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Chance in the tragedies of Racine

Is the outcome of Racine's tragedies decided by a throw of the dice? Put like this, the question invites skepticism, if not derision. Racine? Chance would be a fine thing! The reaction is understandable. Of all the great tragedies in world literature that are still performed and read, those of Racine are commonly presented as deliberately logical structures, pieces of intricate dramatic clockwork in which chance has no place. Georges Forestier has argued persuasively that these plays are carefully constructed in order to arrive at a preordained conclusion, seen as the starting-point of the playwright's whole creative endeavor.¹ Other critics have tried to demonstrate how Racine arouses interest and emotion through a carefully worked plot, and without any reliance on the gratuitous.² After all, are chance and coincidence not defining characteristics of melodrama?³ And melodrama might seem, on the face of it, at an uttermost remove from Racine's tragedies, with their Aristotelian hinterland, severely

¹ See Racine, *Théâtre, Poésie*, ed. Georges Forestier. Editions de la Pléiade (Paris, 1999), p. xl. References to Racine's plays will be to this edition, with line-references set in parenthesis in the body of the text. The following published translations of Racine's plays are used: Jean Racine, *Andromache*, *Britannicus*, *Berenice*, trans. John Cairncross (London, 1967), and Racine, *Phaedra*, trans. Robert Lowell (London, 1961). I also use Aristotle, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Ingram Bywater (Oxford, 1967), with chapter references in parenthesis in the body of the text.

² As for example John Campbell, *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (Chapel Hill, 2005), in particular pp. 37-84.

³ See Hélène Baby, *La Tragi-Comédie de Corneille à Quinault* (Paris, 2001), for whom the tragicomic plot is typically resolved through chance, coincidences and unexpected encounters (p. 169).

restricted form, and cause-and-effect structure. For many, in addition, the idea that chance is not soluble in the mixture called "Racinian tragedy" will be reinforced by a traditional view that in this particular tragic universe the outcome is determined by a relentless fatality, an inexorable force that lies beyond the will of individuals and is untroubled by the unpredictable contingencies of the everyday. All in all, there appears to be little or any breathing space for Dame Fortune.

This article will nonetheless attempt to argue that, while events do not happen gratuitously, chance, or rather the appearance of chance, does have a significant role to play in these works. It will also suggest that Racine's tragic dramas would not succeed either as dramas or tragedies unless the spectator implicitly accepted that the outcome was open to contingency.

To this end, however, it is worth giving some time to that initial, natural reaction of disbelief that chance and Racine's tragedies are natural bedfellows. This skepticism is supported by an overwhelming weight of opinion, from unimpeachable sources. An example is Marmontel's formulation that "tragedy depicts the interplay of the passions, not of chance events."⁴ This uncontroversial opinion reflects Aristotle's insistence on the need for universals in tragedy:

Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do. (ch. 9)

⁴ Marmontel, *Poétique française*, 2 vols (Paris, 1763), II, 217 (my translation).

This requirement for universals leads Aristotle to suggest that the dramatic action should be “one continuous whole” (ch. 10). Unity of Action would be threatened by recourse to the arbitrary, since in any series of events it is causal sequence that provides a sense of unity. This is why the Reversal and Discovery that Aristotle puts at the heart of the tragic action “should arise out of the structure of the Plot itself, so as to be the consequence, necessary or probable, of the antecedents” (ch. 10). The cause-and-effect structure of the plot is embedded in this “necessary or probable.” Logically enough, therefore, for Aristotle what he calls “the worst” type of plot is “when there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence of episodes” (ch. 9).

