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This pdf compilation covers articles on the translation of Racine  for the English stage.

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## Previous Phaedra Translations

One of the best known of translations in the first half of the twentieth century was that by Lacy Lockert, which went through several printings. {19} Lockert wrote in what he termed the old “heroic couplet” of Dryden and Pope, but gave it more flexibility by using imperfect rhymes and making the pauses appear in the middle rather than at the end of the line.

To aid comparisons, I will look at three sections in the play that show different aspects of Racine’s art.

The first is in Act One, Scene 1: simple narration that sets the scene: Theramenes speaking:

Et dans quels lieux, Seigneur, l'allez-vous donc chercher ?
Déjà, pour satisfaire à votre juste crainte,
10. J'ai couru les deux mers que sépare Corinthe ;
J'ai demandé Thésée aux peuples de ces bords
Où l'on voit l'Acheron se perdre chez les morts ;
J'ai visité l'Élide, et, laissant le Ténare,
Passé jusqu'à la mer qui vit tomber Icare.
Sur quel espoir nouveau, dans quels heureux climats
Croyez-vous découvrir la trace de ses pas ?
Qui sait même, qui sait si le Roi votre père
Veut que de son absence on sache le mystère ?

Et si, lorsqu'avec vous nous tremblons pour ses jours,
20. Tranquille, et nous cachant de nouvelles amours,
Ce héros n'attend point qu'une amante abusée...

Lockert's translation runs:

And where, sir, wilt thou look for him? Ere this
To lull thy filial anxieties,
I have made passage over both the seas
Which Corinth sunders. Even on those shores
Where the dark kingdom of the dead devours
Acheron, I have asked for Theseus.
Elis I visited, and from Taenarus
Sailed to those waters which beheld the fall
Of Icarus. Now what new hope, withal,
Leadeth thee on, or in what blessèd place
Expectest thou of his steps to find a trace?
Who knows? thy royal sire, it well may be,
Desireth to preserve in mystery
His absence. While we fear lest he have died,
Perchance the hero doth unharmed but hide
Some newest love, wooing some 'wildered maid . . .

Setting aside the diction, of its time but now dated, the text is perfectly speakable. The rhythms run naturally, more free verse than heroic couplets, with the pararhymes only faintly marking the line ends. It is not particularly powerful, however, and some of the phrases are more decorative than meaningful (e.g. traversed o'er the wave). The looseness of

the phrasing would help an experienced actor, but doesn't cohere into beautiful or memorable lines.

In the second section I've chosen, Act Four, Scene 6, the verse must grip the spectator as Phaedra is here bidding farewell to life:

Pardonne. Un Dieu cruel a perdu ta famille :
1290. Reconnais sa vengeance aux fureurs de ta fille.
Hélas ! du crime affreux dont la honte me suit
Jamais mon triste coeur n'a recueilli le fruit.
Jusqu'au dernier soupir, de malheurs poursuivie,
Je rends dans les tourments une pénible vie.

Lacy Lockert's translation:

Some cruel god hath all
Thy house destroyed. See in thy daughter's fall
A final stroke! Alas, never the fruit
Of that dire crime whose shame made such pursuit
Of me, my piteous heart hath tasted once!
Behold, how sorrow still unceasing hunts
Me even to my latest breath, and I
in torture end a life of misery.

Here, I think, Lockert's verse is straining for effect, the declamation coming between us and the pity we should feel for the ruined queen.

The final section is that terrible description of Hippolytus's death in Act Five, Scene 6:

1535. La fureur les emporte, et sourds à cette fois,
Ils ne connaissent plus ni le frein ni la voix.
En efforts impuissants leur maître se consume,
Ils rougissent le mors d'une sanglante écume.
On dit qu'on a vu même, en ce désordre affreux,
Un dieu qui d'aiguillons pressait leur flanc poudreux.
A travers des rochers la peur les précipite.
L'essieu crie et se rompt. L'intrépide Hippolyte
Voit voler en éclats tout son char fracassé.
Dans les rênes lui-même il tombe embarrassé.
Excusez ma douleur. Cette image cruelle
Sera pour moi de pleurs une source éternelle.

Lacy Lockert's translation:

Terror lays hold on them,
And deaf for once, they heed not voice or rein.
Their master struggles vainly to restrain
Their flight. With bloody foam their bits are red.
Amid the whirling tumult, it is said,
A god was seen, who did with prick and thrust
Of goad assail their sides, besmeared with dust.
Fear drives them over the rocks. Load groans the nave.
The axle snaps. Hippolytus the brave
Sees fly to pieces all his broken car,
And tangled in the reins, is hurled afar.

Forgive my grief. This cruel sight will be
An everlasting source of tears, for me.

Sensible and vigorous, Lockert has captured the prose sense admirably, which may sum up the translation generally. The rendering is intelligent, conveying the sense faithfully and in a language an actor would have little difficulty speaking (though it needs modernizing). What is missing, however, is the power, the compressed irony, the memorable phrasing and the poetry, all of which become necessary in the great scenes that make Phaedra what it is.

Robert Lowell

Robert Lowell's 1960 translation burst on the literary scene to equal praise and condemnation. {20} It was immensely readable, vivid and contemporary. Many lines had that idiomatic exactness of phrasing that marks a good poet, and to this was added rare verve and excitement. No one had ever heard Racine before as:

1. No, no, my friend, we're off! Six months have passed
since Father heard the ocean howl and cast
his gallery on the Aegean's skull-white froth.

1306. Must I still listen and drink your poisoned breath?
My death's redoubled on the edge of death.
I fled Hippolytus and I was free
till your entreaties stabbed and blinded me.

Unfortunately, the failures were equally glaring, and made an impressive list. Lowell's approach was foreign to French classical tragedy, and indeed to the classical world: it was Lowell's play and not Racine's.

Does he need helpers to share
the plunder of his latest love affair;
shipload of spectators and his son
to watch him ruin his last Amazon.

The writing was also uneven: pieces of superlative verse craft could be followed by inanities:

when he leaps to crush her like a waterfall
of honeysuckle.
You are cynical,

The sheer energy often swamped the lines, making for a play without lights and darks, or even sufficient shading in the characters.

The translation failed in the great scenes, the lines passing into rant and bombast.

My lover flees me still, and my last gasp
is for the fleeting flesh I failed to clasp.

The diction was an awkward mix of social registers.

lascivious eulogist of any belle

Whole sections were Lowell's invention, which did not improve the play.

The three sections under comparison:

Where, my lord? I've sent a host
of veteran seamen up and down the coast;
each village, creek and cove from here to Crete
has been ransacked and questioned by my fleet;
my flagship skirted Hades' rapids, furled
sail there a day, and scoured the underworld.
Have you fresh news? New hopes? One even doubts
if noble Theseus wants his whereabouts
discovered. Does he need helpers to share
the plunder of his latest love affair;
a shipload of spectators and his son
to watch him ruin his last Amazon—
some creature, taller than a man, whose tanned
and single bosom slithers from his hand,
when he leaps to crush her like a waterfall
of honeysuckle?

You cannot kill me; look, my murderer
is Venus, who destroyed my family;
Father she has already murdered me.
I killed myself—and what is worse I wasted

my life for pleasures I have never tasted.
My lover flees me still, and my last gasp
is for the fleeting flesh I failed to clasp.

and then the horses, terror struck, stampeded.
Their master's whip and shouting went unheeded,
they dragged his breathless body to the spray.
Their red mouths bit the bloody surf, men say
Poseidon stood beside them, that the god
was stabbing at their bellies with a goad.
Their terror drove them crashing at a cliff,
the chariot crashed in two, they ran as if
the Furies screamed and crackled in their manes,
their fallen hero tangled in the reins,
jounced on the rocks behind them. The sweet light
of heaven will never expunge this sight:

Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes' Phèdre of 1998 was warmly received. {17} The translation was staged in London in 1998, and this production, starring Diana Rigg, transferred to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1999. Unfortunately, perhaps attempting to express Racine's passion as more primeval forces, Hughes replaced the restraint, dignity and beauty of Racine's lines with a monolithic free verse that is often little more than prose. Like Lowell, he rewrote sections to his own liking, and the result is a coarsening of Racine's meaning and effect. The three sections:

But where, my lord, would you begin to look?
We have done all we can to find him.
Our ships have searched both seas, they have gone
as far as Acheron
Where it dives to the underworld, and nowhere
Can Theseus be found.
We have searched Elis, and on past Tenaros,
As far as the ocean
That drowned Icarus when he fell out of heaven.
We have searched every coast within reach
For news of the King and found nothing.
Do you think you'll fare better?
What unsearched patch of earth do you think might hold
him?
In any case, who knows—
He might have chosen to vanish.
He might be lying low for his own good reasons.
While we rack ourselves
Imagining his death,
He is lolling at ease, tucked away
With some beauty—soon to be deserted,

O Father, you have to forgive me.
The pitiless goddess
Would not loosen her grip on your family.
I am one more trophy of her vengeance.
My crimes were execrable.
Their shame walks with me like my shadow.

But they brought me no profit—
Not one flicker of gratification.
No, my every step
Carried me deeper into evil fortune.
My whole life has been wretched and ends in torment.

Then the horses went mad—
I heard Hippolytus shouting among the screams
Of the horses, and the blasts of that beast.
The wonderful strength of Hippolytus was helpless.
Some of the others saw something
I can hardly credit, I did not see it.
They saw the glowing figure of a naked god
Astride the shoulders of the demented horses—
Goading and urging them
Among the rocks of the foreshore
With the chariot, stripped of its wheel,
Bounding like a bucket behind them.
Hippolytus had wound his arms in the reins.
He tore the horses' mouths but they felt nothing.
And the voice they had grown up with
Became a scream that added to their terror
As the chariot disintegrated beneath him.
Then it was two mad horses dragging a man.
Oh my lord, forgive me! The sight of it
Is like a great wound through my body,
It's never going to heal.

