

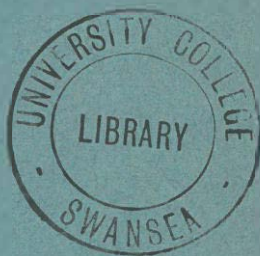
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# RACINE, CONVENTION AND CLASSICISM

*Inaugural Lecture  
of the Professor of French  
delivered at the College  
on 17 January 1952*

by

PROFESSOR R. C. KNIGHT  
M.A., D. ÈS L.



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA

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## RACINE, CONVENTION AND CLASSICISM

I HAD wondered whether I ought to begin by apologizing for having waited for over a year to exercise the rather arduous, and rather perilous, privilege which is mine tonight; but I could not believe the delay had caused any disappointment or impatience. On the other hand, it has enabled me to pay my tribute, after four terms' experience, to the warm welcome and the liberal and stimulating outlook I have found in this College—and, may I add, to the great kindness and friendliness which my wife and I, as new-comers and outsiders, have met with in the town of Swansea. What may call, not perhaps for apology, but at least for explanation, is the subject I have chosen.

The tradition of French here in the University College of Swansea, or so it seemed to me when I came here, has been a Franco-Welsh tradition. Professor Mary Williams, who launched the Department of Modern Languages, and later the Department of French, which she shaped into the body of scholars and learners I have the honour to preside over today, specializes in that period, in the twelfth century and thereabouts, when Celtic folklore and poetry, Welsh heroes and Welsh scenes, became one of the primary inspirations of French Romance. The Chair I must try to fill inherits the lustre of her considerable contribution to research in these matters. Dr. Morgan Watkin, Emeritus Professor of our sister College at Cardiff, who lent the Department the guidance of his experience and the authority of his ripe learning for two intervening years, is a distinguished philologist of the same bilingual school, and a Bard and Councillor of the National Eisteddfod to boot.

Nothing could be more natural, here, than this approach to the world of French studies, or better fitted to fire the imagination of the Welsh student, and to enable the Welsh scholar to make his characteristic and unique contribution to knowledge and understanding.

But it is a path I cannot follow, though I cannot break away without misgivings. I was not nurtured in a Celtic culture, and my French studies have lain in another field. But I fear few reproaches if I let the pendulum swing, and invite your attention to more recent times—unless it be the reproach of not being modern enough.

For I stick about half-way; and I shall not claim that 'my' period holds any key to the problems of our time—that is an honour not every Arts department can aspire to. I decided to speak about the greatest tragic poet of the age of Louis XIV, firstly, because he has been the subject of all my own research; but also, because he is among the great poets and dramatists of the world, and has been little honoured and little loved on this side of the Channel. His work, and the ideals which created it, have left a deep mark in literature, in France and far beyond—a mark which some have tried to eradicate, but in vain. Past and present influences jostle together in his writings in a way that perhaps gives them some relevance to our times and our turning-point of culture—even, perhaps, to the literary situation in Wales; but of that, as yet (let us be optimistic: as yet), I am too ignorant to judge.

To Racine's name I appended a word which I dislike and fear—Classicism; and I did it in order to take my stand before you as a man who is uneasy about the abstractions of critics when they become the labels of textbooks, and distrusts what is called the History of Literature—at least as a subject in a teaching curriculum. For I shall try in this lecture to deal partly with the art

of Racine and partly—since it is as a teacher newly appointed to your College that I come before you—with the ways in which such matters can properly and usefully be presented to the student.

If you have taken me to refer to Racine as a classical dramatist—it would be far from original, but if I can possibly avoid it I shall—what, I wonder, did you understand that judgement to mean? Simply that he was a playwright of the first rank? Or a model, or a criterion, for those coming after? A writer of plays about Greeks and Romans? A believer in rules and restrictions in art? An example of harmonious but slightly chilling perfection in form? Usage and the dictionaries warrant any one of those interpretations—and each assertion has been maintained. There is still another interpretation which would be legitimate: that Racine is an author we ram down the throats of the young because we think he is good for them. Or another, which has behind it the authority of a very great name, that of Stendhal: Racine was a Romanticist when he wrote, because he pleased his public; he is classical now, if it is true that he no longer pleases us.

In a French context it is best to take the word, when you can, as meaning nothing but a date: it is applied to the greatest of the French writers who flourished in the seventeenth century—loosely, from about 1635 (or, more narrowly, from as late as 1660) to about 1700. (Racine was born in 1639 and died in 1699.) The French are committed, or were until recently, to referring to these as the Classical School—though the ideas underlying the word classical were never entirely clear or fixed, and the word school is now seen to be quite inappropriate. Admittedly, history shows from time to time, in any of the arts, groups who think of themselves as united by friendship or discipleship or by a watchword of their own choosing.

They are only too common today. But these men we are speaking of, two writers of tragedy and one of comedy, two other poets, and several prose writers in very different genres, had no common master; they are sprinkled over at least two generations, they were not all even friends (far from it). I do not see how you can bring Corneille into the same 'school' with Racine, or Descartes with Pascal, or La Fontaine with Boileau, without bringing in all their various adversaries too. What conscious beliefs they shared were those of the age. All that unites them, to the exclusion of their contemporaries, is our judgement of their value. Their name was first given to them in the nineteenth century, and their manifesto still awaits its final form. Moreover, the French word contains more confusions even than the English; for *classique* combines the senses of 'classic', 'classical' (which may imply the founder of a tradition), and of 'classicist' (which may imply a servile disciple).