This perspective seems by definition to exclude chance from the domain of tragedy, the more so since, as Malcolm Heath points out, “chance is defined by Aristotle in *Physics* 2.5 by contrast with what happens always or for the most part, that is, by contrast with the necessary or probable.”⁵ Given all the authority afforded the Aristotelian text in seventeenth-century France, it is understandable that a tragic dramatist such as Racine would not stoop to using the merely random or arbitrary in the resolution of his tragic action. It was in the context of Aristotle’s reasoned disapproval that in 1647 Vossius formally excluded chance from the domain of tragedy, while Corneille himself quoted Aristotle’s distinction (ch. 10) between *propter hoc* and *post hoc*, between an event that causes another and one than merely precedes another: the second of these has no place in tragedy.⁶

The challenge for the tragic dramatist was therefore to create an apparently insoluble dilemma and then to resolve it without any recourse to chance. A clear

⁵ Malcolm Heath, ‘The Universality of Poetry in Aristotle’s *Poetics*’, *Classical Quarterly*, 41 (1991), 389-402 (p. 391).

⁶ Corneille, *Writings on the Theatre*, ed. H.T. Barnwell (Oxford, 1965), p. 64. More generally on this point, see Jacques Scherer, *La dramaturgie classique en France*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1950), p. 100.

example is the treatment of the denouement, which in Aristotle's words "should arise out of the plot itself, and not depend on a stage-artifice" (ch. 14), implying disapproval for any form of *deus ex machina*. With his habitual polemical verve, Racine rejected the idea that he had used such a device in *Iphigénie*, with the invention of the victim substituted at the last minute for the daughter of Agamemnon. His response to his critics shows an extreme sensitivity to any suggestion that he could stray from the straight and narrow of the probable or necessary, as indeed he implies Euripides had done with the story of the metamorphosis of the sacrificial victim into a deer:

And how plausible would it seem if the plot of my tragedy were resolved with the help of a goddess and a machine, and by a metamorphosis that some may well have found credible in Euripides' day, but which for us would be too absurd and incredible?⁷

Is chance then banished from Racine's tragedies? It seems to be an open and shut case. This article will maintain, on the contrary, that chance, even in the sense of fortune, does have some place in these works. In addition, and more significantly, without questioning the cause-and-effect structure of Racine's plays, it will attempt to show that it is possible to place the role of chance in another perspective, on condition that we accept the premise that a play is first and foremost a dramatic illusion to which the spectator willingly submits.

⁷ Preface to *Iphigénie* (my translation).

First, chance is commonly defined as “the unknown and unpredictable element that causes an event to result in a certain way rather than in another” (*Collins English Dictionary*). That serves as a reminder that fortune does intervene in Racine's tragedies. In four of his plays, *La Thébaïde*, *Alexandre le Grand*, *Bajazet*, and *Mithridate*, the course of events does appear to turn on what might be called the fortune of war. Battles being what they are, different outcomes must be possible for the characters involved. For example, in *Alexandre le Grand*, it is Fortune (1293) that is held responsible when Porus escapes, as it could be again when he confronts Taxile (1503). Interestingly, in *La Thébaïde* Etéocle speaks directly of the hazards of war (66), a reference Racine removed in later editions, as though conscious of the enmity between any suggestion of chance and a noble idea of tragedy. The structure of *Bajazet*, however, was not changed: here the fate of the characters, and especially of the eponymous hero, secretly condemned to death by the sultan Amurat, depends on the outcome of a distant battle. The wheel of fortune turns, and the sultan wins: “Amurat est heureux, la fortune est changée” (1169) [“Amurat is content, Fortune has changed”]. It is at this point that that news comes of the sudden arrival of an emissary, bearing the sultan's murderous message. If this event astonishes Roxane (1102), the sultan's favorite concubine who is in love with Bajazet, it also must surprise the audience, in the absence of any prior allusion to the possibility of such an unexpected intervention.

It is in *Bajazet*, indeed, that we find the most egregious intervention of pure chance, since Roxane's certainty of being betrayed by Bajazet comes from a letter found on his beloved's person after her she has fainted (1260).⁸ Equally, in *Iphigénie*,

⁸ On the part played by chance in *Bajazet*, see Campbell, pp. 102-6.

the revelation of the identity of Eriphile, permitting Iphigénie to get off the sacrificial hook, is not just a *coup de théâtre* but, at least to some extent, a *deus ex machina*, since it is not clear how this information was uncovered.⁹ One might also ask, in *Mithridate*, by what mishap Monime's diadem broke, instead of strangling her as she intended (1504-8), and why a messenger arrived just in time to prevent her taking the poison Mithridate had provided for that purpose (1540-44). Melodrama? Faced with moments such as these, in another century, and in another genre, one word might just flit cheekily through the mind: Hollywood.

