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# **Aesthetics and Ideology in the Development of "Character" in Theater**

James R. Hamilton

What I am going to present to you today is a synoptic version of one in a series of investigations I have been conducting. In each I take the view that theater history is best undertaken when we see theater developing not just alongside of but in connection with religious, moral, and political developments in our intellectual and social history. My philosophical interests are connected with certain tasks confronting anyone who would attempt to write an intellectual history of theater. And I thought that I would preface my remarks today with a brief introduction concerning theater history and the nature of my interests in it.

Theater is often described as the most social of the arts. This description could hardly have been uttered until after the mid 1700's when, with the decline of the patronage system, most of the arts had begun to be rethought in universal rather than partisan terms. Nevertheless, I believe that theater is peculiarly social; but I also think it is not always obvious what that means. What I take it to mean is best brought out by first considering what happens in theater as analogous to what happens when one hears a joke. With jokes there are three possibilities: you may get the point and laugh; you may see the point but not find it funny; or you may not see the point at all and, far from laughing, find yourself somewhat perplexed. No doubt there are deep psychological, maybe even genetic, explanations for the general fact that human beings laugh and cats, for example, don't. But to understand what is involved in our getting and laughing at a joke, we need a different sort of explanation, one that would emerge when we look at what is going on when we do not. And clearly this is often a function of our social beliefs and attitudes. Someone who gets but does not find funny a joke whose point turns on a racial or a gender slur is someone who believes these things are demeaning. And some people simply do not think about other human beings in ways that allow them even to see the point of such jokes, let alone laugh. Analogously some theater may rely on social beliefs and attitudes sufficiently different from yours that, while you may see some point there perhaps, you do not "respond" to it, it does not "speak to" you, or you do not find it a "satisfying theatrical experience." And some theater may rely on shared beliefs and attitudes so remote from yours that you simply do not "get it" at all.

This is a nice analogy. But it also has two obvious failings. On the one hand, it actually underemphasizes the depth of theater's

involvement in social beliefs and attitudes. After all, even when such beliefs and attitudes are assumed in a theater piece (part of the conventions to be accepted), they are still much more present to us in theater than they are in jokes because they are embodied and enacted (in gesture, dress, stance and movement) before our very eyes. On the other hand, the analogy may seem to overemphasize social matters because it ignores how much our response to a theater piece may be shaped by our knowledge of matters aesthetic, of particularly theatrical traditions. I suspect that it is only infrequently that we can get a joke only if we see it as belonging to a tradition of joke-construction. (Limericks would be an *exception*.) But it is often the case that our reaction to a theater work is strongly conditioned by expectations that are rooted in our knowledge of the theatrical tradition that it stands in (or against).

Now, since there have been significant changes both in social beliefs and attitudes and in the aesthetic traditions of theater we might well suppose that a fair amount of theater is no longer accessible to us in the way in which it was accessible to its contemporary audiences. So there is plenty of work for the writer of an intellectual history of theater; s/he is very like someone whose job it is to explain the point of jokes that we no longer "get." I think of this historian's task as intrinsically important. But our previous reflections suggest a question that gives to the task a good deal more than antiquarian interest (however intrinsic its importance). For it appears that the writer of such a history must ask what the connection is, at particular moments, between the social beliefs and attitudes expressed or assumed in a theater work and the more nearly aesthetic choices which shaped the work and made it work theatrically.

"But need this be done only in terms of particular moments?" the philosopher asks. "Is it not possible to discover what sort of connection this is — indeed must be — in general?" My own instincts tell me not to follow the philosopher here. Although I am interested in the sort of connection this is, I suspect that it is not always the same sort of connection at different times. And so, I am conducting a series of investigations, a series of probes into that history in an attempt to treat these issues directly and for their own sake. What follows is a synopsis of the material I am considering in one such probe.

