

## PHÈDRE AND OENONE

by Donald Norman Levin

Toward the end of the preface to his last secular tragedy Jean Racine explains the purpose which the composition of *Phèdre* was designed to serve:

Ce que je puis assurer, c'est que je n'en ai point fait où la vertu soit plus mise en jour que dans celle-ci; les moindres fautes y sont sévèrement punies: la seule pensée du crime y est regardée avec autant d'horreur que le crime même; les faiblesses de l'amour y passent pour de vraies faiblesses; les passions n'y sont présentées aux yeux que pour montrer tout le désordre dont elles sont causes; et le vice y est peint partout avec des couleurs qui en font connaître et haïr la difformité.

This statement smacks of Jansenism, of course. But the recluses of Port-Royal, under whose tutelage Racine had developed his taste for literature, regarded the contemporary theatre as a den of iniquity and their erstwhile pupil as an *empoisonneur publique*.<sup>1</sup> It is understandable, then, that one whose expressed desire was to reconcile tragedy *avec quantité de personnes célèbres par leur piété et par leur doctrine, qui l'ont condamnée dans ces derniers temps* would endeavor to show that not only his own dramatic writings, but also those of the pre-Christian ancients ("Leur théâtre était une école où la vertu n'était pas moins bien enseignée que dans les écoles des philosophes") were in accord with the austere morality of Port-Royal.

At any rate, we learn that none other than Antoine Arnauld himself, to whom Boileau had brought a copy of *Phèdre* and had read from the closing paragraph of the preface (after which he added some oral argumentation of his own), responded more or less favorably: "Si les choses sont comme il le dit, il a raison et la tragédie est innocente." Once he had time to examine the text thoroughly at his leisure, the great Jansenist announced that, apart from puzzlement over the leading male rôle ("Mais pourquoi a-t-il fait Hippolyte amoureux?"), he could find no fault with the moral content of the play:

Il n'y a rien à reprendre au caractère de sa Phèdre, puisque par ce caractère il nous donne cette grande leçon, que lorsqu'en punition de fautes précédentes,

Dieu nous abandonne à nous-mêmes, et à la perversité de notre coeur, il n'est point d'excès où nous ne puissions nous porter, même en les détestant.

With Boileau still acting as intermediary, an emotion-charged meeting was arranged between the playwright and the theologian: their revived friendship continued without interruption—insured, no doubt, by Racine's return to the Jansenist fold, the so-called "conversion" or "second conversion"—until Arnauld's death.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that Arnauld detected a great lesson in the play (and, of course, the nature of the lesson) has bolstered the conviction of those latter-day scholars for whom Racine's heroine is *Phèdre janséniste*. Though the dramatist even as he was making his start in the theatre had quarrelled in print with Arnauld's colleague and sometime collaborator (together they composed the famous *Logique de Port-Royal*) Pierre Nicole,<sup>3</sup> F. J. Tanquerey sees Racinian tragedy as a series of concrete exemplifications of Nicole's moral theory, that brand of Jansenism with which Racine was most intimately in touch.<sup>4</sup> Tanquerey neatly divides the tragedian's characters into two main categories. Among those who do *not* belong to the Jansenist world ("Chez eux la raison n'est pas aveugle, la volonté n'est pas l'esclave impuisante du coeur")<sup>5</sup> he lists Titus, Iphigénie, and Bajazet,<sup>6</sup> as well as a number of secondary figures: Burrhus, Xipharès, Hippolyte,<sup>7</sup> possibly Britannicus,<sup>8</sup> certainly Monime. "Cependant," adds Tanquerey, introducing the other category, "il est certain que les personnages qu'on considère comme les véritables héros de Racine et caractéristiques de son théâtre depuis Hermione jusqu'à Athalie, sont dans leurs grandes lignes très conformes aux théories de Nicole: ils sont tous des êtres entièrement dominés par leur affectivité, et par conséquent déséquilibrés."<sup>9</sup> His list includes three of the four principal figures from *Andromaque* (Pyrrhus, Hermione, Oreste),<sup>10</sup> two from *Britannicus* (Agrippine, Néron), as well as Roxane, Ériphile, and, of course, *Phèdre*.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, "most prudent scholars," so observes Henri Peyre, "would today avoid any mention of Racine's Jansenism in his lay dramas, *Phèdre* included."<sup>12</sup> Thus armed with prudence Peyre at one point can call Racine "the great Jansenist Frenchman,"<sup>13</sup> at another, having noted the contrast between the fickle coquettishness of Shakespeare's Cleopatra and the single-minded concentration of purpose which he sees demonstrated by Racine's *Phèdre*, can avoid applying the term "Jansenism" even as he draws the following conclusions:

A greater uncertainty hovers over the Shakespearian play. With Racine, fatality is more imperious: it has marked certain characters with a predestination to misfortune, and all their struggles against that inner fatality (which is that of heredity or their physiology stronger than their will power [prudent to the last, Peyre has omitted any express mention of "original sin"]) are foredoomed to frustration.<sup>14</sup>

But consider the approach adopted by Jean Cousin.<sup>15</sup> Noting that the preface to *Phèdre* was written *after* rather than before the initial performance, noting too that Boileau, as we have already mentioned, is said to have brought this preface at the proper time to the attention of Arnauld, he terminates his rather brief discourse with the suggestion that pure, unalloyed Jansenism is to be found *there* ("Cette préface est un chef-d'oeuvre diplomatique") rather than in the play itself. For in the play itself, Cousin has already contended, whereas stress on man's weakness (as opposed to his will) and on the fatality of passion may be Jansenistic, the fevers, obsessions, and hallucinations of Racine's heroine are to be found already in the pagan models which the French playwright followed.<sup>16</sup>

Recognizing the possibility that Cousin and Peyre may both be right in viewing Racinian prefatory remarks with suspicion—"His prefaces, into which too much has been read," complains the latter, "inform us but little about his esthetic views and still less about the genesis of his dramas"<sup>17</sup>—I should like to cite an anecdote of Mme de Lafayette which purports to explain how Racine came to write *Phèdre*:

Racine soutint qu'un bon poète pouvoit faire excuser les plus grands crimes, et même inspirer de la compassion pour les criminels. Il ajouta qu'il ne falloit que de la fécondité, de la délicatesse, de la justesse d'esprit pour diminuer tellement l'horreur des crimes de Médée ou de Phèdre, qu'on les rendroit aimables aux spectateurs au point de leur inspirer de la pitié pour les malheurs. Comme les assistants lui nièrent que cela fût possible, et qu'on voulut même le tourner en ridicule sur une opinion si extraordinaire, le dépit qu'il en eut le fit résoudre à entreprendre la tragédie de *Phèdre*, où il réussit si bien à faire plaindre ses malheurs que le spectateur a plus de pitié de la criminelle belle-mère que du vertueux Hippolyte.<sup>18</sup>

The authenticity of this astounding report has naturally not gone unchallenged. However, it is conceivable that if the preface was written *après coup*, as Cousin puts it, with a view toward mollifying Jansenist hostility, the tragedy itself could have been created to serve a purpose quite distinct from the pious didacticism asserted by the author in that portion of the preface which I quoted initially.

I do not mean, however, to impugn Racine's sincerity. Corresponding to the physical progression from the salon, where even a most worldly and sophisticated gathering was shocked at his utterance, via the quiet study and the noisy theatre to the reunion at Arnauld's chambers there may well have been a spiritual progression—or retrogression, if you prefer—from libertine attitudes back to the frame of mind which apparently antedated the emancipation from Port-Royal. Moreover it would have been during the two-year gestation of *Phèdre* rather than merely in the aftermath of the harassment administered by Pradon's partisans<sup>19</sup> that this inner change was taking place.

However, the disparity between what Racine allegedly said before undertaking the composition of the play and what he actually wrote into his preface afterward may not be so great as had appeared at first glance. In fact I am conscious of more than one element of the paradoxical. Whereas in the conversation heard by Mme de Lafayette the poet spoke of utilizing his talents to reduce the odium attached to certain crimes, in the preface he proclaims that his intention has been to make vice hateful and to invest the very thought of crime with as much horror as the crime itself. Yet if crime and vice have become more horrendous, the same is not true of the criminal. Both in the conversation and in the preface Racine indicates that the audience must be caused to sympathize with the tragic heroine. The heroine herself, therefore, has to become *aimable* (so the anecdote attests) or at least, as the poet states in the preface, *un peu moins odieuse qu'elle n'est dans les tragédies des anciens*. Paying obeisance perhaps as much to Aristotle as to Augustine and Jansenius, the author of *Phèdre* avers that his central figure, *engagée par sa destinée et par la colère des dieux* [there are those who in contexts such as this would understand the polytheistic plural as a Judaeo-Christian singular<sup>20</sup>] *dans une passion illégitime, dont elle a horreur toute la première*, is neither wholly guilty nor wholly innocent.

Still under the influence of Aristotle, whose strictures against dramatizing the downfall of a paragon (the audience will be moved to indignation rather than pity) he readily echoes,<sup>21</sup> Racine explains why he has modified likewise the ancient portrayal of Phèdre's stepson. No longer is the youth *un philosophe exempt de toute imperfection*. One may object that Racine—or at least those ancients who, he says, so reproached Euripides for having thus depicted Hippolyte—has failed to understand that the Euripidean hero is flawed in his very insistence on being virtuous in the extreme.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not he himself has really grasped the intentions of Euripides, the poet whom he so much admired and so frequently imitated,<sup>23</sup> Racine nevertheless counterfeits for Hippolyte *quelque faiblesse*<sup>24</sup> *qui le rendrait un peu coupable envers son père sans lui rien ôter de cette grandeur d'âme*<sup>25</sup> *avec laquelle il épargne l'honneur de Phèdre, et se laisse opprimer sans l'accuser*.<sup>26</sup>

What, then, is the *faiblesse* in question? Observe yet another paradox. Compared to the violent passions which rend Phèdre's soul, the unauthorized but chaste love of Hippolyte for Aricie, daughter and sister of his father's slain adversaries,<sup>27</sup> pales into ludicrous insignificance. When the young hero, still honorably reluctant to blacken Phèdre's name in order to clear his own, confesses to Thésée that the real object of his affections was not Phèdre, but Aricie, his angry parent, who deems adultery and incest<sup>28</sup> far more heinous than fraternization with the enemy, laughs the confession

out of court as a bungled attempt to elude the full weight of retribution through a spurious plea of guilty to a minor offense:

Tu l'aimes? ciel! Mais non, l'artifice est grossier:  
Tu te feins criminel pour te justifier.

(IV. ii. 1127 f.)

The noun *artifice* and the verb *feins* underscore the irony, in that they impute an approach wholly alien to Hippolyte's nature. Furthermore Thésée's reaction is not that of a man who finds his son only—if I may cite again the language of the author's preface—*un peu coupable*. Thus, paradoxically, what brings Hippolyte to his doom of banishment and lamentable death is not a real, but an imagined fault. Indeed, the youth's very substantial virtues have also contributed to his downfall. Like his Euripidean counterpart, whose very nobility of spirit laid him low, τὸ δ' εὐγενές σε τῶν φρενῶν ἀπώλεσεν (*Hippolytus* 1390<sup>29</sup>), he might have escaped harm, had he been willing to commit the very deed for which he has been wrongly charged. For then no false accusation would ever have reached Thésée's ears. Or again, guiltless but accused, Hippolyte might still have chosen to expose Phèdre rather than gallantly defend her by his silence. Not until it is too late to do any good—this, by the way, happens to be a post-Euripidean innovation of Seneca's—does Phèdre come forward to expose herself.<sup>30</sup>

I do not intend to belabor the recurrence in ancient literature, even including the *Old Testament*,<sup>31</sup> of the tale of the sensual matron who seeks to avenge the rebuff of her illicit amorous advances by picturing the reluctant male as the would-be seducer. What is new about the Racinian treatment of the theme is that the author, in his desire to render Phèdre *un peu moins odieuse*<sup>32</sup> and in his belief that calumny *avait quelque chose de trop bas et de trop noir pour la mettre dans la bouche d'une princesse qui a d'ailleurs des sentiments si nobles et si vertueux*, has shunted the onus from Phèdre herself to her nurse and confidante Oenone:

Cette bassesse m'a paru plus convenable à une nourrice, qui pouvait avoir des inclinations plus serviles, et qui néanmoins n'entreprend cette fausse accusation que pour sauver la vie et l'honneur de sa maîtresse.