These few cases might be considered with some justice as exceptions that prove the general rule that chance has no part to play in Racine's tragedies. There is however, one important element that, by definition, does not issue from a probable or necessary sequence: the exposition. In Aristotle's words, "a beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else" (ch. 7). A classic example from Sophocles is the chance meeting of Oedipus at the crossroads with the person whom he will later discover to have been his father. In other words, the initial situation of a tragedy, on which the whole play is built, may originate in chance, that is, in something neither probable nor necessary.¹⁰ Different pressures, passions, and forces have been in existence for some time: only a fortuitous event, or set of circumstances, allows the tragic situation to develop. For example, in *Phèdre*, it is because her husband has decided to go to Trézène that the heroine is brought into close contact with her stepson Hippolyte, whom she has had banished there as she attempts to forget having fallen violently in love with him (297-303). Both of these crucial events, on which the whole tragic action is based, may be ascribed to fortune, unless, that is, one accepts

⁹ A point made by Scherer, *Dramaturgie classique*, p. 130.

¹⁰ On this, see Heath, pp. 394-5.

the thesis that characters are mere puppets in the hands of cruel Gods. One might also ask what “probable or necessary” basis there is, in *Iphigénie*, for the “hidden voice” (516) that strangely persuades Eriphile to go to the one place in which her life will be at risk. In that same play, there is one crucial intervention of chance that leads Iphigénie to come back to the mortal trap awaiting her, and so springs the whole tragic dilemma. For if she fails to encounter the messenger that Agamemnon has sent to prevent her from returning, using the lie that Achille has changed his mind about marrying her, this is quite simply because she and her mother lose their way and take the wrong road home (631). In addition, the final five scenes in Act II hinge on the misunderstandings occasioned by this supposed change of mind by Achille, leading Jacques Scherer to recall that such situations are common features of the nineteenth-century French farce.¹¹

The role played by chance in establishing the initial situation is nowhere better illustrated than in the exposition of *Andromaque*. In the first scene Oreste describes how he went to Greece looking for military glory, in order to forget Hermione, and quite by chance arrived just when the Greek princes had assembled to deal with Pyrrhus's refusal of her. His fateful embassy therefore comes from his having been in the right (or as it turns out wrong) place at the right time (58-66). A second piece of luck is celebrated in the opening lines:

Oui, puisque je retrouve un Ami si fidèle,
Ma Fortune va prendre une face nouvelle;
Et déjà son courroux semble s'être adouci,

¹¹ Scherer, *Dramaturgie classique*, p. 75.

Depuis qu'elle a pris soin de nous rejoindre ici. (1-4)

[Yes, since I find again so true a friend, / Fortune's about to take a different turn; / Her anger seems already to abate / Since she took pains to reunite us here.]

The reunion of the two friends is thus as fortuitous as their previous separation through the lottery of a storm. There is no explanation as to why they should have spent six months sailing about the coast, and none as to why they should meet up at such an important time. In other words, the initial situation, from which the whole dramatic action flows, owes much to fortune.

In this context, it seems equally difficult to place the *coup de foudre*, such as that experienced by Phèdre, in any category of the probable or necessary. It is true that Aristotle is at hand with a dispensation: "There should be nothing improbable among the actual incidents. If it be unavoidable, however, it should be outside the tragedy" (ch. 15). "Outside the tragedy"? Here the case of *Britannicus* is instructive. It is only in Act II, Scene 2 that we as an audience learn that Néron has fallen in love with Junie. This is a moment of revelation for which not only the spectator is unprepared.

Néron: Narcisse c'en est fait. Néron est amoureux.

[Narcissus, all is lost, I've fallen in love.]

Narcisse: Vous?

[You?]

