

Racine and Shakespeare: A Common Language

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When writers' names become symbols this can obscure what they actually wrote. Racine and Shakespeare stand in symbolic opposition. Shakespeare represents full-blooded theatricality; Racine stands for an abstract disembodied form of tragedy. This opposition deserves to be challenged. Of course there are substantial differences between Racine and Shakespeare. Racine has no witches, no gravediggers, no storms, no battles on stage. Racine's tragedies have no low-life subplots and no deliberate excursions into the comic register. Furthermore Shakespeare's exuberant poetry is far removed from Racine's laconic formality. But these differences should not overshadow the similarities. Their theatrical relationship can be better understood by considering what they have in common, in particular the visual dimension of their dramatic art. If one supposes a scale of physical action from the batting of an eyelid to the fighting of battles, one can say that Shakespeare used the whole scale whilst Racine avoided the latter extreme. However, there remains a substantial range of visual language which both dramatists shared and both exploited for significant effect.

The origins of the polarized view of Racine and Shakespeare can be found in Voltaire, who admired Racine, found much to criticize in Shakespeare, but applauded action on stage.¹ Addressing Lord Bolingbroke in 1730, he emphasized the differences between French and English theatre:

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Vos pièces les plus irrégulières ont un grand mérite, c'est celui de l'action. Nous avons en France des tragédies estimées, qui sont plutôt des conversations qu'elles ne sont la représentation d'un événement.²

He spoke warmly of watching *Julius Caesar*: "avec quel ravissement je voyais Brutus, tenant encore un poignard teint du sang de César, assembler le peuple romain" (79). On the other hand, in a partially true but essentially misleading statement, he asserted:

La seule pièce où M. Racine ait mis du spectacle, c'est son chef-d'oeuvre d'*Athalie*. On y voit un enfant sur un trône, sa nourrice et des prêtres qui l'entourent, une reine qui commande à ses soldats de le massacrer, des lévites armés qui accourent pour le défendre. (83)

Voltaire sums up: "Les Anglais donnent beaucoup plus à l'action que nous, ils parlent aux yeux: les Français donnent plus à l'élégance, à l'harmonie, aux charmes des vers" (84). None the less he is no blinkered partisan of spectacular actions on stage. He points out that they risk becoming tedious or puerile unless they are used sparingly and he is aware that subdued effects have the potential to be more significant.

All through the eighteenth century the debate on the dramatic genres continued in France, though one might not think so to read the polemics of French Romantic writers in the early nineteenth century. They give the impression that they are the first to challenge the conventions of French classical tragedy, and they have done much to shape twentieth-century perceptions of the relationship between Shakespeare and Racine. In Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823–25) opposing spokesmen for the Classical and the Romantic school debate the merits of the two dramatists. The spokesman called *Le Romantique* dutifully touches his forelock to Racine's grandeur, with what degree of irony can only be guessed:

Quant à Racine, . . . l'on a fait de son nom une injure pour nous; mais sa gloire est impérissable. Ce sera toujours l'un des plus grands génies qui aient été livrés à l'étonnement et à l'admiration des hommes.³

This is then undercut by the Romantic spokesman going on to express regret that Racine followed the dramatic system of his own day. He could

have done a hundred times better if he had followed the “new rules” based on Shakespeare.

Victor Hugo gives the impression that on reading Shakespeare he had suddenly discovered a new type of drama which could replace the barren conventions of French classical tragedy, especially the two unities of time and place, which seemed to be the main source of impoverishment. Hugo’s description of the setting of French tragedies has left an indelible mark on subsequent views of Racine. Hugo scoffs: “Quoi de plus invraisemblable et de plus absurde en effet que ce vestibule, ce péristyle, cette antichambre, lieu banal où nos tragédies ont la complaisance de venir se dérouler.”⁴ His derisive remarks convey an inadequate description of the variety of scenery specified for Racine’s tragedies: sea, ships, tents, Turkish seraglio, gardens, temple. Yet Hugo’s words are echoed by modern commentators: “the indeterminate royal *antichambre* that serves as the single set of a Racinian tragedy.”⁵