In Ch. VI of the *Poetics* Aristotle argued that plot ('mythos') is the most essential "part" of the art of tragedy because, as he put it, "tragedy is not an imitation of men, *per se*, but of human action and life and happiness and misery." And, he went on, "Both happiness and misery consist in a kind of action, and the end of life is some action, not some quality." This position follows from three things in the *Poetics*. First there is the idea, articulated in Ch. IV, that imitation ('mimesis') is not sheer reproduction but a crucial element in learn-

ing. Second there is the postulate, at the beginning of Ch. II, that “[imitative] artists imitate actings of men...” And third, when one looks in the margins, so to speak, and especially at the material on ‘ethos’ in Ch. XV, one finds that Aristotle thought there was not much to learn about human character-traits (‘ethoi’) because all that was already given in the social order which, in turn, he thought of as given, as natural. (It is singularly instructive to note that his examples of improper presentation of ‘ethos’ concern women and slaves behaving like men.) Aristotle defined the presentation of character-traits as the showing “that agents are of a certain type” (i.e., social class) by “indicating [for each agent] what sort of things he chooses or rejects”. And his position on the relation of ‘ethos’ to plot (the arrangement of the incidents in the imitation of action) is summed up in these words in Ch. VI: “Poets do not, therefore, create action in order to imitate ‘ethos’; but ‘ethos’ is included on account of the action.”

Based on this position, and on his distinctive account of learning as the seeing of the universal (some principle) in the particulars, Aristotle went on to advocate the use of fairly specific theatrical conventions. I would like to mention five of these. (1) He argued that the incidents ought to be arranged so that each incident advanced (in a necessary or probable step) that single action that gave the plot its unity. Correlatively he censured the “episodic” plot. (2) He argued that the resolution of the plot should emerge through the incidents themselves; and therefore the gods should not be brought in to achieve this but only to relate incidents “outside the plot” which, being all-seeing, only they could know. (3) He argued that plots would best achieve the imitative function (of learning) if they presented an action which at first appeared to be happy (or miserable) and then, unexpectedly but also by a necessary or probable advance, was revealed really to be miserable (or happy). Plots so constructed he called “complex” — and those in which there was no “reversal incident” achieving this he called “simple.” (4) He argued that events which are “irrational or depraved” should not be presented unless they were necessary for and actually used in the plot. And (5) he argued that, since tragedy as a genre is concerned with horrible deeds, deeds that arouse “pity and fear,” it is better to present such things as being done by an agent who does not know her/his relation to the victim. This convention makes possible a recognition-reversal incident which best achieves the imitative function (of learning); while the other (where the agent does the deed knowingly) is merely repellent and spectacular, not capable of arousing pity and fear.

I mention all this because, about one hundred years before Aristotle articulated it, Euripides was writing and producing a kind of theater quite antithetical to that which Aristotle advocated. And, apart from two short bits of relatively faint praise (for having his plots

end in misfortune, and for the plot of *Iphegenia at Tauris*), Aristotle consistently criticizes Euripides for "managing things badly." Indeed Euripides managed consistently to violate every one of those five recommended conventions we have just reviewed. In the personal and political tragedies of the first twenty-two years of his thirty-three-year output the plots are episodic (to say the least), the gods are very much part of the "action," there are no reversal incidents in the Aristotelean sense (but the term "simple" hardly applies to his plots either), his agents do and/or cause horrible deeds knowing full well what and to whom they are doing, and Euripides seems to have been quite taken with the irrational and the depraved without much concern for their function in plot-construction. And the reason for this is not that Euripides was a bad playwright who did not understand what worked well in theater. Rather it is that he had a different aesthetic for the theater. At least until shortly after 415 B.C. when *Iphegenia at Tauris* was presented and he began writing what we might well call "melodramas" and "tragicomedies," it is 'ethos' not plot which is given primary emphasis in Euripides' theater.