The characters lack dignity: 'lying low for his own good

reasons'. Racine’s meaning is brutalised: 'But they brought me no profit.' 'Then the horses went mad' and 'Bounding like a bucket' are unintentionally comic. 'Carried me deeper into evil fortune' is the language of pantomime and fairy tales. And so on. Hughes was continuing the modernizing trend of Lowell, but had by this time lost the gifts that made his earlier poetry so memorable.

Robert Boswell

Blank verse does not always give flexibility, as sections from Robert Boswell’s 1898-91 translation show: {21}

And where, prince, will you look for him?
Already, to content your just alarm,
Have I not cross’d the seas on either side
Of Corinth, ask’d if aught were known of Theseus
Where Acheron is lost among the Shades,
Visited Elis, doubled Tœnarus,
And sail’d into the sea that saw the fall
Of Icarus? Inspired with what new hope,
Under what favour’d skies think you to trace
His footsteps? Who knows if the King, your father,
Wishes the secret of his absence known?
Perchance, while we are trembling for his life,
The hero calmly plots some fresh intrigue,
And only waits till the deluded fair—

Spare me! A cruel goddess has destroy’d

Thy race; and in my madness recognize
Her wrath. Alas! My aching heart has reap'd
No fruit of pleasure from the frightful crime
The shame of which pursues me to the grave,
And ends in torment life-long misery.

Fear lends them wings; deaf to his voice for once,
And heedless of the curb, they onward fly.
Their master wastes his strength in efforts vain;
With foam and blood each courser's bit is red.
Some say a god, amid this wild disorder,
Was seen with goads pricking their dusty flanks.
O'er jagged rocks they rush urged on by terror;
Crash! goes the axle-tree. Th' intrepid youth
Sees his car broken up, flying to pieces;
He falls himself entangled in the reins.
Pardon my grief. That cruel spectacle
Will be for me a source of endless tears.

Margaret Rawlings, {22} who modernized the text for her own acting purposes, pointed out the shortcomings. The diction is Victorian. The phrasings are disjointed, and lack the urgency of emotion that must carry the speakers on. Some words have changed their meaning: we can't now say:

129. You have been seldom seen with wild delight
Urging the rapid car along the Strand.

John Cairncross

John Cairncross's 1963 translation, printed by Penguin Books, will have introduced many to Racine's plays. {14} The same volume contained translations of Iphigenia and Athaliah, each with an individual introduction, and a most useful introduction to Racine's place in the French classical stage. Cairncross's phrasings were more subtle than Boswell's, and the diction more contemporary. Within its blank verse limits, the rendering was generally faithful, and individual lines could be very well turned. The end-stopped lines prevented a pleasing flow of utterance, however, and, deprived of convincing voices, the characters did not come alive.

And, where, my lord, would you make search for him?
Already to allay your rightful fears,
I have scoured both the seas that Corinth joins;
I have sought for news of Theseus on the shores
Of Acheron, the river of the dead;
Elis I searched, then sailed past Tenaros
On to the sea where Icarus came down.
What makes you hope that you may find his trace
In some more favoured region of the world?
Who knows indeed if it is his desire
To have the secret of his absence known?
And whether, as we tremble for his life.
He is not tasting all the joys of love,
And soon the outraged victim of his wiles. . .

Forgive me. Venus's wrath has doomed your race.
Your daughter's frenzy shows that vengeance forth.
Alas, my sad heart never has enjoyed
The fruits of crimes whose dark shame follows me.
Dogged by misfortune to my dying breath
I end upon the rack a life of pain.

Carried away by terror, deaf, the steeds
No more responded to his curb or voice.
Their master spent his efforts all in vain.
They stained the bridle with their bloody foam.
In this wild tumult, it is even said,
A god appeared, goading their dusty flanks.
Over the rocks fear drove them headlong on;
The axle groaned and broke. Hippolytus
Saw his whole chariot shattered into bits.
He fell at last, entangled in the reins.
Forgive my grief. For me this picture spells
Eternal sorrow and perpetual tears

Richard Wilbur

Richard Wilbur's 1984 translation went back to Augustan verse for its inspiration, and was the most accomplished to date. {18} Hexameters were expressed as rhyming couplets, and many of the lines were extraordinarily pleasing.

159. These veils, these baubles, how they burden me!
What meddling hand has twined my hair, and made
Upon my brow so intricate a braid.

and here (though less appropriately, as it's the horror that Theramenes is conveying):

1 557. The rocks are red with it; the briars bear
Their red and dripping trophies of his hair.

The rendering was also remarkably close to the original, employing much of its imagery, and retaining Racine's restrained and dignified style. The difficulties lie in four areas.

One is the costume drama diction of woe, sire, maids, ere, hark, behold, etc. The second is the sometimes mechanical nature of the verse, which manhandles the natural cadence of words and phrases into lines that break its pleasing fabric.

6. And yet I do not know what distant shore
Now hides him, or what trials he now may bear.

A third is the archness of expression that rhyme leads Wilbur into, sometimes verging on pantomime language.

785. No doubt it was surprise that made him mute,
And we do wrong to take him for a brute.

The fourth difficulty is Wilbur's detachment, the staccato stating rather than phrasing to evoke the emotion, particularly apparent in the great scenes.

1293. Misfortune dogs me till, with my last breath,
My sad life shall, in torment, yield to death.

The three sections:

You'll go in search of him, my lord? But where?
Already, to appease your fears, I've plied
The seas which lie on Corinth's either side;
I've asked for Theseus among tribes who dwell
Where Acheron goes plunging into Hell;
Elis I've searched and, from Taenarus bound,
Reached even that sea where Icarus was drowned.
In what fresh hope, in what unthought-of places,
Do you set out to find your father's traces?
Who knows, indeed, if he wants the truth about
His long, mysterious absence to come out,
And whether, while we tremble for him, he's
Not fondling some new conquest at his ease
And planning to deceive her like the rest? …

Forgive me. A cruel God destroys your line,
Behold her hand in these mad deeds of mine.
My heart, alas! not once enjoyed the fruit
Of its dark, shameful crime. In fierce pursuit,
Misfortune dogs me till, with my last breath,

My sad life shall, in torment, yield to death.

Sheer panic takes them; deaf now, they pay no heed
To voice or curb, but bolt in full stampede;
Their master strives to hold them back, in vain.
A bloody slaver drips from bit to rein.
It's said that, in that tumult, some caught sight
Of a God who spurred those dusty flanks to flight.
Fear drives them over the rocks; the axletree
Screeches and breaks. The intrepid prince must see
His chariot dashed to bits, for all his pains;
He falls at last, entangled in the reins.
Forgive my grief. That cruel sight will be
An everlasting source of tears to me.

Ocaso Press Translation

As we've seen, it's perfectly possible to translate Racine's Phaedra into something other than it is. Grossly simplifying, Lowell turned it into melodrama. Hughes's version is a prose enactment of mythic forces. Cairncross's is a close-textured mosaic of correct rendering. Wilbur's is an elegant exercise in heroic couplets. What is missing from all these is the empathy with a style of writing that is no longer used to express our profoundest yearnings. To make a translation effective, we have to enter Racine's world, and devise equivalents that affect us today in ways comparable to Racine's appeal to a seventeenth century French audience.

In making this translation, I should emphasize how much I have benefited from previous attempts. Many have

suggested rhymes or useful phrasings, which I have recast in my own fashion. In disagreeing with approaches I have come to see my own more clearly, and what others have achieved in their renderings has guided my own choice of form. That said, I have developed rather than copied. Where previous translators have partly gone back to earlier verse forms to accommodate Racine's rhetoric, I have started from Augustan techniques and brought them forward, modifying and extending as follows:

1. Toned down where possible the declamatory interjections, replacing them with something more acceptable to the contemporary stage.
2. Done away with archaisms and the dialogue of costume drama, the likes of woe, sire, maids, ere, hark, doom, etc.
3. Aimed for a supple continuity of line, indicating changes of tone and force in dialogue by word textural properties in a strict iambic verse.
4. Given the long speeches (tirades) more of a driving force by absorbing the individual lines into the fabric of argument and getting them to flow across the rhyme boundaries.
5. Written a more rhythmically virile and urgent line.

My overall aim has been to recreate the poetry, without which Phaedra is scarcely worth reading. That this can be done, I hope this translation demonstrates. For ready comparison, here are my renderings of the three passages under discussion:

Then, Prince, where look for him? I've scoured each side
the oceans bounding Corinth for some word
of Theseus, what was rumoured, who had heard.
My search to calm your natural fears has led
to shores where Acheron fades into the dead.
I've called at Elis and from Cape Taenarus
surveyed the waters swallowing Icarus.
What makes you think that through some happy place
the steps of our dear hero left their trace?
Perhaps the king, your father, is not prone
to have the secrets of his absence known
and while we tremble for his life he stays
20. in blessed tranquillity, in hiding plays
with some new love who cannot yet suspect. . .

Forgive me that I let a god in wild
1290. reprisal sow her fury through the child.
Never the once to what it sought for came
this heart, but sadness only, and to shame.
Phaedra in sighs, with which her path was rife,
in agonies gives back a painful life.

The horses, terrified, must then stampede
and to his voice and curb could pay no heed.
Hippolytus was wrestling but in vain
to gain a purchase on the blood-wet rein.
It’s even said by one a god appeared
1540. and ran along their dusty flanks and steered
the chariot over boulders, headlong on

until the axle groaned and all was gone.
Hippolytus among the broken stone
was in the reins entangled and then thrown —
the scenes so harrowing that they will stain
all memory afterwards with vivid pain.