French critics would not be French if they did not try faithfully to define the term as they use it. One scholar of authority, M. Daniel Mornet,<sup>1</sup> makes it connote principally the virtues of ease, clarity, logical order, and decorum. A younger student, M. Henri Peyre, has published a book on *Le Classicisme français*, and he finds the essentials to be these: it is founded on reason, it is addressed to the intellect, it tries to be impersonal, and believes it can attain to a truth and a beauty that are universally valid; its ideals are nature and truth; it believes in the discipline of rules, and in the ethical purpose of art; it is supposed to be, and sometimes claims to be, grounded on the great works of classical antiquity. A lot of virtues;

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire de la littérature française classique (1660-1700)*, Paris, A. Colin, 3<sup>e</sup> éd. 1947, p. 7. M. Mornet's date-limits exclude three of the greatest names, Descartes, Corneille, and Pascal; and, paradoxically, he defines an *esprit classique moyen* against which the *grands classiques* were partly rebels (pp. 375-6).

but he himself shows how this synthetic picture tends to dissolve on closer view, and how all his categories require qualification, while some turn out to be in large part illusory.

In fact Classicism comes to pieces in our hands. As far as France is concerned, the word simply denotes a heap of shifting rubble formed by a dozen abandoned critical positions. Instead of stirring up the dust of these abstractions, or making a fresh attempt to say what there was in common between a group of contemporaries, I should like to take as a guiding thread a notion hardly ever used, except by detractors of Racine or of Classicism, a notion that perhaps has little to do with what is usually meant by Classicism, and certainly is not its most important aspect, but one that is interesting because it stresses the link between these artists and their public. That link is always there, but since Racine's day it has become distorted, and the most original artists for over a century have protested and rebelled against the taste of their times. For Racine the link was simpler; there were tensions, but he never went his own way without trying to prove that he was giving his public—which was the general public—what it really wanted. This link I shall call convention.

But it is hard to escape the vice of generalizing, especially in a lecture, where I cannot show you my footnotes. Before we come to the concrete works of Racine, I cannot avoid saying something about this public for which he wrote. And here there is the added danger of plunging an unwary foot into the question of historical determinism. I will be as wary as possible.

One fact which all scholars have noted about the seventeenth century is that, during that time, women began to occupy the position in social life, and hence in literature, to which their sensibility and taste entitle them. This pre-eminence of theirs had been seen before,

in limited circles and for limited periods; this time it was established for good. From the beginning of the century, then in growing numbers as life became more peaceful, they succeeded in making their salons, in which they presided, the centres of civilized life in Paris. (We usually talk about salons, but the word and the thing really come a little later: at the beginning of the century it was more often a bedroom. Probably not a room for sleeping in; but it seems as if a bed, and the alcove round it, were the only places free from draughts in the mansions of the time.) To be acceptable there became more important, to men, than position or fame; or rather, the first led to the others. After the men about town, the writers took the same road: *l'art de plaire*, the art of pleasing the ladies especially, was the key to literary success—for here, in the bedchamber alcoves, was their best public. A large part of the poetry and prose of the day was written directly for it; and it had its say in deciding the fortune of the rest.

It was an intelligent public; it did not refuse to apply itself to serious topics, but it hated pedantry, and it had never received the formal education of its brothers and husbands. The whole of literature gradually adapts itself, and changes its tone. We can say broadly that most writers until 1600 or even later, if their subject is serious, demand attention as a right and make no concessions to attract it: after 1700 at the latest—even if the subject is theology, or philosophy, or natural science—the writer makes the effort, not the reader. And the change lasted, until in the learned subjects the lead passed to other less sociable nations, and in literature the serious artist learned that the big circulations were not for him. But in the seventeenth century, though it was a century of rules, 'the great rule was to please'.

There were diverse currents of unequal value in this

social and literary revolution, and not all of them concern us. There was, for instance, a purism which fell into prudery. There was, in the small circle properly called *les Précieuses*, the beginning of a movement against the inequalities of marriage. There were excesses and absurdities, which Molière turned to excellent comic effect; but his *Précieuses ridicules* and *Femmes savantes* are not sworn testimony. There were many patches left of primæval coarseness; but in the history of the human spirit, aspirations count for more than achievements.

When convention is referred to in connexion with Racine, it is usually the court convention of Versailles. The two conventions are related, and both, no doubt, have their place in the movement towards social and political stability after the thirty years' nightmare of the religious wars. When Louis XIV came to power in 1661, and created a court quite markedly different from that of his predecessors, he owed much to the pattern created by the salons. Its etiquette, brought in from Spain, was rigid, elaborate, and after a time tedious; but it was also splendid. Versailles (though strictly we should not place the court at Versailles before 1682) was the apotheosis of that life of convention the century loved; a slavery of a sort, but a slavery willingly accepted, a privilege eagerly sought after; artificial, but lovingly elaborated; and gilded, at first, by pomp and pleasure and all the prestige of a young, handsome, gallant, and victorious monarch.

We must be careful how we speak of convention. Society cannot exist without conventions of some kind. It is only when they have been outgrown that they become irksome and harmful. This one was new—revolutionary even, after the brutalities of the recent past—it was still being built up, it was the work of the age, and the age believed in it and rejoiced in it. The possession of a politeness unknown of old seemed to it

—we meet with the statement often in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns—one of the clearest proofs of human progress.

