



University
of Glasgow

Campbell, J. (2006) *A marriage made in Heaven? 'Racine' and 'love'*.
Modern Language Review, 101 (3). pp. 682-690. ISSN 0026-7937

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/5076/>

Deposited on: 13 March 2009

A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN? 'RACINE' AND 'LOVE'

If you attempted to identify the properties of that apparently homogeneous product marketed as 'Racine', it would be hard not to conclude, from much of the critical evidence available, that love was of the essence. For over three centuries, commentators have sought to explain what makes Racine different from Corneille partly by stressing the importance accorded to love in Racine's plays. The unfavourable judgements made by Saint-Évremond and other contemporaries, or the reservations expressed even by admirers of Racine such as Voltaire, were based on the premiss that the playwright impaired the dignity of the tragic genre by transforming figures of heroic stature such as Alexander and Pyrrhus into slaves to love: 'c'est un spectacle indigne de voir le courage d'un Héros amolli par des larmes et des soupirs'.¹ As a corollary to this supposed takeover by passionate love, a traditional and still common critical position is to regard this 'Racinian' love as predicating some bleak if not 'Jansenist' vision. Human beings are rendered unable to control their destinies by an irrational power that subjugates reason and will: Phèdre is a child of original sin.² For many, seemingly, all roads in the land of Racine lead to love, that vale of tears far from a paradise lost for ever but paradoxically sought through love.

This article seeks to question this comfortable accommodation of 'Racine' and 'love'. It will first show how this association originated in the particular set of circumstances that accompanied Racine's debuts as a dramatist, circumstances that from early on forged the idea of 'Racine' in opposition to that of 'Corneille'. It will also suggest that such a view, however hallowed by tradition, provides an unsatisfactory critical perspective for interpreting a series of complex and quite distinctive tragic dramas, in each of which love plays a different role.

As evidence that the standard view of love in Racine's tragedies has acquired the status of a received truth, we need look no further than everyday attempts to explain 'Racine' to the public. In works of reference—that is, in works whose general orientation is towards factual knowledge—the preponderant place of love in the playwright's works, and its overwhelming nature, are presented as an undisputed reality:

En concevant la passion amoureuse comme une fatalité infernale, génératrice de haine et de destruction, en la présentant comme l'instinct le plus possessif et le plus égoïste de l'âme humaine, sans, toutefois, que ses misérables victimes entretiennent en elles-mêmes la nostalgie douloureuse d'une innocence perdue, Racine apparaît non seulement comme un disciple de Port-Royal, mais encore comme celui qui, dans le théâtre, a touché le plus intimement à l'essence du tragique [. . .].³

Le théâtre de Racine peint la passion comme une force fatale, qui détruit celui qui en est

¹ Saint-Évremond, *Dissertation sur le Grand Alexandre*, in Racine, *Théâtre. Poésie*, ed. by Georges Forestier, Éditions de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 187. Quotations from the plays are from this edition. Further references to other works contained in this edition, or to the editor's commentary, will be to 'Forestier (ed. Racine)'.

² See e.g. Jean Rohou's edition of Racine, *Théâtre complet* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1998), p. 1054.

³ *Petit Robert 2* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2000), p. 1715.

possédé. Réalisant l'idéal de la tragédie classique, il présente une action simple, claire, dont les péripéties naissent de la passion même des personnages.⁴

This view of 'Racine' as the playwright of love has its roots in his second tragedy, *Alexandre le Grand*, first performed in 1665, and in reactions to it. The idea that his tragedies are the expression of a relentless and destructive passionate love originates in his next play, *Andromaque* (1667). Both works gave audiences what had proved popular since Thomas Corneille's *Timocrate* of 1656, a new mould of tragedy that placed the claims of romance centre stage. This evolution had not gone unchallenged, notably by Pierre Corneille in his *Discours* of 1660. For this most famous exponent of heroic tragedy, seen at its finest in the *Horace* and *Cinna* of twenty years before, the dignity and demands of the genre were such that love could never be at the core of the tragic action:

Lorsqu'on met sur la scène une simple intrigue d'amour entre des rois, et qu'ils ne courent aucun péril, ni de leur vie, ni de leur État, je ne crois pas que, bien que les personnes soient illustres, l'action le soit assez pour s'élever jusqu'à la tragédie. Sa dignité demande quelque grand intérêt d'État, ou quelque passion plus noble et plus mâle que l'amour, telles que sont l'ambition ou la vengeance, et veut donner à craindre des malheurs plus grands que la perte d'une maîtresse.⁵