Romantic dramatists were also unsympathetic to the conventional *récit* or narration, which they contrasted with the representation of action on stage. Hugo complained: “Au lieu de scènes, nous avons des récits; au lieu de tableaux, des descriptions” (82). He was severe on Racine for having missed the opportunity to show on stage the murder of Britannicus. But Racine like Shakespeare knew the value of an appeal to the imagination. Of *Macbeth* Hapgood writes, “we are not allowed to see the key moment, the actual killing of Duncan. . . . Off-stage crime is one of those challenges to the imagination . . . by which Shakespeare draws his audience actively into the ways of his imagined world. . . . We are obliged to join Lady Macbeth in imagining it, straining to hear what we are not allowed to see.”⁶ Racine also knew the theatrical value of portraying characters’ reactions to an off-stage event. The audience join Agrippine in responding anxiously to the sounds of tumult in Néron’s apartment (*Britannicus*, 5.3.1609–11), and then watch her reactions as Burrhus recounts the poisoning of Britannicus in a speech which is both a confession and self-justification.⁷ At the same time Racine was conscious of the importance of action on stage: “une des règles du théâtre est de ne mettre en récit que les choses qui ne se peuvent passer en action.”⁸

Always provocative, sometimes perceptive, occasionally plain wrong, the French Romantics of the early nineteenth century leave the impression that Racine and Shakespeare are at opposite ends of the theatrical spectrum. In their eagerness to promote themselves as theatrical visionaries they left a seductive image of a Racine shackled by constraints which

diminished his theatricality. Dazzled by Shakespeare's brilliance they closed their eyes to Racine's visual language. Such an attitude is reflected in modern academic criticism. Whilst for decades an abundance of works have explored Shakespeare's theatricality,⁹ Racine has lagged far behind.¹⁰ Yet the studies of Shakespeare's theatricality are by no means devoted entirely to battles, crowd scenes, or large groups of characters on stage. Only two out of eight chapters deal with these topics in Styan's *Shakespeare's Stagecraft*; the rest treat matters of relevance to Racine. The bulk of Slater's *Shakespeare the Director* is made up of chapters on action and expression, position on stage, kneeling, kissing and embracing, weeping, silence and pause, costume, properties—just those elements of visual language which Shakespeare shares with Racine, and which Racine exploited more fully than most of his contemporaries who wrote French tragedy in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The study of theatricality must begin with the stage directions, explicit and implicit, which the dramatist writes into his text. Paradoxically these are often neglected in actual performances, though they are essential to the study of the dramatist's stagecraft. Goldman insists on the stage direction "*Thunder and lightning*" at the start of *Macbeth*: "This effect, so clear and definite in the text, is strangely muted in most modern productions" (98). A similar complaint has been voiced in connection with Racine, where excessive attention to speech leads to neglect of the theatrical situation. The final scene of Racine's *Andromaque* should be dominated by the tumult and violence resulting from the murder of King Pyrrhus. Pylade begs Oreste to flee with him: "Sortons de ce palais, . . . Nos Grecs pour un moment en défendent la porte. / Tout le peuple assemblé nous poursuit à main forte" (5.5.1583–86). In modern performances, even though the situation demands agitation and movement, Pylade usually steps dutifully aside to let the actor playing Oreste deliver his celebrated "Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur vos têtes" speech. Pierre Henri Larthomas deplores this failure to portray the realities of the situation:

Mais quoi! dans ce palais cerné par le peuple pas un cri? Pas de coups frappés à la porte? . . . Mais Pylade attendant presque patiemment qu'Oreste se soit évanoui? C'est inadmissible. Car dans cette scène de la folie, unique par sa violence dans notre théâtre classique, véritablement shakespearienne, oserions-nous dire que la situation a autant d'importance et plus d'importance peut-être que les mots?¹¹

The only thing to query in Larthomas's comment is the suggestion that this scene in *Andromaque* is unique in French classical drama. Racine ends *La Thébaine* with Créon's madness, and most of his plays have scenes where there is tumult: the cries of the dying and shouts of victory in *Alexandre*; commotion engendered by the poisoning of Britannicus; shouts and rebellion in *Mithridate*; noisy crowds and thunder in *Iphigénie*; Athalie falling into an ambush on stage.¹²

Racine's system of stage directions is similar to that of Shakespeare.¹³ They are sometimes explicit but more often written into the text. The word "thus" signals gesture or expression to the actor:

MALVOLIO. I extend my hand to him *thus*, quenching my familiar smile with an austere regard of control
(*Twelfth Night*, 2.5.65; emphasis added)¹⁴

In Racine, Monime signals in similar fashion her sudden change from submission to defiance of Mithridate:

MONIME. Mais le dessein est pris. Rien ne peut m'ébranler.
Jugez-en, puisqu'*ainsi* je vous ose parler,
Et m'emporte au delà de cette modestie
Dont jusqu'à ce moment je n'étais point sortie.
(*Mithridate*, 4.4.1362–65)

More frequently "thus" (*ainsi*) in Racine refers to the gesture or expression of the interlocutor, as when Britannicus chides Junie: "Quel accueil! Quelle glace! / Est-ce *ainsi* que vos yeux consolent ma disgrâce?" In like manner Lady Macbeth hisses at her husband mesmerized by the ghost: "Shame itself, / Why do you make *such* faces?"¹⁵

Retrospective stage directions also play their part in both Racine and Shakespeare, when characters subsequently recall a preceding scene and give information relevant to its performance. Slater shows how details of the assassination of Julius Caesar are leaked out later (25). Racine uses the same technique for the farewell of Axiane and Porus in *Alexandre*, for the interrogation of Monime in *Mithridate*, and for Phèdre's struggle with Hippolyte's sword in *Phèdre*.¹⁶ So in writing scripts which contained directions for performance on stage there is a close connection between Racine and Shakespeare—theatrical directors both.

In order to understand how the two dramatists used scenery and stage space, it is necessary to keep in mind the main features of the playhouses

for which they composed their plays. Despite the many differences, there were points in common between the theatres, which permit comparisons to be made. Public playhouses in London were round or polygonal. The chief features of the acting area were a large platform stage up to 40 feet across, the façade of the players' changing room with two or more doors, a gallery above, and a trap-door. The audience surrounded the acting area on three sides (Gurr 121–34). The public theatres in Paris were enclosed rectangular boxes with the stage at one end. The spectators looked down the box at the acting area which measured about 30 by 30 feet within the confines of the canvas scenery.¹⁷ Whilst one can demonstrate clear links between the scenic features of the plays and the staging conditions of the theatres in both Paris and London, none the less dramatists and actors had to be flexible, since plays were performed in other venues, such as at court or in private houses. The physical conditions of the theatres were not a rigid framework, but they need to be borne in mind as a guide to understanding the plays in performance.

One area where Racine and Shakespeare did differ was in the matter of scenery. In spite of the often repeated statements that Racine's tragedies unfold in a banal vestibule or antechamber, most of Racine's plays contain some element of scenery significant for the whole action. In *Andromaque* the backdrop of sea and ships represents Oreste's mission to the court of Pyrrhus. In *Iphigénie* the backdrop representing becalmed ships is a constant reminder of reasons for Agamemnon needing to sacrifice his daughter.¹⁸ Backdrops of this sort were possible because of the convention of unity of place in French drama. Racine differs from Shakespeare not in the use of a vague all-purpose antechamber, but because he used fully representational scenery, which was never a feature of the public theatres in London in Shakespeare's time (Gurr 25, 162). Yet in other respects they both exploited the staging conditions for which they composed their plays. The stage-trap was traditionally the entrance to hell. It may have been used for the ghost who "cries under the stage" in *Hamlet* (1.5.148) or for the graves in the same play. The gallery above the tiring room façade could represent an upstairs in *Romeo and Juliet* (2.5), or more often city ramparts. The English scale the ramparts and the French jump down from them, according to the stage direction: "The French leap o'er the walls in their shirts" (*1 Henry VI*, 2.1.38).¹⁹ There are no parallels in Racine's tragedies, but his one comedy *Les Plaideurs* uses levels above and below the stage: an upstairs window from which Dandin jumps (1.3), and a

basement out of which he pokes his head, only to have it twisted back and forth by the two litigants until they both tumble down to join him: "Ils sont, sur ma parole, / L'un et l'autre encavés" (2.11.575–76). The use of curtains for concealment or discovery occurs in several Shakespearean plays (Styan 22–23) and in two of Racine's: Néron eavesdrops on the lovers in Act II of *Britannicus*; in the last act of *Athalie* the boy-king is concealed behind a curtain and then revealed, after which the backdrop opens to show the interior of the temple and the armed Levites who surround Athalie. The large open stage of the Elizabethans allowed plays to be planned in three dimensions using upstage and downstage as well as significant groupings of characters (Styan 81–138). The proscenium stage in Paris allowed less scope for this, since actors usually came to the front of the stage to speak, but Racine does suggest the three-dimensional positioning of actors by stage directions placed before speeches such as "Antigone, *en s'en allant*," "Néron, *sans voir Burrhus*," "Titus, *en entrant*." Assuérus withdraws after a speech "*Le roi s'éloigne*."²⁰ In spite of the major differences between the English and French stages, there are therefore some general points of similarity between Racine and Shakespeare with regard to their use of stage space. More important, however, are those cases where both use décor in conjunction with movement on stage to speak visually or "parler aux yeux," as Voltaire's phrase has it.