The seventeenth century was the first, the heroic, age of politeness. The eighteenth, in spite of its *fêtes galantes* poeticized by the genius of Watteau, was in reality the meaner and the more prosaic of the two. If only Louis XIV in his prime had had a greater painter than Lebrun to record him, we should understand what was the inspiration on which Racine drew.

But Versailles for all its focal importance matters less to us than the salons of Paris. The court was always mixing with the town, while the reverse was not the case. The new secret was to please the salons, and they were not so easy to please.

The society lady read a great deal, but above all she read novels, every novel that appeared. Her novels were a very different thing from ours, but they were already essentially, inevitably, love-stories, full of lovers' adventures and discussions about love. Love had its convention too—a strict convention—of the infinitely superior goddess and the tirelessly submissive worshipper, which goes back to the Courts of Love and the troubadours: ridiculous in our eyes, though we meet it often enough in our own literature—but civilized love needs conventions as much as other social forms, and whatever lovers say or do is bound to be ridiculous to the outsider. This was a literary convention: it passed from the novel into the salon, and from the salon into the rest of literature; but very little into social life at large—never into the humdrum business of arranging real-life marriages. Yet it still dictates our manners today in so far as we have any; but to the extent that we have forgotten manners, it makes some of the works of the seventeenth century hard to follow.

The society lady went much to the play, and in the play, too, she expected to find the things that pleased her—refined style, refined manners, refined sentiments, and a love-story. It is really these demands that are reflected in one of the great 'laws' of the period. (It was a period that saw all art in terms of 'laws': an art was simply a practice requiring skill, and therefore guidance. But while dogmatic scholars formulated the laws, it was public taste that gave them their meaning.) This law is known to us as *les bienséances*—the Proprieties, as I think we may translate (though the word never had precisely this sense in English criticism). Proprieties and verisimilitude are the two reigning conceptions of the day, and neither means quite what it seems to. It had been a commonplace since Aristotle that fictional characters ought to be 'like the reality' in behaviour, temperament, outlook, and so on: a king in a play ought to behave as a king would (or, better, as a king should). But here we have to allow for the fact that the seventeenth-century man, and more particularly the seventeenth-century woman, knew little of the history of manners and cared less, while they cared much about the manners they did know. The eternal law of the box-office, that you must not offend your public, has never been so hard to keep. When, therefore, the audience judged the behaviour of a king on the stage, it could not help thinking of its own king and the etiquette of his court. When it judged the juvenile lead, it was even worse: the conventions of real life are reinforced by the conventions of fiction, and, after about the middle of the century, it becomes compulsory even in tragedy (more in tragedy than in comedy) that any hero of marriageable age must be in love, and in love after the manner and in the language of the languishing swains of pastoral and romance.

This was a serious thing for Tragedy; and Tragedy,

or what passed for such, had been a thriving genre since the 1630's. The Proprieties placed it in an insoluble dilemma. And yet nobody seems to have seen that it was a dilemma; or if anyone did, he never said so (there was a good deal of make-believe and legal fiction in the application of these literary rules). Nearly all tragedies placed their action in ancient times, and there were two distinct obligations to satisfy: each character must conform to the facts and manners of his own historical period—that was what Aristotle had meant, and critics still pretended to insist on it; he must also conform to the manners and the prejudices of the audience. How could he do both? The unhappy author knew at least on which side his bread was buttered: more or less openly, he satisfied the ladies and their escorts in the best seats, and left critics and rivals to carp—as they always did, if his play proved worth their powder. But he knew, too, that if they had written it they would have done just the same.

Now Racine could be called a classicist in one of the doubtful senses we have not used so far—he knew not only Latin but Greek, he read Sophocles and Euripides in the original (and was one of the few who did, witness the celebrity his learning brought him). I am not implying that he would have liked to write tragedies of exactly the type they had created—for French tragedy was already a type of its own, more technically accomplished in a sense, although much poorer in several others. But we know, from notes in his own hand, that he understood and loved them; he must have seen, then, some of the absurdity of the Proprieties that made it so hard to imitate them (not that one ever sees the full absurdity in the fashions of one's own time). That is what makes his answer to their challenge so interesting.

He was 28 in 1667, when he saw the production of his

first masterpiece, *Andromaque*. He already knew the court, though not the best salons perhaps, or not at first hand. He was prepared to satisfy the reigning taste—he had to, if he wanted to succeed, and he wanted to do that very ardently—but he had already begun to kick against it when it cut across his artistic convictions. He had had two plays acted; they are seldom much studied, but if they were they would show the lengths he had already gone to, with some applause, in portraying classical heroes and heroines as public taste required them.

The characters of *Andromaque* had all appeared in the Greek poets. The heroine, Andromache, has been famous ever since the *Iliad* as the devoted wife of Hector, who died defending Troy. A tragedy of Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, shows her passing into slavery when her city falls: she is allotted to Pyrrhus, the son of the great Greek warrior Achilles, and her baby son is dashed to death from a tower. In *Andromache*, by the same poet, she has borne another son, to Pyrrhus, as his concubine; but that episode is over. Pyrrhus has married Hermione, a Greek like himself, the daughter of Menelaus. Hermione is childless, and jealous of Andromache who remains, of course, in the palace; she tries to kill the handmaid and the baby. That plot is foiled. Then, in the same tragedy, Hermione flies from the place with an old lover Orestes, who has just assassinated Pyrrhus at Delphi.