Racine's *Alexandre le Grand* and *Andromaque* both challenged Corneille's view of tragedy in the most flagrant way possible. The subject of the first play is nominally a famous event in history, Alexander's pardon of his vanquished enemy Porus. The spring of the plot, however, is a love rivalry between Porus and another Indian king, Taxile, for the hand of a fair princess. Apart from the formal pardon at the end, which could be seen as a mere pretext for the play, the great hero Alexander (with whom the new king, Louis XIV, was being sycophantically identified) is much occupied in declaring his love for Taxile's sister Cléophile, in language that could come straight from the *salon*:

Ce grand nom de Vainqueur n'est plus ce qu'il souhaite,
Il vient avec plaisir avouer sa défaite,
Heureux si votre cœur se laissant émouvoir,
Vos beaux yeux à leur tour avouaient leur pouvoir.
(ll. 925–28)

It can sometimes be overlooked that this play was composed by a young dramatist whose first work, in the previous year, had been a flop. If *Alexandre le Grand* had gone the same way as *La Thébàïde*, no one would have noticed. It did, however, catch the mood of the moment, and was a success. The rookie had become a serious rival: Racine never looked back. Little wonder, then, that Saint-Évremond, champion of Pierre Corneille and his conception of heroic tragedy, had serious reasons for going on the offensive. He saw the idea of basing tragedy on romance as a betrayal both of the genre and of antiquity itself, and viewed

⁴ *Le Petit Larousse illustré* (Paris: Larousse, 2000), p. 1618. The first of these quotations is used, with other material, in John Campbell, *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), pp. 153–56, to demonstrate the prevalence of vocabulary linking 'Racine' and 'Jansenism'. Further references will be made to this work in order to reinforce or clarify a point that, for reasons of economy, can only be alluded to in these pages, and also as a quick guide to more complete bibliographical information.

⁵ Corneille, *Writings on the Theatre*, ed. by H. T. Barnwell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), p. 8.

Racine's play as lacking that 'grandeur d'âme' without which tragedy could not be itself.⁶ Whatever the merits of this criticism, it did associate 'Racine' and 'love' in the public mind, and distinguished both from 'Corneille', in a way that has endured.

Racine's next play, *Andromaque*, consummated this association and disjunction. Even three and a half centuries later, it is difficult not to be struck by the way in which heroic figures from the Trojan War are transformed into paragons of a refined, very French courtly love, as in this example from the first act, in which Pyrrhus, the conqueror of Troy, is attempting to cajole his Trojan captive Andromaque:

Je vous offre mon Bras. Puis-je espérer encore
Que vous accepterez un Cœur qui vous adore?
En combattant pour vous, me sera-t-il permis
De ne vous point compter parmi mes Ennemis?
(ll. 293–96)

This apparent surrender to the language of the *salon* seemed enough to justify Barbier d'Aucour's sneer, seven years later, that Racine transformed heroes into lovestruck weaklings.⁷

Andromaque also nourished what is now the common view of 'love' in 'Racine': that of an overweening passion that completely deprives characters of the ability to exercise their free will. This view of 'Racinian love' is concomitant with what are seen to be other expressions of loss of liberty in these tragedies, such as 'destiny' and 'the gods'. For example, a striking aspect of *Andromaque* is the way in which two characters in particular, Oreste and Hermione, are devoured by the love that possesses them, to the point of doing the opposite of what they both desire. 'Ah! Fallait-il croire une Amante insensée' (l. 1585), cries Hermione, before committing suicide over the lifeless body of the man she loved so much that she had him killed. Her monologue, at the beginning of the final act, is one of the passages most quoted as evidence of the true identity of 'love' in Racine's tragedies. Here passion is viewed as being akin to hate, as a blind force as though alien to the self. It has not taken much effort to see this frustrated passion as expressing an Augustinian vision of fallen humanity, striving in wild desperation to cope with insufficiency and loss of identity:

Où suis-je? Qu'ai-je fait? Que dois-je faire encore?
Quel transport me saisit? Quel chagrin me dévore?
Errante, et sans dessein, je cours dans ce Palais.
Ah! Ne puis-je savoir si j'aime, ou si je hais!
(ll. 1401–04)⁸

Here then is the image of 'Racine' that is most often given, reflected in reference books as in critical writings. This image is all the easier to accept in that it slips easily into a traditional account of French seventeenth-century literature and thought that it is tempting to call *1660 and All That*, and which

⁶ Saint-Évremond, *Dissertation sur le Grand Alexandre*, pp. 184–87.