Néron: Depuis un moment, mais pour toute ma vie,

J'aime (que dis-je aimer) j'idolâtre Junie.

[Only now, but it's for all my life. / I love, nay, I adore, I

worship Junie.]

Narcisse: Vous l'aimez?

[You love her?] (382-5)

Without being physically present until Act II, Néron has been at the very centre of the dramatic action from the beginning. However, this has been as son and half-brother, as emperor and usurper, certainly not as a lover. Narcisse's reaction demonstrates the extent to which his master's new role is a bolt from the blue. What then of the idea that a cause-and-effect structure should be constituted from the elements presented in the exposition? In Corneille's words, "I would like the first act to contain the basis of the whole dramatic action, and for it to close the door on anything else being introduced later in the play."¹² Although one can perfectly well argue that Néron's *coup de foudre* happened before the beginning of the tragic action, it is the sudden revelation of this chance event that is important. *Britannicus* is, after all, a play created to hold an audience. And we as an audience experience's Néron's love as something entirely new, and almost gratuitous, something that nothing previous could have led us to expect. Any link with the "probable or necessary" seems tenuous.

A play? An audience? It is here that we reach the heart of any attempt to grapple with the notion of chance in Racine's tragedies. On the one hand, as we have seen, both playwrights and pundits freely admitted the need for a cause-and-effect structure: the effect of the tragic action would be less powerful, and indeed not tragic, if the play's outcome depended on a series of events without previous cause. On the other hand, that is not how the spectator sees things, or even wishes to see them. As

¹² Corneille, 'Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique', in *Writings*, p. 22 (my translation).

Jacques Scherer pointed out, when dramatists decided not to resort to chance, they were in conflict with what audiences wanted.¹³ A tragic action that follows a predictable path to a known outcome will not engage those watching, whether at the theatre or with the mind's eye. Such involvement demands the unpredictable: it feeds on suspense and surprise. From this we may deduce that what concerned Racine, as a practical dramatist, more than any slavish adherence to supposed norms, was the desire to move and to hold his audience. That alone is "necessary," as Corneille quite robustly had pointed out: "I therefore maintain that in tragedy what is "necessary" is nothing other than the dramatist's need to reach the destination he has decided on or make sure his characters reach it."¹⁴

It is in this light, for example, that an audience will accept that in the fourth scene of *Andromaque* the heroine should come on stage at a critical moment without any particular reason for doing so: she is just passing through on her way to see her son.¹⁵ A similar example comes from *Athalie*. One might ask what "instinct" (527) made the queen go into the temple the first time and thus, quite by chance, see the boy Joas, an act on which the whole plot hinges. Whatever the apparent role of fortune, however, both these encounters are dramatically necessary, in order to engineer a confrontation that both expresses and intensifies the conflict on which the plots of these two plays are based. For in the end, as Corneille suggests, for the playwright the play comes first. Equally, in *Mithridate* and *Phèdre*, the sudden and spectacular reappearance of an apparently dead king, by coincidence just after compromising

¹³ Scherer, *Dramaturgie classique*, p. 100.

¹⁴ Corneille, 'Discours de la Tragédie et des moyens de la traiter selon le vraisemblable et le nécessaire', *Writings*, p. 59 (my translation).

¹⁵ As Georges Forestier observes (edition of the plays, p. 1352, note to l. 260), such apparently gratuitous stage appearances were frowned on by pundits and purists.

declarations of love made only because news of the death was too readily believed, clearly illustrates this primacy of the dramatic. A measure of the seeming improbability of that survival and return, at the time it happens, is the reaction of characters who declaim against "Cruel Fortune" on hearing the news (*Mithridate*, 335-6). If "chance" is one name we give to that freedom of the unpredictable, and to the seemingly improbable, then it clearly has its place in Racine's tragedies.