Much later Andromache appears in Virgil. The third book of the *Aeneid* shows us the last episode of her life. She is married again to a Trojan prince. The harsh story begins now to be softened and sentimentalized; Andromache, here, thinks of nothing but the memory of Hector; she has built him a cenotaph and mourns there; she speaks much of his son, the dead Astyanax; and when she tells her story to Hector's brother Æneas, all the glorious past of Troy fills her mind again. She is



idealized as the faithful and inconsolable widow of a great and gallant warrior, and all the rest is deliberately blurred.

Racine knew all these treatments of the legend; borrowings and allusions in his play prove this without a doubt. The background of battle and glory and cruelty reappears in many of his verses:

Je songe quelle était autrefois cette ville,  
Si superbe en remparts, en héros si fertile,  
Maîtresse de l'Asie; et je regarde enfin  
Quel fut le sort de Troie, et quel est son destin.  
Je ne vois que des tours que la cendre a couvertes,  
Un fleuve teint de sang, des campagnes désertes,  
Un enfant dans les fers. . . .

I think of that citadel as once we knew it,  
Sublime in battlements, mother of many a hero,  
Mistress of Asia—that was Troy of late;  
Then I remember what is Troy to-day,  
Nothing but bastions buried in their ashes,  
A river red with blood, a country ravaged,  
A child in chains. . . .

The play is full of such touches, and it would be true to say that nowhere in French has the poetry of the Trojan tale been more beautifully expressed. But in *Andromaque* all the details are distorted and in a way wrong. He writes his play round the love-story (if so it may be called) of Pyrrhus, Andromache, and Hermione; Andromache is his captive, her child is threatened; and Orestes kills Pyrrhus. But the wrong child is in danger, or else the right child at the wrong moment; Pyrrhus marries the wrong woman, the Trojan Andromache and not the Grecian Hermione, and he is killed for the wrong motive (and in the wrong place too, but that is a detail).

There are reasons for all these changes. The first reason is clear and peremptory: the Proprieties. Racine's

public was fond of a triangle love-situation, but neither a concubine nor even a jealous married woman would do as a heroine.<sup>1</sup>

Another reason is that, arranged and edited by Racine, the situation gives us a very neat chain of unrequited loves, a little too neat perhaps, but full of dramatic possibilities. A loves B, but B loves C, who loves D—that is, Orestes loves Hermione, who loves Pyrrhus her betrothed, who now loves Andromache his captive. B might take A if C won't have her, but C may have her if he can't get D, who hates him. Hence, on all sides, waverings, hopes, fears, and jealousies, symmetrical yet always diverse. Moreover D (who is Andromache) is devoted to a baby son (by Hector, not Pyrrhus, in Racine's version), whose life C, Pyrrhus, can threaten. Now all this had been thoroughly tried out in novels and plays before—not with such pathos and insight, I hasten to add, but not without success. *Andromaque* falls into pattern so well (thanks to the changes in the story), and the study of love, jealousy, and hate (arising from the pattern) is so important in it, that one simply cannot tell whether Racine first thought of the Greek and Trojan theme, then rearranged it, or whether he decided to show a chain-gang of lovers first, and fitted them with Greek and Trojan names at a later stage.

Andromache herself is not in love—or only with a memory—and to fall into place she only needs idealizing a little further in the direction Virgil had indicated. But position A in the chain is held by Orestes; and everything Orestes does in the play, except the murder, is invented by Racine. No harm in that; but to fit him into place Racine has obliterated the most tragic character known to antiquity—the man tormented by the Furies because

<sup>1</sup> This is not quite the reason Racine gave (later, in his second Preface). He never liked admitting the full extent of his concessions.

he had killed his mother, as Apollo himself ordered him to do, to avenge his father. In Orestes was the tragedy of two conflicting orders of right and duty, which crush the helpless man that falls between them. Matricide was peculiarly abhorrent to seventeenth-century France—but so it had been to the Greeks; only to them it had the proper kind of horror for tragedy, whereas in France the Proprieties stepped in with censor's shears. There is not a word about Orestes' matricide in *Andromaque*; the place he has to fill is that of a lover. True, at the end he has his fit of madness and his Furies—and a fine scene it is—but it is brought on by remorse for a different murder, and even more by the frustration of a lover's hopes. He still sees himself the sport of Fate, but his fate is simply a passion he is too weak to throw off:

Le destin d'Oreste

Est de venir sans cesse adorer vos traits  
Et de jurer toujours qu'il n'y viendra jamais.

Orestes has a destiny that drives him  
Time and again to seek you, to adore,  
And swear each time that he will come no more.

A most interesting study of what has been called the Romantic lover born before his time—but it is not Orestes. Nowhere else does Racine go quite so far in betraying the ancient world to please a modern taste.

Pyrrhus (loved by his betrothed Hermione, but lover of his captive Andromache) talks often of his past violence and cruelty in war; and when he defies the rest of Greece over his prisoner and her son he shows the same fire as his father Achilles in the *Iliad*, though not the same range of vocabulary. However, in most of the play it is another Pyrrhus that we see, dignified as the Proprieties decreed a king should be, eloquent and sometimes bitingly ironical, veiling his threats, mastering his impatience, and always polite. Pyrrhus is a diptych, not

a single portrait—the past and the present, or the outdoor man and the indoor; in one panel the Homeric warrior, the sacker of cities, in the other, the convention of the court and salon, adjusted to the theatre. And yet he is not two different men, for this double character must have been present in many a prince and general of Racine's day: war was still brutal, men still unscrupulous; but that did not prevent them from playing their part, as they had to, in the intercourse of social life.