In so doing Racine has converted a subordinate figure not into the protagonist, surely, but into the *sine qua non* of his tragic plot. Had Oenone not interfered, Phèdre might have quietly but honorably suffered through her remaining existence without ever having revealed the dark secret of her infatuation with Hippolyte. There would then have been no impetus for an embarrassing encounter between stepmother and stepson and consequently no declaration of love, no rebuff, no countervailing slander, no parental punishment, and no plea for divine retribution. Inasmuch as there would have been no pressing need for Hippolyte to make known his love for

Aricie, Thésée would not have scoffingly relayed to Phèdre what the youth had said, and Phèdre would not have grown jealous and thus refrained too long from making the confession which would have cleared Hippolyte of the false charges against him.<sup>33</sup> Finally everyone except Aricie's father and brothers—but their extirpation at Thésée's hands antedates the action of the play—would still be alive. No sea-monster created by Neptune at the behest of an outraged parent would have caused Hippolyte's horses to stampede and drag their master to a violent death. As a result Théràmène would lose his "big moment": for he would have no magnificently horrifying *récit* to deliver.<sup>34</sup> And neither would Phèdre have taken slow poison nor would Oenone, the obtuse "do-gooder" overwhelmed by forces which she herself has set in motion, have leapt suddenly into the sea with the vehement condemnation of the mistress whom she had tried so faithfully to serve still ringing in her ears:

Je ne t'écoute plus. Va-t'en, monstre exécration!<sup>35</sup>

Va, laisse-moi le soin de mon sort déplorable.

Puisse le juste ciel dignement te payer!

(IV. vi. 1317 ff.<sup>36</sup>)

Thanks to the nurse's meddling all these events have come to pass. The irony of it brings to mind the story of Oedipus. For just as that hero by virtue of his very efforts to avert the twin crimes of parricide and incest merely hastened his perpetration of both, so Oenone in a misguided and mismanaged effort to keep her mistress alive and undisgraced has ensured both Phèdre's death and Phèdre's dishonor.

In making Oenone's rôle so crucial to the drama Racine has possibly augmented one sort of verisimilitude at the cost of subverting another. I am not so convinced as he that a high-minded princess would be incapable of calumny. In the *Hippolytus* of Euripides there existed a sort of "division of labor" between mistress and nurse which corresponded to a difference in mentality and ethics. Euripides' nurse, for whom the concept of honor is utterly meaningless,<sup>37</sup> concerns herself only with deflecting her employer from bringing to completion an already announced plan of suicide. Failing to comprehend that what motivates the latter toward taking her own life is not the frustration of her sensual impulses, but the all too real possibility that her moral strength will prove inadequate to guard her from dishonoring and disgracing herself, the nurse undertakes a direct and wholly unauthorized embassy to Hippolytus. The predictable fiasco leads to a consequence which the nurse herself might have foreseen, had she been granted any real understanding of Phaedra's psyche. Suicide, which Phaedra hitherto had contemplated as the most feasible method of ending her torment without losing her good name, becomes not only inevitable, but doubly destructive. Fearing to face Theseus, now that Hippolytus knows all and is in a position

to denounce her—which neither Euripides' misogynist nor Racine's more gentlemanly hero ever does, please take note<sup>38</sup>—the heroine resolves irrevocably to do away with herself without delay. By contriving to be found with a slanderous suicide note on her person she posthumously keeps her own honor intact at the expense of her hapless and totally innocent stepson.

Or should we say that she has maintained only a semblance of honor? Racine, after all, found this behavior so objectionable that he refused to assign it to *his* noble heroine. Hence it should be no surprise that the Euripidean Phaedra's attitude as she composed the false note should find an echo not in the words of her Racinian counterpart, but rather in the shocking statements uttered by the latter's amoral would-be preserver and champion as she seeks to gain acquiescence for her scheme to accuse Hippolyte before Thésée:

Mais, puisque je vous perds sans ce triste remède,  
 Votre vie est pour moi d'un prix à qui tout cède:  
 (III. iii. 897 f.<sup>39</sup>)

. . . et pour sauver votre honneur combattu  
 Il faut immoler tout, et même la vertu.  
 (II. 907 f.)

Marcel Cressot sees in the striking opposition of *honneur* and *vertu* a sort of analogue to the aphoristic manner of La Rochefoucauld.<sup>40</sup> But the substance as well as the style of Oenone's declaration deserves scrutiny. This morality of expediency, of counselling that the end justifies the means and that it is of greater consequence to seem good than to be so, proves as repellent to Phèdre as it would to a Plato or a Socrates.<sup>41</sup> Though she has been goaded by Oenone into declaring Hippolyte a monster,<sup>42</sup> the proposal that she foil her stepson's expected next move by accusing him before he has a chance to accuse her arouses horrified astonishment: "Moi, que j'ose opprimer et noircir l'innocence!" (I. 893<sup>43</sup>). Even Oenone has misgivings: "Tremblante comme vous, j'en sens quelque remords" (I. 895). Nevertheless she demands and ultimately attains Phèdre's passive compliance in her intrigues. The emotionally shattered queen has no longer any will to resist. At the sight of father and son approaching together—note the contrast between Oenone's matter-of-fact announcement ("On vient: je vois Thésée") and her mistress' guilt-ridden response ("Ah! je vois Hippolyte: / Dans ses yeux insolents, je vois ma perte écrite") (909 and 909 f.)<sup>44</sup>—Phèdre lapses into total and abject languor. Bereft of the ability to make decisions, she grants "power of attorney" to Oenone:

Fais ce que tu voudras, je m'abandonne à toi.  
 Dans le trouble où je suis, je ne puis rien pour moi.  
 (II. 911 f.)