Consider his *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.): From the outset it is obvious that the weight of emphasis is not given to the sheer telling of the story, with unexpected but necessary or probable reversals, and with each incident emerging out of its predecessor(s) in a stepwise advance of the story. For the first thing we witness is the goddess Aphrodite, alone onstage in the Prologue, telling us the entire story that is to come and that she is bringing it all to pass. Where the weight of emphasis is actually given in this play is revealed by what is presented in the first two episodes. The first episode presents us with Hippolytus and a chorus of huntsmen celebrating the hunt and worshipping at the statue of Artemis. When his servant warns him that it is arrogant to refuse to acknowledge Aphrodite, Hippolytus describes himself as "cold" towards any "goddess whose power reaches its zenith/when the bed's warm and the night's dark." And Hippolytus will remain arrogant, cold, chaste and disdainful of sexual passion throughout the play. Following a choral passage in which the chorus worries about the cause of Phaedra's rumored malady, Phaedra (Hippolytus' step-mother) is presented to us in the second episode. Unlike what we see of Hippolytus, what we witness of Phaedra from the outset is a person torn by conflicting impulses. When she first appears to us she is distracted about her clothes and her hair (nothing fits or looks right); then she expresses wild desire for the hunt; and finally she wakes up, so to speak, and is shamed by her own wild talk. And Euripides is careful to keep these conflicting traits in the focal point right through the long second half of the episode during which Phaedra confesses her love for Hippolytus to her Nurse. On the one hand, there is Phaedra as she once was and still would be, honorable and above all

reasonable. On the other, there is Phaedra as she now is, driven by desire. Her irrationality both indicates and describes this conflict. And, since Aphrodite has told us in the Prologue that she has sent this passion on Phaedra as the device by which she will make Hippolytus pay for refusing to worship her, we might say that Euripides has managed things very well indeed if his theater is what we might call the "theater of character-traits."

That kind of theater (which I believe continued to exist at least through Racine) features (a) an initial presentation of agents with clearly scribed character-traits and no subsequent character development or unveiling, together with (b) a presentation of an impossible situation for agents with such traits, then (c) an 'action' of the play that is really only the playing out of the outcome. And it is especially noteworthy that, in that theater, when agents are presented with divided impulses (as Euripides' Phaedra is) this is all "on the surface." That is, there is no presentation of ostensible, surface, impulses masking a real and explanatory impulse underneath; nor is the surface division of impulse presented as a symptom of underlying psychological factors. (This is part of what I meant about the absence of what we call "character development" or "unveiling".) But while these three features remain constant, the history of this kind of theater reveals an important set of variables. And the handling of those variables and of their interaction with these more constant features strongly suggest differences which are not purely aesthetic but are deeply involved in matters of ideology. The particular aesthetic variations, are: (d) that Euripides' plot-construction is "episodic," but that there is a movement in Seneca and Racine towards ever more "rationalized" plot-construction (towards a plot-construction that resembles that advocated by Aristotle); (e) that Euripides, Seneca, and Racine each make quite different use of moments when agents may be brought into confrontation; and (f) that, while Euripides and Seneca portray the outcome on a field of action which is open, public and exterior, Racine (especially in his *Phaedra*) portrays the outcome as primarily occurring and located *within* the central tragic agent.

Let us look at these aesthetic variations in some detail. First, Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Overall the plot appears not just "episodic" but divided in two. The first half concerns Hippolytus and Phaedra and has Phaedra committing suicide right at the halfway mark, even before Theseus arrives; and the second half is entirely taken up with Hippolytus and Theseus. And what integrates these two stories is a pure contrivance — Phaedra, rejected by Hippolytus, writes out an accusation that Hippolytus has raped her on a tablet that she then holds in her hand while hanging herself! Then too there is that other contrivance of having the Nurse mention a magical medicine at the end of the third episode: for it to work they need a thread from Hippolytus'

clothing or a piece of hair, etc. The use of this moment seems simply to give Euripides an excuse to send the Nurse "inside" to speak with Hippolytus; and this, in turn, allows Euripides to have the Nurse "spill the beans" to Hippolytus (much to the surprise and consternation of the listening Phaedra) in the fourth episode. From the point of view of Aristotelean rational plotting, it is simply perplexing that Euripides did not create a plausible reason for having Phaedra and Hippolytus meet and confront each other. Which brings us to the next point, the absence of a confrontation between Hippolytus and Phaedra. In that fourth episode, Phaedra overhears Hippolytus berating the Nurse offstage and then, when they do appear on stage, she continues just to stand there isolated while Hippolytus denounces her and the Nurse (indeed all women and sexual passion). She does not speak until he has left, and then only to drive out the Nurse and to steel herself for committing suicide and (falsely) accusing Hippolytus. Now, Euripides is capable of striking confrontation scenes — in this play there are argumentative confrontations between Hippolytus and the servant, Phaedra and the Nurse, Hippolytus and his father, Theseus. But here, just where we might expect one, he seems deliberately to have avoided it.

