansenists, who were never popular at Court, and rallied to Louis' support. The Duke, soon smiled on by the King, smoothed the path of the ambitious and gifted young poet. How well he profited from the opportunity may be seen from the select list of names of the patrons to whom he dedicated his plays. *The Thebaid*, his first work (1664), bears the name of the duc de Saint Aignan (the organizer of Louis' colourful Court fêtes). The Duke is followed by the King himself, Henrietta of England (the King's sister-in-law), the duc de Chevreuse (the duc de Luynes' son), and lastly the great Colbert, who was the main instrument of Louis' policy and was in effect the Minister for Culture. Gratifications, honours, and applause all came Racine's way in a steady stream. But this success was due at least as much to his ability and tact as a courtier as to his literary genius. By 1677, he had ten plays to his credit (see list on p. 29) and was basking in the King's favour. He had achieved the rare feat of winning the approval of the general public and the esteem of the Court and learned circles.

It was at this point that Racine was reconciled with religion and abandoned the theatre. The information on the reasons for the change is scanty and controversial (see Introduction to *Phaedra*), for the poet's sons took good care to destroy any material that might present their father in an unedifying light. In particular, practically the whole of Racine's correspondence for the period from *The Thebaid* to *Phaedra* (1664 to 1677) has gone astray. There is a hint in a contemporary ditty that he was supplanted in his mistress's affections just before his conversion. But we know almost nothing of the poet's feelings at that time. The guilt-laden atmosphere and terrible sensuality of *Phaedra*, however, point to a crisis. It is not impossible that his disappointment in love is linked with the return of his religious convictions.

Outwardly, Racine's 'conversion' differed little from what would now be termed 'settling down', and in no way implied a flight from the world; it was in line with the general trend towards sobriety and orthodoxy observable at Court. Racine

JEAN RACINE

abjured the stage and actresses. He made a marriage in which, according to his son Louis, 'love had no part', but which brought him considerable material advantages. In the same year, thanks to the support of the sister of Madame de Maintenon (the King's mistress), he was appointed, jointly with Boileau, to the coveted post of royal historiographer. This honour marked a substantial move up the social ladder, and made the commoner Racine the envy of many an aristocrat.

After a silence of twelve years, at the request of Madame de Maintenon, he composed *Esther* (1689) for the young ladies of a boarding school run by her at Saint Cyr. The play was a tremendous success, and he was encouraged to write another work on the Old Testament subject of *Athaliah* (1691). Ironically, the play was attacked by those bigots who would not tolerate the stage in any form whatever. And Racine, discouraged, let his pen drop for good, except for a few minor works. In 1699 he died, high in the royal favour and deep in piety.

Racine was a writer of the *avant-garde*. His plays are of a ruthlessness, an extremism, an amorality, which, in his own day, shocked the conservatives, mystified the average theatre-goers, and appealed to the radicals. Louis XIV, in particular, was an enthusiastic admirer. If Racine carried the day against the entrenched opposition of the supporters of his great rival, Corneille (then, it is true, long past his prime), his success was in large measure due to the firm backing of the King. The link between the two men was by no means accidental. Louis and Racine, each in different ways, made a sharp break with the hitherto prevailing ethos of the feudal aristocracy that may conveniently be referred to as baroque.* On assuming personal charge of affairs in 1661 (three years before the performance of Racine's first play), Louis set out to bring the nobility, and indeed all the other privileged and unproductive sections of the nation, under the control of a strong central administration. The emphasis was laid on the expansion of

* For an explanation of this term see Note on p. 28.

trade and industry, by state intervention if need be; and religious intolerance was not allowed to stand in the way of the achievement of these aims.

Before the young King took over, the nobility had dominated France, and their outlook had shaped French literature. For the baroque writers, the king was merely the first of the feudal lords. He was their equal, not their ruler. Any attempt to exercise the supreme power was regarded as tyranny, and was usually represented as being directed to base or selfish ends.

Racine's plays, on the contrary, reflect the attitude to statecraft visible in Louis' radical new policies. The dramatist shows his kings as usually all-powerful, and surrounds them with an aura of majesty. A monarch is great and respected only if he rules firmly and effectively. If Athaliah, the Old Testament queen, can boast that her reign has been glorious, it is because she:

... fell upon her startled enemies,
And never let the crucial moment pass. (873-4)

Decisiveness and ruthlessness, rather than generosity, are prerequisites of stable rule. The interests of the state, which are broadly equated with those of the throne, must take absolute precedence over the rights or interests of the individual. The origin of this attitude is clear. It derives straight from Machiavelli, the great Florentine thinker of the Renaissance, who was, generally speaking, the delight of the freethinkers and anathema to the Church. For him, as for Racine, statecraft was a science, not a moral philosophy, and its laws could be defied only at the risk of downfall or death. This is the theory preached by such 'realists' as Acomat, the Grand Vizier in *Bajazet*, or Ulysses in *Iphigenia*. The former reminds Bajazet that the Turkish sultans regarded

The interest of the state [as] their only law
while the latter,

... jealous of the honour of our [i.e. Greek] arms,