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## English Stage Verse

At its most basic, two problems face the translator: that of creating in English the equivalent of the French hexameter, and that of making it engaging to a modern audience.

The first may be approached by seeing what contemporary English poets were writing for the stage. The most talented was John Dryden (1631-1700), whose best-known speech comes from *Aureng-Zebe:*

When I consider Life, 'tis all a cheat;
Yet, fool'd with hope, men favour the deceit;
Trust on, and think to morrow will repay:
To morrow's falser than the former day;
Lies worse; and while it says, We shall be blest
With some new joys, cuts off what we possest.
Strange couzenage! none would live past years again,
Yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain;
And, from the dregs of Life, think to receive
What the first sprightly running could not give.
I'm tir'd with waiting for this Chymic Gold,
Which fools us young, and beggars us when old. (*Aureng-Zebe,* IV. i)

The antitheses and end-stopped lines make for epigrammatic neatness, but hardly fervour. Indeed, the general run of Dryden's dramatic writing is a good deal more dutiful and flat-footed. *Aureng-Zebe* starts (Arimant

speaking):

Heav'n seems the Empire of the East to lay
On the success of this important day:
Their Arms are to the last decision bent,
And Fortune labours with the vast event:

She now has in her hand the greatest stake,
Which for contending Monarchs she can make.
What e'r can urge ambitious Youth to sight,
She pompously displays before their sight:
Laws, Empire, All permitted to the Sword,
And Fate could ne'r an ampler Scene afford. (*Aureng-Zebe*, I. i)

Dryden is better in blank verse: some of the more memorable lines in *All for Love:*

Antony

They are enough.
We'll not divide our stars; but, side by side.
Fight emulous, and with malicious eyes
Survey each other's acts: So every death
Thou giv'st, I'll take on me, as a just debt,
And pay thee back a soul.

Ventidious

Now you shall see I love you. Not a word
Of chiding more. By my few hours of life,
I am so pleased with this brave Roman fate,
That I would not be Cæsar, to outlive you.
When we put off this flesh, and mount together,
I shall be shown to all the ethereal crowd,—
Lo, this is he who died with Antony!

Antony

Who knows, but we may pierce through all their troops,
And reach my veterans yet? 'tis worth the 'tempting,
To o'erleap this gulf of fate,
And leave our wandering destinies behind. (All for Love, V)

More alive, but nothing like the formal politeness of Racine. Dryden's occasional quatrains were smoother, but also slower and more charming than Racine's repressed violence: here in *The Indian Emperor:*

Cydara

Thick breath, quick pulse, and heaving of my heart,
All signs of some unwonted change appear:
I find myself unwilling to depart,
And yet I know not why I would be here.
Stranger, you raise such torments in my breast,
That when I go, (if I must go again)
I'll tell my father you have robbed my rest,

And to him of your injuries complain.

Cortez

Unknown, I swear, those wrongs were which I wrought,
But my complaints will much more just appear,
Who from another world my freedom brought,
And to your conquering eyes have lost it here. (The Indian Emperor, I. ii)

Verse for the Stage

Blank verse may therefore seem the preferred medium, being the most compact and flexible of verse forms, capable of expressing the full range of passion but also providing a pleasing approximation to everyday speech. Indeed, so easy to write is blank verse that it needs constraints, challenges and constant melodic invention if it is not to become flat and merely correct. Such variations may be decorative, serving the beauty of expression, or more dramatic. In the plays of Shakespeare's middle period — *Love's Labour Lost, Romeo and Juliet, Richard II, A Midsummer' Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice* — the verse often stands apart from the narrative, halting the action while players and audience respond to the poetry:

These are the forgeries of jealousy:
And never, since the middle summer's spring,
Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead,
By paved fountain or by rushy brook,
Or in the beached margent of the sea,

But with thy brawls thou hast disturbed our sport.
(Midsummer' Night's Dream, II. i)

Such lines remind us of the Sonnets, here beginning to flow on in an approximation to natural speech. 11 By the tragedies, the verse is much more made by phrases serving dramatic needs, where the poetry, just as beautiful, echoes and supports the action:

The crown o' the earth doth melt. My lord!
O, wither'd is the garland of the war,
The soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls
Are level now with men; the odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon. (Antony and Cleopatra, IV xv)

The cost is in the smoothness: the verse is episodic and works by the accumulation of brilliant phrases, rather than by Racine's method, which is by the insistent weight of closely modeled logic.

Shakespeare obtained the dramatic effectiveness in his later works by thickening the metaphors, beginning sentences in midline, adding parenthetical phrases, and replacing the smooth correctness of verse by a complicated but effective series of rhythmic fragments. Characters appear inconsequentially, adding to the tension and richness of the narrative, but also stand as living personages, not cogs in

the machinery of plot. Racine's work, by contrast, is much more controlled and predetermined. Characters appear on cue to say eloquently what is necessary, but hardly a word more. No speech or character can be dispensed with, and all interlock to become an overwhelming force. Content does not overflow the boundaries of the hexameter, but Racine points his meaning by rhetoric and subtle alterations in the fabric of the lines. He changes the word order, adds interjections, uses the tu form or extreme simplicity at key points. He obtains significance by the simplest means, though a deep and mordant irony is never far away.

Blank Verse

There is no reason why a smoothly turned blank verse should not cope admirably with these features, and John Cairncross has indeed written such: {14}

269. My malady goes further back. I scarce
Was bound by marriage to Aegeus' son;
My peace of mind, my happiness seemed sure.
Athens revealed to me my haughty foe.
As I beheld, I reddened, I turned pale.
A tempest raged in my distracted mind.
My eyes no longer saw. I could not speak.
I felt my body freezing, burning; knew
Venus was on me with her dreaded flames,
The fatal torments of a race she loathes.

Here as elsewhere, Cairncross's scrupulous attention to the meaning has created rather static verse, but that can be

remedied by giving the lines the power to flow on more:

269. My crime goes further back, when first I vowed
my laws of hymen to the son of Aegeus,
Secure in happiness and peace of mind
I met in Athens my contemptuous foe.
I saw him, coloured, at the sight grew pale,
my soul rose fluttering but was lost.
The daylight blinded and I could not speak
but knew immediately in fire and ice
that Venus was with me and with powers
to goad the blood she loathes with fierce desires.

But if we now add rhyme, their whole character changes,
becoming much more shaped and incisive:

269. My crime goes further back, but was begun
Once more in wedding vows to Aegeus' son.
Fulfilled in happiness a bride should know,
I met in Athens my contemptuous foe.
Hippolytus I saw, and blushed, grew pale,
felt soul in agitation rise and fail.
My veins ran fire and ice, and that physique
rained daylight at me, and I could not speak,
but saw then Venus in her full-clothed fire
would goad the blood she loathes with fierce desire.

The truth, I think, is that Dryden, for all the fame it brought
him, was not at home on the stage, and so did not exploit

heroic couplets sufficiently. In satire he made them much more effective:

A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one but all mankind's epitome.
Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong;
Was everything in starts and nothing long:
But, in the course of one revolving moon,
Was chemist, statesman, fiddler and buffoon. (Absalom and Achitophel)

Such vigorous, varied and intelligent verse reappears with Alexander Pope. He did not write for the stage, but again achieved a conversational ease in satire:

Shut, shut the door, good John! fatigu'd, I said:
Tie up the knocker, say I'm sick, I'm dead.
The Dog-star rages! nay 'tis past a doubt,
All Bedlam, or Parnassus, is let out:
Fire in each eye, and papers in each hand,
They rave, recite, and madden round the land; (Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot)

It’s an ease achieved by incessant practice, and so worth noting that couplets are a form that can be continually improved. Alexander Pope’s lines 13-14 of The Rape of the Lock in the 1717 version:

Sol through white curtains shot a tim’rous ray,

And op’d those eyes that must eclipse the day

began in the awkward 1712 rendering:

Sol thro’ white Curtains did his Beams display
And op’d those Eyes which brighter shine than they

In summary, heroic couplets should be able to reproduce the neatness, surface politeness, repressed power and eloquence of Racine, given some skill and a good deal of work.

Free Verse

What of free verse, the reigning orthodoxy of today? We look at Ted Hughes’s rendering below, but here is a typical excerpt.

I had to confront the one I banished.
The first sight of him ripped my wounds wide open.
No longer a fever in my veins,
Venus has fastened on me like a tiger.
I know my guilt and it terrifies me.

It’s difficult to imagine a queen speaking with such banality, and it’s certainly not Racine’s style.

303. J'ai revu l'ennemi que j'avais éloigné :
Ma blessure trop vive a aussitôt saigné,
Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachée :
C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée.

J'ai conçu pour mon crime une juste terreur ;
J'ai pris la vie en haine, et ma flamme en horreur.

That might be better rendered in heroic couplets as:

I saw my exiled enemy and knew
the unhealed wound would start to flood anew.
No longer in my veins was love at bay
but Venus wholly fastened on her prey.
The terror of my crime will not abate:
my love is monstrous, and this life I hate.

Hughes's language is real and immediate, but it's also coarse and clumsy, far from the dignity and eloquence a French court expected of the classics. Individually, the lines lack shape, persuasion or poetry.

No doubt much verse written today is similar, not far from dislocated prose, but free verse at its best achieves a rhythmical and idiomatic exactness, resonant with everyday meanings of words.