Seneca handled this material quite differently in his *Phaedra* (c.55 A.D.). His Phaedra confesses her love for Hippolytus to his face. Then, when Hippolytus rejects her and threatens to kill her, she begs for death at his hands — his response is to cast aside his sword in disdain. But, while Seneca adds this scene of confrontation between Hippolytus and Phaedra, he deletes the scene in which Theseus accuses Hippolytus and Hippolytus attempts to defend himself. Thus he handles the possibilities for confrontation quite differently. He also rationalized the plot. For example, Seneca adds the tale that Theseus is absent in search of illicit sex. This provides an opportunity, in the opening presentation of traits, for his Phaedra to display irrationality: she will resent Theseus' wayward lust and not see it as parallel to her own passion for Hippolytus, and she will unreasonably deduce from the fact that Theseus' adventure is in the underworld that he is dead. But this latter irrationality also does work in the plot by making it plausible that Phaedra herself should feel free to confront Hippolytus and bend him to her will. And then too there is that device of the sword. The magical medicine moment of Euripides' third episode is dropped; but the token from Hippolytus is picked up. Phaedra (who in this play dies at the end, not in the middle) will show the sword to Theseus as proof and identifying sign of her charge against Hippolytus. But then, after Theseus has cursed Hippolytus and Hippolytus has been killed by the sea-monster, Phaedra will re-enter, bearing the sword, exonerate Hippolytus and kill herself upon the sword.

These changes in the handling of confrontations and plot-construction are also reflected in the manner in which Seneca handles



the “constants” — the presentation of the agents’ traits, of the situation, and of the outcome. First, from the outset it is obvious that both the explanations for the presence of the traits and of the nature of the traits themselves are different. There is no Aphrodite here to tell us that Hippolytus is arrogantly and exclusively devoted to Artemis and that she has caused Phaedra to fall in love with him. (Nor, for that matter, does Artemis appear at the end — as she does in Euripides’ piece — to promise revenge against one of Aphrodite’s favorites.) Instead, Seneca’s Hippolytus is depicted as a beautiful and chaste youth. . . who happens to hate women (and he is not sure whether this is reasonable, instinct, or “causeless madness”). Second, let us notice this — Seneca is not much interested in making plain what the reason is. There is no scene, nor any other device for allowing Hippolytus’ hatred of women to emerge *with an explanation*. That hatred is not presented as arrogant, but just as a fact. Strategically it is less a setting out of Hippolytus’ traits and more a presentation of a part of the situation Phaedra confronts. Third, the irrationality of Phaedra’s response to the situation is not presented as a division between the impulse of desire and the impulse to be reasonable; instead her irrationality is presented as being in the nature of the state of desire, a state which is constantly contrasted with the calmer, more reasonable, Stoic attitude espoused by the Nurse (until the end of Act II) and by the Chorus (throughout). The moment with the clothes and hair is, in Euripides, our first view of Phaedra — and it prepares us to see Phaedra torn between desire and reason. In Seneca, it is used at the outset of Act II, after Phaedra has told the Nurse of her love for Hippolytus. In that scene it is made explicit that these are royal garments; the scene thus symbolizes how irrational Phaedra has already become, how far her desire has driven her — she is so far gone that she is rejecting her royal duties. And finally, all these factors contribute to a rather different technique for presenting the outcome. Euripides’ technique might well be described this way: first he sets forth both the agents’ traits (with an explanation of how they have come by them) and the situation; and then, by obvious artifice, he simply knocks over any impediments to the disaster. Seneca, in contrast, adds “motivation” by so humanizing the setup of the situation that his agents are much more active in bringing about the disaster.

