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MEDEA, POISON, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF ERROR IN *PHÈDRE*

The critical effort to understand the death of Racine's *Phèdre* as an allegory of the end of his production of profane theatre has by now a certain history. Most notably, in a study that originally appeared in 1980, Marc Fumaroli claimed that *Phèdre* signifies in two registers that reflect upon one another: she is the heroine of the tragedy, and she is the tragic muse in action, a character 'en abîme' of a tragedy both of her own destiny and that of tragedy itself.¹ Fumaroli understood this self-reflexivity in genre-historical terms. That is, the tragedy of what he called 'le principe de plaisir' (p. 501), born in Corneille's first tragedy, his *Médée*, exhausts its logic, betrays the succession of bargains it had struck with morality, and is here put to death. For Fumaroli, *Phèdre* is an exercise in truth, indeed an 'orage de vérité' (p. 516), an act of contrition, and a symbolic suicide (p. 517). A broadly and historically Oedipal plot is thus sketched out by Fumaroli for Racinian tragedy. There is nothing particularly surprising about this, for, as Terence Cave has remarked, 'Oedipus always seems to intrude between Corneille and Racine'.²

Fumaroli insisted upon self-referentiality not just as the defining agenda of *Phèdre* but also as the defining characteristic of any great dramatic text (p. 507, n. 10). But Fumaroli was not the first to notice that Racine's tragedy reads well as a comment upon its author and upon itself. A generation earlier, the explicitly Freudian project of Charles Mauron had depended very much upon his identifying Racine with *Phèdre*.³ 'La culpabilité de *Phèdre* figure celle de Racine écrivain', Mauron had noted, 'la retraite de *Phèdre* annonce celle du poète devant les regards d'un Dieu janséniste exigeant son immolation' (pp. 161–62). Mauron was equally insistent that what *Phèdre* may be said to be about is the act of writing tragedies: 'La file des tragédies nous retrace [...] l'histoire du désir coupable d'écrire des tragédies' (p. 184).

What is remarkable in the juxtaposition of these two analyses is that they both make use of Oedipal structures. This structure is explicit in the case of Mauron, who claims that, for Racine, parental figures relate to Port-Royal and the Oedipal crime to the theatre (p. 149, n. 1). But it is implicit as well in the genre-historical claims made by Fumaroli: *Phèdre* dies in a storm of truth about herself and about the tragedy, and in so doing, commits an act of patricide against the compromised tragedy of Corneille. That Fumaroli's reading, informed as it is with vast erudition on the subject of rhetoric, should, like the most elaborate psychoanalytic reading of Racine, insist upon that theatre's self-reflexivity and conclude that its dynamic is Oedipal, raises the question, once again, of the relationship between psychoanalysis and early modern tragedy. Certainly, one way in which to understand the sympathy between an allegorical reading of Racine's theatre and psychoanalysis would be to recall the fundamental place held by rhetorical devices, metaphor, metonymy,

¹ 'De *Médée* à *Phèdre*: Naissance et mise à mort de la tragédie "cornélienne"', in *Héros et orateurs. Rhétorique et dramaturgie cornéliennes* (Genève: Droz, 1990), pp. 493–518 (p. 507).

² 'Corneille, Racine, Oedipus', in *Convergences: Rhetoric and Poetic in Seventeenth-Century France: Essays for Hugh M. Davidson*, ed. by David Lee Rubin and Mary B. McKinley (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), pp. 82–100 (p. 96).

³ *L'Inconscient dans l'œuvre et la vie de Racine* (Paris: CNRS, 1957), p. 166.

paranomasia, and so on, in Freud's thinking. There is, as Michel de Certeau has remarked, 'a renaissance of rhetoric in Freud's work'.⁴ But this would be simply to restate, in specific and operational terms, an underground identity and a chicken-and-egg problem that readers of Freud and of early modern tragedy have long noted. The problem is that tragedy and Freud seem, on the one hand, to be made for each other. The specific case of Racinian theatre responds beautifully to an analysis explicitly informed by psychoanalytic concerns, and we have not just the work of Mauryon, but also that of Barthes, Green, and Orlando to prove it.⁵ But, to anyone who thinks to question the possibility of granting to psychoanalysis the status of a 'method', anachronistic or not, which might then be 'applied' to an early modern text, it soon becomes apparent that tragedy and Freud are not made for each other as much as they are made by each other.