In the second-rate literature of Racine's time the various conventions were so much in control of the characters that often there was nothing behind the mask they wore. In real life the conflict between inner reality and social fiction could be absorbing to the onlooker; La Bruyère confirms this, Saint-Simon shows it. Of this conflict, Racine learnt to make drama.<sup>1</sup>

I am thinking of a scene between Pyrrhus and Andromache. He is trying, you remember, to make her accept him, and is ready to go to all lengths short of physical violence (which the Proprieties forbade him to contemplate). But as long as she lets him, he holds the pose of the submissive and languishing lover; his most elaborate lover's speech is this:

Hé quoi? votre courroux n'a-t-il pas eu son cours?  
Peut-on haïr sans cesse? et punit-on toujours?  
J'ai fait des malheureux, sans doute; et la Phrygie  
Cent fois de votre sang a vu ma main rougie.  
Mais que vos yeux sur moi se sont bien exercés!  
Qu'ils m'ont vendu bien cher les pleurs qu'ils ont versés!  
De combien de remords m'ont-ils rendu la proie!  
Je souffre tous les maux que j'ai faits devant Troie.  
Vaincu, chargé de fers, de regrets consumé,  
Brûlé de plus de feux que je n'en allumai,  
Tant de soins, tant de pleurs, tant d'ardeurs inquiètes . . .  
Hélas! fus-je jamais si cruel que vous l'êtes?

<sup>1</sup> Corneille may have shown him the way; in his later plays he uses the device almost as well, but more obviously.

Nay, must there be no term to your displeasure,  
 No end to your aversion and my penance?  
 I too, I know, have made unfortunates;  
 I reddened Phrygian earth a thousand times,  
 And with your blood. But your victorious eyes  
 Have made me pay, how many times, the drops  
 I made them shed, and rue how many times  
 The sufferings I wrought at Troy—no greater  
 Than the long suffering I now endure,  
 Bowed in bondage, wasting in remorse,  
 Burnt with fires fiercer than all I kindled,  
 And all these tears, these ardours, these entreaties. . . .  
 If mine was cruelty, tell me, what is yours?

To us this sounds horribly forced, or perhaps wildly silly. I grant that Pyrrhus is indefensible when he says he suffers more than all the Trojans put together—and I do not think we can admire today the verbal ingenuity with which he sets the flames of love against the flames of Troy. It is a fault of youth (in Racine), of a type rare in him after *Andromaque*, and typical really of an earlier generation; though it must be said in his defence that Pyrrhus' love is a tragic love, more worthy than most to sustain the monstrous comparison. I grant, too, that in certain lines he is insincere—though not in the way we moderns might at first think. For this passage must have sounded rather different to an audience that was thoroughly used to the convention.

You remember that a woman beloved had to be treated as a goddess on a pedestal—so exalted, in fact, that any declaration of love was an insult, a kind of sacrilege. Not unforgivable of course, for love-affairs had to go on; but there was a protocol. The code laid down by the novels has been very skilfully summarized for us by one of Molière's *précieuses ridicules* (very unkindly too, but the account is not essentially inaccurate):

The day of the declaration arrives. Normally it must be made

in some garden walk, while the company has drawn off a little; and this declaration is followed by immediate displeasure [displeasure—*courroux*—the same word that Pyrrhus used], as revealed by our blushes, which banishes the lover, for a time, from our presence. Later he finds means of appeasing us, brings us gradually to endure the pleadings of his passion, and elicits from us that avowal which is so hard to utter. After that come the adventures, rivals . . . , persecutions . . . , jealousies . . . , lamentations and despairs . . . . That is how things are done in the proper style; and these rules, in true gallantry, can never be dispensed with.<sup>1</sup>

Pyrrhus is putting the matter as if Andromache's resistance is only due to this compulsory coyness, he is protesting with the licensed impatience of a lover that it has gone too far and that he has worked his passage to the next stage. 'Have you not made me languish long enough?'—that is what he wishes to say. But what he means is something different again; for they both know that the situation is not that at all. His father killed her husband; he killed Hector's father Priam. Andromache's aversion is not a move in the game, but a real hatred, and he knows it. He is not her submissive slave, and she knows that; she knows he is ready (or nearly ready) to kill her baby if she will not have him. But if she will yield, as he hopes, he offers her a pretence by means of which she can yield with dignity, and neither of them will have to look again at the ugly realities. I do not think this interpretation is fanciful; we shall see a similar case in a moment. So the insincerity and the cruel intention, both clear to the spectator, balance each other and give a surprising edge to the over-conventional forms of speech. Remember that Racine's audiences were accustomed to detecting—or using—these ironies on a smaller scale in their own daily life.

There is only time for one more example. We must skip three tragedies set in Roman periods of history, and

<sup>1</sup> Sc. 4.

one more modern, in all of which we could study the same desire to save some of the truth of the subject, and the same skill in turning modern conventions to poetic, or dramatic, use. At the close of Racine's work for the public stage (which lasted only ten years) come two plays which take their titles, and, this time, in great measure their plots, from plays of Euripides: here the distance is greater again between the ancient setting and the Paris stage. I take the second and greater of these, *Phèdre*.