By contrast, Euripides' Phaedra stoutly rebuked the assertion on the part

of the nurse that saving her mistress' life outweighed all other considerations.<sup>45</sup> At that time, however, the situation had not yet become so desperate. There was not yet even a hint that it would become necessary to slander innocence in order to conceal one's own guilt. At issue instead was whether or not to arrange an interview for the purpose of acquainting the stepson with the fact that he has become the object of more than stepmotherly affection. Phaedra forbade any such revelation: *μή μοί τι Θησέως τῶνδε μηγύσης τόκωι* (520). Thinking that she knew better what had to be done, the nurse disobeyed and, as a result, set moving a disastrous train of events.<sup>46</sup> Only in this indirect and unexpected way, however, can she be considered responsible for the fatal libel against Hippolytus: the damning suicide note was Phaedra's invention, not hers.

Not only has Racine shifted responsibility for the false charge from the heroine—now become only a silent accomplice—to the nurse; he has also allowed the nobility of Phèdre's nature to reassert itself in a casting off of silence. Whereas in Euripides' play the belated exoneration of the unjustly accused youth is supplied by Artemis, the *dea ex machina*, in Racine's the heroine herself clears Hippolyte of guilt and lays bare her own malodorous rôle:

C'est moi qui sur ce fils chaste et respectueux  
Osai jeter un oeil profane, incestueux.  
(V. vii. 1623 f.)

Seneca's Phaedra, with whom the Phèdre of Racine ordinarily has less in common than with her Euripidean or even Ovidian prototype,<sup>47</sup> likewise confesses that the wrong person has been condemned and punished:

. . . uana punisti, pater,  
iuuenisque castus crimine incesto iacet,  
pudicus, insons . . .  
(*Phaedra*. 1194 ff.)

Clearly these verses of Seneca have provided not only the pattern for the revelations of Racine's remorseful heroine, but the vocabulary as well.<sup>48</sup> Even the paired adjectives "castus" and "incestus" are repeated by the French poet in his own tongue. However, whereas there can be little doubt concerning the significance of one of the two Latin terms, the other (which occurs often enough in Seneca's play, and usually with reference to Phaedra) is capable both of a generalized meaning, "lewd," "unclean," and of a more particular application corresponding to Racine's *incestueux*. Whether or not the *crimen incestum* from which the *castus iuuenis* has been tardily absolved consists in adultery only or in transgression of taboo as well,<sup>49</sup> the utterance of the Racinian Phèdre ought to be perfectly clear, as should that of Thésée, who, though his ire was misdirected as a result of

Oenone's tale-bearing, distinguished between the two offenses even as he excoriated his son for having committed both:

Va chercher des amis dont l'estime funeste  
Honore l'adultère, applaudisse à l'inceste.

(IV. ii. 1145 f.)

At the outset of this unfortunate interview Thésée had branded Hippolyte an adulterer only. Ironically it was the accused himself who first mentioned incest. Via the *castus-incestus* dichotomy later to be employed, as we have already noted, by Phèdre with reference to Hippolyte and to herself respectively he endeavored to demonstrate that one who is morally upright by inheritance and by training does not suddenly turn into a criminal:

Un jour seul ne fait point d'un mortel vertueux  
Un perfide assassin, un lâche incestueux.  
Élevé dans le sein d'un chaste héroïne,  
Je n'ai point de son sang démenti l'origine.  
Pitthée, estimé sage entre tous les humains,  
Daigna m'instruire encore au sortir de ses mains.

(II. 1099 ff.)

On the other hand, the family background of the woman with whom he allegedly sinned is so notorious that Hippolyte, stopping short of direct counter-accusation, need only mention bloodlines to call to mind such unspeakable crimes as that of Pasiphaë, who wantonly coupled with a bull to produce the minotaure, Phèdre's and Ariane's monstrous half brother:

Vous me parlez toujours d'inceste et d'adultère:  
Je me tais. Cependant Phèdre sort d'une mère,  
Phèdre est d'un sang, seigneur, vous le savez trop bien,  
De toutes ces horreurs plus rempli que le mien.

(II. 1149 ff.<sup>50</sup>)

Phèdre herself was only too conscious of the history of wrongly focussed eroticism which had plagued the women of her family. In response to the ceaseless prodding of Oenone, up to now mystified as to the cause of her agitation, the overwrought queen exclaimed that Pasiphaë and Ariane and she had been victimized each in turn by inimical divine forces:

PHÈDRE: O haine de Vénus! O fatale colère!  
Dans quels égarements l'amour jeta ma mère!  
OENONE: Oublions-les, madame; et qu'à tout l'avenir  
Un silence éternel cache ce souvenir.  
PHÈDRE: Ariane, ma soeur, de quel amour blessée  
Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée!  
OENONE: Que faites-vous, madame? et quel mortel ennui  
Contre tout votre sang vous anime aujourd'hui?  
PHÈDRE: Puisque Vénus le veut, de ce sang déplorable  
Je péris la dernière et la plus misérable.

(I. iii. 249 ff.)

"Aimez-vous?" asks Oenone forthwith. Once the identity of the beloved becomes known—and only a few suspense-filled verses strongly redolent of Euripides are needed to effect a revelation<sup>51</sup>—it is Oenone's turn to regard the tainted lineage of Phèdre with horror and dismay:

Juste ciel! tout mon sang dans mes veines se glace!  
O désespoir! ô crime! ô déplorable race!

(ll. 265 f.)

In allowing Phèdre herself to catalogue a climactic series of amorous dolours with her own as the culmination Racine has taken his cue not only from a stichomythic exchange between mistress and nurse in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides,

ΦΑΙΔΡΑ: ὦ τλη̄μον, οἶον, μη̄τερ, ἡράσθης ἔρον,  
ΤΡΟΦΟΣ: ὄν ἔσχε Ταύρου, τέκνον, ἢ τί φῆις τόδε;  
ΦΑΙΔΡΑ: σύ τ', ὦ τάλαιν' ὄμαιμε, Διονύσου δάμαρ,<sup>52</sup>  
ΤΡΟΦΟΣ: τέκνον, τί πάσχεις; συγγόνους κακορροθεῖς;  
ΦΑΙΔΡΑ: τρίτη δ' ἐγὼ δύστηνος ὡς ἀπόλλυμαι.

