SIX PLAYS BY CORNEILLE and RACINE

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

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SIX PLAYS BY CORNEILLE AND RACINE

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INTRODUCTION

Nothing in the literature of modern Europe speaks with a stranger language to Anglo-Saxon ears, or has more difficulty being heard than the French classic tragedy of Corneille and Racine. Nothing more forcibly represents the abysmal gulf which even in the modern world may exist between the habits of thought of two civilized peoples than the attitude of the French towards Shakespeare and that of English speaking peoples towards these corresponding dramatists of France. Although little by little both peoples have come to recognize the merit of the other's premier poet, such recognition remains for the most part intellectual, and in general it is still true that to the French mind Shakespeare is "a barbarian of genius," and to those brought up on English literature Racine is almost the opposite, a cultivated mediocrity.

We who are accustomed to the rich variety of Shakespeare, who thrill with unnamable emotions at the imaginative incoherence of Lear, who delight to laugh and shudder at once at the heartless humor of the grave-diggers, are likely to remain unmoved by the meticulously worded passion of Phædra, and our admiration for even the most violent of Corneille's tirades expresses itself in regret that he would not permit himself the freedom of our own Elizabethans. We have learned from our master the mad beauty of words flung out in artless frenzy, and tragedy for us is a grand symphony in which the lines are often a burning obbligato to an accompaniment of thunder and lightning and the wind on the heath. Even Hamlet, the most intellectual of our tragic heroes, would be

less moving for us without the grisly horse-play and the moonless battlements of Elsinore.

All this somber orchestration of life and nature is lacking in French classic tragedy. Even when the characters are glamorous with the luster shed by Homer, we are discouraged at the start by the frigid announcement: "The scene is at Buthrotum, a city of Epirus, in a room in the palace of Pyrrhus." As we read on we discover that the action is as little startling as the setting. Nothing really happens in this room; only endless talk, some impassioned duologues and soliloquies, and more long analytical confessions to characterless confidants. Clearly we are not meant to get from these plays the same sort of thrill which we derive from Shakespeare.

Nevertheless, there is about these decorous tragedies a peculiar and matchless beauty, if one develops the ability to see it. As with all drama, the first necessity for appreciation is a recognition of the conventions of the theater for which the plays were written. The French theater of the seventeenth century accepted on what it thought was the authority of Aristotle the three unities of time, place, and action. As was the case in fifth century Athens, these conventions were in a measure supported by the physical limitations of the theaters; but with the French by far the most potent force in maintaining the unities was the example of Greek and Latin drama and the criticism of Aristotle. Corneille deliberately accepted the principle that the action of the play must take place in a single day, that it must be carried on in one circumscribed locality, and that it must be concerned with a single situation. That he chafed under these limitations and that he was not always able entirely to adjust his matter to their requirements is evident from his plays. Both *The Cid* and *Cinna* require more than one room to accommodate the action, and *The Cid,* in order to maintain the unity of time, relates the events of

what is probably the most crowded day in all recorded time. In those twenty-four hours Roderick declares his love, fights his first duel, kills his sweetheart's father, repels in a tremendous battle a national invasion, wins a trial by combat, and in the course of all this loses and regains the favor of his king and the lady of his heart. Here, if anywhere in drama, it is necessary to accept Mr. Belloc's principle that if a thing is true you must accept it no matter how incredible it may seem. Once the conventions of the unities have been accepted, these difficulties disappear, and especially in the hands of Racine, these very restrictions become the instruments of power.

No literary artifice can long persist in so popular an art as the drama unless it possesses some deep and fundamental virtue, and this, in the case of the unities, is the aid they give to dramatic concentration. After all it is the moment, not the story, that is dramatic, and the drama of Corneille and Racine concentrates on the moment. In a sense these plays do not really tell a story at all. Whereas Shakespeare traced the degradation of Macbeth from the first timid, conscience-stricken yielding to ambition to the utterly heartless courage with which he met his death, Racine in *Britannicus,* also a study in degradation, concerns himself only with the culminating moment at which Nero by his first assassination became a tyrant. It is as if Macbeth ended with the murder of Duncan. We are not shown the birth and growth of Phædra's guilty passion for Hippolytus, but only the maddening day when Theseus' return brought all their tangled lives to ruin. There can be no doubt that the latter method is better adapted to the brief time of a stage presentation, and that the former is more the method of the novel.