Euripides' tragedy of *Hippolytus* tells how this youth, the son of Theseus, was loved by his stepmother with a consuming love inspired by the goddess Aphrodite for motives of her own. Hippolytus is chaste by unshakable principle, he has dedicated himself to Artemis and lives under the open sky, a hunter and a horseman. He rebuffs veiled hints from Phædra's old nurse; and for her honour and her children's sake Phædra hangs herself, leaving a written accusation which causes Theseus to curse his innocent son. The sea-god sends a monster at his entreaty which causes Hippolytus' death.

Five centuries after Euripides, the Roman playwright Seneca wrote a different treatment, in which Phædra has a longer role, less pitiable but more active, and so more attractive to modern adapters. Both plays were used by Racine.

Now, on this story of guilt and self-condemnation—for Phædra struggles bitterly against her passion—we know exactly how the French Proprieties impinged, for Racine's was not the first adaptation, and we can read two French tragedies written on the theme, one in 1646 and one in 1672.<sup>1</sup> There were three features in it which

<sup>1</sup> The *Hippolytes* of Gabriel Gilbert and Mathieu Bidar (see W. Newton, *Le Thème de Phèdre et d'Hippolyte dans la littérature française*, Paris, Droz, 1939, or my ed. of *Phèdre*, Manchester, 1943).

French writers felt they could not retain—a married heroine, whose love was therefore sinful, a wicked accusation of a shocking act of violence, and (worst of all to them) a young man who could not or would not love. Unfortunately these are the three essentials of the plot. So all they could do was to write new stories about an unmarried girl called Phèdre unhappily in love with a decent polite young man called Hippolyte, and let him be killed off-stage by a fish-tailed bull who seems rather out of place in such a china-shop.

Not so Racine. Ten years after *Andromaque*, at the height of his reputation, he felt bold enough to put back the married heroine with her illicit passion, to keep the false accusation, though suitably attenuated, and to make honest use of the strong tragedy the theme contained. But even he did not venture—or did not wish—to keep Hippolytus immune from love. He matches him with a virtuous and oppressed young princess called Aricie, and fits her up most ingeniously with an identity and a background pieced together from various legendary sources. Their love is crossed; they have two quite touching scenes together—no more; and of course there is nothing in this modern half of the play that stands comparison with the tragic stature of the heroine, but neither is there anything in the least ridiculous or bathetic.

For the matter of that—the critics who claim to like nothing but the reproduction-antique may say what they will—I maintain that there are no insipid love-scenes in the whole of Racine: the danger is always there, with such a cramping convention which must be respected; and he always side-steps it. He has plenty of minor characters whose loves are secondary to the grimmer business of his tragedies; from time to time he gives them a scene, but they are too busy for much love-making and discuss instead their latest hopes or fears;

then in comes some Néron or Roxane or Mithridate to bring us back to sterner thoughts.

His great lovers are all thwarted lovers, and the drama lies in the obstacles to their love, or the by-products of their love—cruelty, jealousy, revenge.

For his transformed Hippolytus Racine has recourse once again, as with Pyrrhus, to the double portrait. There is a Greek Hippolytus, and there is a French Hippolyte for the Paris public. We learn at the outset that he has fallen into the snare of Love. But it has only just happened—he is indignant and bewildered at the change; his love-making—if we can only read it in the context of the times—is, as he says himself, uncouth. And all the other characters are ignorant of the change, and tell us many times that he is still ‘the old implacable Hippolytus’, ‘moulded in ways austere and maxims rude, nurtured in forest wilds’.

Young, impulsive, inexperienced, he is yet in many other respects surprisingly level-headed. The scene where Phædra pours out before him the confession of her tortured love is a masterpiece of dramatic management as it is of poetry. All eyes are on her, deservedly, but if we can tear them away for a moment, Hippolytus’ behaviour is remarkable too. Is he brutal and callous like his Greek and Latin prototypes? No; the Proprieties would have forbidden that, if nothing else did. Is he uncomprehending and bewildered? Not in the least, in my reading; and I believe he would have been hissed off the stage if he had been—though I am bound to say that is how his part is always acted.<sup>1</sup> But read it: his first replies show him deferential, but on his guard. At the first hint of the horrible truth he understands—so I

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J.-L. Barrault’s ed. of *Phèdre* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1946), pp. 123–5, and my article, ‘Hippolyte and Hippolytus’ (*Modern Language Review*, xxix, 1944), pp. 225 ff.

believe—and for decorum’s sake he pretends he does not. Twice, with a skill that must be conscious, he mentions as if by accident the eternal barrier that ought to restrain her—‘my father’, ‘your husband’. His assumed blindness, his misinterpretations, are ways of escape for her, means to withdraw, if she will, with dignity—it is the equivocation of Pyrrhus again, with an opposite motive; and this time Racine has not been afraid to bring such verbal fencing into one of his truly moving scenes.

Phædra does not accept the pretence—as Andromache had not accepted the pretence of Pyrrhus. Racine strikes his note of convention ironically used, and passes on to something deeper.

We have not finished with Hippolytus the lover. By his very love, which so many have dubbed an artistic mistake, he contributes powerfully to the central theme, the passion of Phædra. For if Racine could not take over Euripides’ vivid contrast between guilty love and icy purity, one would think his play must suffer. Instead he finds another contrast, less simply black-and-white—the love of Hippolytus is made a prelude for the love of Phædra, in a less tragic key; he and Aricie repeat or anticipate the very expressions that she uses. For they see their own love as guilty, since Theseus had forbidden it; but in itself it is as natural as Romeo’s for Juliet, and Phædra sees all the difference:

Le ciel de leurs soupirs approuvait l’innocence. . . .