(ll. 337 ff.)

but also from the epistolary confession of Phaedra to Hippolytus included in Ovid's *Heroides*:

forsitan hunc generis fato reddamus amorem,  
et Venus ex tota gente tributa petat:  
Iuppiter Europen (primast ea gentis origo)  
dilexit, tauro dissimulante deum;  
Pasiphaë mater, decepto subdita tauro,  
enixast utero crimen onusque suo;  
perfidus Aegides, ducentia fila secutus,  
curua meae fugit tecta sororis ope.<sup>53</sup>  
en, ego nunc, ne forte parum Minoia credar,  
in socias leges ultima gentis eo!

(4. 53 ff.)

Whereas the nurse in the Euripidean tragedy had been forced to specify Pasiphaë's aberration as well as name the object of Phaedra's desires, Oenone counselled her mistress to conceal such painful facts and forget them. Ovid, however, makes his Phaedra conscious of a tendency toward odd forms of love on both sides of the family. Thus we learn not of one, but of two bulls: the genuine bovine who mated with Phaedra's mother, and Jove-in-disguise, amorous partner of Phaedra's grandmother Europa and progenitor of her father Minos.<sup>54</sup>

Racine and Ovid are in agreement nevertheless with regard to causation: the gods (specifically Venus) have singled out this royal line for punishment. There is no comparable mention in the passage from Euripides to which both later poets are indebted, though Venus' counterpart Aphrodite not only sets all the machinery in motion in Euripides' play, but also appears

on stage at the outset to inform the audience that she has done so in order to wreak vengeance on him who would dare refuse to acknowledge her sovereignty. However, the target of Aphrodite's wrath is not Phaedra and not Phaedra's family: it is Hippolytus. His blameless stepmother has been brought into this design of retribution merely as the unwitting tool:

ἦ δ' εὐκλεῆς μέν, ἀλλ' ὄμως ἀπόλλυται,  
 Φαίδρα· τὸ γὰρ τῆσδ' οὐ προτιμήσω κακὸν  
 τὸ μὴ οὐ παρασχεῖν τοὺς ἐμοὺς ἐχθροὺς ἐμοὶ  
 δίκην τοσαύτην ὥστ' ἐμοὶ καλῶς ἔχειν.

(ll. 47 ff.)

Divinity though she may be, Aphrodite maintains a standard of morality apparently indistinguishable from that of Racine's Oenone. The code followed by Artemis is scarcely any better.<sup>55</sup> Unable to thwart her rival's plans, the patron-goddess of Hippolytus vows to avenge bloodshed by striking down an innocent victim of her own choosing: Aphrodite's favorite, Adonis.<sup>56</sup>

However, we ought to draw an important distinction. Euripides' gods are amoral, but can foresee the consequences of their actions. Racine's Oenone is gifted with no such insight, though her amorality is comparable to theirs. Or is it? The deities portrayed by the Greek tragedian are ruthless; Oenone acts out of compassion. Yet this compassion achieves not its own humanitarian ends. Instead it serves only to further the completely opposite objectives of a higher ruthlessness which Racine defines sometimes as *le ciel*, sometimes as *les Dieux*, sometimes as *Vénus*.<sup>57</sup>

Have we come full circle back to Jansenism—or at least to Jansenism *cum* pagan fatalism? Possibly so. Most discussion of the subject centers, understandably, on the person of Phèdre herself. Yet the rôle of Oenone, in the absence of whose misconceived and less-than-divine intervention the heroine would never have reached her divinely appointed doom, ought not to be left out of account. That her love for Hippolyte is both adulterous and incestuous Phèdre knows perfectly well. Nevertheless, in the wake of the erroneous report of Thésée's death—which her ever-present confidante views not as a disaster (rather it is the later news that Thésée is alive and en route home which will be so regarded), but as a stroke of unexpected good fortune—she allows herself to be seduced by Oenone's arguments (political, in large measure)<sup>58</sup> into approaching Hippolyte directly: "Eh bien! à tes conseils je me laisse entraîner" (I. v. 363<sup>59</sup>).

Alas! with her usual faulty moral vision Phèdre's counsellor has discerned but a fraction of the problem. Conscious only that the removal of Thésée eliminates any technical charge of adultery, "Thésée en expirant vient de rompre les noeuds / Qui faisaient tout le crime et l'horreur de vos feux" (ll. 351 f.), she completely ignores the fact that the demise of him who is at

once husband and father will not render carnal connection between step-mother and stepson—or even the unfulfilled desire thereof<sup>60</sup>—any the less incestuous. Phèdre's consciousness of incest will return to plague her, but for the moment the heroine heeds the good intentions and poor advice of her nurse. Only from Oenone or from one as morally purblind as she could words such as these have come forth:

Vivez; vous n'avez plus de reproche à vous faire:  
 Votre flamme devient une flamme ordinaire.  
 (ll. 349 f.)

#### NOTES

1. Pierre Nicole had thus classified dramatic poets in general. But Racine had ired his mentor in the mid-1660's by calling into question the views set forth in the *Lettres sur l'hérésie imaginaire*. Racine's two *Lettres à l'auteur des hérésies imaginaires* as well as a number of *Réponses* from various individuals are collected in Vol. IV of the complete *Oeuvres de J. Racine*, ed. P. Mesnard (2nd edition, Paris, 1886), pp. 259-343.
2. This series of incidents is reported by the poet's son Louis, *Mémoires contenant quelques particularités sur la vie et les ouvrages de Jean Racine* (Lausanne and Geneva, 1747), I. 142 (or pp. 281 f. in the initial volume [Paris, 1886] of Mesnard's second edition of the elder Racine's works: for the full text of the *Mémoires* see pp. 207-364).
3. Cf. above, n. 1.
4. "Le jansénisme et les tragédies de Racine," *Revue des Cours et Conférences*, XXXVIII (1936-1937), 59-71; 152-165; 346-357; 457-468.
5. *Op. cit.*, p. 69.
6. Why has he not included Andromaque also?
7. I shall have to register an objection. Although Hippolyte is *subordinate* to Phèdre in Racine's treatment of the story, he is not *secondary* in the same sense as the other characters whom Tanqueray thus designates.
8. This time, despite the title assigned by the author, I am more inclined to accept Tanqueray's classification.
9. *Loc. cit.* (above, n. 5).
10. Concerning the fourth see above, n. 6.
11. Théramène, whom Tanqueray has not deigned to mention, clearly ought to be grouped along with his sane and sensible non-Jansenist secondary figures.
12. See pp. 82 f. of his "The Tragedy of Passion: Racine's *Phèdre*," *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*, ed. Cleanth Brooks (New Haven and London, 1955), pp. 77-106. No doubt it was very prudent, then, of H. P. Salomon (see the closing paragraph of his "*Phèdre* pièce janséniste?" *Cahiers Raciniens*, XV, i [1964], 54-64) to state that Phèdre—or rather *Phèdre*—*n'est pas plus janséniste que jésuite, pas plus chrétienne que grecque, mais janséniste, jésuite, chrétienne et païenne à la fois*.
13. *Op. cit.*, p. 106.
14. *Op. cit.*, p. 94. Later (p. 104) he observes that the French word *insatisfaction* ("frustration" is *not* an exact equivalent in English) better defines what he takes to be the dominant motive in *Phèdre*.
15. "Phèdre n'est point janséniste," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, XXXIX