Jean Starobinski, who once took up Freud's two signal references to tragedy,⁶ 'Hamlet et Œdipe', analyses 'un double mouvement [...] dans la démarche intellectuelle de Freud', a psychoanalysis that is as much thought by Oedipus and Hamlet as they are thought by it.⁷ Cave has considered 'the extent to which [Freud's] readings of literature actually predetermine his theory, rather than simply illustrating it';⁸ similarly, De Certeau has pointed out that 'the psychic machine is constituted in the manner of a Greek tragedy and in that of Shakespearean drama, from which we know that Freud drew structures of thought, categories of analysis, and authoritative quotations' (p. 22). Working from the other direction, Stephen Greenblatt has examined the curious temporality of 'a discourse that functions *as if* the psychological categories it invokes were not only simultaneous with but even prior to and themselves causes of the very phenomena of which in actual fact they were the results';⁹ most recently, Suzanne Gearhart has brought a great deal of critical pressure to bear on this double logic, claiming that 'if psychoanalysis and various forms of philosophy and criticism find their theoretical insights confirmed in tragedy, it is because they are already being "thought" by tragedy, but not in the same terms that they project onto it'.¹⁰ The complication pursued by Gearhart is that tragedy might trouble psychoanalysis from within, both confirming some of its insights, and, at the same time, furnishing the grounds for questioning others (p. 2). One such question, in her analysis, goes to the striking fact that the Oedipal situation in Racine's tragedies is so often interpreted from the perspective of the female

⁴ 'The Freudian Novel: History and Literature', in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 17–34 (p. 23).

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963); André Green, *Un Œil en trop. Le Complexe d'Œdipe dans la tragédie* (Paris: Minuit, 1969); Francesco Orlando, *Toward a Freudian Theory of Literature, With an Analysis of Racine's Phèdre* (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁶ See *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 29 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), iv, 261–66, and 'Psychopathic Characters on the Stage,' in *Standard Edition*, vii, 304–10. Freud first explained his thoughts on Oedipus and Hamlet in the letter to Fliess of 15 October 1897 (*The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*, trans. and ed. by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 270–73).

⁷ 'Par le recours au modèle œdipien, la subjectivité (de Freud) s'objective, tandis que le mythe "antique se subjectivise" (comme expression d'une loi psychique universelle)' (*L'Œil vivant II: La relation critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 286–319 (p. 313)).

⁸ *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 176.

⁹ 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture', in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. by Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 210–24 (p. 210).

¹⁰ *The Interrupted Dialectic: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and their Tragic Other* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 2.

characters (pp. 126–27). Gearhart proceeds to demonstrate that specifically feminine guilt, a problem before which Freud himself retreated, is deeply linked to the functioning of the superego and to the issue of primary masochism. Her conclusion that is specific to psychoanalysis does indeed transform, if not negate, a central image of Freud's psychic economy, 'the picture of the woman as resentful both of the "defect" that prevents her from fully participating in an economy of pleasure and of the man as finding pleasure where she cannot'. But her conclusion that is specific to Racinian tragedy returns to self-reference and to allegory: 'A common relationship to masochism links the feminine and the tragic and makes the women characters particularly crucial, not just in terms of the action of the play, but as figures of tragedy itself' (p. 131).

This, then would be the latest episode in the development I mentioned by way of introduction. The effort to read Racinian tragedy for the allegory it sets up of tragedy was born from an explicitly psychoanalytic reading, grew sturdy with an allegorical reading that placed Racine's theatre in its family relationship to Cornelian tragedy, and risked death in a reading that threatened to dismantle its genealogy, but in the end was confirmed and survived intact.

In what follows, I shall be testing the possibilities and the limits of this powerful and durable notion that *Phèdre* is the figure of tragedy and that in her suicide we may read Racine's dying to the tragic stage (his professional suicide, that is), and his contrition and confession before his Jansenist fathers. In order to put some critical pressure on this allegory, I shall be reading the methodology of *Phèdre*'s dying, 'Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes'.¹¹ The question will then become: what is the nature of the error, or as Racine himself put it, the 'scandales' of his greatest tragic theatre?¹² Put another way: how is it possible, in the end, to be too enlightened with respect to error, as in Thésée's closing imperative, 'Allons, de mon erreur, hélas, trop éclaircis' (l. 1647)?