Rhymed Couplets

Unfortunately, Racine does not use words with everyday associations, quite the opposite. He exemplifies the old adage that things can be said in verse that cannot be said in prose, because the verse structure itself adds refinement to the meaning. To obtain that refinement, however, the prose sense of words has to be left behind, or winnowed from its contemporary and everyday associations. The dangers are

obvious — retreat into invention and bombast, the pedantry of academic correctness or the sterile language of some contemporary styles. Classicism requires surpassingly appropriate utterance in a public place — what we, given overriding emotions, and an eloquence to match, would dearly loved to have said to a cultivated audience. Words at the ideal fullness of their meaning, therefore, and calling up their primary meanings.

Some examples may make this clearer. We can agree that Wilbur's translation: {18}

We'll sail, and at whatever cost obtain,
Great Athens' crown for one who's fit to reign

is a sensible and compact translation of:

735. Partons ; et quelque prix qu'il en puisse coûter,
Mettons le sceptre aux mains dignes de le porter.

but also wonder if the constricting fit is quite appropriate. Racine's line is rather grander, and it may be best to retain the flourish:

If not we sail, and, cost what price it may,
we'll place in worthier hands the sceptre's sway.

Similarly, we have to think continually of the audience, and avoid rhymes too obviously contrived.

Wilbur's

459. But, dear Ismene, how rashly I have talked!
My hopes may all too easily be balked,

might be better put as:

459. You'll hear me humbled by my grief, in days
to come perhaps regret these vaunting ways.

Balance, a middle way, is therefore what is needed. We want a translation that is sensitive to Racine's shades of meaning, but also vigorous, alive and believable, what polished courtiers would say in real situations. That means, I think, we should avoid the easy rhymes of pantomime verse, expunge the archaisms beloved of costume drama, and avoid the melodramatic phrase of reverberating doom and the like.

Equally imperative is a verse that injects life into the characters. Some critics, and indeed productions, have given the limelight entirely to Phaedra, turning other members of the cast into mere contrivances. Theseus becomes a vainglorious buffoon, Hippolytus a unconvincing prig, and Aricia someone only concerned to make a good marriage. But Racine is a subtle writer, and if the shadings are less obvious in the polished flow of alexandrines, an English translation needs to throw these aspects into higher relief.

Hippolytus needs to woo Aricia ardently after his timid start, for example, and Aricia to respond as warmly as conventions allow. Even Oenone, whose guile is often seen as setting events on their destructive course, is only protecting her mistress, and her practical if plebeian mind calls for its characteristic phrasing.

Finally comes writing something a modern audience can appreciate: the last obstacle a translator faces. In this I may have failed, since many today have no ear for verse, even those teaching the subject or performing it on stage. Phaedra can be read for many reasons, but the prime reason is for its poetry, which is indissolubly part of the verse, and a very formal verse at that. A glance at the French text will show how different is the verse of the play from the prose of the Preface, and those verse features need to be retained in a translation, since it is through them that Phaedra exerts its power. A translation in contemporary styles would be more accessible, but it wouldn't be Racine and probably not poetry.

Phaedra (Phèdre) References and Resources

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## Athalie by Racine

Racine's Athalie or Athaliah was written for private performance at court, and has something of the gloom and piety that marked the later years of the Sun King's reign. It was staged in 1691 by the convent girls at St Cyr, and so belongs to the period between the Counter-Reformation and the grand operas of the following century. The first attempted to bring the majesty of God down to earth in magnificent music, ceremony and architecture. The second aimed at spectacle and stunning stage effects. With its extended choruses (though unperformed in Racine's lifetime, and a troubled history for the play as a whole thereafter), Athaliah is indeed close to opera, but of a peculiarly religious kind.

### Difficulties of Athalie for the Modern Audience

The stern teachings that underlie Athalie cause problems for modern audiences. Austere and more successful in stagecraft than in creating sympathetic characters is probably the common impression. But Voltaire, no great friend of the French court, considered it one of the great achievements of the human mind, excelling anything of Shakespeare's. Flaubert greatly admired the work, and Gide praised the chorus sections. Like all Racine's work, the play is not naturalistic but poetic: it succeeds or fails as the poetry succeeds or fails.

We miss what Racine intended by complaining that what little warmth emanates from the play comes from the minor characters: the honest but simple Abner and the long-suffering Princess Jehoshabeath, who meekly follows her husband's dictates. Similarly with Joash. His is a cloistered virtue, doubtless, but if he comes over as something of a prig that is all to Racine's purposes. The untried youth was to turn apostate in his later years, as Racine takes pains to emphasize, in the Introduction and the play itself, because man is born into sin, and cannot escape damnation by his own efforts. Racine was not writing fiction, but dramatizing something that was importantly true. The choruses put the matter plainly, and the play fails if we simply respond to them as poetry.

E-Book

A free e-book in pdf format includes the French text, glossary and notes on the translation.

Background to the Play

Life of Racine

Jean Racine was born to modest circumstances in 1639, orphaned at a young age, and brought up on charity. He was given a first-class education by the Jansenists at Port Royal, and spent a further two years at their college of Beauvais. Rejecting their sober teachings, however, Racine began writing for the theatre in 1660, and by the time of Phaedra, performed in 1677, had nine plays to his credit,

several of them masterpieces of the French classical theatre and containing some of its greatest poetry. Phaedra was poorly received, however, and Racine retired to marriage and a court position, though returning a decade later with two further plays: Esther and Athaliah. He died of cancer in 1699. Athaliah was written for private performance at court, and has something of the gloom and piety that marked the later years of the Sun King's reign. It was staged in 1691 by the convent girls at St Cyr, and so belongs to the period between the Counter-Reformation and the grand operas of the following century. The first attempted to bring the majesty of God down to earth in magnificent music, ceremony and architecture. The second aimed at spectacle and stunning stage effects. With its extended choruses (though unperformed in Racine's lifetime, and a troubled history for the play as a whole thereafter), Athaliah is indeed close to opera, but of a peculiarly religious kind.

We can stay on the outside, surrendering to the play as an accomplished work of art, but only as a work of art. Athalie/Athaliah is then a view of Biblical history at a certain time by a certain man, and not a model for a worthwhile and virtuous life. Many readers have found the queen a more generous and tolerant character than Jehoiada, for all that she meets the savagery of the time with a brutal statecraft that sheds innocent blood if necessary. Athaliah may have turned away from Yahweh, and have seated herself on a throne reserved for men, but her accomplishments are real and impressive. She is imperious and lustful for gold, but

what contemporary ruler was not? Racine's treatment suggests his human sympathies lay with Athaliah, but she was nonetheless to be destroyed and the line of David continue with Joash and so on to Christ.

We are so used to drama exploring the subtler shades of human psychology that we can forget that drama need not do anything of the kind. Athaliah presents memorable characters but does not refine their motivations. A threat existed in this Biblical episode to the appearance of Christ, who alone saves us from eternal damnation. God removed the threat. Otherwise, man remains as he always has been. Israel will again turn from the true faith. Contending interpretations of Christ's intentions will arise, and nations be plunged into error and bloodshed. Racine himself has seen the religious wars of France, and knows the hope for man lies on the other side of the grave, though none can tell what that will be.

Racine's Choice of Theme

The Bibical episode no doubt appealed to Racine, providing a credible and fast-moving plot, a strong female lead, and the threat of violence. The playwright was also making atonement for his years of indulgence and error. But Athaliah has none of the quiet resignation and reconciliation that old age brings: it is an uncompromising play, which Racine's verbal skill makes even more challenging. Racine the commoner become courtier has some very hard things to say on the failings of courts, kings and priests. Yahweh is a jealous and vengeful God. Mathan is an odious character,

who understands the sources of his thwarted ambition and self-loathing. Jehoiada, that unfaltering tower of rectitude, vanquishes the queen, but does so through treachery, in the Temple and under the promise of safe conduct.

In the end the play has to be judged on its own terms, as Racine's statement of faith. Religious freedom had been largely lost: private worship was allowed, but an orthodox Catholicism was the state religion. Louis XIV, whom he genuinely admired, had closed the very college where Racine had been educated, and this peculiarly sensitive man who had come so far from middle class beginnings has now, in his last play, to look back on a world from which he has been largely excluded. Choruses mark the ends of four acts but are missing from the fifth. The conclusion of the play sees Joash restored to the throne, the besieging army dispersed and Athaliah executed, but at this golden moment, when choral celebration might be so expected, Racine simply has Jehoiada say:

Par cette fin terrible, et due à ses forfaits,
Apprenez, roi des Juifs, et n'oubliez jamais
Que les rois dans le ciel ont un juge sévère,
L'innocence un vengeur, et l'orphelin un père.

Which I have slightly condensed as:

Learn from that fierce ending, King of Jews,
how heaven's stern judge of kings exacts His dues,

that innocence when wronged will have redress
in He who's father to the fatherless.

Racine's View of Life

What does this mean? More than alluding to Jean Racine the orphan who eventually found a father in his religious faith, it is a pointer to matters more compelling than the Greek tragedies Racine knew so well. Where Greek city life was admittedly precarious, and the gods only occasionally beneficent, Jansenists accept that God moves to unknown and unknowable ends. Some of us will be saved, and many more will be damned to eternal suffering. It is Racine's outlook that gives Athaliah its particular frisson and chilling force.

While the tragedy of Phaedra rises from flaws in the characters, the characters in Athaliah are not flawed but only limited, indeed almost monolithic in their inner workings. In such an absence of psychological shading, Racine has moved beyond depicting the frail vessels of humanity to more essential matters. They are not lovable, these embodiments of God's purposes, but they are magnificently compelling. Only the queen weakens, it must be supposed, when the Lord parts the waves of her suspicious mind to allow pity to enter, for a few hours only, but sufficient to preserve Eliacin from vengeance and have Jehoiada's plot succeed. Otherwise, there are no sub-plots or twists of fate to waylaid denouement. The conflicts are not resolved on the personal level, but by appeal to the chorus, to the Almighty himself.

