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The metamorphoses of innocence in Racine's *Esther*

'Un poème pieux'?¹ Jean Rohou's judgment reiterates what was a common reaction to Racine's *Esther* among those happy few privileged to attend one of the few private performances given in 1689 at the college of Saint-Cyr. 'On n'a rien fait dans ce genre de si édifiant', declared Arnauld, thus giving the Jansenist stamp of approval to an Old Testament drama specifically commissioned by Mme de Maintenon for performance by the adolescent girl pupils of her new school.² The view that *Esther* is a piece of religious poetry, rather than genuine tragic theatre, was amplified and given authority in the eighteenth century, by Voltaire and La Harpe who could not be suspected of any animosity to Racine. It is not difficult to see why this view took hold. The particular circumstances of the commission, Racine's heavy reliance on a Biblical source, the limpid beauty of the poetry, the intervention of a chorus singing sacred texts, the constant invocations of innocence, and the speedy triumph of that innocence against oppression, might all seem to support the belief that *Esther* is, above all, a beautifully expressed manifestation of religious feeling, untroubled by ambiguity, complication, or genuine dramatic interest.

¹ Edition of Jean Racine, *Théâtre complet*. Paris: Poche, 1998, p. 1089.

² Quoted in Raymond Picard, *Nouveau Corpus Racinianum*. Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1976, pp. 240-41.

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The purpose of this article is to question this uncontroversial viewpoint. While accepting that there are reasons why notions of 'poetry' and 'innocence' have predominated, it will nonetheless suggest that each of these elements needs to be treated with caution. It will attempt to show that *Esther* is truly dramatic in nature, and that the 'innocence' it projects contains a degree of moral ambiguity, enough to call into question what has been called 'Racine's utopic attempt to make God and truth manifest on stage.'³

A poem? Despite its subtitle, 'tragédie tirée de l'Écriture sainte', *Esther* is described, in the royal *privilège* granted for its publication, as 'un ouvrage en poésie [...] propre à être récité et à être chanté'.⁴ This explains why a recent work has again suggested, cautiously, that '*Esther* n'est pas exactement une tragédie'.⁵ This is a sentiment to which Voltaire had given a more vigorous expression. Though few have put Racine on so high a pedestal, his admiration for *Esther* was for its immense poetic quality: 'trente vers d'*Esther* valent mieux que beaucoup de tragédies qui ont eu de grands succès.'⁶ His judgement of the work as drama was uncompromising: 'une aventure sans intérêt et sans vraisemblance. [...] tout cela, sans intrigue, sans action, sans intérêt, déplut beaucoup à quiconque avait du sens et du goût.'⁷ La Harpe followed the same line, with equal vigour. He maintained that, in a tragic drama, the emotions could be aroused only by the danger attendant on individual characters, not by the imminent prospect of massacre awaiting the Jewish people. Like Voltaire, he held the poetry of *Esther* to be of the very highest quality, but judged that the work could never engage the emotions of a real audience, since it had no

3 Barbara Woshinsky, 'Esther: no continuing place', in Richard-Laurent Barnett, *Re-lectures, raciniennes. Nouvelles approches du discours tragique*. (Tübingen: Narr, 1986), pp. 253-68 (255).

4 J. Racine, *Œuvres*, ed. Paul Mesnard. 8 vols (Paris: Hachette, 1865-73), III, 402.

5 Julia Gros de Gasquet, Marie-Alix Le Loup, Bénédicte Louvat-Molozay, Dominique Moncond'huy, *Esther et Athalie de Racine*. Paris: Atlande, 2004, p. 58.

6 *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, in *Œuvres historiques*, ed. René Pomeau (Paris, Gallimard, 1957), p. 942.