But there is one variable that Euripides and Seneca treat quite similarly — the scene of the disaster, indeed of the playing out towards the disaster, is public. Even if Seneca’s Phaedra is guilty of something, and there is no hint of this in Euripides, still she is objectively guilty; her divisions of impulse are not expressions of guilt *feelings* nor, when she finally takes the stoic attitude at the end, does she suffer from *feelings* of guilt. Racine’s Phaedra exhibits both of these, a fact that makes his treatment of this material a giant step in the direction

of the "theater of character." Furthermore, Racine adds not just "more human" motivation but specifically more "psychological" motivation.

His play, like Seneca's, opens with Hippolytus. But it does so with significant changes. The hunt theme is dropped; Hippolytus is, instead, preparing to leave in search of Theseus. This provides an occasion for doubt as to the reasons for Theseus' absence. Hippolytus may be convinced that his father has seen the errors of his wayward youth; but that news is greeted skeptically by Hippolytus' confidante, Theramenes. However, no sooner is this raised than it gives way to a remarkable change in the story. Hippolytus is ashamed; he is ashamed because he has fallen in love with Aricia, who is the "last of a line that plotted Theseus' death" and whom Theseus has forbidden any man to marry. Indeed, Hippolytus is so ashamed that he cannot fully admit to it. This whole scene is pretty remarkable. First we note that, unlike our previous plays, doubt about an agent's motives is possible. Second, here an agent may express shame without its being either a sign of clashing demands of desire versus reason or a sign of the state of desire. In fact, given the rather lighthearted reaction of Theramenes, Hippolytus' shame looks like blushing youthful confusion, and nothing more. The sub-plot is a romance. But third, the introduction of this romantic sub-plot allows Racine to do a very striking thing later on. In Act IV, Scene IV, right after Theseus (in a reinstated but reworked accusation-defense scene) has cursed Hippolytus and driven him out, Phaedra comes to plead for Theseus to spare Hippolytus. Theseus tells Phaedra that Hippolytus has tried to clear himself by the stratagem of confessing love for Aricia. At that moment, Phaedra finally understands Hippolytus' rejection, is instantly jealous, and stops herself from saving Hippolytus. Where Seneca had one exoneration scene at the end, Racine has two: this first one is arrested by the onset of a sudden natural passion, the second one will be motivated by guilt. From the outset, then, and in its working out, Racine's *Phaedra* presents what seems to us a much more natural psychology than we find in Euripides' and Seneca's treatments. Doubt, shame, jealousy and guilt.

Nonetheless, this piece is still rooted firmly in the theater of character-traits (or at least in its Renaissance avatar, the theater of character-types). Each agent is presented to the audience initially just as s/he will remain throughout. Their traits are established and, if they chance to have a new feeling aroused (as Phaedra's jealous reaction shows), that new feeling is not an unveiling of some impulse heretofore hidden "underneath" but a natural response given the traits the agent already is depicted as having. Once the traits are assigned, Racine uses two techniques to take us to the outcome. The first is a gradual releasing of information (some of it false) as to the

situation. In this he is using high artifice, like Euripides (except that whereas Euripides removed impediments to the outcome, Racine withholds the information which leads to it). But it is the second technique that is most striking. Outdoing Seneca, who used Hippolytus' and Theseus' character-traits as part of the situation Phaedra was to confront, Racine's is a theater in which the situation for each of the agents is almost totally constituted by the traits of the other agents. This is why doubt as to others' traits plays such a dominant role in the piece. This is why Racine's treatment, far more than one finds in Euripides or Seneca, is a sequence of confrontation scenes between the agents. Not sure of each other, they must be brought together even if only to make grave errors in their assessments of each other. This, in turn, is why Racine's plotting appears even more rationalized than Seneca's -- Racine's need to bring two agents together is explicable in terms of their previous doubts. Thus, even though this is still an illustration of the theater of character-traits, it exhibits crucial ingredients of the theater of character, *per se*.