The word 'erreur(s)' occurs more frequently in *Phèdre* than in any other of Racine's tragedies.¹³ In general, its meaning there coincides with the first meaning given in Furetière, 'fausse opinion. L'erreur est une meprise de l'entendement' (Furetière, *Dictionnaire*), as in Hippolyte's 'Hé quoi? De votre erreur rien ne vous peut tirer?' (l. 1131). But, at least once, the sense of 'erreur' approaches more nearly its own etymology, and the first meaning of 'errer' in Furetière, 'vagner de coté &

¹¹ Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, Act v, Scene 7, l. 1638.

¹² In his will, quoted by Charles Perrault, Racine asks that he be buried at Port Royal des Champs, in spite of the fact that he does not count himself worthy, 'par les scandales de ma vie passée' (*Les Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle*, 2 vols in 1 (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), II, 82). Both in the early modern period, and more recently, the notion of scandal and that of error have been closely linked. According to Furetière, 'scandale signifie, ce qui est occasion de tomber dans l'erreur, ou dans le péché' (Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, 3rd edn (La Haye: Husson, Johnson, and others, 1727)). This linkage is reinforced by the iconographic tradition in which, for example, scandal, whose etymological meaning is a stumbling-block, is represented as the stumbling of the man who errs ('*Errere*. A Man in a Pilgrims Habit, groping his way blind-fold. The cloth blinding him signifies mans Falling into Error, when his mind is darkned by worldly Concerns; the Staff, his being apt to stumble, if he take not the Guides of the Spirit, and of right Reason', in Caesar Ripa, *Iconologia or Moral Emblems* (1709) (New York and London: Garland, 1976), p. 27, fig. 107). More recently, 'scandales' is misquoted by Picard as 'erreurs', in Racine: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Raymond Picard, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), II, 1138. But Picard's error is in turn supported by Furetière's definition of 'erreur': 'On le dit en general des fautes que l'on commet dans la conduite de la vie, ou dans l'usage du monde; des égarements où l'on tombe. Il a grand regret des ses erreurs passées. Les folles erreurs de la jeunesse.'

¹³ Bryant C. Freeman and Alan Batson, *Concordance du théâtre et des poésies de Jean Racine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 451.

d'autre; voyager sans avoir de route certaine; courir ça et là à l'aventure'. This occurs in the scene of Phèdre's fantasized descent into the labyrinth, where, after indicating sufficiently to Hippolyte what she would like to do with him within its fabled twists and turns, she executes a spectacular pun on the word, 'Je t'en ai dit assez pour te tirer d'erreur' (l. 671).¹⁴ In the word's final appearance, it seems to cover the most important of the plot elements that turn the scenario of *Phèdre*, as a number of its readers have remarked, into a rewriting of the tragedy of Oedipus (Cave, p. 334; Mauron, p. 146). For Thésée's error is unjustly to cause the death of his son, within a plot structure which declares the son to be completely innocent, and the mother incestuous in spite of herself. In these closing moments of the tragedy, Thésée and Aricie are 'éclaircis', 'enlightened', a state thus marked by the vocabulary of recognition (Cave, p. 170). But Thésée's error has been overly recognized; he is 'trop éclairci'. In order to understand how this could be, we might inquire into the mechanism of his enlightenment.