⁷ Barbier d'Aucour, 'Apollon Charlatan: allégorie critique sur les ouvrages de M. Racine' (l. 66), in Forestier (ed. Racine), p. 769.

⁸ For a recent interpretation of the passage on these lines, see again Rohou's edition of Racine's plays, pp. 885–86.

commonly relates *le Grand Siècle* in terms of a swing from optimism to pessimism. Although this account of things has never gone unchallenged, it still exerts a tenacious hold. Bénichou's theory of the 'demolition of the hero' in the second half of the seventeenth century has itself never been demolished, as can be seen in recent work by two such authoritative figures as Philippe Sellier and Jean Rohou.⁹ It is a game of two halves. In the first 'optimistic' half you can call on Pierre Corneille, the supposed champion of the heroic will, and René Descartes, defining the human being in terms of his ability to reason, and painting a world that the rational mind can comprehend and possess. In this account, the 'pessimistic' second part of the seventeenth century is seen through the filter of Pascal's refutation of the claims of rationalism, and his Augustinian vision of a universe in which human beings, surrendering to their impulses, wander without light or hope: 'En voyant l'aveuglement et la misère de l'homme, en regardant tout l'univers muet et l'homme sans lumière abandonné à lui-même [. . .]'.¹⁰

Racine's works have often been used to support this familiar narrative. Since the image of passionate love given in works such as *Lettres d'une religieuse portugaise* (1669) and *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) are ordinarily seen to paint a sombre picture of humanity, it is easy to make Racine's tragedies appear as the clearest expression of this vision. Plenty of material may be found to support this point of view, not least in those most popular (and studied) of plays, *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*. The will's subjection to forces external to it is famously articulated in *Phèdre*'s description of her passion: 'C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée' (*Phèdre*, l. 306). Other plays by Racine can be mined for evidence of this view of love as a subjection to dark forces over which the will holds no sway. In *Britannicus* (1669), the famed cruelty of the emperor Nero is expressed by Racine in something he invented, Néron's oppression of the woman who rejects his expression of desire, and his elimination of a political rival who has become his rival in love: 'C'est votre Frère. Hélas! C'est un Amant jaloux' (l. 1070). The whole action of *Bérénice* (1670) turns on the Roman emperor's attempt to tell the heroine that their love is no longer possible. In *Bajazet* (1672), the sultan's favourite mistress, Roxane, takes violent revenge after her love is spurned. And in *Mithridate*, first performed in the same year, this mythical enemy of Roman power is portrayed as a lover jealous enough to seek to kill his own son. These and other such examples concord with the common view, repeated in the encyclopaedias quoted above, that 'love' in Racine's tragedies is blind, violent, and destructive, that it mirrors an Augustinian vision of human beings lost without bearings in a fallen universe, and that it expresses the spirit of a pessimistic age.

⁹ Paul Bénichou, *Morales du Grand Siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948). See e.g. Philippe Sellier, *Port-Royal et la littérature*, 2 vols (Paris: Champion, 1999–2001), e.g. his narration of the change of direction in the middle of the seventeenth century (II, 261). See also Jean Rohou's comparison of Corneille's and Racine's tragedies as 'deux visions de la condition humaine', in 'De *Pertharite* à *Andromaque*: les enseignements d'une comparaison historique', *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, 27, (2000), 57–84 (p. 59). On the optimism/pessimism narrative as a whole, see the following two works by Rohou: 'L'anthropologie pessimiste des "classiques": tentative de distinction et d'explication', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 101 (2001), 1523–50; *Le XVII^e siècle: une révolution de la condition humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

¹⁰ Pascal, *Pensées*, fr. 198, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Louis Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 525.

The simplistic nature of this narrative should be enough to engender scepticism. And it has. For a start, voices have been raised to contest the view that one identifying mark of seventeenth-century French literature is a transition between optimistic and pessimistic views of the ability of human beings to resolve challenges by acts of a will enlightened by the reason.¹¹ One celebrated model of such an optimistic view tends to be Auguste's pardon, in Corneille's *Cinna*, of those who had conspired to kill him, in a heroic act of the sovereign will:

Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers;
Je le suis, je veux l'être. Ô siècles, ô mémoire,
Conservez à jamais ma dernière victoire!
(ll. 1696–98)