But, before we turn to that, let us look back over this brief survey of the theater of character-traits with a view to understanding why those convention-choices which are its features should have been made. The first question here is why character-traits should have been emphasized at all. After all, even if no one ever carried out Aristotle's particular program, it is surely possible to pick out theater (from Sophocles through Shakespeare) in which the emphasis is laid on conceptions of and problems about human action. The second question is why Euripides, Seneca, and Racine would have found natural those particular choices which gave to each's theater its distinctive shape.

(Earlier I asserted that here we would be involved in matters of ideology. By that word, I am referring to religious, moral and political beliefs which are assumed as givens by a people in their understanding of their lives but which may not be true at all and certainly are open to criticism. And with that in mind, let us turn to the issues directly.)

At first glance, Euripides' use of episodic structure may seem to us to be a purely aesthetic and, moreover, an idiosyncratic choice. And it certainly did distinguish his theater from that of his older contemporary, Sophocles. But it is important to note that both Sophocles and Euripides were working with and working out assumed beliefs in Athenian theology which could be seen to undermine, in a fairly radical way, that combination of official pietism and imperial militarism that was already being employed in Athens' justifications for its war with Sparta. But Sophocles (as I believe, despite Aristotle's rather different assessment) was probing beliefs about the metaphysical instability of human action and, hence, the lack of authority for it as well. And he made no explicit connection between that theological strain

and the intrinsic evils of militarism until his last play, *Oedipus at Colonus* (406 BC). Moreover, Sophocles' view on the instability of life and action was a two-edged sword: Thucydides (if we can believe him) describes the Athenians taking the very same position in their argument in 415 (with the leaders of Melos) in support of the legitimacy of sheer military power. Euripides' choice to emphasize 'ethos', and thus to use episodic structure so as to de-emphasize interest in plot and action, represents a rather different strategy, one indeed which turned out to be immune to having another face put on it. Euripides teased out a thread in Athenian theology which had it that each of the gods was to be served in his/her own coin. And, while most Athenians may well have believed one could quite reasonably serve all the gods, Euripides took the "own coin" idea literally and showed that it led to obsession and unreasoning folly. But folly, furthermore, requires victims. And this, I think, explains the absence of confrontation between Hippolytus and Phaedra. In his other confrontation scenes we are invited to see one agent in a better light than the other (although it may not be the ostensible winner of the argument). But Phaedra and Hippolytus are both portrayed as victims, each in her/his own way and part of the play. Euripides' choice avoids having us see one as more or less a victim than the other.

This overall strategy of connecting this theological belief with disastrous folly was clearly applied to Athenian militarism in Euripides' political tragedies (between 428 and 415). And that, together with his general sophistic skepticism, was to get Euripides into such political "hot water" that (even though he had already given up writing this kind of tragedy) he was forced to leave Athens around 408 BC.

Of course, once you know it's there, it is easy to see how the social-religious dimension informs Euripides' aesthetic choices. It is even easier to see this phenomenon in Seneca's theater. Seneca was perhaps better known in Europe, until well after the French Revolution, outside of theater and for his writings in Stoicism. Moreover, Seneca wrote in that period just before Stoicism made its inward turn and gave up its political program of egalitarian reform. The central ethical notion in stoicism is "obedience to nature." As a political ethic Stoicism held that citizens ought to obey the state because the existence of states is "natural," and that a state ought to treat its citizens fairly and equally because each citizen is a "natural" agent in her/his own regard. As a personal ethic Stoicism held that one should attempt to alter only what is in one's natural power to change; and, since one's circumstances (wealth, fame, or honor) are usually a function of the reaction of others to one (not, therefore, in one's own power to change) this usually meant that right-living was a matter of adjusting one's attitude towards acceptance of circumstance. With this in mind, I think we can see why Seneca was attracted to Euripides' plays and

why he reshaped the Euripidean material as he did.