The heavens smiled  
On the innocence of their embrace, no fear  
Restrained their eager steps, and each fair day  
Rose clear and candid on their love. And I . . . .

These words of Phædra lead straight into her greatest scene, where the envy mounts into a frenzy of jealousy, to sink at once into redoubled remorse, and an anguished

realization that the whole earth can give no refuge for guilt such as hers, nor even Hell itself:

Misérable! Et je vis? Et je soutiens la vue  
De ce sacré Soleil dont je suis descendue?  
J'ai pour aïeul le Père et le Maître des Dieux.  
Le ciel, tout l'univers est plein de mes aïeux.  
Où me cacher? . . .

And will I live, and will I face the sight  
Of that sacred Sun the giver of my life,  
I, grandchild of the high Father of the Gods,  
My forbears crowding Heaven and all creation?  
Where may I hide? Flee to the night of Hell?  
No, no, not there; for there my father's hands  
Inexorable lift the doomsday urn  
They say, and Minos stands in deathly justice  
Over the pallid multitudes of men. . . .

Father, what will you say? . . .

And this scene is Racine's own, it has no earlier models, and it is touched off precisely by this alien invention of Aricie the beloved of Hippolytus. But the value of jealousy in Racine's modern *Phèdre* is a commonplace, and I will not dwell upon it.

We see then that Racine is quite willing to use the conventions of his time, but not to let them use him—as others did, leaving their plays worthless to our eyes except as unreliable documents of social history. Where he uses love, he keeps it in the background, or lifts it to a tragic intensity where convention is irrelevant. When it is a question of convention in other kinds of behaviour, he uses it for contrast—contrast of smooth and rough, as in the volcanic passages where his heroines drop for a few lines the obligatory *Seigneur* and pass from *vous* to *tu*—or else contrast of word and intention, in the other sex, which is denied the outlet of violence; the conven-

tion bears more hardly on them, their only weapon is irony. The drama here is the elegant and often cruel play between mask and face.<sup>1</sup>

I spoke just now of Racine's 'modern' Phædra. He would have protested indignantly. He had claimed the success of *Iphigénie*, two years before, as a proof that the taste of Paris was still the taste of Athens, in other words that his *Iphigénie* was the Iphigenia of Euripides. In his preface to *Phèdre* he tries to pass off his heroine as indistinguishable from the Phædra of Euripides, and offers to prove it by analysing the part she plays. The demonstration is extremely interesting, for it carries us only to the end of Racine's first act. There he abandons it—he has to, because from there onwards she is not the same person at all: her principal deeds, and her principal crimes, are in the last four acts and they are not in Euripides.

These prefaces of Racine must have done a great deal to make several generations of French critics write as if he had simply transposed into French the masterpieces of the Attic stage, changing nothing except a few primitive crudities of taste—whereupon certain later critics, mostly not French, set off fuming in the opposite direction, proving that Racine was a periwigged courtier who had never looked at life, and never guessed what Grecian beauty was.

We must not blame struggling authors too harshly—and Racine always had his struggles—if their prefaces do not tell the whole truth. It is clear that Racine used his scholarship as publicity for all it was worth; yet if we are tempted to conclude that he never really cared, or

<sup>1</sup> Dr. W. J. Moore has used this expression with striking effect in his *Molière, a new criticism* (Oxford, 1949). Without contesting his originality, I can claim to have applied it to Racine eight years earlier ('The Politeness of Racine', *Scrutiny*, ix, 1941, p. 330).

even really knew, very much about Sophocles and Euripides, we must remember one other fact: after twelve years' retirement from all connexion with the commercial stage and its servitudes, Racine, at fifty, was asked to write a sacred opera (an oratorio with action, we might say) for Madame de Maintenon's girls' school—and he wrote *Esther* and *Athalie*, which come nearer than anything that France has ever witnessed to the tragedy of Athens. And in the preface to *Esther* he tells us this was the one thing he had desired to do for a very long time.

Believe that literally or not as you like, it is clear that there is this ancient influence still alive in Racine—clashing, or rather blending, with other influences as we have seen. How heavily it weighed is hard to say; but it is important, if only because it is the greatest single difference between his equipment and that of his contemporaries and rivals.

For it is not in them. It is not a distinguishing mark of the 'Classical school'. Descartes is always looked on as a founder-member of this school, and he abolished antiquity from his world of thought. Corneille and Molière—to come nearer to Racine—are fairly indifferent to it in their writing. It may be objected that they were steeped in it in spite of themselves—that their education had been a Latin education, and that their conception of literature had been moulded by the humanism of the Renaissance. True, the seventeenth century did not go back on the decision made in the sixteenth, that serious plays should henceforth be tragedies, not mysteries, that odes should replace ballades and rondeaux, and epics take, or try to take, the place left empty by *chansons de geste* and verse romances. But it did insist that no great art could be made with the eyes turned back over the shoulder; and under the old Greek names it created new forms of art, sometimes worthy counterparts of the

old. Racine, we can say, was of this mind too—though he did not admit it.