The playwright is thus faced with conflicting demands. On the one hand, even the most surprising event should seem a probable or necessary consequence of what precedes it, as D'Aubignac, was quick to point out: "although the spectator wishes to be surprised, he wants the event to appear plausible."¹⁶ On the other hand, as that High Priest of verisimilitude was well aware, it is a basic dramatic principle that the audience should not be too prepared for what is about to happen: "All these preparations are defects in a play, because when the events in question come about they lack interest and have little effect on the audience."¹⁷ Aristotle had already noted this apparent paradox:

Tragedy, however, is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear. Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another. (ch. 9)

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¹⁷ D'Aubignac, *La Pratique du Théâtre*, ed. Hélène Baby (Paris, 2001), pp. 200 and 193 (my translation)..

It is this necessary coexistence of causality with unpredictability that opens the door to the apparent place of chance in Racine's tragedies. This reminds us that the word "chance" is itself Janus-like, looking back or forward. Used with a retrospective gaze, it is "the occurrence and development of events in the absence of any obvious design or cause", whereas when there is an attempt to anticipate, the term indicates "a possibility of something happening" (OED). This distinction between reflection and expectation mirrors the two different roles the audience is required to play, as John Lyons has noted:

During the tragedy, the audience is expected to behave as if what happens onstage were *really* happening. [...] On the other hand the spectator is also supposed to reflect critically on the dramatic presentation and on the text in order to judge it as a work of art. [...] In the moment of the dramatic performance (or while reading a play), the audience of a successful tragedy believes in the *truth* of the events and characters. Only after this experience, and most of all, after repeated experiences of this sort, can the spectator transform the perception of the *véritable* into a judgment of *vraisemblance*.¹⁸

This verisimilitude thus demands that on reflection, after the event, a plausible reason must be found for what at the time seems to depend on fortune. For example, in *Phèdre*, we as an audience, at the moment when the scene is being painted for us, might see Hippolyte's inability to control his frightened horses as a matter of bad luck (1535-43). It is only afterwards, on reflection, that we might recall how he had

¹⁸ John Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder. The Theory of Tragedy in Classical France* (West Lafayette, 1999), pp. 93-4.

neglected his horsemanship to pursue his forbidden love for Aricie (129-32). Chance, therefore, may give the appearance of being present before and during the event. Events seem to strike like lightning, in an unpredictable and seemingly fortuitous way. There is an unforeseen change of fortune, an event contrary to rational expectation. The creation of suspense and surprise is therefore entirely consistent with the probable or necessary. Fortune only disappears as part of the equation after the event: as an audience we realize that what happened had to happen, we fit it into a coherent sequence of events. Before it happens, however, different possibilities are held open. It is, therefore, through the crafting of this illusion of contingency and volatility, rather than by any slavish adherence to hidebound neo-Aristotelian conventions, that Racine was able to create works of art so charged with emotion, beauty, and truth. As D'Aubignac suggested, the different elements of a tragedy should interact so well that they seem to arise spontaneously, and progress towards a resolution through their own impetus, with their creator as though standing watching in the wings.¹⁹

The dramatic experience provided by this illusion is linked with two common features of seventeenth-century French tragedy in general, and of Racine's tragedies in particular. The first is the freedom given to characters. To illustrate the point, Jacques Scherer chooses the tragedy traditionally viewed, with *Athalie*, as the most determinist of them all, *Phèdre*: "At every moment in that fateful day, Phèdre was free to spurn Œnone's advice; indeed, that day is tragic only because Phèdre chose to proceed in a way she was very quickly going to condemn."²⁰ Destiny, in other words,

¹⁹ Quoted by Georges Forestier, *Passions tragiques et règles classiques. Essai sur la tragédie française* (Paris, 2003), p. 102.

²⁰ Jacques Scherer, *Racine et/ou la cérémonie* (Paris, 1982), pp. 34-5 (my translation).

is not some inflexible fate dished out to puppet-like characters: it is, more simply, what happens to them.²¹ And what will happen is impossible to predict.