On the one hand there are those obsessed irrational agents in Euripides' plays — just the sort of foils against which one could place another, a Stoic, conception of right-living. And, since Stoic life is a matter of choosing attitudes before actions, Euripides' theater was a far better model than was Sophocles'. On the other hand, the Athenian theological-political complex that Euripides exploited was alien to Seneca; and so too was the picture of obsessed agents as victims (however much they committed acts of folly). Therefore the gods were written out and the situation made more concretely human. The plots got rationalized, the moviation "humanized." This also explains why Seneca would add the confrontation between Phaedra and Hippolytus: it is done precisely to invite a comparative assessment between Phaedra and that part of her circumstance comprised by the traits of Hippolytus, something not in her power. The accusation-defense scene is dropped because Theseus and Hippolytus are both used as aspects of Phaedra's situation; and thus for Seneca the scene would be pointless. Finally we should also note that Euripides' strategy of taking the theology obsessively allows no room for choice once the situation is set up. Seneca's theater constantly leaves open the Stoic alternative even though here, in his *Phaedra*, it is not constantly advocated by some agent in the play. (This feature, by the way, emphasized the difficulty of the Stoic alternative, and of Phaedra's final correct choice; and it is what makes Seneca's *Phaedra* quite different from his reshaping of the *Medea*, a play that is almost pure polemic for Stoicism.)

While a social-political aspect in Seneca's theater is obvious, it is far less so in Racine's. Of course, there are obvious political preoccupations in Racine's *Phaedra*. The Nurse's attempt to persuade Phaedra to think of the political fate and prospects of her children occurs but once in Euripides' play; and only a little more is made of this in Seneca's. In Racine's it is a major element in the situation and is set up from the outset in the Aricia subplot. At issue is who will succeed Theseus if he really is dead: Aricia, Hippolytus, or Phaedra's oldest son. But while this question is used to turn the plot in several important places, this obvious reflection of 17th century French political life does not seem to be connected with those aesthetic features that distinguish Racine's theater of character-traits from those we have seen before. Instead, the extensive use of confrontations to resolve and to occasion mistaken assessments of traits, the use of agents with certain traits as constitutive of the situation that other agents face, and the emphasis on Phaedra's feelings (especially the picture of suffering as primarily *mental* anguish) are more certainly connected with that less obvious but equally powerful set of ideological assumptions concerning the status of the individual in the religious, metaphysical,

moral, psychological and political thought of the 17th century.

Consider Descartes for starters. His *Meditations*, for all its skepticism in the opening, is still a defense (albeit circuitous) of the rational foundations of empirical science. That such a defense was desperately needed is clear — the *Meditations* were published in 1642, one year after Galileo was forced to recant for the third time and then died. But what is just as striking about the *Meditations*, from an ideological point of view, is that it seemed natural to Descartes to have grounded epistemological certainty in the *mind* and that, not of God, but of a human *individual!* This is not unconnected with the fact that Machiavelli's earlier picture (1531) of right political action as the exercise of the will ('virtu') was taken, in the political thought of the 17th century, to mean that political authority was legitimated by and a function of the traits of a powerful individual. Nor is this unconnected with the central role of the individual in establishing religious doctrinal authority, an element present both in the Reformation theologies and in the Jansenist movement within Roman Catholicism. (And Racine was once and then later a Jansenist.) Nor is all this unconnected with the political and economic aspirations of the rising bourgeoisie class in nations or emerging nations whose political and economic forms (especially the tax structures) were still based on late feudal models. The "individual" as the source of all authority had been conceived and was a-borning (if not already born) when Racine produced his *Phaedra* in 1677.

Once our attention is focused in this direction, the distinctive aesthetic choices in Racine's theater seem very natural choices indeed. The situation an agent faces is, in this ideology, largely comprised of the traits of other agents. But since in this conception (at least after Descartes) the individual's mind is logically isolate and knowable only through the individual's "outer" behavior, there is room for an agent to make mistakes, possibly tragic mistakes, as to the traits another agent actually possesses and is exhibiting. And this is pretty interesting stuff to make dreams on. Indeed, when one does, it will also be natural to set the tragic action of the play in the mind of the central tragic agent. So Phaedra's suffering at the end is *mental* anguish, guilt. And her mode of physical dying, which no doubt is also a solution in a theater that raised aesthetic and moral objections to onstage violence, is still marvelously in keeping with the focus on the inner, isolate, individual — Racine's Phaedra poisons herself and dies from the poison working inside her, onstage.

