

BRITANNICUS

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Britannicus by Eugene Pellissier

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EUGENE PELLISSIER

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Tragédie

PAR

RACINE

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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presented to Molière, who was "directeur du théâtre du Palais-Royal," a tragedy founded on a Greek novel by Heliodorus, but Molière wisely advised him to burn the manuscript. Recognising, however, some signs of talent in this youthful performance, he suggested to him a more dramatic subject, helped him to develop the plot, and, as soon as the work was completed, had it represented by his own troupe. *La Thebaïde ou les Frères Ennemis* (1664), though nothing more than a weak imitation of Corneille, was received with some degree of favour, and Racine gave, in the following year, his second tragedy, *Alexandre le Grand*, which showed some progress in style, but none in dramatic conception. Though he piqued himself on having scrupulously followed history, his characters are most unreal, and love is made the chief spring of action, where it is wholly out of place. St. Evremond could justly say: "Je ne reconnais ici d'Alexandre que le nom seul; son génie, son humeur, ses qualités ne m'apparaissent en aucun endroit;" and Corneille need not be suspected of jealousy when, consulted by Racine, he told him that he had great talent for poetry, but none for tragedy, and advised him to give up writing for the stage. The play, praised by its admirers much beyond its real merit, was violently attacked by Racine's enemies, and his bitterness in defending it contributed not a little to envenom the quarrels in which his rising genius was soon to involve him.

The performance of *Alexandre* was the occasion of a rupture between the author and Molière, "which lasted always, although they did justice to one another's works." It was first acted by Molière's troupe, but Racine, dissatisfied with the actors, and forgetting what he owed to the manager, gave it, after a few nights, to the rival troupe of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. He showed as little gratitude to his former masters of Port-Royal, who, in their anxiety for his moral welfare, urged him in concert with his

family, to renounce writing for the stage. Wounded to the quick by some expressions of Nicole's, who, in his *Visionnaires*, had condemned the theatre with the austerity of a zealous Jansenist, and had gone so far as to say that "un faiseur de romans et un poète de théâtre est un empoisonneur public, non des corps, mais des âmes," he took up the cause of the dramatists with a vehemence and bitterness scarcely justifiable in any one, and sadly surprising in an old pupil of Port-Royal. Not content with having poured ridicule on the Jansenists in a sarcastic letter, "one of the best and most ingeniously written in the French language," he composed another, more cruel still, and was only dissuaded from publishing it by Boileau's remark that such a performance would do more honour to his wit than to his heart. It is only fair to add that he gave afterwards public proof of sincere repentance.

In 1667 he produced *Andromaque*. Here he is no longer the timid imitator of Corneille, but shows himself a master in his turn, and creates a new kind of tragedy by taking love instead of heroism for the mainspring of the action. The success was great, almost as great as that of *Le Cid*, and St. Evremond, faithful as he was to the end, like Mme. de Sévigné, to his old admiration for Corneille, could not help saying: "Andromaque a bien l'air des belles choses. Il ne s'en faut presque rien qu'il n'y ait du grand." The style, however, had not yet reached that high degree of perfection to which it soon rose. Several expressions were borrowed from the fashionable vocabulary of the time. The severe criticisms they provoked were not lost upon the author. He answered them, as usual, with biting epigrams, but also in a much better way, by acting upon them.

His marked inclination to raillery, which so often exposed his enemies, and even his friends, to ridicule, induced him, at the very moment of his first tragic

triumph, to abandon tragedy for comedy. *Les Plaideurs* (1668), freely imitated from the *Wasps* of Aristophanes, is a brilliant satire levelled at judges and lawyers.¹ If the plot is weak, if old Dandin is a caricature, if the dialogue, like Sheridan's, is too uniformly witty to be natural, some of the characters are traced with great skill, the pleasantry is always free from the coarseness so frequent at the time, and the style is not unworthy of Molière himself. Still, the public, surprised at the novelty of this play, showed so little appreciation of it that the actors, on the point of being hissed at the second representation, did not venture on a third. Encouraged, however, by Molière's remark that the comedy was excellent; and that those who laughed at it deserved to be laughed at, they performed it a month later at Court, and the King having given unmistakable signs of his keen enjoyment of it, they resumed the representations at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and this time obtained the decided approval of the spectators.

After this excursion into Molière's domain Racine returned to tragedy, and gave in 1669 *Britannicus* ["la pièce des connaisseurs," says Voltaire].