Yet Corneille's *Horace*, written at the same period, features a hero who loses self-control to the extent of stabbing his innocent sister in the back as she runs away from him, and a king who pardons the crime because the State needs the hero's military prowess. It is difficult to see how such acts can easily fit into a narrative of optimism. Similarly, one cannot easily reconcile the actual evidence of both dramatists' works with the common images of a 'Corneille' whose plays turn on conflicting interpretations of the heroic ideal and a 'Racine' who created tragic dilemmas springing from impossible love. Georges Forestier's commentary on Corneille's greatest theatrical success shows the perils of attempting to maintain such a simple opposition:

Pour l'essentiel, la beauté du *Cid* vient de ce qu'il met aux prises deux amants qui ne doivent plus s'aimer, mais qui ne peuvent pas ne pas s'aimer, une amante qui réclame la tête de celui qu'elle ne veut pas voir mourir et un amant qui attend qu'elle obtienne sa tête tout en acceptant des actes héroïques qui l'éloignent toujours plus de la mort attendue.¹²

As for the second half of the century, there is no shortage of works whose lightness of being contradicts the notion that the artistic creations of the period essentially feed on some dark Augustinian vision of a paradise never to be regained by the hapless mass of fallen humanity. The works of Molière and La Fontaine immediately spring to mind. Molière may of course be viewed through the prism of *Le Misanthrope*, with the comedy toned down, and La Fontaine seen through a Hobbesian reading of 'Les Animaux malades de la peste', where the innocent donkey is sacrificed by the other animals. Fortunately, however, other interpretations and other works by the same and other authors make it difficult to imprison the period within this bleak world-view. Avatars of Augustinian thought were undoubtedly influential. The extent of this influence in works of the imagination will remain a matter of debate. The only certainty is that Jansenism was not the only show in town. Given the possibly irresolvable nature of this question, it would therefore seem prudent not to use the supposed pessimism of the age as a key to understanding the presentation of love in Racine's tragedies.

¹¹ See e.g. the following articles by Jean Emelina: 'Peut-on imaginer un classicisme heureux?', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 100 (2000), 1481–501; 'Les "Classiques" sont-ils heureux ou malheureux?', *ibid.*, 102 (2002), 633–36.

¹² Forestier (ed. Racine), pp. 1318–19.

It would be equally imprudent to imagine that any single key exists that might unlock the sense of these works, as though ‘meaning’ were some inert matter waiting to be deciphered by the intrepid researcher. Quite simply, the monolithic picture often presented of ‘love’ in Racine’s tragedies makes scant allowance for the variety, complexity, and uncertainty that emerges from an examination of the different tragedies taken individually. Firstly, in other plays there are images of love quite different from those presented in *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*. Secondly, even in these two plays it would be unwise to underestimate the weight of the Petrarchan inheritance, as it was expressed in the *précieux* language so clearly on display. Here love is true love when its dart flies in the night and wounds beyond repair: the powerlessness of the will is part of the furniture. It has therefore at least to be asked whether this type of language proves the presence of some Jansenist subtext relating to the infirmity of the will and the power of concupiscence, or is simply part of a lexical stock gathered by convention over several centuries.¹³

For those who wish to marry ‘Racine’ and ‘love’, there is also the inconvenient fact that in two of his plays, *La Thébàïde* and *Iphigénie*, passionate love does not figure prominently, and that in the final religious dramas, *Esther* and *Athalie*, it does not figure at all. These represent too big a chunk of ‘Racinian tragedy’ merely to be dismissed as ‘exceptional’. Indeed, the lack of an important love-interest in *Iphigénie* led l’abbé de Villiers to comment with satisfaction, in 1675, that here was a living, modern vindication of his own idea that love was not needed to make tragedies attractive.¹⁴ The reputation acquired by Racine was such that in that same year, when he eventually came to write the Preface to *La Thébàïde*, composed eleven years before, he had to explain to those expecting other things that love was not necessary in a tragedy:

L’amour qui a d’ordinaire tant de part dans les Tragédies, n’en a presque point ici. Et je doute que j’en donnasse davantage si c’était à recommencer. [. . .] En un mot je suis persuadé que les tendresses ou les jalousies des Amants ne sauraient trouver que fort peu de place parmi les incestes, les parricides et toutes les autres horreurs qui composent l’Histoire d’Œdipe et de sa malheureuse Famille.¹⁵

Iphigénie, written some months before these words, is the proof that they are not just mere rhetoric designed to mollify Racine’s disappointed admirers. His final tragedy *Athalie* is another striking illustration of the simple truth they contain: love is not necessary to turn the iron wheels of his *machine infernale*.