To begin to sum up: I have tried to single out and illustrate one quality in Racine—the happy understanding he arrived at with the social conventions and the taste of his age, partly accepting them, partly correcting them, though prudently: a fruitful tension which was not quite a conflict. Whether or no this is one of the qualities rightly to be called 'classical', I thought it was a useful one to emphasize because it clears away so many of the obstacles to understanding him—and only misunderstanding can prevent enjoyment once we know him; that, or perhaps also a poor ear for the music of French.

There is another 'classical' trait you must have expected me to mention: the fact that Racine clearly gives to formal perfection—in both language and stagecraft—as much attention as he gives to substance. As much—I do not say more. We can explain this as a tension too—an accommodation reached, after much thought and labour, with the exigencies of the most exacting forms of writing (poetry and drama), more exacting in his day than ever before or since. Racine accepts all the restrictions—why not? art must restrict its scope; all art needs conventions. (I am deliberately using the same word for questions of form as I used for questions of manners.) Not that our theatre today could go back and submit to the rules he accepted—they are not ours, they are dead; but for him they were a response to conditions then reigning, a response he shared, and helped most effectively to formulate. Much happier than other self-disciplined artists later on—Gautier, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Valéry, or Mr. T. S. Eliot—he had no search to find his discipline.

He was a modern with a sense of the past, not a traditionalist; his imitators were to show abundantly what poverty it is in art to live on inherited capital.

But I have said more than I should about form, and still said almost nothing; and I cannot begin to talk about the paradox of his poetry, so rich on such slender resources, though these things are more worth studying (I think) than all I have tried to discuss. How can I talk of them adequately if I cannot put his works themselves before you? More especially, how can I go on talking about them in a lecture which I meant to be partly a protest against large generalizations without facts?

I have generalized only too much tonight, against my will and against my principles. For, in our studies, the facts are not merely raw material for generalizations, as they are to the scientist: the facts matter more than the generalizations; they are books, and to cause great books to be rightly read and fully enjoyed is the chief end of our teaching of literature, as I understand it. The man who, like Taine, reads a book only to know the man that wrote it, or the society behind the man, is not studying literature, but some kind of psychology or history.

There is such a thing as the History of Literature, the charting of innovations, influences, and revolts. It has never been accurately written yet, and never will be. It is a speculation for experts, an immensely complicated inquiry you can only follow if you are prepared to study, not only the great writers, but the mass of minor talents. There are such things as movements, and, less often, schools; but it is the little men—whom we have no time or wish to introduce to our students—who make the big currents of thought, feeling, or fashion. The great men are original and uncharacteristic; they can start movements, they never follow wholeheartedly, and where they

do follow they may take their lead, not from the last great name before them in our solemn roll of honour, but from the common herd of the unremembered and unmemorable.

Therefore—if you will forgive a last digression which will also be a conclusion, and which is my profession of faith as a teacher—the more you teach the history of literature, the more you must neglect the great books. Nor can you ever teach the history fully (as fully as it is known): you must summarize, omit, and probably distort. Historians—straight historians—must have faced the problem of superficiality in their teaching, and resigned themselves to it, long ago: I do not see why we must, for it is full of dangers for us. Once you begin to tell the student about the forgotten rank-and-file (or neglected masters, if you will) whose works, even if he would, he cannot read (for we do not possess the books); or once you overload him so that he looks for short cuts; or once, for any reason, you make the history as important to him as the literature—he will note down diligently your version of the facts, your praise and your blame (yours, or some other scholar's, but almost certainly yours), he will learn them by heart, he will regurgitate them in examinations—all by hearsay, all on trust—and think he is doing what you want. And to let him do that is a deadly sin, because it atrophies the very faculties of observation and judgement that make for true scholarship, or simply for maturity of mind. It undoes the greatest good we can do in an Arts Faculty to any but those who only ask for facts to hand on, as so-called teachers, in their turn.

I would rather, therefore, limit our field—drastically, for French literature is too rich for the student to discover, in three bare years, all its stars even of the first magnitude. I would put texts before him, not very many



or he will be careless, great in themselves and as representative as may be; I would supply enough explanation for him to understand (in so far as I understand) what the author thought he was doing, and why he did it; and I would try to stimulate him to use all his eyes and all his mind and all his taste (but his eyes first), to read as much as he has it in him to read of what is really being said in the page before him. Scrupulous, faithful reading is not such a common art today. If I could teach it I should think I had done something to educate my students—and something not unworthy of this College, and of the enlightened and realistic ideals I have often heard our Principal propound. The books they read would do even more.

I have exaggerated a little, I admit. Towards the end of their time with us, it does capable students nothing but good to be taken a little out of their depth—provided they realize it is dangerous, and provided a qualified instructor keeps close at hand. But when you do this it is salutary also, I think, to choose for the excursion one of the reaches—and there are many; each researcher knows one at least—where the accredited guides no longer guide, or speak with divided voices, or can be proved at fault.

Our main task, however, is to direct, to stimulate, and to assist by removing barriers and pitfalls. Should we go further and throw in our own judgements, our interpretations, should we extract what is called the 'contemporary relevance' of what we make them study? Only tentatively; less perhaps than I have done tonight. I acknowledge my duty to endeavour to disentangle, from what I study, a coherent picture of the world for myself: their duty is to do it each for himself, and it is not helping them to do it for them.

I have spoken of books and reading; add to that the

study of language, and the use of language, and you have our discipline entire. Reading and writing: it is not for nothing that in some countries our Faculty is called the Faculty of Letters. I should be satisfied to call it—or to call my part of it—the Faculty of the Word, remembering that to the Greeks *word* also meant *reason*.

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