Thésée has been enlightened by Phèdre, whose moment of confession and blinding truth-telling has been enabled by her taking a detour to death, 'un chemin plus lent' (l. 1636), poison instead of the blade. But the thread of causality does not stop there, for, alone among writers, ancient and modern, of the tragedy of Phèdre, Racine has supplied a source for the poison which she takes: the barbarian sorceress and princess, Medea.¹⁵

Medea is an embodiment of the etymology of error. The well-known story of her vagabond existence takes her from her homeland in Asia Minor, trailing death and downfall, across the Mediterranean, performing further misdeeds, to Corinth, scene of her infamous infanticide, to Athens, bringing her poison with her.¹⁶ At this point, we pick up the story that Racine's preface acknowledges from Plutarch: Aegeus, King of Athens, had offered to protect Medea in exchange for her magical aid in ending his state of childlessness. But, unknown to Aegeus, he already has a son. This is Theseus, famous for his deeds of heroism and seduction, who makes his way from his native Troezen to Athens, which is in the midst of great political turmoil. Aegeus is suspicious of the stranger and agrees to let Medea poison him at a banquet. But when Theseus draws his sword to cut the meat, Aegeus recognizes it as the very sword he had left long ago in Troezen for his unborn child, and he dashes the cup of poison from Theseus's hand. Medea leaves Athens.

So, the story of Medea in Athens and the story of Phèdre in Troezen are profoundly permeable to each other's motifs. In each, there is a baleful stepmother; there is a mainly, although not wholly, virtuous stepson; there is the sword that offers itself as a certain kind of proof; and there is, finally, poison. The event

¹⁴ For a reading of this scene, see my *Towards a Cultural Philology: Phèdre and the Construction of 'Racine'* (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, 1999).

¹⁵ The poisoning of Phèdre is not unique to Racine's version of the play, but its attribution to Medea is; see Claude Francis, *Les Métamorphoses de Phèdre dans la littérature française* (Québec: Pélican, 1967). Additional comparatist studies of *Phèdre* include Hans Schmitz, *Die Bearbeitung der Phaedra-Hippolytus-Sage durch die französischen Dichter vor Racine* (Leipzig: Fock, 1915); Charles Dédéyan, *Racine et sa Phèdre*, 2nd edn (Paris: Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1978); Jean Pommier, *Aspects de Racine suivi de l'histoire* (Paris: Nizet, 1954), pp. 331–417.

¹⁶ On Medea, see Léon Mallinger, *Médée: Étude de littérature comparée* (1897; repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1971); Seneca: *Three Tragedies*, ed. by Frederick Ahl (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 107–11; most recently, *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, ed. by James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Ruth Morse, *The Medieval Medea* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996).

structure of the Medea plot is attempted poisoning—sword recognition. That of the Phèdre plot is attempted seduction—sword recognition, and the parallelism of the two failed attempts is suggested by Phèdre's description of her 'fol amour' as 'poison' (ll. 675–76). But in being sent from Athens, or brought to Troezen, the poison's address is precisely reversed. Destined by the stepmother for the stepson, it is now the stepmother herself who is its final addressee. What is effected, on the level of the plot, by Racine's specification of the poison as Medean is the activation of a cascading sequence of reversals. Phèdre's attempted seduction is not material, but metaphorical poison; Theseus's recognition of the sword does not save his son but condemns him. And the poison destined for the stepson circulates through the themes of the stories of Medea and Phèdre until it finds its final victim in the stepmother herself.¹⁷

But this mythic interlock produced by the reference to Medea is, to my mind, too satisfyingly tight. Tragedy is never, or never just, a closed thematic hydraulics, and the most basic claim of the allegorical readings of *Phèdre* is that the tragedy escapes the stage to attain both the unspoken guilt and the career path of Jean Racine. Now I have called Medea the embodiment of an etymology, the one who errs. As such, her name would be Errance and she would be, in other words, an allegory, or at least allegorical movement, a movement that continues in her poison after her departure from the plot.¹⁸ The conclusion would then be that the enlightening of Thésée's error has been produced by Error itself in a double sense, both cases of which come to rest on poison. First, Phèdre's confession has been enabled by a detour, the 'chemin plus lent', poison instead of the blade. Secondly, that poison itself has been errant. It has come, like its carrier, from elsewhere. This would be a first aspect of poison's epistemology: as a metonym for Medea herself, poison participates in the error of her ways. This notion that error comes from elsewhere is reinforced by the entry in Furetière, which defines that elsewhere not as a foreign land but rather as the imagination: 'L'erreur ne vient jamais de l'entendement pur, mais de l'imagination qui lorsqu'elle se trompe, regarde comme différentes des choses qui sont les mêmes, ou comme les mêmes celles qui sont différentes.' Further, this notion of imagination as the elsewhere from which error arises recalls Pascal's great fragment on 'Imagination', 'cette partie dominante dans l'homme, cette maîtresse d'erreur et de fausseté'.¹⁹