The doors of the Elizabethan stage could be used symbolically (Styan 20–22). On several occasions stage directions require characters to enter by separate doors emphasizing the division between opposing sides:

Enter at one door King Henry, Exeter . . . and the other Lords; at another Queen Isabel, the King of France . . . and other French.
(Henry V, 5.2)

Racine used doors in a similar fashion. In Act IV of *Bérénice* the spectator sees Antiochus enter from Bérénice's door urging Titus to prevent the queen from committing suicide. A few lines later a Roman messenger enters from the opposite door, announcing that the senators await the emperor in his apartment. Titus is caught between his love for Bérénice and the demands of state. His dilemma, the subject of the play, is represented in a theatrical tableau, as he listens to Paulin and Antiochus, representing Rome versus Love, standing by opposing doors and exhorting him to leave the stage in their respective directions.

Shakespeare highlighted differences between characters by divergent exits through separate doors. "Bertram sends his newly married Helena 'home, where I will never come' through one door, and promptly slips away through the other."²¹ Racine uses divergent exits in *Iphigénie* when Ériphile orders her confidant not to follow the royal family as they go to save Iphigénie from sacrifice: "Suis-moi. Ce n'est pas là, Doris, notre chemin." (4.9). They exit in a different direction to indicate that Ériphile intends to betray Iphigénie to the high priest.²²

Another element of décor which permits a precise comparison is the raised throne. In a banal sense it denoted the royal status of its occupant, but more interestingly its significance could be subverted by other occupants. Shakespeare tried it first in *3 Henry VI* when York takes the throne so that King Henry has to stand beneath him: "My lords, look where the sturdy rebel sits, / Even in the chair of state" (1.1.50–51). Then again, more subtly, Richard II's throne is occupied by Bulingbrooke, while unthroned King Richard grows in kingly stature:

BULINGBROOKE. In God's name I'll ascend the regal throne. . . .
 K. RICHARD. Alack, why am I sent for to a king
 Before I have shook off the regal thoughts
 Wherewith I reign'd?²³

Only in *Esther* does Racine use a formal throne. It denotes the terrifying kingship of Assuérus, before which Esther collapses in a faint. Yet it has the potential to protect the Jews, a development in the plot symbolically foreshadowed by Esther's command to her girls at the end of Act II:

Et vous troupe jeune et timide,
 Sans craindre ici les yeux d'une profane cour,
 A l'abri de ce Trône attendez mon retour.
 (*Esther*, 2.8.710–12)

Later in the play the spectators see Assuérus turn from persecutor into protector. The central theme of the play is expressed in these actions around the throne.

Entrances and exits are used by both Racine and Shakespeare for theatrical effect. In addition to obvious devices such as surprise entrances or ceremonial parades, there are more subtle ways in which the movement of

characters on and off stage can have significance. Arrested movement and delayed exits abound in *Hamlet*. Characters say they are leaving but they linger. After the first ghost episode Hamlet urges his companions away with the words "Let's go together" but he pauses and hesitates before finally deciding to depart (1.5.190). After "To be, or not to be," Hamlet in conversation with Ophelia thrice utters "Farewell" and thrice stays on stage (3.1.132–40). "Thus the element of delay in *Hamlet* is not just a debatable matter concerning the characterization of the Prince. The playwright has built delay into the plot and choreography" (Hapgood 108–09). Choreography would be a suitable word for the movements of Hippolyte in Racine's *Phèdre*. He is constantly seeking to escape from Troezen and repeatedly sketches movements of flight during the scenes in which he appears. He is visibly impatient to leave *Phèdre* in Act II, Scene 5, and she remarks upon this in a retrospective stage direction: "Comme il ne respirait qu'une retraite prompte!" (*Phèdre*, 3.1.745). Yet when Hippolyte's father orders him to leave, driving him away with "Fuis, traître. . . . fuis: . . . fuis, dis-je," Hippolyte stays on stage (4.2). Indecision is also represented visually in other plays. Pyrrhus says he is leaving to deliver Andromaque's son to certain death but he fails to exit. Roxane swears vengeance against Bajazet, but prevents Acomat leaving the stage to carry out her order to have him killed.²⁴ Arrested actions convey the dynamic quality of these tragedies of vacillation.