The amiable Princess Henrietta of England, sister-in-law of Louis XIV.,² in proposing both to Corneille and Racine the subject of *Bérénice* (1670), procured an easy victory to the latter. Corneille was no longer the Corneille of *Le Cid*

¹ The *Mémoires sur la vie de Jean Racine*, written by his son Louis, himself a poet of some talent, contain interesting details on the way in which this comedy was composed:—"Il faisait alors de fréquents repas chez un fameux traiteur où se rassemblaient Boileau, Chapelain, Furetière, et quelques autres. . . . Plusieurs traits des Plaideurs furent le fruit de ces repas: chacun s'empresait d'en fournir à l'autour. M. de Brillac, conseiller au Parlement de Paris, lui apprenait les termes de palais, Boileau lui fournit l'idée de la dispute entre Chicaneau et la comtesse. . . . Plusieurs autres traits avaient également rapport à des personnes alors très-connées. . . ."

² Her funeral oration is one of Bossuet's masterpieces.

and *Polyeucte*, and even when at the height of his genius it is more than doubtful whether he could have succeeded in investing such a situation with any dramatic interest. The story of the unhappy love of Titus and Berenice was much better suited to the tender poet, from whom the feminine heart seems to have had no secret, than to the manly painter of chivalric prowess and Roman stoicism. Racine, with all his art, could not himself draw a real tragedy from a subject so utterly devoid of action, but he wrote a charming idyl, and with the most wonderful talent managed to keep up the interest by a picture of love, the truthfulness and delicacy of which is only equalled by the harmony of the style.

Bajazet, which followed in 1672, offers a striking contrast to this tender elegy in the tragic terror of its *dénouement*. Forsaking antiquity, and reckoning on the remoteness of the scene and the mystery of the seraglio to make up for the want of that prestige which time usually gives to the heroes of tragedy, Racine boldly undertook to place upon the stage a contemporary subject. The weakness of the plot, the inaccuracy of the picture of Mussulman manners, the transformation of Bajazet into a lover of comedy, the carelessness of the style in a few passages, were warmly criticised by the enemies of the poet and by Corneille's friends, still smarting under his recent defeat. Mme. de Sévigné, in sending the play to her daughter, wrote to her: "Le personnage de Bajazet est glacé; les mœurs des Turcs y sont mal observées: ils ne font point tant de façons pour se marier; le dénouement n'est point bien préparé: on n'entre pas dans les raisons de cette grande tuerie. Il y a pourtant des choses agréables, mais rien de parfaitement beau, rien qui enlève, point de ces tirades de Corneille qui font frissonner. Ma fille, gardons-nous bien de lui comparer Racine! Racine fait des comédies pour la Champmeslé; ce n'est pas pour les siècles à venir. Si jamais il n'est

plus jeune et qu'il cesse d'être amoureux, ce ne sera plus la même chose. Vive donc notre vieil ami Corneille!" If *Bajazet* cannot be ranked with the masterpieces of its author, the traits of passion in which Roxane's part abounds, and the character of the Vizier Acomat, which Voltaire calls "l'effort de l'esprit humain," suffice to justify the public in their admiration of the play, which was received with enthusiasm in spite of all adverse criticisms.

Racine soon proved the injustice of the judgment passed upon him by Mme. de Sévigné by attacking Corneille upon his own ground, where he moved the secret springs of politics and depicted the heroic soul of a great man in a manner worthy of the hand

" Qui crayonna

L'âme du grand Pompée et l'esprit de Cinna."

The incomparable grace of *Monime*, the noble virtue of *Xipharès*, the fortitude of *Mithridates*, the admirable political scene in which he reveals to his sons his bold intention of carrying war into Italy, compelled envious critics to admiration and reduced them for a time to silence. Of all Racine's tragedies, *Mithridate* (1673) was the one which Louis XIV. preferred until the appearance of *Esther*, and Voltaire tells us that Charles XII., who doubtless saw an image of himself in the indomitable enemy of the Romans, made it his favourite reading.

After having thus rivalled Corneille, Racine, in his *Iphigénie en Aulide*, entered into competition with Euripides, but it must be confessed that, in spite of many striking beauties, he fell short of the touching simplicity and naturalness of the Greek poet. Acted first at Versailles (August 1674), in the midst of the fêtes given by Louis XIV. to celebrate the conquest of Franche-Comté, then at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, *Iphigénie* was nevertheless greeted with all but universal applause. Two obscure poets, Leclerc and Coras, tried to mar its success by hastily writing a second *Iphigénie*, destined to eclipse the first,