As for Racine's confession, it seems that if he, like Thésée, has been enlightened on the subject of his own error, then this enlightenment has been enabled by error itself. The condition enabling confession is poison. As error, poison originates abroad. But the 'abroad' of error, it seems, is to be found in the stock of images that is the imagination. In this connection, it is certainly worth remembering Pascal's position on the status of imagination as productive of 'une erreur nécessaire'. Could Racine here be confessing, but to an error that is somehow necessary? In order to pursue this question, we might turn to the biographical and genre-historical

¹⁷ Further on thematics, see Ronald W. Tobin, '“Les Trachiniennes” et “Phèdre”: D'un poison à l'autre', in *Ouverture et dialogue: Mélanges offerts à Wolfgang Iser*, ed. by Ulrich Döring and others (Tübingen: Narr, 1988), pp. 421–27 (p. 426).

¹⁸ Allegorical movement is analysed as 'progress', one of the two basic forms of allegory, and one based in part on allegorical interpretations of the *Argonautica*, in Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 151.

¹⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Louis Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1963), no. 44; *Pensées*, ed. by Philippe Sellier (Paris: Garnier, 1991), no. 78.

considerations that an allegorical reading addresses: that is, to Racine's break with Port-Royal and the Querelle des Imaginaires.

In January, 1666, Racine published an anonymous response to the 'Lettres sur l'Hérésie Imaginaire'.²⁰ Their author was Pierre Nicole, and the letters were meant to convince the public that the heresy imputed to the Jansenists existed only in the imaginations of their enemies. Nicole's polemic includes this famous attack on the theatre, which uses the rhetoric of poison, peril, and perduration:

Un faiseur de romans et un poète de théâtre est un empoisonneur public, non des corps, mais des âmes des fidèles, qui se doit regarder comme coupable d'une infinité d'homicides spirituels, ou qu'il a causés en effet ou qu'il a pu causer par ses écrits pernicieux. [. . .] Ces sortes de péchés sont d'autant plus effroyables qu'ils sont toujours subsistants, parce que ces livres ne périssent pas, et qu'ils répandent toujours le même venin dans ceux qui les lisent. (Picard, II, 13)

Racine's reason for taking it upon himself to respond to Nicole, and the modalities within which he chose to respond, have puzzled Racine's readers from that day to this. There seems to have been no specific reason for him to have felt himself to be singled out for personal criticism by Nicole's attack. Indeed, his son Louis will write that this exchange of letters was 'une querelle qui ne le regardait pas'.²¹ Picard is astonished that Racine's defence of the theatre is so lacking in force: 'Tous ses arguments sont étrangement superficiels; [. . .] il faut ici s'étonner de la méchanceté concentrée de Racine, qui attaque les personnes, et non point les idées' (II, 14).

It has more recently been suggested, however, that this quarrel, ostensibly and overtly about the theatre, may in fact have been much more about Pascal (see Thirouin, above). That is, Racine's arguments may seem superficial, his motivation unclear, because what is at stake in his exchange with Nicole is a competition to occupy the place left vacant by the Pascal of the *Provinciales*. Racine is less concerned to defend the theatre than he is to become Pascal, the master rhetorician who, by means of agreeable and seductive rhetoric, persuades the public of his cause, and to deny this place to Nicole. Racine's stance, accordingly, is conditioned from the outset by the necessity of eloquence. His first letter begins, 'J'ai lu jusqu'ici vos lettres avec assez d'indifférence, quelquefois avec plaisir, quelquefois avec dégoût, selon qu'elles me semblaient bien ou mal écrites' (II, 18); he moves immediately to denounce the pretension of taking the place of Pascal: 'Je remarquais que vous prétendiez prendre la place de l'auteur des *Petites Lettres*; mais je remarquais en même temps que vous étiez beaucoup au-dessous de lui, et qu'il y avait une grande différence entre une *Provinciale* et une *Imaginaire*.' This is a point to which Racine's letters return (II, 24, 27). The stakes, in other words, are symbolic (who will occupy the place of Pascal?), the concerns meta-polemical: the object of the discussion is not the apparent subject of the debate but rather rhetorical superiority itself.