- (1932), 391-396. Tanquerey (above, n. 4), p. 466, n. 2, lists what he takes to be Cousin's arguments and attacks each in turn.
16. *Op. cit.*, p. 394.
  17. *Op. cit.* (above, n. 12), p. 82.
  18. Recounted in turn by l'Abbé de St-Pierre (see l'Abbé de la Porte, *Anecdotes dramatiques*, II, 57 f., reprinted in Mesnard's *Notice* to the tragedy, *op. cit.* [above, n. 1], III [2nd edition, Paris, 1910], 263).
  19. Concerning the cabal which had, in effect, commissioned the poetaster Jacques Pradon to mount a rival *Phèdre et Hippolyte* with the express purpose of driving Racine's tragedy from the stage (ultimately the opposite occurred) and the subsequent "Querelle des sonnets à bouts rimés," see F. Deltour's old, but still valuable *Les ennemis de Racine* (Paris, 1859; 3d ed., 1879), Ch. 8, pp. 294-326. Cf. Mesnard, III, 248-260 (from the *Notice* to Racine's *Phèdre*).
  20. "Cela nous autorise-t-il," inquires R. C. Knight (p. 425 of his "Les dieux païens dans la tragédie française," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, LXIV [1964], 414-426), "à identifier les Dieux de Phèdre avec le Dieu de Racine?" Others assert rather than ask.
  21. Cf. Ch. 13 of Aristotle's *Poetics*.
  22. See Aristotle again, this time the middle books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where virtue is defined as a mean between two extremes (the one an excess, the other a deficiency) and where a number of specific exempla are cited.
  23. I forgot who it was who said that Racine "imitates Euripides, obeys Aristotle." But it should be noted that some of the time he merely "pretends to obey" the latter. As for the former, some of Racine's borrowings are more corrective than imitative. Concerning the extent of the French dramatist's debt to the ancients see especially R. C. Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* (Paris, 1950) where a chapter on *Phèdre* will be found at pp. 334-367.
  24. Aristotelian ἀμαρτία, pivotal to the tragic hero's downfall (see *Poetics*, 13.1453<sup>a</sup> 7-12). But scholars continue to debate whether Aristotle intended the term to refer to something internal ("flaw") or external ("error"). Clearly Hippolyte's *faiblesse* is internal; yet at the same time Racine has manipulated the plot in such a way that the connection with the demise of that hero is quite indirect.
  25. Possibly Racine is attempting to furnish a French equivalent for μεγαλοψυχία, the term which denotes the Aristotelian mean between the extremes of mean-spiritedness (μικροψυχία) and vanity (χαυνότης). But does not Euripides' hero, who appears never to tire of broadcasting his own merits, come uncomfortably close to the latter extreme? One is almost tempted to pose the same question with regard to the seemingly impeccable heroine of Euripides' *Alceste*.
  26. Concerning this and other related matters see R. C. Knight, "Hippolyte and Hippolytus," *Modern Language Review*, XXXIX (1944), 225-235.
  27. In his preface Racine takes pains to justify Aricie's inclusion despite the lack of any counterpart either in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides or in the *Phaedra* (or *Hippolytus*: both titles are attested) of Seneca. Other ancient authorities mention a highborn maiden of that name or tell of hostilities between Theseus and the Pallantidae. Racine's ingenious contribution lay not in making Hippolyte *amoureux*—some of his French predecessors (concerning whom see W. Newton, *Le thème de Phèdre et d'Hippolyte dans la littérature française* [diss. Paris, 1939]) had done the same—but in introducing Hippolyte's beloved into the family (actually his own and Thésée's kinsmen) with which his father had been feuding.
  28. See below, pp. 58 f.; 61 f.
  29. "It is the upright character of Hippolytus," contends L. H. G. Greenwood, *Aspects*

of *Euripidean Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 47, ". . . not his peculiar temperament that brings his fate upon him." A year or two before Greenwood's book came to my attention I remarked in conversation with some colleagues at Washington University that Euripides clearly establishes the causal connection of Hippolytus' downfall with his best qualities (his ἀρετή, that is) rather than with anything which might be labelled ἀμαρτία. P. H. DeLacy retorted that Artemis—it is she who ascribes the demise of Hippolytus to τὸ εὐγενές—in view of her rôle as the youth's patron deity and in view of her unending feud with Aphrodite, upon whom she fastens responsibility for the ἀμαρτίαι of Phaedra and of Theseus, could hardly be deemed an unbiased and impartial witness. With regard to the possibility that Euripides' Hippolytus, to quote a familiar oxymoron, is "virtuous to a fault" see above, p. 54 and nn.

30. Cf. below, p. 58.
31. I.e., *Genesis* 39 (Joseph and the wife of Potiphar). A series of analogous stories is cited by L. Séchan (pp. 129 f. and nn. and his "La légende d'Hippolyte dans l'antiquité," *Revue des Etudes Grecques*, XXIV [1911], 105-151).
32. Cf. above, p. 54.
33. I am not alone in pointing out that the jealousy of Phèdre, though effectively motivated and psychologically convincing, affects the plot of Racine's tragedy only in this very limited way.
34. Had Fénelon been consulted, there would have been no *Récit de Thérémène* in any event. Note the famous pronouncement from his letter to M. (or was it addressed to Mme?) Dacier (quoted by Mesnard, III, 276):

Rien n'est moins naturel que la narration de la mort d'Hippolyte à la fin de la tragédie de *Phèdre*, qui a d'ailleurs de grandes beautés. Thérémène, qui vient pour apprendre à Thésée la mort funeste de son fils, devoit ne dire que ces deux mots, et manquer même la force pour les prononcer distinctement: "Hippolyte est mort. Un monstre envoyé du fond de la mer par la colère des Dieux l'a fait périr. Je l'ai vu." Un tel homme, saisi, éperdu, sans haleine, peut-il s'amuser à faire la description la plus pompeuse et la plus fleurie de la figure du dragon . . . ?