## Plot

The plot is largely based on Biblical history. Athalie (Athaliah in this translation), widow of the king of Judah, has abandoned the Jewish religion for the worship of Baal, and believes she has eliminated other members of the royal family. In fact, however, the late king's son, Joash, has been rescued by Josabeth, wife of the high priest, and secretly raised in the Temple as Eliacin.

Act 1. Abner, Athalie's general, assures Jehoiada, the high priest, that he would support a descendant of the king of Judah if one appeared. Jehoiada agrees with Josabeth to reveal the existence of Joash, intending to dethrone Athaliah and return the country to the old faith.

Act 2. Athalie goes into the Jewish temple and finds a child, Eliacin, whom she has seen in a threatening dream. Not knowing that this child is Joash, she aks Jehoiada to bring him to her, and then invites the child to live with her at the palace.

Act 3. Fearing what the dream foretells, Athalie demands Eliacin be sent as a hostage. The high priest decides to hasten the restoration of Joash to preclude plots by the treacherous Mathan, the chief priest of Baal.

Act 4. Eliacin is revealed as Joash, the true successor of the kings of Judah. The priests barricade the Temple.

Act 5. Athalie prepares to dislodge the rebels from the Temple. She comes under promise of safe passage into the Temple to claim Eliacin and the reputed treasure of the place. Joash is then proclaimed king, when armed priests seize Athaliah and kill her guards. The army besieging the Temple flees. Athalie is executed.

Translation Excerpt

Act One: Scene 1 (Opening)
Jehoiada, Abner

ABNER

In Temple custom, yes, I come to praise
our God on this revered of hallowed days,
and celebrate with you what would be still
were laws as handed down from Sinai’s hill.
How times have changed! For when the dawn's first red
by sacred trumpet had been heralded,
the Temple with its festooned porticoes
was thronged by worshippers. In endless rows
they progressed to the altar, there to yield
10. the first of fruits they'd gathered from the field,
with blessings of the universal god to ask,
that priests were scarcely equal to the task.
But now that one audacious woman's cast
her shade on blest occasions of the past,
there are of fervent worshippers but few
who dare recall to us the ways we knew.

The rest are sunk in dire forgetfulness
and even to the shrine of Baal would press,
in shameful mysteries so far gone
20. as curse the name their fathers called upon.
Athaliah soon will leave small doubt
of aims in having even you dragged out,
and in her gloomy savagery reject
those last few vestiges of feigned respect.

JEHOIADA

What do these dark presentiments presage?

ABNER

Can you be holy and escape her rage?
The faith that ornaments your diadem
is long what Athaliah must condemn.
Devotions such as yours assault
30. her mind with dark suspicions of revolt.
She envies merit in another's life.
and Josabeth she hates, your blameless wife,
for if you fill the high priest Aaron's place,
your wife's the late king's sister. So take care
of Mathan more. For Mathan, that false priest,
in goading Athaliah is not the least
of dangers. Treacherous, he prowls around
in search of virtue to dispatch or hound.
A Levite still, but foreign mitre wears,

40. in ministering to Baal and vile affairs.
So much our Temple galls him, he would reft
the greatness from it of the God he left.
To injure you no wiles are too refined:
he seems to pity you, and has combined
a soft, persuasive and forgiving air
with depths that cloak his baleful scheming there.
He paints you as determined to withhold
what salves her sovereign appetite for gold.
You guard the Temple, and to you alone
50. is known the treasure of King David's throne.
Athaliah, strikingly, these past
two days, has shown a shrouded, sombre cast.
I watched her yesterday, and saw advance
across her features such a furious glance,
supposing that our Temple vastness held
a God that injured and her force repelled.

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# Racine's Athaliah: Literary and Academic Renderings

## The Academic Translation in Context

Few matters in literature are clear-cut, and distinctions between academic and literary translation depend very much on what is being discussed, and the viewpoints adopted. Generally we call a translation academic if it scrupulously and self-consciously covers all the bases, most particularly if it makes the faithful rendering of the prose sense its primary objective. But while a literary translation aims to do more, to also convey the spirit and literary quality of the original into another language, that target language is also shaped by contemporary and sometimes academic expectations.

As always, the devil is in the detail, and to see the many alternatives thrown up, we look at three modern translations of Racine's Athaliah (Athalie in French)— one in unrhymed verse {1} and two in heroic couplets {2-3}.

The first is quiet, accomplished and faithful to the original text. It's also written as expected of serious poetry today: matter of fact, stripped of unnecessary detail, and adopting an emotionally neutral investigation of the everyday world.

The opening French

Oui, je viens dans son temple adorer l'Eternel ;
Je viens, selon l'usage antique et solennel,
Célébrer avec vous la fameuse journée
Où sur le mont Sina la loi nous fut donnée.
Que les temps sont changés ! Sitôt que de ce jour
La trompette sacrée annonçait le retour,
Du temple, orné partout de festons magnifiques,
Le peuple saint en foule inondait les portiques ;

Professor Chilcot's translation:

I come to worship God here in his shrine.
To follow the old and solemn ritual
And celebrate the famous day with you,
When holy law was given us on Sinai
How times have changed. The the sacred trumpet then
Had scarcely sounded out the day's return
Than crowds of worshipper streamed through
The temple doors. Garlands were everywhere

Indeed, the explanatory notes spell out the objectives. Rather than write rhyming couplets, which would seem unreal to contemporary audiences, and involve many contrivances, we'd do better to convert the text to short and straight-forward sentences. Those sentences can then be assembled into lines approximating to blank verse but still kept simple, i.e. devoid of rhetorical flourishes common in declamation from the stage. Certainly the lines are unrhymed, but if Racine's own verse is in couplets, they are

also very well-behaved couplets that use subtle shifts in the alexandrine to provide line shape and emphasis.

Put another way, the rendering is more open to the actor, who is free to phrase and emphasize matters as he or she sees fit, not therefore so restricted by the verse form — a post-modernist and arguably more democratic approach.

If we judge it on those terms, the rendering reads admirably. The lines may be somewhat dislocated, and their emotional impact kept from to swelling into grandiloquence, but Racine is usually performed that way, even on the Paris stage.

The difficulties come in two areas: diction and the long 'tirades'. Racine's diction is indeed limited, but the style moves beyond the mundane. For what works on an elevated plane there are often no simple English equivalents. An extreme example.

So there you are, you scum.
You vicious seed of secret packs and plots

The French is rather different:

Te voilà, séducteur,
De ligues, de complots, pernicieux auteur,

Before looking at the rhymed versions, we should note the

obvious: that traditional verse is difficult to write, requiring gifts, experience and sustained application. Tony Kline, for example, who employs a very serviceable free verse for his popular translations, made this early attempt on Phaedra.

Hippolytus

My plans are made, dear Theramenes, I go:
I'll end my stay in pleasant Troezen so.
Gripped as I am by deadly uncertainty
I've grown ashamed of my inactivity.
5. For more than six months, far from my father, here,
I'm unaware now of the fate of one so dear.
I'm unaware, even, in what place he might be.

Just about everything is unfortunately wrong with the rendering: the lines don't scan; the phrasing is awkward; rhymes are contrived; the translator has no ear for the graces of English verse. That it still ranks well in Google is probably testament to the many useful translations on the PoetryinTranslation site, though it may also point to the lamentable level of English verse appreciation among academics and their captive students.

Racine's Athaliah (Athalie) brings exceptional problems, for translator and the reader.

The themes, incidents and characters are far from contemporary concerns. The classical theatre of the French

was much more rule-bound, static and formal than our seventeenth century stage. Racine's choruses employ intricate rhyme schemes, and the speeches generally exhibit great subtleties in the alexandrine — all of which have to be conveyed in a fluid and ever-varying manner if the English couplets are not to fall into monotonous and antiquated bombast.  Since small details of pacing and sonic echoes, on which Racine depends, and which the Ocaso Press version does its best (in its own way) to reflect, may be inaudible to readers familiar only with prose in the theatre, I will try to explain what's involved.

First, as will be clear at many places in the text, the Ocaso Press rendering is a literary translation, a recreation, one where I have usually made small departures from a literal translation if these will make a verse better enabled to carry the power of the original. Those who cannot read the French, and want a closer rendering of the prose sense, can be referred to John Caincross's very serviceable blank verse translation, or to the new version by Geoffrey Alan Argent in faithful heroic couplets.

Here we might note that academic renderings, which aim to convey the prose sense as closely as possible, and, in Dr. Argent's rendering, the end-stopped nature of Racine's lines, face three dangers. A faithful rendering preserving the aa bb rhyme scheme is usually compelled to sacrifice many features of pleasing English verse, i.e. the euphony, cadences, sonic properties of words and a dozen

contrivances that lift the phrasing from the flat-footed to the seeming inevitable.

The second danger is much more serious, which is to the tendency carry into English what strictly belongs to the French tradition. There is rarely a central caesura in English verse, for example, and no preference for the rime riche, indeed the very opposite. As much as possible I have tried to avoid rhymes like decorate / inundate, which verge on pantomime effects, enjoyable in a mundane setting, but out of place in Racine's plays. For the same reason, I have kept the diction somewhat elevated: Racine does not use an everday French.

The third danger is related to the last. Like dialogue generally, speeches have to disclose the speaker's personality, background and motivations, carry the plot, create decisive twists in the story-line, heighten tension or conflict between the speakers, record subtle changes in their relationships, remind the audience from time to time of what it may have forgotten, foreshadow important events, and establish the right mood or tone. To that a long list should be added, I think, the traditions of the English stage. Racine's lines are restrained and deadly, the emotion resonating as it were between the confines of the balanced and end-stopped alexandrine. The English theatre is quite different. Speeches are expected to come alive, i.e. carry a forward-sweeping momentum and cogency, expressing what real people would say in real situations. For that reason I

have tried to recreate the verse from the inside, often writing more by the paragraph than the couplet. Many lines are therefore far from the economy, balance and elegance of Racine — i.e. more energetic, phrased for the speaking voice though still I hope observing vowel harmony and melodic invention. It's an aim that departs very much from the French classical tradition, the reader should be warned.