7 *Ibid*, p. 941

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plot to speak of: 'Les défauts du plan d'*Esther* sont connus et avoués: le plus grand de tous est le manque d'intérêt. Il ne peut y en avoir d'aucune espèce.'⁸ Over the centuries these arguments have carried conviction, and are reflected in modern-day critical judgments, such as that delivered by Jean Rohou: 'c'est la moitié du texte qui relève du lyrisme religieux. [...] L'intrigue est toute simple. [...] une telle intrigue ne fait aucun appel à des élaborations psychiques complexes.'⁹

With its long prologue praising Louis XIV, and the three short acts filled with quotations from the Bible, *Esther* is manifestly quite different from Racine's previous tragedies. Not that the *devote* Mme de Maintenon wished anything that might resemble such worldly and dangerous works. Indeed, despite a widely-accepted legend, it does seem highly improbable, as Georges Forestier points out, that she could previously have organized the performance of a play such as *Andromaque*, with its display of violent, passionate conflict exhibited on stage, by schoolgirls she wished to keep from worldly snares, and *a fortiori* those of the theatre.¹⁰ In his Preface, Racine certainly claims that he has written a work of religion with no link to his previous existence as a practising dramatist. He expresses pleasure that 'on se peut aussi bien divertir aux choses de piété qu'à tous les spectacles profanes'.¹¹ For what he had been asked for was not a new tragedy:

On ne lui demande pas une nouvelle pièce de théâtre, mais un texte qui puisse être dit par des jeunes filles, qui contribue à leur instruction, voire à leur édification, et qui participe d'une entreprise impliquant qui plus est chant et musique.'¹²

8 La Harpe, *Cours de Littérature*, 14 vols (Paris: Depelafol, 1825), p. 5.

9 Rohou, edition of Racine, pp. 1091-92.

10 See Georges Forestier, *Jean Racine*. Paris: Gallimard, 2006, p. 689, dismissing this idea, originating in the Memoirs of Mme de Caylus, and thus showing scepticism about a story accepted elsewhere, as in Gros de Gasquet, p. 40, and indeed in his own edition of Jean Racine, *Théâtre, Poésie*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 1677. References to Racine's works will be taken from this edition, with line-numbers in parenthesis following the reference.

11 Forestier, edition of Racine, p. 946.

12 Gros de Gasquet, p. 13.

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As though to stress this point from the outset, the figure of Piety, who recites the Prologue, makes the distinction between the 'folles passions' aroused by the theatre on which Racine had turned his back, and the wholesome 'plaisirs' to be given in a work whose aim is to represent religious truth:

Et vous, qui vous plaisez aux folles passions,
Qu'allument dans vos cœurs les vaines fictions,
Profanes amateurs de Spectacles frivoles,
Dont l'oreille s'ennuie au son de mes paroles,
Fuyez de mes plaisirs la sainte austérité.
Tout respire ici Dieu, la paix, la vérité. (65-70)

It is undeniable this intention to put purity and austerity on display is at an uttermost remove from the exhibition of violent and forbidden passion that smoulders in Racine's adieu to worldly theatre, in 1677:

Chaque mot sur mon front fait dresser mes cheveux.
Mes crimes désormais ont comblé la mesure.
Je respire à la fois l'inceste et l'imposture.
Mes homicides mains, promptes à me venger
Dans le sang innocent brûlent de se plonger. (*Phèdre*, 1268-72)

In *Phèdre* this dark, consuming fire is at the very heart of the tragic conflict on which the dramatic action is based. No such combustion takes place in *Esther*: 'Une tragédie qui se veut *pieuse* n'est pas un voyage au bout de la nuit chargé d'interrogations, d'incertitudes et de vertiges.'¹³ Indeed, one important reason for seeking to deny the work any dramatic quality is its continual emphasis on the uncomplicated innocence of a child's vision of the world. 'Tout y est simple, tout y est innocent', was Mme de Sévigné's reaction when she saw one of the few performances allowed.¹⁴

13 Jean Emelina, 'D'*Esther* à *Athalie*, théâtre et religion, profane et sacré', in Gabriel Conesa and Franck Neveu, *L'agrégation de lettres modernes 2004* (Paris, A. Colin, 2003), pp. 189-229 (195).

14 Mme de Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. Roger Duchêne, 3 vols, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1972-78), III, 508.