Shakespeare used seating arrangements to speak visually. In *Macbeth* the banquet opens in harmony: "You know your own degrees, sit down," but ends in disorder when Lady Macbeth dismisses the guests: "Stand not upon the order of your going, / But go at once."²⁵ Racine breached etiquette in *Alexandre* to break up a formal embassy in muted disorder, when the ambassador Éphestion, who has been seated before the two Indian kings, rises without permission to signal Alexandre's arrogant declaration of war. Contemporary spectators would have been more sensitive to protocol than are modern audiences. The list of stage properties in the *Mémoire de Mahelot* makes it clear that Éphestion sat upon a stool ("tabouret") to signify his inferior status whilst the two Indian kings sat on chairs with arms ("fauteuils") as befitted their rank.²⁶ *Macbeth* and *Alexandre* are both studies of how ambition disrupts an established order, and both contain scenes where the violation of social conventions represents disruption in visual terms which would have had an impact upon contemporaries.

Both dramatists use the signifying power of collapse on to a chair:

Shakespeare picks up Antony's loss of self-control ("he was not his own man"), extends it to his leadership of men, whom he can no longer command, but only entreat, and clinches it by the stage symbol, as Antony collapses in a state of total self-abandonment. (Slater 47)

The stage direction here is most probably authorial:

ANTONY. . . . indeed I have lost command,
Therefore I pray you. I'll see you by and by.
Sits down.

(*Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.11.23–24)

Racine brings Phèdre on stage only to have her collapse in the same posture:

PHEDRE. . . . mes genoux tremblants se dérobent sous moi.
Hélas! *Elle s'assied.*

(*Phèdre*, 1.3.156)

Shakespeare and Racine insist on the humiliation caused by this loss of control. Antony averts his face: "See / How I convey my shame" (3.11.51). The same gesture is implied for Phèdre as she addresses her confidant: "la rougeur me couvre le visage: / Je te laisse trop voir mes honteuses douleurs" (3.182). Later Phèdre, like Antony, confesses that she is no longer in command:

Moi régner! Moi ranger un état sous ma loi,
Quand ma faible raison ne règne plus sur moi.

(*Phèdre*, 3.1.759)

Shakespeare employed kneeling in many contexts, to signal order when men kneel in prayer, homage, or supplication, and to signal disorder or deceit when they refuse to kneel or they kneel insincerely (Slater 64–68). Kneeling can be the pivot of the tragic mechanism. Titus Andronicus's *hamartia* is given visual expression when he is seen rejecting the captive Tamora's pleas to spare her son. Although there is no explicit stage direction, her situation strongly implies that she kneels.²⁷ The essence of

Shakespeare's visual tableau here is paralleled in Racine's *Andromaque* where Hermione, like Titus Andronicus, commits the fatal error of rejecting a kneeling suppliant. Hermione dismisses Andromaque scornfully, sending her to plead with Pyrrhus (3.4). This starts a chain of supplications from which Andromaque eventually emerges victorious, whilst Hermione and Pyrrhus meet their death.

Unconventional kneeling is seen in Shakespeare when Volumnia kneels to her son Coriolanus, or Lear to his daughter Regan.²⁸ Racine also knew the power of such incongruous actions. Queen Clytemnestre kneels to the subordinate Achille to ask him to protect Iphigénie, who is to be a human sacrifice. Achille is disconcerted; indeed he is struck rigid and says in astonishment: "Madame je me tais et demeure immobile. . . . / Une reine à mes pieds se vient humilier!" (*Iphigénie*, 3.5–6.949, 952). Racine uses Clytemnestre's posture to emphasize the extreme peril of her daughter. It carries the implication that Agamemnon, Iphigénie's father and natural protector, has forfeited his natural protective role because he is to sacrifice his daughter. The scene which Racine has contrived for the kneeling Clytemnestre could well be glossed by Shakespeare's lines in *Coriolanus*, which describe Volumnia's kneeling to her son:

Behold, the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
They laugh at. (5.3.183–85)

Shakespeare's lines are especially apt because Racine's *Iphigénie* is a cruel joke. It turns out that the gods never meant Agamemnon's daughter to be the sacrificial victim, and she is saved at the end after much unnecessary suffering.