Much in my notes on Phaedra applies equally to Athaliah, particularly Racine's verse skills and my reasons for writing rhymed couplets rather than blank verse. Those views are echoed in the Mr. Argent's intentions, which are, I think, to create an academic version in the best tradition of the word. The formality, diction and the static, end-stopped nature of Racine's verse are all faithfully rendered: a very considerable achievement.

What is not always conveyed, however, is Racine's poetry, not through any incompetence on Dr. Argent's part, but by the nature of his translation aims. What works in the French tradition will not necessarily work in English. Vocabularies, verse conventions, rhyme preferences and indeed the very sounds of the languages are markedly different.

We can see differences between the two versions, academic and literary, almost from the beginning. In the second line of the play Racine achieves one of those little miracles in verse, employing the nasal sounds and the evocative 'antique et solennel' in a flowing sentence that emphasizes

the importance of the day.

Oui, je viens dans son temple adorer l'Eternel ;
Je viens, selon l'usage antique et solennel,
Célébrer avec vous la fameuse journée
Où sur le mont Sina la loi nous fut donnée.

Dr. Argent's version is very faithful, conveying well the halting rhythm of the first line, and representing the phrase in question by a sonorous 'solemnly, from old':

Yes, to His temple I come, to adore the Lord,
As solemnly, from old, he's been adored,
And celebrate that glorious day that saw
Our God, on Sinai's height, bestow His Law.

It's excellent, in all perhaps but the excessive assonance of 'adore.. Lord. . .adored. . saw . . .Law'.

Originally (for those who still have the pre-February 2016 version) I evaded the problem altogether and wrote a forward-driving:

Yes, for love of the Eternal One,
I come in Temple custom, as was done
to praise that glorious day, which would be still
were laws as handed down from Sinai’s hill.

But eventually realized I was overlooking what Racine

clearly thinks important, that the lines should serve as an introductory coda. So, in the latest version:

In Temple custom, yes, I come to praise
our God on this revered of hallowed days,
and celebrate with you what would be still
were laws as handed down from Sinai's hill.

The verse in Athaliah is compact, sometimes sonorous, but above all effective. The surface prettiness of the earlier plays is gone, as is the sensuous rhetoric and shifting emotional depths of Phaedra. There are many celebrated passages, but the verse is not so finished, either because Racine's powers were waning or because the incessant polisher had little opportunity to rework what was written for private performance.

Racine was never one to load each rift with ore, and the verse in Athaliah sometimes passes from the efficient to the mechanical.

377. Voici notre heure : allons célébrer ce grand journéé
Et devant le Seigneur paraître à  notre tour.

Or loosens towards prose:

688. Oui... Vous vous taisez ?
Quel père
Je quitterais ! Et pour...

In short, Racine was not always at his best in Athaliah. His limited vocabulary caused him to write:

1237. D'un pas majestueux, À coté de ma mère,
Le jeune Eliacin s'avance avec mon frère.

Mr Argent's rendering is exact:

With a majestic stride, beside my mother
Young Eliakim advances with my brother?

But 'majestic'? Everyone understands what Racine was trying to convey — gathering confidence — but 'majestic' too much exposes the poverty of Racine's diction, at least to English ears. I have rendered this as:

Here comes Eliacin with mounting stride
at now his mother’s and my brother’s side.

In his Translator's Note (whose tone echoes Racine's own introductions), Dr. Argent writes: 'After all, as Proust observes, "the tyranny of rhyme forces good poets into the discovery of their best lines", and while subjected to that tyranny, I took great pains to render Racine's French into English that is incisive, lucid, elegant and memorable. For I believe that the proper goal of a work of literature must be, first and foremost, to produce a work of literature in the language of the target audience.' Worthy aims, but, as I

have mentioned above, difficult to achieve in academic translations. Dr. Argent's renderings are generally more than competent, with many pleasing lines, but they also have also have sections like the following, where Racine's static lines are transferred bodily into English:

What fires you with a hatred so intense?
Does zeal for Baal provoke such vehemence?
For me, you know, a child of Ishmael's race,
Nor Israel's creed nor Baal's do I embrace.

The French is:

915.Qui peut vous inspirer une haine si forte ?
Est-ce que de Baal le zèle vous transporte ?
Pour moi, vous le savez, descendu d'Ismaël,
Je ne sers ni Baal, ni le Dieu d'Israël.

More in the English tradition of verse is:

What generates such vehement hate in you?
Or is it zeal for Baal that you pursue?
As for me, I come from Ishmael's stock
and neither bow with Baal's nor Israel's flock.

Nonetheless, it seems wise not to emphasize too much the antithesis inherent in the heroic couplet, and in place of :

JOSABETH

Who counters then these realms of hungry beasts?

JEHOIADA
Need I tell you? Levites and our priests.

Which just about renders the French:

207. Qui donc opposez-vous contre ses satellites ?
Ne vous l'ai-je pas dit? nos prêtres, nos lévites.

Write something rather less neat or glib:

So who resists her followers today?
Our priests and Levites. surely. Need I say?

Small points, but we have to remember the actors speaking the lines.

Occasionally, the English verse conversions are entirely thrown away in Dr. Argent's rendering, as in this section, where speech rhythms break the iambic flow:

You think it possible they won't comply?
Curious reluctance! What could be the cause?
Strange new suspicions might well give me pause.
Jehoiada or his wife must bring them here.
I speak now as your sovereign: is that clear?

The French is:

Manquerait-on pour moi de complaisance ?
De ce refus bizarre où seraient les raisons ?
590. Il pourrait me jeter en d'étranges soup□ons.
Que Josabet, vous dis-je, ou Joad les amène ;
Je puis, quand je voudrai, parler en souveraine.

A literary translation has to keep tone and sense more within the rhythmic outlines of the heroic couplet:

Why do you hesitate, condemn
my words to hopes with which they won't comply?
590. I could have doubts of someone asking why.
With Josabeth, or husband, have them seen,
for I can talk, when need be, as a queen

The differences are more pronounced in the chorus sections where lines of varying length, often repeated in different speeches, and exhibiting a complex interweaving of rhyme schemes, have to be rendered by a verse that will convey some poetry in Racine's uncompromising declarations. An example:

1490. Triste reste de nos rois,
Chère et dernière fleur d'une tige si belle,
Hélas ! sous le couteau d'une mère cruelle
Te verrons-nous tomber une seconde fois ?
Prince aimable, dis-nous si quelque ange au berceau
Contre tes assassins prit soin de te défendre ;

Ou si dans la nuit du tombeau
La voix du Dieu vivant a ranimé ta cendre ?

Few singing lines appear in Dr. Argent's version, which — by its terms of reference — employs a conventional diction and often turns alexandrines into hexameters, those most unwieldy of English forms:

Sad remains of a royal dynasty,
The last and dearest flower of so fair;
Alas, will this most cruel of mothers once more dare
To lift the fatal knife against her progeny?
Say, sweet prince, by some angel were you blessed,
Who at your cradle, stayed the assassin's blade?
Or did God's voice, when you'd been laid to rest,
From the tomb's darkest night recall your shade?

Literary versions keep more to the spirit of the play, diverging from the exact sense:

1490. So rest the sad remains of kings,
the last fair blossoming of one bright stem:
What cruel mother would condemn
us see a second time such brazen things.
Did some angel, tell us, from your birth,
take care that no assassin threaten you?
Or in dark ashes of the earth
the living voice of God breathe fire anew?

That divergence is a conscious choice. The queen's final speech:

Voici ce qu'en mourant lui souhaite sa mère :
Que dis-je, souhaiter ! Je me flatte, j'espère
Qu'indocile à  ton joug, fatigué de ta loi,
Fidèle au sang d'Achab qu'il a reçu de moi,
Conforme à  son aïeul, à  son père semblable,
On verra de David l'héritier détestable
Abolir tes honneurs, profaner ton autel,
1790. Et venger Athalie, Achab et Jézabel.

Is rendered adequately, if a little freely, by Dr. Argent as:

hear now his mother's last wishes as she dies
Her wish? No! — Athaliah prophesies
That, weary of laws that make his soul repine,
Faithful to Ahab's blood, which flows from mine,
shunning his forebear's' influence in vain,
David's abhorrent scion will profane
Your altar and defame Your majesty,
Avenging Ahab, Jezebel, and me.

The Ocaso Press literary translation is:

1780. But have him reign, this child, your handiwork.
Were well, to signal a new realm, he pressed
his dagger deep into a mother's breast.
This dying woman would accept the blow.

Accept? I hope and long for. This I know:
that tired of yoke, and by the law deceived,
still bound by Ahab's blood that I received,
as were the grandsire, and the father too,
he'll die detested David's heir, undo
the very altar, and his name as well,
1790. avenging Ahab, me and Jezebel.

Where, of course, 'This dying woman would accept the blow
. . .' is so free as to seem the translator's invention,
curiously when more faithful renderings come easily:

It is my dying wish to make it so.
Wish? More dearest yearning I could know,

So they do, but the freer variants better maintain the
momentum of the speech, and keep that penumbral echo of
poetry so essential to Racine. The play's final four lines are:

Par cette fin terrible, et due à ses forfaits,
Apprenez, roi des Juifs, et n'oubliez jamais
Que les rois dans le ciel ont un juge sévère,
L'innocence un vengeur, et l'orphelin un père.