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This concept of *innocence* brings us to the heart of the matter. As its etymology makes clear, the word can connote innocuousness, 'qualité de celui qui ne nuit à personne'.¹⁵ In this sense *Esther* is presented as a harmless entertainment, 'jeux innocents' (62). However, the terms *innocence* and *innocent*, which occur 22 times in the play, have commonly a more theological sense, one appropriate to young children: 'Pureté de l'âme qui n'est point souillée de pechez'.¹⁶ In the Prologue, it is with this connotation of *innocence* that the figure of Piety associates Saint-Cyr, as though to banish outside its walls any association with the sinful theatre:

Je descends dans ce lieu, par la Grâce habité.
L'Innocence s'y plaît, ma compagne éternelle. (2-3)

Racine gave some emphasis to this association. Whereas in the Prefaces to his other tragedies he does not mention his actors, in the Preface to *Esther* he stresses that the play was performed with great modesty and piety. The same idea emerges strongly when the chorus of young maidens first makes its appearance, after the opening scene. These performers are so far from being actresses that the words they speak rise up like fragrant prayers:

Ciel! quel nombreux essaim d'innocentes beautés
S'offre à mes yeux en foule, et sort de tous côtés!
Quelle aimable pudeur sur leur visage est peinte!
Prosperiez, cher espoir d'une Nation sainte.
Puissent jusques au Ciel vos soupirs innocents
Monter comme l'odeur d'un agréable encens! (122-28)

Unsurprisingly, therefore, their agenda is most wholesome:

Ne cherchons la félicité,
Que dans la paix de l'innocence. (800-1)

This movement reaches its apotheosis in the final scene of the play, when the chorus announces that 'Dieu fait triompher l'Innocence'

15 Jean Dubois, René Lagane, Alain Lerond, *Dictionnaire du français classique: le XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Larousse, 1992).

16 Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (The Hague and Rotterdam, 1690).

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(1200). Jean Rohou has pointed to the uncomplicated nature of the conflict that is enacted, with good against evil, pure against impure.¹⁷ With such an apparently black-and-white moral canvas, and with so much easily triumphant innocence on display, there seems little room for the dramatic, ethical, and philosophical conflicts and ambiguities that constitute the plot, and do so much to enrich the dramatic action, of Racine's previous tragedies.

Yet, curiously enough, Racine called *Esther* a tragedy. And it was not recited or merely chanted by a group of singers: it was performed. Indeed, as Paul Mesnard points out, if the work had lacked dramatic interest, it would have appeared cold from its first performance, yet the opposite was true: Mme de Sévigné called it 'sublime et touchant'.¹⁸ Voltaire's opinion was countered by that of Chamfort:

Toutes les parties de la tragédie y sont parfaitement observées. Rien n'est plus grand que le sujet, puisqu'il s'agit du sort de toute une nation. Les développements de l'action y sont d'autant plus admirables, que presque toutes les scènes sont des chefs-d'œuvre, et la péripétie est une des plus belles qu'il y ait au théâtre.¹⁹

While it is true that in his Preface Racine shows due respect for Holy Scripture, he nonetheless calls his work an *action*, and draws attention to his observation of the Unity of place. All the unities are in fact observed, unlike in the biblical source. Racine even indicates that his chosen 'sujet de piété et de morale' demands a dramatic action 'qui rendît la chose plus vive et moins capable d'ennuyer'. That action is conducted with that sense of urgency that he instills in other tragedies, for the same properly dramatic reasons:

Il faut les secourir. Mais les heures sont chères.
Le temps vole, et bientôt amènera le jour

17 Rohou, edition of Racine, p. 1101.

18 Mesnard edition of Racine. III, 434, and Mme de Sévigné, III, 508.

19 Chamfort, *Œuvres*, 5 vols (Paris: Chaumerot, 1825), V, 81. See also Jean Dubu, *Esther: Bible et poésie dramatique*, *French Review*, 64 (1991), 607-20 (608): 'En Racine, c'est le dramaturge qui a pu être intéressé [...] par ce *renversement du sort* qu'en auteur tragique consommé, il sait être la *péripétie* de la pièce.'