In addition, even in those plays by Racine where love-relationships play an important role in the plot, the nature of that ‘love’ changes from play to play, and from character to character. As Alain Viala points out, ‘Dire qu’à part sa première et ses deux dernières pièces l’amour est au cœur des tragédies de Racine est dire vrai, mais dire peu: ce n’est pas toujours le même amour, ni toujours la même façon d’être au cœur.’¹⁶ Thus *Andromaque* remains faithful to her dead husband, but with a grief that encompasses the loss of family and nation. Her maternal desire to save her son, which involves facing up to

¹³ This point is developed in Campbell, pp. 224–26.

¹⁴ Abbé de Villiers, ‘Entretien sur les tragédies de ce temps’, in Forestier (ed. Racine), p. 775.

¹⁵ In Forestier (ed. Racine), pp. 119–20.

¹⁶ Alain Viala, ‘Racine galant, ou l’amour au pied de la lettre’, *Les Cahiers*, 17 (1995), 39–48.

the terrifying possibility of having to marry the butcher of her own people, is inseparable from what is a desperate attempt, in an impossible situation, to save the last remains of all that was dear to her. It is on her decision that the whole play turns. And yet, quite clearly, we are at an uttermost remove from any common notion of 'Racinian love', or the gilded phrases of the *salon*:

Ô cendres d'un Époux! ô Troyens! ô mon Père!
 Ô mon Fils, que tes jours coûtent cher à ta Mère!
 (*Andromaque*, ll. 1049–50)

A similar point might be made about *Britannicus*. It is true that Racine's invention of Junie does give the emperor more than a political reason to assassinate his political rival. Yet Junie's love for Britannicus is expressed, not as some 'Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée', but as an admiration and affection for a man unjustly stripped of his royal birthright:

Ses honneurs abolis, son Palais déserté,
 La fuite d'une Cour que sa chute a bannie,
 Sont autant de liens qui retiennent Junie.
 (*Britannicus*, ll. 646–48)

In *Bérénice* the eponymous heroine might seem to be the incarnation of the 'All for love' that gave Dryden the title for his play:

Un soupir, un regard, un mot de votre bouche,
 Voilà l'ambition d'un cœur comme le mien.
 (*Bérénice*, ll. 576–77)

Yet it is Bérénice who unties the knot of the play, with her final realization that she is confronted by something more important than her own love: 'Bérénice, Seigneur, ne vaut point tant d'alarmes' (*Bérénice*, l. 1496).

Finally, many of these same plays, in which love-relationships are undoubtedly a significant element, have an important historical, political, and moral dimension within which love has each time a different face, without which love would not have the same impact, and to which it is thus to some extent subordinate. In *Bérénice*, again, Racine was open to criticism for making the emperor so much in thrall to love. But far from demonstrating the 'fatal force' often ascribed to Racine's depiction of passion, the play in fact shows an emperor who refuses to bow to its dictates. It is a play in which the political context is all-important. Titus's will is stiffened at every turn by the pressure coming to bear on him, from the senate and people of Rome, for their ruler to reject a foreign queen (l. 1237). He uses language that often recalls the inner struggle of the emperor Auguste in Corneille's *Cinna*, that work so emblematic of the will's refusal to be subjugated by passion: 'Ma Gloire inexorable à toute heure me suit' (*Bérénice*, l. 1406). That Titus cannot decide between love and duty is not to downgrade this political dimension, but to underline its importance in a play whose very hinge is the decision the emperor cannot bring himself to make. Indeed, as Georges Forestier has argued, *Bérénice* may be seen as a play about the illusions of love's power and the hard necessities of absolute monarchy.¹⁷ Paradoxically, it is not the absolute monarch who establishes this

¹⁷ Forestier (ed. Racine), p. 1459.

final perspective, but the character most commonly associated with absolute love. Home rule is Rome rule. In *Mithridate* there is a similarly vital 'Roman' dimension. The old king may be a jealous lover, but in the end what matters to him is the importance of gaining revenge on Rome, as evidenced in his frequent references to what has dominated his past life, in his plan to mount a surprise attack on the capital, and in his final pardon of a son no longer seen as a rival in love, but as one who will carry on the good fight against Rome.