The verbal and the visual work in conjunction when characters try to persuade each other to perform actions which will be seen on stage. This is a specifically theatrical way of linking speech and action. In Shakespeare's *King John* a handshake signalling alliance provides the visual focus for a long debate in which the King of France hesitates between alliance with England or Rome. King Philip holds King John by the hand. The conflicting parties try to make them part:

PANDULPH. Philip of France, on peril of a curse,
Let go the hand of that arch-heretic,

And raise the power of France upon his head,
Unless he do submit himself to Rome.

ELINOR. Looks't thou pale, France? Do not let go thy hand.
(*King John*, 3.1.191–95)

An analagous effect occurs in *La Thébaïde* when Racine makes a potential embrace the visual focus of the debate between the warring brothers, Polynice and Étéocle. Here Jocaste's arguments are aimed at making her sons embrace. She calls them by name to draw near to each other and then she pauses to focus on the action: "Hé quoi! loin d'approcher, vous reculez tous deux? . . . Commencez, Polynice, embrassez votre frère" (4.3.985, 999). Such examples illustrate the dynamics of persuasive speech combined with the focussing power of bodily movement. Not only does this generate dramatic tension but, as so often, Racine creates a visual image which encapsulates the theme of the tragedy, here the fruitless attempts by a mother to make peace between her two warring sons.

Another technique which combines the verbal and the visual is the use of a stage property as the focus of imaginative speech. One can compare the use of daggers in *Macbeth* and *Bajazet*. "For Shakespeare a property was a dramatic opportunity—think only of Macbeth's dagger, the real weapon slung at his waist, the 'air-drawn' fantasy a chance to plumb his mind" (Styan 32). The important point here is that although Macbeth is addressing an imaginary dagger, he is prompted by the real one which he wears and which he handles when he says: "I see thee yet, in form as palpable / As this which now I draw" (2.1.40–41). Bajazet's dagger is also the starting point for musings which reveal his state of mind. He has purchased his freedom by accepting marriage with Roxane. Atalide is jealous and Bajazet should be responding to her anxieties. Instead, the concrete reality of his dagger feeds his imagination with thoughts of noble exploits against his brother:

Mais enfin je me vois les armes à la main;
Je suis libre, et je puis contre un frère inhumain,
Non plus, par un silence aidé de votre adresse,
Disputer en ces lieux le cœur de ma maîtresse,
Mais par de vrais combats, par de nobles dangers,
Moi-même le cherchant aux climats étrangers,

Lui disputer les cœurs du peuple et de l'armée,
 Et pour juge entre nous prendre la renommée.
 (*Bajazet*, 3.4.947–54)

In his exultant mood, he fails to see that Atalide does not share his dreams. She weeps. Bajazet's insensitive response to her tears precipitates a crisis which will lead them all to their deaths. It could be called Bajazet's "dagger speech." Both Racine and Shakespeare weave together material reality, fantasy, and tragedy.²⁹

When a hat temporarily functions as a stage property and becomes the focus of attention, the connotations are more light-hearted. In *Hamlet* (5.2) Osric displays excessive deference to Hamlet by refusing to replace his hat after they have exchanged greetings. Hamlet urges him "Put your bonnet to his right use, 'tis for the head" (92–93), and a contest of courtesy ensues, emphasizing the incongruity of Osric's conduct "especially in a creature of the usurping King addressing that King's victim" (Gurr 1–2). The porter in *Les Plaideurs*, acting the part of a barrister, does not know that barristers addressed the court wearing their hats. Hence his incongruous contest of courtesy with the judge:

DANDIN. Couvrez-vous.
 PETIT JEAN. O! Mes . . .
 DANDIN. Couvrez-vous, vous dis-je.
 PETIT JEAN. Oh! Monsieur, je sais bien à quoi l'honneur m'oblige.
 DANDIN. Ne te couvre donc pas.
 PETIT JEAN. *se couvrant* Messieurs. . . . (3.3.671–73)

In this manner Racine launches his sparkling parody of legal procedures and forensic oratory.