In action so concentrated as this, what happens is of less importance than the mental reactions of the characters. In fact the action is practically confined to the mind. Once this is

realized, it becomes clear that the "room in the palace of Pyrrhus," is simply a place where tortured souls display their strength and agony. Any room would have done as well, and the very poverty of the scene helps to concentrate the attention upon the psychological analysis. This is not really Epirus, but anywhere; these are not Homeric Greeks, but man and woman. Paradoxically, this narrowing of the scene and action gives to the characters a universality difficult to attain in the more varied panoramas of romantic plays. It may seem at first that there is no life here; but presently we come to realize that in thinking so we are mistaking movement for life, and that here is life stripped of all its trappings, life and nothing else. Abbé Dimnet relates that a great French teacher once asked a pupil whose dramas he preferred, Racine's or Hugo's. "Hugo's," answered the boy, "there is more life in them." Half to himself the teacher murmured: "More bustle." It is a confusion which our present-day civilization renders more and more prevalent.

Actually the classic tragedies move from first to last with a feverish intensity. It is only at the moment when passion has been heated to incandescence that we see it, and in these plays we see it rather than feel it. In the last analysis they were written to be witnessed, not read. This, of course, is true of all real drama, but of French classic tragedy it is more true than of most, that the reader who comes nearest to appreciating them is the one who reads as an actor. In one way or another these plays must be acted to be enjoyed.

The two dramatists whose works are here chosen to represent French classic tragedy were almost contemporaries. Corneille (1606-1684) belonged to the first generation of the seventeenth century, and Racine (1639-1699) to the second; and Corneille's reputation was established before Racine began to write. *The Cid* was written in 1636, and *Cinna* in

1640. *Andromache* was first produced in 1667, *Britannicus* in 1669, and *Phædra* in 1677. The greater part of their lives overlapped, and the rivalry between them was often intense and generally disastrous to the elder poet. Corneille set the fashion, and *The Cid* has been called "perhaps the most epoch-making play in all literature." With what difficulty he forced his material almost to conform to the unities has been pointed out. *Cinna* is much more successful in this respect, but even here there are difficulties. Racine took the form established by Corneille and made of these unities, next to his verse, his greatest instrument of power.

It is not necessary here to judge between them. Racine is generally esteemed the greater, and, all things considered, the judgment must stand. His plays are more closely knit; his verse, at its best incomparable, never descends to the banalities of which Corneille is sometimes guilty; and above all, his characters present their emotional states, whereas those of Corneille often ask you to take their feelings for granted and talk about them rather than display them. But Corneille, too, has his virtues. Nothing in Racine is finer structurally than the dexterity with which Corneille in *Cinna* first throws the sympathy to Cinna, then to Augustus, and finally extracts and unites the virutes of both. And it would be hard to find anywhere a more powerful exposition of the confusion of good and evil, strength and weakness, egotism and humility, that can exist in the heart of a noble man than Augustus' great soliloquy.

Finally, what is often attacked as Corneille's greatest weakness becomes for some of us, once it is appreciated, his noblest virtue. "Admiration," say his detractors, "is not a tragic passion." Aristotle, it must be admitted, bears them out; but to us it matters very little whether *The Cid* and *Cinna* are proper tragedies or not. Admiration is at least a noble and unselfish

passion, and one, unfortunately, rather out of fashion in the world in which we live. It has its roots in a conception of man as a being capable of nobility, and that is an idea that the race cannot afford to lose.

The passion-swept heroines of Racine plumb the depths of the human spirit, and under their spell, in the words of Mr. Strachey, "we plunge shuddering through infinite abysses, and look, if only for a moment, upon eternal light." That is true tragedy, and it must be admitted that Corneille does not move in that sphere. But we of the Freudian era who have been nourished on psychoanalysis, though we have had precious few glimpses of eternal light, have become used to plunging into abysses. For us, sturdy old Corneille has a more salutary message than his more poetically gifted rival. We may be bored sometimes by his stiffness, and we may agree with Voltaire that Roderick offers Chimene his head much too often for dramatic effect, but we cannot read with understanding without a thrill of pride at man's capacity for self-mastery. Here is a world in which personal honor is not a chemical reaction of gland secretions, but a self-instituted, self-administered rule of life. Here is a world which believes that man is master of himself and responsible for good and evil in his own conduct; a world in which nothing—not even life and love—is so precious as one's honor as a man. It is an old-fashioned, classical world, to be sure, but the knowledge that destroys it may be bought at too high a price.

PAUL LANDIS.

Urbana, Illinois
1931

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THE CID

by

PIERRE CORNEILLE

CHARACTERS

DON FERDINAND ..... *First King of Castile*
DONNA URRAQUE ..... *Infanta of Castile*
DON DIEGUE ..... *Father of Roderick*
DON GOMEZ ..... *Count of Gormaz, father of Chimene*
DON RODERICK ..... *Lover of Chimene*
DON SANCHO ..... *in love with Chimene*
DON ARIAS, DON ALONZO } *Castilian Gentlemen*
CHIMENE ..... *Daughter of Don Gomez*
LEONORA ..... *Maid to the Infanta*
ELVIRE ..... *Maid to Chimene*
A PAGE TO THE INFANTA

The scene is in Seville.