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Où le nom des Hébreux doit périr sans retour. (186-88)

In other words, Racine's work, at least in ambition, is more than just a piece of pious verse. The characters, too, are of a stature proper to tragedy, as is the conflict that drives the dramatic action, on whose resolution hangs the survival of a nation, and of the messianic promise, a theme to which *Athalie* would later return. In addition, Racine manages to integrate the chorus into that action, thus creating a work that, though markedly different in form from the previous tragedies, maintains a properly tragic and dramatic dimension:

Ainsi, sans le vouloir, Mme de Maintenon avait offert à Racine l'occasion d'inventer ce qui a pu lui paraître la forme idéale de tragédie, une tragédie où alterneraient harmonieusement le dramatique et le lyrique, les émotions propres au tragique et l'émotion due aux cantiques, le déclamé et le chanté, l'alexandrin régulier et le vers alterné, bref une forme supérieure d'émotion théâtrale.²⁰

Nor is the play made any less dramatic by the biblical material used by the playwright. True, the work does lean heavily on the book of Esther: in the circumstances, it could do no other. This fact, however, simply begs the question as to whether Racine's use of his biblical source is fundamentally different from his use of situations, characters, themes, and even lines of poetry in the writers of Greco-Roman antiquity.²¹ For in *Esther*, essentially, Racine proceeds in the same way as in his previous tragedies: the needs of the dramatic action are paramount. One example is the greatly expanded role of Mardoché. The Moredcai of the book of Esther is a loyal courtier who encourages his god-daughter Esther to plead with the king for the Jewish people, and who in turn receives her instructions (Esther 4: 17). Racine creates an altogether more substantial figure, to the extent of changing the biblical story of Esther being chosen at random to her being brought to the king's notice by Mardoché.²² In this the

20 Forestier, edition of Racine, p. 1690.

21 H. T. Barnwell, review of Gabriel Spillebout, *Le vocabulaire biblique dans les tragédies sacrées de Racine* (Geneva: Droz, 1968), in *French Studies*, 25 (1971), 198-99 (199).

22 On this, see R. J. Howells, 'Racine's *Esther*: Reintegration and Ritual', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 20 (1984), 97-105 (101).

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character foreshadows the prophetic High Priest Joad in *Athalie*, who organizes every element of resistance to the oppressor. Like the Acomat of *Bajazet*, who is able to enter the harem, Mardochée also can enter the queen's private apartments: in both plays the needs of the dramatic action are given priority over simple historical plausibility.

Another example of the primacy of dramatic necessity over fidelity to the biblical source is the most famous scene in the play, in which Esther is obliged to come into the king's presence without his prior consent, a capital offence. In the Book of Esther, the encounter is unproblematic for the king: 'When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold sceptre that was in his hand' (Esther 5: 2). Racine's play, by contrast, stresses the peril in which Esther has placed herself by daring to enter the royal presence without the king having sought to see her:

Sans mon ordre on porte ici ses pas?
Quel Mortel insolent vient chercher le trépas?
Gardes. C'est vous, Esther? Quoi sans être attendue? (631-33)

Even here the suspense is maintained, since Esther does not explain what she wants until the fourth scene of the next act, when her Jewish identity, and the treacherous designs of Aman, can simultaneously be revealed. The dramatic tension is nourished by her palpable fear ('Je me meurs', 635), the anxiety that this postponement of revelation has aroused in the king (699), and by the confidence expressed hubristically by Aman that the Jewish people will be eliminated (930). The climatic moment of this mounting curve of fear and uncertainty comes in the following act. Esther's spectacular revelation, that she comes from the same 'source impure' that Assuérus has decided to destroy, raises the perilous possibility that this mighty king of kings might feel cheated and tricked: 'Vous la fille d'un Juif?' (1037-39). The fact that there is some truth in this suspicion obliges Esther to make a long speech in her defence, as a matter of life and death for herself and for her people. This whole movement has dramatic power, and an undeniably tragic dimension. The biblical source, indeed, is so

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far from stifling the drama that Racine was able to find here an unimpeachably Aristotelian reversal and recognition:

La matière [...] comportait même une exceptionnelle “dramaticité”: non seulement par son retournement terminal qui a tous les caractères de la péripétie aristotélicienne (l’action se dénoue par une inversion de ce qui était attendu, et, grâce à une révélation d’identité) [...] mais aussi par l’étonnante suspension de jugement d’Assuérus.²³

In other words, *Esther* is not a piece of beautiful verse, but a genuine dramatic action whose impact is intensified by the beauty of the verse. No amount of biblical commentary, nor its origin as a pious commission, can hide the fact that it is, first and foremost, a work of the imagination created to please an audience in ways that are in evidence in Racine’s other plays.