Which Dr. Argent translates as:

From that condign and dreadful end she's she's met,
Learn well, king of the Jews, and ne'er forget:
Kings have, in heav'n, a Judge, stern and severe,

Innocence an Avenger, hovering near,
Orphans a Father, Who holds His children dear.

Which is rather expanded, with rhymes somewhat contrived. We can write:

Learn from that fierce ending, King of Jews,
how heaven's stern judge of kings exacts His dues.
Do not forget that virtue has redress
in He who’s father to the fatherless.

But it seems better to aim for the poetry more, and stress innocence rather than virtue, thus ending on a quieter note:

Learn from that fierce ending, King of Jews,
how Heaven's stern judge of kings exacts its dues,
that innocence when wronged will have redress
in He who's father to the fatherless.:

So the literary tradition, which draws its words from the overall sense of the piece, closely guided by the original text but at times creating what is only latent in the original.

Students who want a close rendering that respects Racine's end-stopped and static lines will find Dr. Argent's version the more useful. Those who want more fluid verse in the English manner, and something that converts readily to the stage, may like to consider the free Ocaso Press offering. Professor

Chilcot's version, also free, admirably conveys the prose sense in everyday diction.

Some Details

French and English follow different rhyme conventions. As I have mentioned, the French surrender to the rime riche, which to English ears is detestable, mere pantomime verse. The English are quite content with the rime pauvre, however, indeed prefer it, or some variation of rime pauvre and rime suffisante. These conventions have to be respected if the translation is to read as competent verse, let alone poetry. For Racine's continual use of such rhymes as:

133. Que sur toute tribu, sur toute nation,
L'un d'eux établirait sa domination,

I have often avoided the like of:

when over every tribe and every nation
extend throughout a single domination,

and written something like:

when every tribe would know, and every state,
a domination none repudiate

For the choruses I have retained the rhyme schemes and approximated to the changing line lengths, but tried initially to make the verse rise out of the alexandrine texture of Racine's verse. In place of the rather grandiloquent

315. In vain is fury found
to mute a people or their praise confound.
Never perishes His name
but passes day to day in glory crowned.

I first wrote the easier running:

315. Violent falsehood's never found
enough to suffocate a people's sound.
Nor shall ever fade His name
but be from day to day as glory crowned.

But then came to realize the uncompromising nature of the choruses, which not so much add a descant to the play but exist in another dimension altogether, adding momentum and religious significance to actions in the world below. The lines went back to being more standalone:

315. In vain is fury found
to quell a people or their praise confound.
Never surely fades His name
that's daily more in power and glory crowned.

The limited and conventional nature of Racine’s rhymes I have generally rendered with equally conventional English rhymes, occasionally allowing two rimes suffisantes, but generally aiming for more variety.

In a few places, quite against the French tradition, I have written a free-flowing verse with rhyme entirely incidental, i.e. not shaping the lines. One example is Athaliah's momentary confusion:

435. No, I cannot leave: you see how weak
I am. Bring Mattan here, for I must speak
to him, and have his happy wisdom find
the peace I want but still eludes my mind.

'Athaliah' does not depend on our empathy with the characters, but on the sheer power of its writing, that close interlocking of stagecraft with superlative technique. The play succeeds or fails as the verse convinces us that something is irrefutably the case. The verse is therefore self-enclosing, and made more so by the end-stopped nature of the alexandrine. To make something more virile and faster moving, I have let the content flow across the lines more than Racine allows, but kept its hard surface by writing in exact, iambic rhymed couplets that aim to give the full sense immediately.

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## Characteristics of Racine's Phaedra Verse

Classicism is an aesthetic attitude deriving from the arts of ancient Greece and Rome, specifically an emphasis on simplicity, proportion, and restrained emotion. Put very simply, Classicism, Realism and Romanticism all deal with the outside world, but Realism shows the world as it is, Romanticism as the heart tells us it should be, and Classicism as it would be in some ideal and public incarnation. Contemporary literature, by contrast, is commonly a retreat into the writer's consciousness — to make autonomous creations that incorporate diverse aspects of modern life (Modernism), or free-wheeling creations constructed of a language that largely points to itself (Postmodernism).

Classicism stressed simplicity, surface clarity and painstaking craftsmanship. Proportion was important, and nothing should be taken to excess. Expression was public rather than individual, and was restrained by convention and propriety, indeed the language was often elevated: not necessarily refined but excluding the humdrum, misshapen and obscene. There was also a respect for traditional forms and genres, a building on achievements of celebrated authors, and reference to experience more than theory.

Racine absorbed the attitude of classical authors to their world, in which the gods were both convenient abstractions

and living realities. Their reality in story and myth was created in the ritual of their dramatic presentations, and such performances had to be continually repeated. Religion itself became meaningful in such acts — ritual, prayer, theatrical performances, mystical encounters — and was not something that could be extracted from content and tested by logic or empirical experiment. Just as myths are expressed in a language typically closed and self-supporting, not easily transferred from one culture to another, so poetry depends on the precise makeup of the symbols employed. Admit the loose cynicism of everyday life into the fabric of classical verse and its elevation falters. We who expect poetry today to have no boundaries, but encompass our most mundane thoughts with idiomatic clarity, may find classical verse impossibly elevated, remote and stylized. Racine’s art is not one of imagination, but of phrasing, of having the right words in the right places. Wisdom begins with calling things by their proper names, and naming is important in classical tragedy because individual words are underwritten by an ideal, unchanging and public understanding. Poetry, said Aristotle, is superior to history because it uses words in their fuller potential, and creates representations more complete and more meaningful than nature can give us in the raw.

Jean Racine’s plays observed Aristotle's supposed unities of place, time and action, aiming for power and homogeneity, but where Corneille expressed heroic sentiments in noble oratory, Racine's restrained, polished but always appropriate

language depicted man's ferocious passions, savagery and imprudence. Classicism, with its balance and wholeness, was retained, with a correct and restricted vocabulary, but given an unforgettable force.

Racine’s characters were impelled by fierce passions, thwarted only by circumstances and the pressing desires of others. As kings, heroes and court personages they suffered irreparably from their actions, though in a larger setting, remote to us in time and space. Racine depicts human life intensified, but also given grandeur and significant by myth and distance. {1} {2} {3}

Two important concepts were vraisemblance and bienséance. Vraisemblance required plays to be believable: the historical facts could be tampered with, but motive, narrative and characters had to be convincing. Racine, for example, adds Aricia, for whom there is no historical precedent. Bienséance required plays to follow the decorum of good society and avoid words of too violent, obscene or mundane a character. Hippolytus, for example, brought up a savage in the woods, speaks like a Louis XIV courtier. {4}

Racine was not the first French dramatist to portray Phaedre and her guilty love for Hippolytus. There already existed plays by Garnier, La Pinelière, Bidar and Pradon, {5} but Racine overcame the seeming injustice in the story by having all characters err in some degree, and be aware of doing so. Phaedra’s passion is monstrous, as she herself

realizes. Theseus gives way to rage, and knows he recklessly calls up Neptune’s curse. Hippolytus wittingly disobeys his father, and is encouraged by Aricia to propose marriage. Oenone’s solicitude for Phaedra exceeds the moral bounds. By concentrating the action on the day of Theseus’s return, the play reverberates with the characters’ excessive desires and their punishment.

Also effective is the background Racine evokes, which adds the miraculous necessary for the death of Hippolytus. Aricia has a claim on Athens, the city Minerva built. Hippolytus is the son of Antiope, queen of the Amazons. The opening scene not only foreshadows the political motivation behind events, but sets them in an ancient world of the Mediterranean still alive with myths and the fabulous monsters that Hippolytus wishes to emulate his father in subduing: another of Racine’s resonating ironies.

Details of Racine's Phaedra Verse

Speeches to a confidant are a stable of French tragedy, but Racine makes Theramenes and Oenone distinct personalities, getting them to play critical parts in the story. The loves of Phaedra and Hippolytus run in parallel, both emerging from obscurity into the sunlight in a way emphasized by the play of light and dark in the verse, but also underlining Phaedra’s predicament, a queen suspended between the judging darkness of her father Minos and the health-giving radiance of the sun, all members of her bloodline.

Like most European writers of the time, Racine was a close student of rhetoric, the art of controlling an audience. Whole textbooks were written on the subject, and its rules governed the way Racine and others crafted their poetry, from initial creation (inventio), arrangement ( dispositio) to the words adopted to write or speak in a correct, moving and pleasing manner (elocutio). Racine was familiar with a technical terminology now only of interest to scholars, and the organising power of those devices is present on every page he wrote. {4}

French tragedy made much use of periphrases, for emphasis (a trois fois chassé la nuite obscure) or embellishment (la plaine liquide ). Epithets came out of stock, ennobling in intent, but at times banal and immaterial (timide, cruel, fatal, etc.) The exclamations used to heighten speech sound unnatural or unconvincing today (Ah! Dieux! Ciel! Quoi! Hélas!).

Racine's verse was in alexandrines, which are nothing like English blank verse or the rhyming couplet, and rather different from everyday spoken French. {6} Somewhat simplified, the rules governing the French hexameter are as follows. The alexandrine always consists of exactly twelve syllables. The only licence allowed the poet concerns the 'double vowels'. There are no diphthongs in French, and i/u/ü + vowel may be treated as two separate syllables (diaeresis) or as one by pronouncing the double vowel as y + vowel (synaeresis). Each syllable of the alexandrine is a

sounded vowel. The neutral e is not sounded when occurring at the line end, but lengthens the preceding vowel/syllable. A similar rule applies to the third person plural present tense ending of ent. Lines ending in e or ent are termed feminine. Other lines are masculine. Though they may end with the same sound, feminine and masculine lines do not rhyme. A feminine line can only rhyme with another feminine line, and a masculine line rhyme with a masculine one. French classical verse is written in alternating pairs of masculine and feminine lines. If an act closes with a masculine line, the following act must open with a feminine line, and vice versa.