Dispute over the appropriateness of the *récit* continues to the present day. Probably the most brilliant defense attempted lately is that of L. Spitzer, "The 'Récit de Thérémène,'" *Linguistics and Literary History* (Princeton, 1948), Ch. 3, pp. 87-134.

35. Thus the sea-born agent of Hippolyte's doom is not the exclusive exemplar of destructive bestiality. Nor is Oenone the only "human monster" to be denounced by Phèdre. Note this earlier exchange between nurse and mistress in the wake of Hippolyte's failure to respond to amorous suggestion:

OENONE: Mais, ne me trompez point, vous est-il cher encore?

De quel oeil voyez vous ce prince audacieux?

PHÈDRE: Je le vois comme un monstre effroyable à mes yeux.

(III. iii. 882 ff.)

Yet at the time of that ill-fated meeting she had directed the same sort of language against herself and had even begged Hippolyte (not yet become monstrous in her eyes: only later will Oenone have an opportunity to foment hatred) to strike her dead straightway:

Digne fils du héros qui t'a donné le jour,  
 Délivre l'univers d'un *monstre* qui t'irrite.  
 La veuve de Thésée ose aimer Hippolyte!  
 Crois-moi, ce *monstre affreux* ne doit point t'échapper;  
 Voilà mon coeur: c'est là que ta main doit frapper.

(II. v. 700 ff.)

For statistics on the frequency with which several key terms recur in the play (in descending order: *crime*, *monstre* [Thésée is noted for his prowess against various beasts and ogres: cf. below, n. 53], *mourir* and *mort*, *horreur*) see J. G. Cahen, *Le vocabulaire de Racine* (Paris, 1946), p. 139.

36. The language of this denunciation seems to echo Euripides, *Hippolytus* 682 ff.:

ὦ παγκακίστη καὶ φίλων διαφθορεῦ,  
 δι' εἰργάσω με. Ζεὺς σε γεννήτωρ ἐμός  
 πρόρριζον ἐκτρίψειεν οὐτάσας πυρί.  
 ὄλοιο καὶ σὺ χῶστις ἄκοντας Φίλουσ  
 πρόθυμός ἐστι μὴ καλῶς εὐεργετεῖν.  
 ἀλλ' ἐκποδῶν ἀπέλθε καὶ σπαντῆς πέρι  
 φρόντις· ἐγὼ γὰρ τὰμὰ Θήσομαι καλῶς.

But note that in the ancient tragedy Phaedra's harsh words to the nurse are provoked only by the knowledge that the latter has blurted out to Hippolytus the very facts which he was not to be told. Despite the repeated pleas for her destruction the Euripidean nurse does not perish: she merely disappears from the scene (permanently) in the brief interval between the suicide of Phaedra and the home-coming of Theseus.

37. Although Euripides is noted for stripping Homeric heroes of their heroism and for elevating "the little people," a hint of the old notion that ἀρετή is vouchsafed only to aristocrats (see not only the poems of Homer, Theognis, Pindar, et al., but also the illuminating discussion in Vol. I of W. Jaeger's *Paideia*<sup>2</sup>, tr. G. Highet [Oxford (Blackwell), 1954]) seems to persist in his tragedies. In the *Medea*, for example, there occurs an analogous disparity between the nurse's and the heroine's sense of ethical values. The case of the lowly farmer (Electra's husband-in-name-only) who shows himself to be an exemplar for kings is only an apparent exception: like the admirable swineherd Eumaeus of Homer's *Odyssey*, this individual was born of royal stock, but was seized by pirates and sold into slavery.
38. Cf. above, p. 55.
39. Cf. Euripides, *Hippolytus* 496 f.:

... νῦν δ' ἀγῶν μέγας  
 σῶσαι βίον σόν, κοῦκ ἐπίφθονον τόδε.

Here too the nurse is the speaker, the queen the addressee. The context, however, is different. See pp. 57 f. below.

40. See p. 171 of Cressot's "La langue de Phèdre," *Français Moderne*, X (1942), 169-182. A reminiscence (Mesnard shrinks from considering it a parody) of this couplet may be detected in Boileau's tenth *Satire*:

... qu'à l'Amour, comme au seul dieu suprême,  
 On doit immoler tout, jusqu'à la vertu même.  
 (II. 137 f.)

41. An invidious distinction between τὸ ὄν and τὸ δοκοῦν is, of course, a constant of Platonism. In the human sphere we learn of Socrates' misadventures among those persons who appeared wise both to themselves and to others but who, upon examination, turned out not to be so at all (*Apology* 21<sup>b</sup>9-23<sup>d</sup>9). However, the converse to Oenone's thinking is put into words already in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (line 592). Οὐ γὰρ δοκεῖν ἄριστος, declares a messenger in an attempt to characterize Amphiarus succinctly, ἀλλ' εἶναι θέλει.
42. Cf. above, n. 35.
43. With regard to Phèdre's admiration for purity and innocence and her thwarted yearnings in that direction see especially Cressot (above, n. 40), pp. 174 ff. Cf. T. Maulnier, "Lecture de Phèdre," *Revue Universelle* (1942) N.S. XLI, 222-234; XLIII, 390-400; XLIV, 445-459; XLV, 559-571; XLVII, 721-733; XLVIII, 792-803 (repr. Paris, 1943).
44. Spitzer (above, n. 34), pp. 106 ff. and nn., accords due emphasis to "Racine's pre-occupation with the act of 'seeing.'"
45. The nurse's words are cited above, n. 39.
46. Of course, the ultimate mover is Aphrodite. Cf. below, pp. 60 f.
47. Racine's debt to Seneca manifests itself more in shared incidents, images, and verbal patterns than in similarity of characterization. Concerning the influence of Ovid, who treated this particular myth both in his *Metamorphoses* (XV, 492 ff.) and in *Heroïdes* 4 (a segment of which is cited below, p. 60) see G. May's excellent little book, *D'Ovide à Racine* (Paris and New Haven, 1949).
48. Yet Racine's very next couplet,

Le ciel mit dans mon sein une flamme funeste:  
La détestable Oenone a conduit tout le reste.  
(ll. 1625 f.)

is modelled rather on some verses from Euripides' speech of Artemis:

γνώμη δὲ νικᾷ τὴν Κύπριν περιωμένην  
τροφοῦ διώλετ' οὐχ ἑκοῦσα μηχαναῖς,  
ἢ σῶι δι' ὄρκων παιδὶ σημαίνει νόσον.  
(ll. 1304 ff.)