It is the very dramatic qualities of *Esther* that, in turn, prompt the first questions to be asked about its apparent ‘innocence’, and the simple piety its verse may appear to radiate. A tragic drama is not a simple statement or message, something that can be read out as though from some authorial pulpit. It is a more dynamic and interpersonal mode, allowing audiences and readers to live out the representation of a conflict in the anguish of the present. That representation necessarily carries with it a degree of openness to differences of interpretation and performance, and thus to those qualities that, as I have sought to show elsewhere, may be found in abundance in other tragedies by Racine: ‘difference, difficulty, uncertainty, irresolution, incompleteness’.²⁴ If it be accepted that *Esther* has the characteristics of a tragic drama, why would it be fundamentally different from those that preceded it? Is it possible for such a complex medium to transmit a message of uncomplicated innocence?

These questions are self-evidently rhetorical. For at the very outset, any idea of ‘innocence’ was complicated by the context in which the first performances of *Esther* were held. Between the professed piety of intention and the reality of dramatic performance,

23 Forestier, edition of Racine, p. 1686.

24 John Campbell, *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 247

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there was an immediate hiatus. For a start, it was impossible completely to remove all idea of pleasure even from this apparently innocuous kind of drama, especially during carnival time: 'l'usage ayant autorisé les plaisirs dans cette saison, on n'en peut refuser à la jeunesse.'²⁵ Secondly, when Louis XIV himself became heavily involved in the enterprise, its whole character changed. What had been destined, at least supposedly, as a private, in-house affair became a Court entertainment that only the most favoured could attend:

On en avait fait deux représentations en particulier devant le Roi à Versailles, à quoi il prit tant de plaisir que Mme de Maintenon jugea que sa majesté ne s'empêcherait pas d'y mener toute la Cour [...]. M. Bérain, directeur des spectacles de la Cour, en prit le soin.²⁶

Thereafter, whatever Mme de Maintenon's intentions may have been, very little modesty attended the fitting-out of the theatre, and indeed of the young performers, as Manseau notes: 'Mme de Maintenon fit faire des habits magnifiques à toutes les actrices, et un théâtre avec trois decorations convenables au sujet et au lieu, ce qui lui coûta plus de quinze mille livres.'²⁷ Racine in his Preface thus remarks that 'un divertissement d'Enfants est devenu le sujet de l'empressement de toute la Cour'. In every sense of the word, it was a show.

It is true that it was no ordinary show. Racine, understandably, omitted to add that this rush for admittance had something to do with courtiers' attempts to ingratiate themselves with the royal couple. More disingenuously, perhaps, he also maintained that the play's success proved that 'on se peut aussi bien divertir aux choses de piété qu'à tous les spectacles profanes'. And it is true that Esther does come on stage speaking words of submission, modesty, and humility. The role, indeed, calls for special qualities: 'Tout respire en Esther l'innocence et la paix.' (672). This is not a Phèdre or a Hermione breathing the dark fire of passion:

Aux pieds de l'Éternel je viens m'humilier,
Et goûter le plaisir de me faire oublier.' (109-10).

25 Donneau de Visé, *Mercurie galant*, January 1689, in Picard, p. 230.

26 Donneau de Visé, in Picard, p. 231.

27 Manseau, *Mémoires*, in Picard, p. 225.

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On the other hand, Esther's arrival at Court has not been quite so innocent. Mardochée had slipped her into the process by which the king procured women from all over the empire in order to select the very best:

De l'Inde à l'Hellespont ses Esclaves coururent.
Les Filles de l'Égypte à Suse comparurent.
Celles même du Parthe et du Scythe indompté
Y briguèrent le sceptre offert à la beauté. (39-43)

From this less than innocent beauty contest Esther emerges the winner. Though she attributes her success to divine intervention (72), and says that her own means of persuasion were her tears (63-64), there is also the fact that she was beautiful: 'De mes faibles attraits le Roi parut frappé' (70). As Richard Scholar points out, it is difficult to see only a supernatural, Augustinian dimension in the 'grâce' with which Esther charms and persuades Assuérus.²⁸