Hiatus is avoided in French, by running wherever possible the last consonant(s) of the preceding word or syllable into the vowel, by adding a letter ( a-t-il), or by absorbing the neutral e before aient. The neutral e is not sounded in everyday speech (cette semaine is pronounced as sèt smèn) but is pronounced when occurring in the body of an alexandrine (cette semaine becomes sè te se mèn).

Unlike English, however, where words have an inherent stress pattern (bódy, embódiment), French is a syllabic language where the stress falls on the last syllable of any meaningful group of words. In the alexandrine, this comes at the end of the line and usually, to a lesser extent, after the sixth syllable, which is marked by a caesura. The arrangement can be varied a little, and other patterns deployed, but in general the alexandrine is securely end-stopped, making it very different from English blank verse

where enjambment or run-on is expected.

Rhyme is a match in sounds (phonemes) between words of different meaning, preferably different function as well (verb with noun, etc.) but has more complicated rules in French. We are happy with high/sky, etc., but the French dislike what they call rime pauvre. Rime suffisante requires two sounds or phonemes to match: vowel + consonant or consonant + vowel. Rime riche requires an additional phoneme match, generally consonant + vowel + consonant, but is sometimes taken to include assonance earlier in the line. And whereas the English detest rime riche, reserving it for comic effects, the French admire this extra correspondence. There are also a few licences applying, which derive from earlier changes in pronunciation. Under rime normande, the terminal er is allowed to rhyme with é. A final s or t can rhyme with a 'fossilised e'. And a few words can be spelt in odd ways: pié for pied, remord for remords, croi for crois and encoue for encore.

Racine wrote in a very regular and composed manner: as here in the famous Act Four, Scene Six speech in which the ruined queen pours out her despair:

Je crois te voir, cher chant | un su ppli ce nou veau, 4 2 | 3 3
Toi-mê me de ton sang | de ve nir le bou rreau. 2 4 | 3 3
Par do nneUn Dieu cru el | a per du ta fa mille: 4 2 | 2 4
Re co nnais sa veng ean | ceaux fu reurs de ta fille. 3 3 | 3 3

Hé las ! du cri mea ffreux | dont la hon te me suit 2 4 | 4 2
Ja mais mon tri ste coeur | n'a re cuei lli le fruit. 2 4 | 4 2
Jus qu'a der nier sou pir, | de mal heurs pour sui vie, 3 3 | 3 3
Je rends dans les tour ment | su ne pé ni ble vie. 2 4 | 4 2

What further punishments can you devise
than butchery in which your bloodline dies?
Forgive me that I let a god in wild
1290. reprisal sow her fury through the child.
Never the once to what it sought for came
this heart, but sadness only, and to shame.
Phaedra in sighs, with which her path was rife,
in agonies gives back a painful life.

Phaedra in fact contains many celebrated lines:

Cet heureux temps n'est plus. Tout a changé de face
Depuis que sur ces bords les Dieux ont envoyé
La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé.

Those happy days are gone. All changes here
since gods have sent to us across the sea
the child of Minos and of Pasiphaë.

Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachée :
C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée.
No longer slumbering love was kept at bay
but Venus wholly fastened on her prey.

But it is the verse as a whole that gives the lines their magic. Far more than his contemporaries, Racine varied the alexandrine to create a range of effects. Short lines conveying shock:

O désespoir ! ô crime ! ô déplorable race !
Voyage infortuné ! Rivage malheureux,
Fallait-il approcher de tes bords dangereux ?

An offhand manner as when the nervous Hippolytus starts wooing Aricia:

Madame, avant que de partir,
J'ai cru de votre sort devoir vous avertit.
Mon père ne vit plus.

The tender correctness of Aricia’s reply:
Mais cet Empire enfin si grand, si glorieux,
N'est pas de vos présents le plus cher à mes yeux.

Theseus’s anger expressed in heavy epithets:

Monstre, qu'a trop longtemps épargné le tonnerre,
Reste impur des brigands dont j'ai purgé la terre !

Phaedra’s dream-like manner as she imagines Hippolytus killing the Minotaur:

Oui, Prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée.
Je l'aime, non point tel que l'ont vu les enfers,
Volage adorateur de mille objets divers,
Qui va du Dieu des morts déshonorer la couche ;
Mais fidèle, mais fier, et même un peu farouche,
Charmant, jeune, traînant tous les coeurs après soi,
Tel qu'on dépeint nos Dieux, ou tel que je vous voi.

Phaedra’s horror at her guilt:

Dans mes jaloux transports je le veux implorer.
Que fais-je ? Où ma raison va-t-elle s'égarer ?
Moi jalouse ! Et Thésée est celui que j'implore !
Mon époux est vivant, et moi je brûle encore !
The broken, pell-mell horror of Hippolytus’s death:
J'ai vu, Seigneur, j'ai vu votre malheureux fils
Traîné par les chevaux que sa main a nourris.
Il veut les rappeler, et sa voix les effraie ;
Ils courent. Tout son corps n'est bientôt qu'une plaie.
De nos cris douloureux la plaine retentit.

Then there is the flowing unity of the tirades, achieved by rhetorical devices that make the couplets part of a larger and overstepping dispositio, as here in Act Two, Scene One, Aricia speaking: {5}

exultant exclamation

415. Que mon coeur, chère Ismène, écoute avidement

Un discours qui peut-être a peu de fondement !
appeal for sympathy
O toi qui me connais, te semblait-il croyable
Que le triste jouet d'un sort impitoyable,
Un coeur toujours nourri d'amertume et de pleurs,

rhetorical question

420. Dût connaître l'amour et ses folles douleurs ?

dynastic background

Reste du sang d'un roi, noble fils de la terre,
Je suis seule échappée aux fureurs de la guerre.
J'ai perdu dans la fleur de leur jeune saison,
Six frères, quel espoir d'une illustre maison !

epic diction

Le fer moissonna tout, et la terre humectée
But à regret le sang des neveux d'Erechtée.

enmity of Theseus explained

Tu sais, depuis leur mort, quelle sévère loi
Défend à tous les Grecs de soupirer pour moi :
On craint que de la soeur les flammes téméraires
430. Ne raniment un jour la cendre de ses frères.
Mais tu sais bien aussi de quel oeil dédaigneux

Je regardais ce soin d'un vainqueur soupçonneux.

despising mere sexual love

Tu sais que de tout temps à l'amour opposée,
Je rendais souvent grâce à l'injuste Thésée
Dont l'heureuse rigueur secondait mes mépris.

seeing Hippolytus: fulcrum of speech

Mes yeux alors, mes yeux n'avaient pas vu son fils.

change to positive note

Non que par les yeux seuls, lâchement enchantée,
J'aime en lui sa beauté, sa grâce tant vantée,
Présents dont la nature a voulu l'honorer,
440. Qu'il méprise lui-même, et qu'il semble ignorer.
comparing her feelings to those of Phaedra for Theseus
J'aime, je prise en lui de plus nobles richesses,
Les vertus de son père, et non point les faiblesses.
J'aime, je l'avoûrai, cet orgueil généreux
Qui n'a jamais fléchi sous le joug amoureux.
Phèdre en vain s'honorait des soupirs de Thésée :
Pour moi, je suis plus fière, et fuis la gloire; aisée
D'arracher un hommage à mille autres offert,
Et d'entrer dans un coeur de toutes parts ouvert.

her superiority to Phaedra

Mais de faire fléchir un courage inflexible,
De porter la douleur dans une âme insensible,
D'enchaîner un captif de ses fers étonné,
Contre un joug qui lui plaît vainement mutiné ;
C'est là ce que je veux, c'est là ce qui m'irrite.
Hercule à désarmer coûtait moins qu'Hippolyte,
Et vaincu plus souvent, et plus tôt surmonté,
Préparait moins de gloire; aux yeux qui l'ont dompté.

return to present circumstances

Mais, chère Ismène, hélas ! quelle est mon impudence !
On ne m'opposera que trop de résistance.
Tu m'entendras peut-être, humble dans mon ennui,
Gémir du même orgueil que j'admire aujourd'hui.
Hippolyte aimerait ? Par quel bonheur extrême
Aurais-je pu fléchir...

Finally there is verse texture itself, with its ever-varying pace modulated by subtle assonance and consonant clusters. In Phaedra, Racine has moved beyond the grand effects of his earlier verse and writes something closely apt, resonant and pleasing. The play opens with a line first compressed with the nasal dessein and en, is then driven on and opened with pris and pars, and then partially closed with the mène of Théramène.

Le dessein en est pris, je pars, cher Théramène,

The next line is brisker and more businesslike with its alliteration on t and assonance between séjour and Trézène:

Et quitte le séjour de l'aimable Trézène.

The next line sounds a key element in the play with doute mortel, and echoes the unease of Hippolytus with je suis agité.

Dans le doute mortel où je suis agité,

And so on, for hundreds of lines with a variety that will be apparent to any reader of the original.

Phaedra (Phèdre) References and Resources

1. Bernard Weinberg. The Art of Jean Racine (Univ. Chicago Press, 1963).
2. J.P. Short. Racine: Phèdre. Critical Guides to French Texts 20. (Grant and Cutler Ltd., 1983).
3. Norah K. Drown. Jean Racine: Meditations on his Poetic Art. (Manley & Son Ltd., 1982).
4. Peter France. Racine’s Rhetoric (Clarendon Press, 1965).