ACT I

SCENE I

(*Enter Chimene and Elvire*)

Chimene. Is this the truth, Elvire? Have you disguised
Or held back anything my father said?

Elvire. My heart still thrills with thinking of his words;
He honors Roderick as you adore him,
And if I read your father's heart aright
He will command you to return his love.

Chimene. Tell me again, I pray, a second time,
Why you believe he will approve my choice;
Teach me anew the hope that I may cherish—
So sweet a tale is never heard too much.
Nor can you pledge too often to our loves
Freedom to come from hiding into day.
What did he say about the secret plot
Which Roderick and Sancho made with you?
Did you not make too clear what difference
Between these lovers draws me all to one?

Elvire. Not I! I made of yours a pliant heart,
Not kindling hope nor quenching it in either,
Not viewing either with too stern an eye,
Nor yet too gentle, waiting to obey
Your father's wishes when you take a husband.
That caught his heart; his lips, his whole expression
Gave quick and eloquent assurance of it.
But since you wish that I repeat his words

Over and over for you—thus he spoke:
"She shows her duty; both are worthy men,
Both sprung of noble blood, both brave and faithful,
Youths in whose eyes one easily may read
The shining virtues of their ancestors.
Roderick especially bears upon his face
No features but bespeak a man of courage,
Sprung of a house so rich in warriors,
Born every one in the very lap of glory.
His father's valor and the matchless age
To which his strength endures are marvelous;
The lines his deeds have graven on his brow
Speak still of that which formerly he was.
I hope for such a son as was his father,
And loving him, my daughter gives me joy."
The council-chamber called him then; he left
Breaking his speech off when he'd scarce begun.
And yet from these few words I think he holds
His favor balanced between both your lovers.
The king would choose a tutor for his son,
And this high post will fall upon your father.
His choice is certain, and his noble spirit
Cannot admit the fear of rivalry.
His deeds have marked him peerless, he will have
No rival for a post so well deserved.
Don Roderick has gained his father's word,
Straight on adjournment to propose the matter.
I let you judge if all will not be well,
And all your hopes rest presently fulfilled.

Chimene. It seems my troubled heart is still unapt
For happiness, heavy with doubting still.
Such alteration may one moment bring
That in great joy I fear a greater sorrow.

Elvire. You'll see your fears dissolve in happiness.
Chimene. Well, come what may, we will await the issue.

Scene II. *Infanta and Leonora, Page*

Infanta. Go quickly, page, and tell Chimene I think
She waits too long today to come to me,
And that my love complains of this delay.
Leonora. Madam, each day you press the selfsame wish;
I see you thoughtful, sad; each time we meet
You ask the daily progress of her passion.
Infanta. Have I not reason? Her young heart is pierced
By shafts I leveled at her breast. Her lover,
Roderick, was my lover first; she holds
His love but by my gift. So I, who forged
These lasting lovers' chains, feel rightfully
Desire to see the end of all their pains.
Leonora. Madam, their dear delight in one another
Finds, as I read your heart, no echo there.
This love which crowns them both with happiness—
Does it oppress your noble head with sorrow?
And does the anxiety you feel for them
Render you sad at seeing them so happy?
But I am bold. I overstep discretion.
Infanta. My sorrow doubles while I hold it hidden!
Hear, hear at last how I have battled, hear
What trials my heart has still to undergo.
Love is a tyrant sparing none. This youth,
This gallant lover whom I give away—
I love him!
Leonora. You!
Infanta. Here, feel my beating heart,
See how it flutters at its conqueror's name,
How well it knows its master.

Leonora. Pardon, madam,
I would not fail in gentle courtesy,
Though I o'erstep respect to censure you.
A royal princess but forgets herself
To take a simple cavalier to heart.
What would the king say? What would all Castile?
Have you remembered who your father is?

Infanta. So well I know it that I would shed this blood
Rather than bring dishonor to my rank.
I might well say that in a noble soul
Merit alone should light the flame of love;
And if my passion sought to find excuse,
A thousand noble names would sanction it.
Yet would I not pursue where honor falls.
A heart surprised does not destroy my courage.
Always I am the daughter of a king
And none but kings are fit to mate with me.
When once I saw my heart fail of defense,
Myself rejected what I dared not take.
I drew the bonds of love about Chimene,
And lit their passions to extinguish mine.
Wonder no longer that my harassed soul
Awaits impatiently their wedding day.
You see how much my peace depends upon it.
Love lives on hope, and dies when hope is dead;
It is a flame which sinks for lack of fuel.
And spite of all the sorrows I have borne,
If Roderick once is wedded with Chimene,
My hope is dead, my wounded spirit healed.
Till then I suffer torture, until then
Roderick will still be dear to me.
I will to lose, yet lose regretfully.
That is the secret sorrow of my heart.