A second important link with our experience as an audience is the idea of reversal. Emotion is created when what happens is the very opposite of what characters intended, or of what would have seemed plausible beforehand. Aristotle gives a famous illustration:

Even matters of chance seem most marvelous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them; as for instance the statue of Mityls at Argos killed the author of Mityls' death by falling down on him when a looker-on at a public spectacle; for incidents like that we think to be not without a meaning. A Plot, therefore, of this sort is necessarily finer than others. (ch. 9)

This story is used by Aristotle to illustrate his paradoxical observation, noted earlier, that events have the most impact on spectators when they occur “unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another”. The “appearance of design” is thus consubstantial with the appearance of chance. Both work together to generate emotion and tragic irony. In retrospect the appearance of chance may be dismissed, as a mere appearance. But man does not live in retrospect alone, especially not at the theatre. An audience lives a performance in the present: that is one good reason for calling it “live.”

It is thus in the spectator's living experience of the dramatic action, if only in that golden dramatic moment before the event, that the tragic action seems to move

²¹ Note Forestier, *Passions*, p. 317, on the non-fatalistic meaning of the terms *destin* and *fatal* in Racine's **tragedies**.

freely, beyond the iron grip of the probable and necessary. Here, at the moment of impact, fortune seems to intervene: the king gone missing will return unexpectedly, and at the worst moment, when his wife and son, thinking him dead, have just come clean about their forbidden loves. This is not a question of “stuff happens”, or even what Aristotle calls “the probability of even improbabilities coming to pass” (ch. 18). Tragedy is not “life”, but a carefully constructed artifice designed to arouse emotion. And it is precisely for this reason that high tragic drama can use the techniques of the melodrama. Events can happen in a manner that seems fortuitous, at a time when characters, and audiences, least expect them. In this context emerge concepts such as the *coup de théâtre* and “peripety,” the sudden and unexpected event that reverses the expectations of characters and audience. An example given by Jacques Scherer is the succession of surprises that structure Act V of *Mithridate*, as for example the report that Xipharès is dead beyond any doubt, (1478), a report that is absolutely believed, and is absolutely false.²²

The surprise caused by overturning of expectations based on what is probable can give a sense that fortune has intervened. This sense that something has happened by chance may be momentary, and be quickly replaced by our realization, as characters or audience, that we should or could have realized that what happened had to happen. But that moment simply cannot be dismissed, since much of the emotional charge of tragic drama is contained within it. In this perspective, a telling example occurs in the continuation of those opening lines of *Andromaque* quoted earlier:

Qui l'eût dit, qu'un rivage à mes vœux si funeste,

²² Scherer, *Dramaturgie classique*, p. 86.

Présenterait d'abord Pylade aux yeux d'Oreste,

Qu'après plus de six mois que je t'avais perdu,

A la Cour de Pyrrhus tu me serais rendu!

[“Who would have thought on this unlikely shore / Orestes would at once meet Pylades; / And, when you had been lost for six long months, / At Pyrrhus’ court you’d be restored to me.”] (5-8)

What these words emphasize, especially through the framing device of the “Qui l’eût dit...?”, is the unanticipated nature of the event. From the beginning, in other words, the audience is attuned to a dramatic action in which the unexpected may be expected to happen. Pylade suggests that his friend’s luck has turned: “Un Destin plus heureux vous conduit en Epire” [“A happier fate to Epirus guides your steps.”] (22), and Oreste’s reply underlines this unpredictability: “qui peut savoir le Destin qui m’amène?” [“who can foretell my Destiny?”] (25). These lines serve to illustrate the simple fact that dramatic tension is created by the necessarily partial knowledge of the characters on stage. They do not know the true situation, in its totality, nor what impact their actions will have. This vulnerability to the unpredictable, which is always to some degree shared by the audience, is revealed in those moments of surprise when, if only for a moment, it seems that chance has intervened to disturb the predicted course of events. The decisions taken by characters have therefore something in them of a throw of the dice, a reminder of what the word *chance* meant in Racine’s time.

In that same opening scene of *Andromaque*, when Oreste asks Pylade what Pyrrhus will do, his friend’s answer seems to account for the most improbable of possibilities, since it seems obvious that everything will turn on the king’s eventual decision:

Il peut, Seigneur, il peut, dans ce désordre extrême,

Épouser ce qu'il hait et perdre ce qu'il aime.