In *Bajazet*, it is true, Roxane is for part of the play motivated only by her love, and is blinded by it. For the other characters, however, the main issue is survival in a snakepit where one false move means death. The eponymous hero in fact simulates love for Roxane in order to stay alive, while Amurat, who speaks more lines in the play than Bajazet, makes an admission that must seem heretical to those who conflate 'Racine' and 'love':

Voudrais-tu qu'à mon âge
Je fisse de l'amour le vil apprentissage?
Qu'un Cœur qu'ont endurci la fatigue et les ans,
Suivît d'un vain plaisir les conseils imprudents?
(*Bajazet*, ll. 177–80)

Self-evidently, the blackmail that accompanies Roxane's love for Bajazet is an important constituent of the plot, but it is not a determining one. From the very first scene it is clear that the sultan, who has left to fight a battle, has already ordered the execution of both Bajazet and Acomat. Thereafter the characters' fate will be decided by the outcome of that battle: Acomat will not be able to resist a victorious sultan returning with his army. In fact, the sultan is able to enforce his order, which is executed at the end. Nothing that happens within the play modifies the importance, for the tragic action, of this crucial external action, which is of an essentially political and dynastic character.

As for *Britannicus*, I have stressed elsewhere the importance given to love and sexual jealousy in the working-out of the plot.¹⁸ That said, a large part of the play is given over to the rivalry between Britannicus and Néron, and that between the emperor and his mother Agrippine, in a context where both mother and stepbrother have been deprived of power. As the whole of the first act demonstrates, these rivalries existed before Néron's encounter with Junie. Some might wish to play up the sexual tension existing between Néron and Agrippine, though it is a dimension even more played down by Racine (ll. 1595–97) than by Tacitus. This particular branch of research, however, should not obscure the tree, or the wood. Agrippine from the outset is obsessed by her loss of political control (ll. 91–96), just as Néron is by the 'fureurs d'Agrippine' (l. 1316). Indeed, iv. 2 contains a political lesson delivered by Agrippine, in what is the longest speech in the play, on the way in which she single-mindedly used 'love' with her uncle the former emperor in order to gain power for her son:

Je souhaitai son lit, dans la seule pensée
De vous laisser au Trône, où je serais placée.
Je fléchis mon orgueil, j'allai prier Pallas.

¹⁸ John Campbell, *Racine: 'Britannicus'* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1990), p. 58.

Son Maître chaque jour caressé dans mes bras
 Prit insensiblement dans les yeux de sa Nièce
 L'amour, où je voulais amener sa tendresse.
 (ll. 1127–32)

In the decisive final scene of this act, in order to persuade Néron to eliminate his rival Britannicus, it is not on any sexual jealousy that his counsellor Narcisse plays, but on the emperor's desire for total control (ll. 1464–79). Similarly, Junie's resistance to Néron's advances, made explicit by her flight to the Vestal Virgins, is made with a prayer to the emperor Augustus, and in the name of values that transcend the appetite of Néron to possess the earth: 'Du Feu toujours ardent qui brûle pour nos Dieux' (l. 1766). If this is love, it is not the sort with which Racine is habitually associated.

A short article cannot with any fairness treat a subject as complex as the nature and place of passionate love in Racine's tragedies. But it can ask that the complexity be given greater recognition. Even the minimal evidence presented here does suggest that to interpret what is called 'Racinian tragedy' in terms of 'love' could be misleading. One can understand why, in the 1660s, it was convenient for all concerned to set up an opposition between Corneille and Racine. With the perspective afforded by distance, however, and the different interpretations of the different works over three centuries, it seems unsatisfactory to identify 'Racine' as the celebrant of a certain type of obsessive, overweening love. Self-evidently, in some characters, in some plays, love is all-devouring: one thinks of Oreste, Hermione, and Pyrrhus in *Andromaque*, and then of Roxane and Phèdre. But there are other characters, and other types of love. There are plays in which love has little or no part to play. In those in which that part is important, love takes on the character appropriate to that play, and is only part of a much wider equation.

This begs an obvious question. Despite the evidence to the contrary, why does the common image of Racine persist? Here we enter the domain of speculation. One hypothesis worth considering might be the preponderant place taken by the character of Phèdre in this image of 'Racine' that is commonly projected. But Phèdre is not *Phèdre*, just as *Phèdre* is not 'Racine'. And that 'Racine', as defined by our encyclopaedias and enclosed in so many received ideas, does not mirror the differences, paradoxes, and uncertainties that spring from the tragedies of Jean Racine. One acceptable form of literary criticism must surely be to cope with what cannot easily be categorized by literary criticism, or is too easily categorized by it.