Romantic praise of Shakespeare and condescension towards Racine led to misconceptions with regard to the tears which are shed copiously in both Racine and Shakespeare.³⁰ Failure to appreciate this has helped to perpetuate misconceptions concerning Racine's theatricality. Stendhal's spokesman for Romanticism blamed Racine for being the slave of the conventions of his day:

LE ROMANTIQUE. Racine ne croyait pas que l'on pût faire la tragédie autrement. S'il vivait de nos jours, et qu'il osât suivre les

règles nouvelles, il ferait cent fois mieux qu'*Iphigénie*. Au lieu de n'inspirer que de l'admiration, sentiment un peu froid, il ferait couler des torrents de larmes. (*Racine et Shakespeare* 11)

There is a double error here in Stendhal's comparison between Racine and Shakespeare. Racine's *Iphigénie* did excite torrents of tears and he did employ the same techniques as Shakespeare. Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* makes an exit under arrest while all her women weep: "My women may be with me, for you see / My plight requires it. Do not weep, good fools" (2.1.117–19). Agamemnon in *Iphigénie* looks around him as he comes to take his daughter to be sacrificed and says: "Ma fille, vous pleurez, . . . Mais tout pleure, et la fille, et la mère."³¹ Both plays show several characters on stage weeping together and this was a means of prompting the audience's tears. Racine in his preface to *Iphigénie* congratulated himself on achieving this response, and contemporary evidence confirms the tears that this play generated.³²

The visual language of Racine and Shakespeare overlaps to a much greater extent than the traditional opposition between them allows for. Although it is true that Racine confines himself to the more subdued visual effects deriving from décor, stage properties, bodily movements and gestures, he generally extracts maximum significance from them and his visual language is nearly always related to a central theme of the play. This same range of effects is found in Shakespeare, though not always with such key significance. But in both there is a weaving together of the material and the intellectual that can disconcert the literary minded critic. In the seventeenth century both were criticized for stage business which was felt to be inconsistent with the dignity of tragedy. Thomas Rymer, in his boisterous diatribe against *Othello*, inveighed against the physical object on which the plot hangs: "So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was this not called the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*?" He objected to the actors's visual language: "the Mops and Mows, the Grimace, the Grins, and Gesticulation."³³ Subligny, reporting on a performance of Racine's *Phèdre* during its first run, criticized it in similar vein. Racine had invested *Phèdre* with "trop de fureur, trop d'effronterie"; Oenone, who clasps her mistress's knees "arrache avec trop d'indiscrétion et d'emportement le secret de sa maîtresse." Subligny reserved his fiercest strictures for the snatching of Hippolyte's sword by *Phèdre* (*Phèdre*, 2.5), and in so doing bears witness to Racine's uncompromising theatricality:

Cette épée tirée est un incident qui fait pitié . . . si M. Racine a eu quelque sujet d'exposer à nos yeux cette violente action, c'est assurément pour donner un beau jeu à sa pièce . . . mais quand on cherche des jeux de théâtre, il ne faut pas être si critique.³⁴

The visual language of the theatre displeased critics like Rymer and Subligny, but it links great dramatists and crosses linguistic frontiers. The divisions symbolized by the doors in *Henry V* and *Bérénice*, the polyvalence of the throne in *Richard II* and *Esther*, the disrupted seating arrangements in *Macbeth* and *Alexandre*, the collapse into a chair in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Phèdre*, the spurning of a suppliant in *Titus Andronicus* and *Andromaque*, the unconventional kneeling in *Coriolanus* and *Iphigénie*, the gestures of alliance in *King John* and *La Thébaïde*, the daggers in *Macbeth* and *Bajazet*—Racine and Shakespeare provide examples of a common visual vocabulary which is the peculiar feature of theatrical language, and which unites dramatists who can exploit its rich potential.

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NOTES

1. For French attitudes to Shakespeare the most comprehensive general survey is still J. Jusserand, *Shakespeare en France sous l'ancien régime* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1898); see also M. Monaco, *Shakespeare on the French Stage in the Eighteenth Century* (Paris: Didier, 1974).
2. *Discours sur la tragédie à Milord Bolingbroke* in *Théâtre de Voltaire* (Paris: Garnier, 1874) 77.
3. Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare*, ed. Leon Delbos (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1907) 11.
4. Victor Hugo, "Préface de Cromwell," in *Cromwell*, ed. Annie Ubersfeld (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968) 81.
5. Peter Nurse in his edition of Corneille's *Le Cid* (London: Harrap, 1978) 31. This is typical of many statements which claim that the *palais à volonté* is the normal setting for Racine's tragedies. For the actual scenery specifications, see *Le Mémoire de Mahelot, Laurent et d'autres décorateurs de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne et de la Comédie Française au XVIIe siècle*, ed. H. C. Lancaster (Paris: Édouard Champion, 1920).
6. Robert Haggood, *Shakespeare the Theatre-Poet* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1988) 44–45.
7. See Michael Hawcroft, "Racine, Rhetoric, and the Death Récit," *Modern Language Review* 84 (1989): 34–35.
8. First preface to *Britannicus* 404. Racine quotations are from his *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. R. Picard, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1951–52) with the standard line numbers added for the plays.
9. I have drawn on J. L. Stryan, *Shakespeare's Stagecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP,