With reference to Racine's tendency to substitute such traditional and vague terms as *les Dieux* and *le ciel* for the names of individual deities see Knight (above, n. 20: *q.v.* concerning *Dieux* and *Dieu*), p. 423. Even where Vénus is specified Knight finds such mention equivocal: does the appellation signify an external power or something "within us"?

49. The Greeks, despite their horror of carnal liaison between parent and child—witness the story of Oedipus as well as some of the myths recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—seem not to have placed any ban on union of foster-child and foster-parent, so long as the spouse of the latter was no longer living. But Roman law specifically prohibited marriage of such persons to one another under any circumstances. A comparable prohibition is stipulated in canon law. How these facts relate to the several tragedies which we have been considering and to the *Phèdre* of Racine in particular is the subject of a series of short articles which appeared in the same periodical during the 1930's. See H. Jacobet, "L'inceste dans Phèdre," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, XXXVIII (1931), 95-98; J. Cousin, "Phèdre est incestueuse," *ibid.*, XXXIX (1932), 397-399; G. H. Gifford, "L'inceste de Phèdre (Réponse à M. H. Jacobet)," *ibid.*, 560-562; P. Moreau, "À propos

de l'inceste de Phèdre," *ibid.*, XLI (1934), 404. See also the more recent remarks of Salomon (above, n. 12), pp. 57 ff.

50. Racine may have adapted this utterance from a verse assigned to Pitthée in Act II, Scene i, of Gabriel Gilbert's *Hypolite, ou le garçon insensible* (staged and published initially in the 1640's): "Phèdre est d'une race aisément embrasée." Concerning this and other possible borrowings from Gilbert see Newton (above, n. 27), pp. 58-71. See also n. 51 below.
51. Racine, like Gilbert before him, follows the Greek tragedian also in arranging to have the fatal name pronounced by the nurse rather than by the heroine. The latter is thus enabled to disclaim responsibility:

σοῦ τὰδ', οὐκ ἐμοῦ κλύεις (Euripides)  
C'est toi qui l'as nommé. (Gilbert and Racine)

52. The two tragedians seem to have availed themselves of conflicting traditions regarding the outcome of the other daughter's plight. According to an account reported by Homer (*Odyssey* XI. 321-325) Dionysus was witness to the slaying of Ariadne at the hands of the goddess Artemis. An alternate version of the story makes Dionysus Ariadne's rescuer and her bridegroom as well. See, for example, Catullus 64, 251 ff.; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII. 176. However, I detect no commitment to either tradition in the passage from *Heroïdes* 4 cited below.
53. The paradoxical rôle of Theseus-Thésée deserves to be the subject of a separate inquiry. In the passage from *Phèdre* cited above, p. 59, Racine does not specify who it was with whom Ariane was in love and who it was who left her abandoned and sailed away, though she had aided him in his escape from the Cnossian labyrinth. Indeed, that benefaction is not mentioned either. However Phèdre alludes to the adventure itself in a later speech which Knight (above, n. 23), p. 343, terms *la dernière phrase de l'hallucination*. For at the time of her interview with Hippolyte she not only becomes afflicted with a "double vision" which makes her see Thésée's face when she gazes at Hippolyte; she also makes a complete substitution of participants in the exploit at Cnossos. Thus Hippolyte is pictured emerging from the labyrinth after having slain the minotaur, while Phèdre replaces Ariane as instructress of detours and supplier of the vital thread. Naturally Phèdre will not call to mind Thésée's less creditable career as a sort of prototype for Don Juan. Théramène did so earlier (Act I, Scene i), but was rebuked by Hippolyte, who preferred to recount his father's nobler actions as extirpator of noxious beasts.
54. For a more comical treatment of the multifarious disguises adopted by Jove and other Olympians in order to ensure their conquests of mortal women see Ovid again (especially the description in *Metamorphoses* VI of the tapestry woven by Arachne).
55. "Ces deux personnages," comments Paul Masqueray, *Euripide et ses idées* (Paris, 1908), p. 127 (he has Hippolytus and Phaedra in mind), "sont presque divinisés, les dieux au contraire sont rabaissés au niveau des hommes."
56. At least so I understand *Hippolytus* 1420 ff.:

ἐγὼ γὰρ αὐτῆς ἄλλον ἐξ ἐμῆς χειρὸς  
ὄς ἂν μάλιστα φίλτατος κυρῆι βροτῶν  
τόξοις ἀφύκτοις τοῖσδε τιμωρήσομαι.

57. Cf. above, nn. 20 and 48.
58. It was under the pretext of interceding for her own son as well as with the objective of tempting Hippolyte with a crown that Phèdre, encouraged by Oenone, had inaugurated her ill-starred meeting with Hippolyte. Hippolyte, for his part, was

already pledged to throw his weight behind Aricie, whose claims to the throne (via her deceased father) had the most legitimacy and considerable popular support as well.

59. Phèdre's passivity becomes even more marked, of course, later when Oenone proposes to accuse Hippolyte (III. iii; cf. above, p. 57). But eroticism is consistent with her complex nature, talebearing is not. Hence the nurse volunteers to "do the dirty work" herself. See, however, the objection which I raised earlier (above, p. 56).
60. Consider this poignant distich from the last scene of Act IV:

Hélas, du crime affreux dont la honte me suit,  
Jamais mon triste coeur n'a recueilli le fruit.  
(ll. 1291 f.)