["He may, sir, in this frenzied turmoil wed / The one he hates and spurn the one he loves."] (121-2)

What really happens is, as we will find out, even more unexpected. The same is true of the different possible courses of action projected by Oreste, depending on whether Hermione can or cannot be persuaded to come away with him:

J'aime; je viens chercher Hermione en ces lieux,

La fléchir, l'enlever, ou mourir à ses yeux.

["I love, and come to win Hermione, / Carry her off or die before her eyes."] (99-100)

Do or die: it is a rational attempt to construct a probable or necessary scenario, before the event. Nothing of the sort of course happens. The outcome depends on such a complicated chain of interconnecting events as to defeat attempts at rational prediction. After all, at the outset of *Andromaque* it would seem highly improbable that Oreste, sent as ambassador by the Greeks, could kill a reigning monarch, and great Greek hero of the Trojan War, to satisfy the desire for revenge of a woman who, openly, loves that person rather than him. When a desperate Hermione comes to propose that course of action, Oreste's reaction is thus one of incredulity (1176-7). How could he have imagined that he would accept such a contract, or indeed that she would refuse to honour it when the deed was done? What could possibly seem

“probable or necessary” here, before the event? After the event it becomes easy to see that Hermione’s word should not have been believed, a cold truth that ironically issues from her jealous fury: “Ah! Fallait-il en croire une Amante insensée?” [“Ah! How could you believe my frantic words?”] (1585) But at the moment of its delivery, her rejection of Oreste is as much a surprise for the audience as for the character. At this point of maximum emotional impact, the “probable or necessary” has little visibility, however illusory that impression will appear with hindsight. This experience is true to the extent that even those who know the play by heart, as spectators or readers, can suppress that knowledge in order to live in the present of the dramatic performance, a term illuminated by its French translation, *représentation*. Within the constraints of the tragic action and the tragic genre itself, we as an audience willingly surrender to the sense that “anything might happen,” while being ready to dismiss, after the event, anything that is merely gratuitous.

It is in the creative tension between the unpredictable and the probable or necessary that Racine’s tragedies are composed. If he chose to construct a plausible and coherent sequence of cause and effect, it was not because he was browbeaten by the Academy or hamstrung by rules, but because such plots generate a tragic action of deep emotion and lasting pleasure. At the same time, he knew the first rule of all, that the lived experience of the theatre is emotional and anticipatory. This means that spectators as well as characters are kept in suspense, and are continually surprised, as by lightning in a clear sky. “Quel coup me l’a ravi? Quelle foudre soudaine?” [“What sudden thunderbolt has struck him down?”] cries out Thésée, in *Phèdre* (1497), on hearing the news that his son is dead. In the cold light of day, which is not that of the present, Hippolyte’s fate cannot be such a surprise. It is indeed because Thésée, in blind passion, calls for Hippolyte to be punished that the killing produces such an

effect of reversal and recognition, since he realizes that it is he who has caused the life of his beloved son to be extinguished. That clear relationship of cause to effect, however, does not prevent Racine making the manner in which the event is presented appear unexpected and shocking, as the monster surges from a calm sea. Indeed, he crafts the timing of its revelation for maximum unsettling impact, by chance just when Thésée has discovered that his son is innocent. This plotting technique makes his tragedies, at least in appearance, seem much freer, more open, and more uncertain than is sometimes assumed.

And that appearance is of primary importance. For what is theatre but the triumph of an appearance, a dramatic illusion? That very fact has been enough for moralists from Saint Augustine onwards to reach for their bag of anathemas. In the end, therefore, when all the pundits have spoken of the probable and necessary, the only inflexible rule for dramatists such as Racine, as he himself made clear, was to create a play that moves and holds an audience: "The main rule is to give pleasure and arouse emotion. All the others are only designed to reach this first goal."²³

It is in that truly theatrical context that chance has its chance.

²³ Preface to *Bérénice* (my translation).