So, Racine's ambition here is not to claim the place that has been denounced by Nicole, of the 'faiseur de romans' or, certainly, the 'poète de théâtre'. Rather,

²⁰ For the chronology and context of the publication history, see Laurent Thirouin, 'Les *Provinciales* comme modèle polémique: la Querelle des Imaginaires', in *Ordre et contestation au temps des classiques*, ed. by Roger Duchêne and Pierre Ronzeaud, 2 vols (Paris, Seattle, WA, and Tübingen: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1992), I, 75–92; *Œuvres de J. Racine*, ed. by Paul Mesnard, 9 vols, 2nd edn (Paris: Hachette, 1886), IV, 257–76. For the text of the letters and responses to them, see Mesnard, IV, 277–343; Racine's letters only are in the Picard edn (see note 12), II, 13–31.

²¹ Louis Racine, *Mémoires contenant quelques particularités sur la vie et les ouvrages de Jean Racine* (1747), in Picard, I, 41.

Racine attempts here to trump Nicole as a polemicist. The stakes are rhetorical, and the battle is fought out on the level of the image, that imagination to which the very denunciation of the imagination by the Pascal of the *Pensées* has recourse: the imagination is a 'maîtresse', before whom, sadly, 'La raison a beau crier, elle ne peut mettre le prix aux choses'.

Now the image over which, it seems, Racine was most concerned to assert his mastery is contained in Nicole's rhetoric of public poison and permanent venom. If it is the case that the polemic about the theatre here serves only as a platform for a different kind of contestation, then readers following Louis Racine have been a little too credulous in finding an act of conscience in his father's response. But Louis nevertheless is specific about the fact that his father's reaction was to the accusation of poisoning:

Mon père, à qui sa conscience reprochait des occupations qu'on regardait à Port-Royal comme très criminelles, se persuada que ces paroles n'avaient été écrites que contre lui, et qu'il était celui qu'on appelait un empoisonneur public. (Picard, I, 42)

It is this specific charge that Racine quotes in his 'Lettre' (II, 19), and it is this specific charge he seems particularly concerned to turn back against Nicole: referring to the fact that Le Maître de Saci had translated three comedies of Terence, and, what is more, had claimed that they were 'très honnêtes', Racine observes, 'Ainsi vous voilà vous-mêmes au rang des empoisonneurs' (II, 21).

About what happens next there is little disagreement among Racine's readers. For ten years, he writes successful and sometimes profoundly interesting plays, prepares the first edition of his complete works for the stage, and then, in 1676, writes the play which, as the allegorical readings claim, represents the confession of his sins and his taking leave of profane tragedy in the suicide of *Phèdre*. From the accusation of Nicole to the contrition of *Phèdre*, that is, Racine's career is defined by his gradual realization that Nicole had been right all along about the theatre. Fumaroli does not make a connection between the *Imaginaires* and Racine's unprecedented move of supplying a reference to an 'empoisonneuse publique' in the closing lines of the tragedy. Instead, he implies that this is a moment of anamnesis linking *Phèdre* to Corneille's *Médée*. Mauron does make the connection with the *Imaginaires*, but in passing (p. 252). Either way, the conclusion is much the same: the spiritual and psychic biography of Jean Racine may be read in the end of *Phèdre*, and the news is not good for the profane tragic stage. It has all been a scandal, an error, 'criminel', as Fumaroli puts it. Recognizing his error, 'éclairci', Racine moves on.

I would suggest, however, that the resurfacing of the image of the public poisoner at the end of *Phèdre* is about the theatre in much the same way as the discussion of the *Imaginaires* was about the theatre. The allegorical readings of this final scene argue very plausibly that Racine's own tragic muse is here being put to death. The theatre is certainly the overt subject of the discussion. But if discussion this is, if Racine's final word on his profane theatre may be understood as a continuation of the polemic in which he engaged with Nicole, then that polemic has as its subject generally a contest for rhetorical superiority, and specifically a test of how, why, and by whom the image shall be controlled. In this sense, it is a virtuoso move by Racine, for the confession of *Phèdre* is enabled by the manipulation of one particular image of error itself. This may well be Pascal's 'erreur nécessaire', the image without

which an argument against the imagination, source of error, cannot be mounted. What Racine is demonstrating at this moment is not, or not only, that he has become his Phèdre and intends to die to the profane stage. It is also not, or not only, that he has become Medea, thus owning up at last to his own despicable status of 'poète de théâtre', a dangerous public poisoner. Instead, it is that he has become the one who demonstrates that one requirement of truth ('Il n'était point coupable') is the prior existence of error, 'Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes'.