For the first performances at Saint-Cyr, this central and necessarily ambiguous role was given to the young but worldly Mme de Caylus, until it was realized that she was acting with the bravura of Racine's most famous actress:

On continue à représenter *Esther*. Mme de Caylus, qui en était la Champmeslé, ne joue plus. Elle faisait trop bien, elle était trop touchante. On ne veut que la simplicité toute pure de ces petites âmes innocentes.²⁹

This comment by Mme de Sévigné goes to the heart of the problem. How was it possible to foster unworldly sentiments in that most worldly of hothouse worlds, the public performance of a play? The young ladies themselves seem to have been fired by the enthusiasm that greeted them: 'ces jeunes personnes [...] entrent dans le sujet

28 Richard Scholar, 'Je ne sais quelle grâce': Esther before Assuérus', *French Studies*, 56 (2002), 317-27 (320). See Dubu p. 609: 'La beauté et le charme d'Esther sont des atouts, naturels ou acquis; il [= Mardochée] a su en jouer et il n'hésite pas à lui rappeler qu'elle doit savoir en jouer à son tour.'

29 Mme de Sévigné, III, 501.

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comme si elles n'avaient fait autre chose.'³⁰ From some clerical quarters there came the complaint that the male courtiers present were physically attracted to these unschooled but enthusiastic actresses.³¹ This latent sensual interplay explains why these performances left various prelates feeling great unease, despite the obvious piety of a text sourced directly from the Bible. Indeed, and paradoxically, it was for that very reason that the unease was all the greater, as the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* of 1689 makes clear: 'il n'y a aucun mélange de fiction poétique, mais la représentation n'en est pas moins dangereuse par tous ces endroits de mérite, d'autant plus qu'on y ira comme au sermon.'³²

In other words, Bible or no Bible, this was still perceived to be the theatre, with all its attendant dangers, for performers and audience alike. Pleasure, that lure of the devil, was still on the agenda. This was a point made energetically by Fr. Duguet: 'Les grandes assemblées sont toujours dangereuses. La curiosité n'est jamais une vertu, et ce plaisir des sens ne peut devenir spirituel, ni chrétien.'³³ Quite simply, audiences were enjoying themselves, as they would have at any good play, with, for some, additional spice provided by the open display of nubile young women, the 'nombreux essaim d'innocentes beautés' (122). Slightly late in the day, Mme de Maintenon saw the danger, and brought the performances to an end.³⁴ One outcome was that the next sacred work she commissioned from Racine, *Athalie*, had only two performances, and this time without costumes, scenery, music, or courtiers. The lesson had been learnt: no play, once it begins to be performed, can be entirely 'innocent', the more so if it is performed in the extraordinary conditions that pertained for *Esther*. It is difficult therefore completely to accept the distinction Racine makes in his

30 Ibid., III, 509.

31 On this, see Rohou edition of Racine., pp. 1103-5.

32 Picard, p. 237.

33 Ibid., p. 240.

34 See Forestier edition of Racine., p 1680: 'Mme de Maintenon, qui s'était déjà inquiétée l'année précédente du trouble apporté dans la jeune communauté par ces représentations et qui connaissait bien la condamnation farouche que portaient sur elles les plus rigoristes des ecclésiastiques, se résolut à y mettre un terme définitif.'

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Preface between the pious sentiments supposedly occasioned by his religious drama and the ‘folles passions’ excited by ordinary theatre. Indeed, it is just as difficult to believe that he had completely left that worldly, sinful theatre behind him when we remember that in 1687, just two years before *Esther*, he had prepared a new edition of his dramatic works, which this time included *Phèdre*.³⁵ Voltaire’s disciple La Harpe in no way shared the moral agenda of those who were wary of any representation of emotion on stage. And yet, in his description of the performance of *Esther* and the circumstances surrounding its production, he takes some pleasure in showing how, after all, these rigorous moralists had a point:

Qu’on se représente de jeunes personnes, des pensionnaires que leur âge, leur voix, leur figure, leur inexpérience même, rendaient intéressantes, exécutant dans un couvent une pièce tirée de l’Ecriture Sainte, récitant des vers pleins d’une onction religieuse, pleins de douceur et d’harmonie, qui semblaient rappeler leur propre histoire et celle de leur fondatrice; qui la peignaient des couleurs les plus touchantes, sous les yeux d’un monarque qui l’adorait, et d’une cour qui était à ses pieds; qui offraient à tous moments les allusions les plus piquantes à la flatterie ou à la malignité, et l’on concevra que cette réunion de circonstances dans un spectacle qui par lui-même n’appelait pas la sévérité, devait être la chose du monde la plus séduisante.³⁶

The seductive qualities to which La Harpe alludes, the ‘onction’, ‘harmonie’, and ‘douceur’ of the verse, point to another of the problems attending the idea of ‘innocence’ in *Esther*: the reaffirmation of Racine’s immense poetic and dramatic talents. From *La Thébaïde* to *Phèdre*, these talents are deployed with great effect to heighten the impact and intensity of tragic dramas composed to arouse emotion. In other words, the pious message cannot be so easily separated from the passionate medium employed: it is not just ‘des paroles extrêmement molles et efféminées’, as Racine professes to believe in his Preface, that can ‘faire des impressions dangereuses sur de jeunes esprits’.

35 See Forestier, *Jean Racine*, p. 679: ‘L’historien n’oubliait pas que, s’il devait sa nouvelle importance à son “emploi” auprès du roi, c’était son théâtre qui avait fait de lui “l’illustre M. Racine”’.

36 La Harpe, VI, 2-3.

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Is it therefore true, as Jean Emelina asserts, that 'toute sensualité et toute passion, au sein de cette cour orientale, sont évacuées'?³⁷ The evidence suggests otherwise. For a start, the vocabulary of the emotions used in seventeenth-century French drama is limited and even conventional. This leads Racine, necessarily, to use in *Esther* terms which, in other contexts, express the most disordered passion, and cannot so easily shake off all their associations. Thus Esther's 'Tout mon sang dans mes veines se glace' (165) recalls identical words spoken, in Racine's previous play, by a heroine consumed by guilt at her incestuous passion (*Phèdre*, 265). And the story of Assuérus and Vasti, Esther's predecessor (31-34), is a similar narrative of sex and power, if in reverse, to that spoken by the predatory Agrippine (*Britannicus*, 1127-28), and it is couched in the same language. Secondly, even the most sincere and respectable religious sentiment is necessarily expressed in terms that have also served in other contexts, to describe more worldly desire. The figure of Piety, for example, presents herself in the Prologue as Louis XIV's new mistress. It is difficult to disentangle the publicly pious Mme de Maintenon from this comparison:

Je suis la Piété, cette Fille si chère,
Qui t'offre de ce Roi les plus tendres soupirs.
Du feu de ton amour j'allume ses désirs.
Du zèle, qui pour toi l'enflamme et le dévore,
La chaleur se répand du Couchant à l'Aurore. (20-24)

This language of religious ardour, *tendres soupirs, feu de ton amour, allume ses désirs, enflamme, dévore, chaleur*, has been widely used in Racine's other plays, and in purely erotic contexts: 'Brûlé de plus de feux que je n'en allumai' (*Andromaque*, 320). For this reason alone, the verse in *Esther* retains its sensuous power, as it must do to give pleasure. It is of course true that this play does not have the role of a *Phèdre* or a *Hermione*, and that the lexis of passion is much reduced.³⁸ But this absence, or abstinence, only seems to give greater intensity to

37 Emelina, p. 209.

38 Rohou edition of Racine. p. 1100 : 'La fréquence du lexique amoureux se réduit nettement (*amant, ardeur, flamme, brûler* disparaissent).'