Now, in retrospect, there is an obvious contradiction between this conception of "the individual" and the theater of character-traits. In fact there are several. First, if an individual is a logically isolate mind, (a) is it really possible to know another individual, and (b) can one honestly present an individual as knowable to the audience? The full

implications of this problem lay dormant in the tradition until this century. What was clearly seen, not long after Racine, was at least that one could not present an individual as knowable by *her/his traits*. Whatever general psychological laws might be discovered, in the ideology of individualism it seems false to draw agents in plays as *types*. And, as this view gets worked out in theater, the presentation of who a person is takes place in scenes revealing and/or relying on the particular psychological history of the individual. But let me note two historical facts. (1) These developments occurred gradually. Slowly, conventions of scribing the traits of agents gave way to conventions for displaying agents' eccentricities; and they, in turn, gave way to conventions for developing and unveiling "character" (a term that was first used in English in this way by Henry Fielding in the mid-1700s). (2) These developments took place largely in the background; for most theater between Racine and the mid-1800s emphasized action, or morals and manners, or reasoning and rhetoric rather than conceptions of and issues about motivation. But with Naturalism and Realism motivation was once more placed at center stage. And when it was, we discover, another contradiction within the ideology of individualism had already been sufficiently mapped out that the presentation of the contradiction itself was a convention of the new theater.

Interestingly, the convention and the contradiction are prefigured in Act III, Scene I, of Racine's *Phaedra*. At the conclusion of Act II, Hippolytus rejects Phaedra. She has confessed her love; and he, once he does begin to understand what she is saying and suggesting, becomes deeply embarrassed and ashamed. Act III opens with Phaedra refusing to put on royal dress, seeing herself as shamed, unreasoning, and above all self-deceiving. And then, in the very same scene, she turns right round and deceives herself into thinking she has a chance with Hippolytus! Of course the mistakes she makes here are pure Racine. She mistakes his embarrassment for youthful shyness and confusion. She mistakenly reasons that, since she has no rivals, the field is clear. And this second mistake, when corrected, gives rise to the jealous reaction that cost Hippolytus his life. But note this: the reason she thinks she has no rivals is that Hippolytus is "known" to hate all women! This is not Seneca's Phaedra who deludes herself into thinking Theseus is dead when she *ought* to know better. Racine's Phaedra deludes herself when she *does* know better (even though what she "knows" is actually false).

Consider: if the individual is logically isolate, and if the way one knows an individual is by observing her/his "outer" behavior, how does one know one's self? Descartes argued that this was immediate knowledge, and certain. But as soon as the question is posed, the issue is opened and no cozy answer seems to do. Indeed it becomes a crucial problem in the ideology of individualism (right up through Freud

and beyond) to give some satisfactory account of the phenomenon of self-deception so that we may have a coherent account of self-knowledge. And it may well be quite impossible to do so. But before that ugly thought was to rear its head in the theater, self-deception was thought to be merely symptomatic of something deeper and hidden but still accessible, if one knew how and where to look. And so the scene of self-deception became stock-in-trade in the theater of character. Ibsen, Checkov, Zola.

Whereas generally in Racine, agents' mistakes are mistakes about traits that are clearly and obviously there (the audience sees them), in Naturalism and Realism such mistakes (about others and oneself) are part of the human condition because what really is there is masked, hidden, or unclear from surface inspection. And since the real impulses are hidden they may also erupt to the surface in surprising and disastrous ways. It matters not whether these impulses are conceived of in psychological, genetic, or social Darwinian terms, the convention-choices (the strategies of presentation) that give the theater of character its distinctive aesthetic are rooted in the developing and increasingly fragmented ideology of individualism.

What happens next will have to wait for another investigation.

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