We should then be alert to a kind of discursive conclusiveness about *Phèdre* that would interact with the allegorical conclusiveness noticed by attentive readers. It is an oblique moment, dropped into a biographical trajectory that is far from simple in its relationship to Port-Royal. We know that Racine asked to be buried at Port-Royal in spite of the scandals of his past; we know as well that, towards the end of his life, he protested to Mme de Maintenon that in writing two entire sacred tragedies for her, at least three thousand lines of poetry, not one single passage of his work betrayed 'l'erreur [. . .] qui s'appelle jansénisme'.²² Scholars have not even agreed that Racine's preface to *Phèdre*, with its explicit reference to 'quantité de personnes célèbres par leur piété et par leur doctrine', addresses his tragedy to Port-Royal. H. Carrington Lancaster thought that it might well refer to the prelates of the court,²³ and Roy C. Knight once cast doubt not only upon the preface's sincerity but also upon the very possibility that Racine's public theatre could attain the moralizing goal here set for it.²⁴ However, if the preface's last paragraph, its 'reste' ('Au reste, . . .'), is read as an address to Port-Royal, then its closing words read like an urgent continuation of the *Imaginaires*, as affect-laden as though more than a decade had not intervened. Accordingly, another way in which to express the force of the reference to Medea would be: if one kind of truth is discursive, then it is a function of rhetorical considerations. To communicate its truth, *Phèdre* must in the first place, Racine is saying, attract an audience, and then that audience must be taken on a detour, led down the path of the imagination, 'maîtresse d'erreur et de fausseté'.

The force of 'un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes' is then arguably double. It is in the first place fully determined in the field of polemic, in which it serves triumphantly to conclude the *Querelle des Imaginaires*. It does this substantively, pointing up the necessity of Nicole's old formulation of the 'empoisonneur public' to the tragedy's ending truth. But we could certainly say in addition, following on from the readings of Mauron, Fumaroli, and Gearhart, that Racine's poisoning of Phèdre via Medea is fully determined as well in the field of allegory, in which, as etymological error, Errance, Medea is the 'erreur nécessaire' who allows Racine's own tragic muse to die in freedom. This double determination, or overdetermination, is one answer to the question of how it is possible to be too enlightened, 'trop éclaircis'.

But these formulations of overdetermination and of dying in freedom are of course a reversion to or a spring towards biographical and theoretical concerns of Freud. Is there not a specifically early modern structure within which this doubled

²² Letter of 4 March 1698, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil), pp. 525–26 (p. 526).

²³ *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century*. Part IV: The Period of Racine 1673–1700 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; London: Milford; Oxford: Oxford University Press; Paris: Belles-Lettres, 1940), I, 122.

²⁴ *Racine et la Grèce* (Paris: Boivin, n.d.) pp. 334–67 (pp. 342, 365–67).