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expressions of love, as the power of a gaze is multiplied when the rest of the body is veiled. Jules Lemaître, famously, read *Esther* in the context of the *Arabian Nights*, as a ‘conte voluptueux et sanglant’, while Sarah Bernhardt, in the role of Assuérus, ‘played with Racine’s duplicity, his ambiguous positioning between purity and impurity’.³⁹

Chamfort for one was alive to the erotic charge of Racine’s play. As he points out, Assuérus behaves with Esther as any anguished lover would do:

Il est attentif à ses moindres mouvements; il la presse, il la supplie de lui révéler son secret. Il la voit lever les yeux au ciel; l’inquiétude s’empare de son esprit, il ne se possède plus; et il finit par lui dire en amant aveugle, sans savoir ce qu’elle exigera: « de vos désirs le succès est certain » (683). [...] Voilà le véritable langage de la passion.⁴⁰

Assuérus even seems to suggest that it is her very virtue that attracts him. This seduction is expressed in terms of velvet sensuality:

Je ne trouve qu'en vous je ne sais quelle grâce,
Qui me charme toujours, et jamais ne me lasse.
De l'aimable Vertu doux et puissants attraits! (669-71)

It is verse such as this that leads Chamfort to conclude, reasonably enough, that Racine’s poetic representation of the emotions had not radically changed since *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, and indeed could not change, so much was it bound up with his very identity as a creative artist:

En effet, on avait demandé à Racine une pièce sans amour, il le promit; mais fut-il en état de tenir parole? et dépendait-il de lui qu’on ne reconnût, même dans ce sujet sacré, la plume brûlante qui avait exprimé tous les mouvements de l’amour? car, qu’est-ce que l’amour, si ceci n’en est point?⁴¹

39 Jules Lemaître, *Racine* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1908), p. 279. On turn of the century productions of *Esther*, see Antoine Compagnon, ‘Proust on Racine’, *Yale French Studies*, 76 (1989), 21-58 (39).

40 Chamfort, V, 57.

41 Chamfort, V, 56.

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Mme de Sévigné gave the same idea a more puckish formulation: 'Racine s'est surpassé; il aime Dieu comme il aimait ses maîtresses; il est pour les choses saintes comme il était pour les profanes.'⁴² It is difficult to perform *Esther* in a kind of sensual void. This underlying uncertainty, generated in *Esther* by the suggestion of a sensual undercurrent to an apparently unworldly action, invites a fundamental reappraisal of the innocence projected by the play, as indeed of the whole idea of innocence. This ambiguity was expressed robustly by Charles Péguy: 'Nulle part autant que dans Racine n'apparaît peut-être le poignant, le cruel problème de l'innocence ou de la prétendue innocence de l'enfant.'⁴³ The analysis of that ambiguity is a project far beyond the confines of this modest paper. But ambiguity there is.

Another major element complicating the conflation of *Esther* with simple ideas of piety and innocence, and which also deserves further work, is the political dimension of the play. This complication comes in two parts: the contemporary political context that the work reflects, and the internal political drama that is played out. In the Prologue there is lavish praise for the political action of Louis XIV, though the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the king's endless wars are not events to which one would ordinarily attach the term 'innocent'. The action within the play has a similarly equivocal stamp, worthy of the two versions of the biblical story used by Racine.⁴⁴ *Esther*, like *Athalie*, ends in a bloodbath, and like *Athalie*, it raises uncomfortable issues such as inherited guilt, cyclical violence, and the problem of evil. From these further, uneasy ambiguities, lurking in the background, the play only gains in density and suggestiveness.

42 Mme de Sévigné, III, 498.

43 Charles Péguy, *Victor-Marie, comte Hugo*, in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, 3 vols, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), III, 293. On this and other such views, see Compagnon, p. 42: 'The coexistence of cruelty and piety, which suggests that chastity always has its hidden underside, that impurity is part of purity, was to remain an essential characteristic of the turn-of-the-century view of Racine.'

44 See Scholar p. 320: 'The Hebrew version is a secular story of transgression, reversal, and revenge [...]. In the Greek version, however, the narrator depicts events as the result of God's direct intervention.'

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To see *Esther*, therefore, as the representation of innocence on stage is to minimize some major problems. There are, certainly, reasons for viewing *Esther* in a one-dimensional way, as essentially a religious poem, a song of innocence triumphant over evil. It does not take much, however, to transform this song of innocence into a song of experience. The 'semence féconde' (7), sown by Piety to cultivate virtue, is a fitting metaphor for the reception of this play over three centuries. The ever-changing cultural context, and the different audiences and expectations over the centuries, are the changing soil and climate for a work capable of remarkable transmutations. And if this transformation produces a more enriching experience, dramatically, intellectually, and emotionally, than the work of piety that was perhaps intended, who would complain?

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