1967); Andrew Gurr *The Shakespearean Stage*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980); Anne Pasternak Slater, *Shakespeare the Director* (Brighton: Harvester and Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1982); Michael Goldman, *Acting and Action in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985); and Hapgood.

10. For the first detailed study of Racine's theatricality, see David Maskell, *Racine: A Theatrical Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991).

11. *Le Langage dramatique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972) 141.

12. *Alexandre*, 3.1.700; 4.1.957; *Britannicus*, 5.3.1609; *Mithridate*, 3.5.1046, 4.7.1447; *Iphigénie*, 5.2.1517; 5.4.1697; *Athalie*, 5.5.

13. For Shakespeare's stage directions, see Slater 9–33.

14. Shakespeare quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

15. *Britannicus*, 2.6.707–08; *Macbeth*, 3.4.65–66.

16. *Alexandre*, 2.5 and 4.1; *Mithridate*, 3.5 and 4.2; *Phèdre*, 2.5 and 3.1.

17. The dimensions of the Hôtel de Bourgogne where most of Racine's plays were performed have been much debated; see T. E. Lawrenson, *The French Stage and Playhouse in the XVIIth Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: AMS P, 1987) 114–16, 233–36.

18. Full discussion in Maskell 16–35.

19. Styan 18–19, 24–27.

20. *La Thébaïde*, 5.3; *Britannicus*, 3.9; *Bérénice*, 5.3; *Esther*, 3.4.

21. Styan 20; *All's Well that Ends Well*, 2.5.89–92.

22. Mathan's exit in *Athalie*, 3.5 shows a similar change of direction.

23. *Richard II*, 4.1.113, 163–64; see Slater 40–41.

24. *Andromaque*, 3.6; *Bajazet*, 4.6, of which the significance is spelt out by Acomat: "Tu vois combien son coeur, prêt à le protéger, / A retenu mon bras trop prompt à la venger" (4.7.1408–09).

25. *Macbeth*, 3.4.1, 118–19; Slater 44.

26. *Alexandre*, 2.2; for the etiquette of seating arrangements, see Maskell 68.

27. E. M. Waith in his edition of *Titus Andronicus* (Oxford: Clarendon P; and New York: Oxford UP, 1984) inserts the editorial stage direction "kneeling with her sons" on the strength of the Peacham drawing and Saturninus's reference to the kneeling queen (1.1.454–55); for discussion of the Peacham drawing, see Waith 22–27; for the interpretation, see Slater 73.

28. *Coriolanus*, 4.3.56; *King Lear*, 2.4.154; Slater 77–78.

29. There is some uncertainty whether Bajazet's weapons are dagger or sword or both (see Jacques Scherer, "Aspects de la mise en scène de *Bajazet* et de *Tartuffe*", in *La Mise en scène des oeuvres du passé*, eds. J. Jacquot and A. Veinstein (Paris: Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, 1957) 211–13. This does not, however, affect the impact of his speech or the theatrical analogy with *Macbeth*.

30. Slater 101–20; Maskell 81–83.

31. *The Winter's Tale*, 2.1.117–19; *Iphigénie*, 4.4.1171–73.

32. Barbier d'Aucour, *Apollon vendeur de Mithridate ou Apollon charlatan* (Paris, 1675) qtd. in *Nouveau Corpus Racinianum*, ed. R. Picard (Paris: Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, 1976) 87.

33. Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693) in *The Critical Works*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (New Haven: Yale UP, 1956) 160, 149.

34. Adrien-Thomas Perdoux de Subigny, *Dissertation sur Phèdre et Hippolyte* (1677) in *Recueil de Dissertations sur plusieurs tragédies de Corneille et de Racine*, ed. F. Granet, 2 vols. (Paris: Gisse, 1739) 365, 372, 379–80.