point of the tragedy's language may be understood? I would argue that the recuperation of emphasis upon the tragedy's polemic enables us to understand the status of its language as responding to a certain kind of Port-Royalist thinking about the sign. That is, the heritage of allegory is exegetical, its most ancient assumption, that it is 'a human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language which tries to preserve the remoteness of a properly veiled godhead' (Fletcher, p. 210). Allegory, in other words, is a symbolic mode of the discourse of God to man, while polemic, with its necessary concern for the public, is the discourse of man to man. In Racine's *Medea*, we may observe this doubled structure, which corresponds to the internal, Pascalian, critique of the Port-Royal *Logique* that Louis Marin once identified in *La Critique du discours* (Paris: Minuit, 1975). It is no accident, I would say, that the text that supports much of the weight of Marin's analysis, the 'Entretien avec M. De Saci',²⁵ is concerned first with the slippage from the discourse of man to man (that is, philosophy) to the discourse Marin calls 'de/sur Dieu' (that is, theology) and, secondly, takes poison and the detour as the images of that slippage. It is Marin who places the emphasis upon Pascal's apology to Saci, and who argues that the movement of displacement and substitution in question is named by Pascal, 'insensiblement': 'Je vous demande pardon, Monsieur, dit M. Pascal à M. De Saci, de m'emporter ainsi devant vous dans la théologie, au lieu de demeurer dans la philosophie qui était seule mon sujet; mais il m'y a conduit insensiblement' (p. 296). This 'insensiblement', this vibration of the sign between man and God, is the slippage that Marin both patiently and energetically analysed, in the *Critique* and in numerous works that were to follow. Among those who think about the problem of allegory, the slippage was called 'somehow' ('But somehow this literal surface suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention, [. . .] a structure that lends itself to a secondary reading' (Fletcher, p. 7)) until de Man carried the project of allegorical thinking to the level of the text, and so transformed it.²⁶ But to one particular contemporary of Pascal, his interlocutor Le Maître de Saci, this slippage was precisely called poison: 'Il [Saci] lui dit qu'il [Pascal] ressemblait à ces médecins habiles qui, par la manière adroite de préparer les plus grands poisons, en savent tirer les plus grands remèdes', and the narrator of the 'Entretien' formulated this slippage as a detour, the delaying of a certain kind of arrival, not of the infamous witch, not of the dying queen, but of Pascal himself, 'M. De Saci y étant arrivé tout d'un coup par la claire vue du Christianisme, et M. Pascal n'y étant arrivé qu'après beaucoup de détours, en s'attachant aux principes de ces philosophes' (p. 297).

In taking a detour to truth via an errant poison, Racine's *Phèdre* follows an itinerary that was precisely formulated by his own contemporaries as Pascalian. On Racine's part, this represents the last word of a famous quarrel, and, at the same time, a defence that writes itself by virtue of the sign's structure. The nature of the 'scandales' of Racine's greatest tragic theatre, and thus the status of his gesture of renunciation, is accordingly not to be understood, as Fumaroli once argued, as criminal confession, but rather as strictly apologetic. Its epistemology is aporetic, depending that is, upon error for its truth. The problem presented by the attempt to

²⁵ Pascal, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), pp. 291–97. For textual criticism of the 'Entretien', see *Entretien avec M. De Sacy sur Épictète et Montaigne*, ed. by Pascale Mengotti-Thouvenin and Jean Mesnard (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1994), and Henri Gouhier, *Blaise Pascal: Commentaires* (Paris: Vrin, 1971), pp. 67–82.

²⁶ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

develop a 'reading' of *Phèdre*, that it is both deeply secular and deeply sacred at the same time, is perhaps not a problem any more than is the sign a problem. Rather, the chasm of the sign, 'absence et présence, plaisir et déplaisir', is the sign's, and the tragedy's, engine.

However, as for the attempt to toss away Freudian notions as they may be understood with respect to the Racinian text in favour of an understanding demonstrably contemporary with that text itself, it might well be noted that Louis Marin, who has given one of the most profound and persuasive readings of the Port-Royalist sign, has been called 'a staunchly Freudian historian',²⁷ and that one of the most enduring formulations of thinking on allegory prior to de Man includes a chapter on 'Psychoanalytic Analogues: Obsession and Compulsion' (Fletcher, pp. 279–303). Freud's Rat Man, according to Fletcher, provides a model for thinking about the allegorical level. But it is Freud's grandson who may provide a model for the doubled logic of tragedy and psychoanalysis. His Fort-Da game involved, according to Freud, a division into acts, a curtain, and, precisely, the staging of joyous appearances and troubling disappearances.²⁸ Tragedy is the gap between the plaything and the mother of the Freudian text.

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²⁷ Louis Marin, *The Portrait of the King*, ed. by Tom Conley, trans. by Martha M. Houle (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. viii.

²⁸ 'Jenseits des Lustprinzips', in *Studienausgabe*, ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, and James Strachey, 11 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1982), III, 211–72 (p. 225).