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SUBLIME RACINE: THEATRICAL PRACTICES OF THE INEFFABLE

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For John, I love you with all my heart! Thanks for the wonder.

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Note on the Pandemic

Much of this dissertation was written during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, library access was limited and certain preferred editions were not readily available. I am grateful to Google Books and the access they have offered to first-edition volumes; many of my primary sources were found through them. I am also grateful to HathiTrust and the different academic libraries that offered their collections virtually during the pandemic since without this service it would have been very difficult to finish.

Abstract

This dissertation examines Jean Racine's conception of tragic theater and its relationship to the theory of the sublime developed by his contemporary and friend, Nicolas Boileau. Boileau's translation of Pseudo-Longinus radically upset the traditional definition the sublime as the highest level of classical rhetoric, redefining it instead as an aesthetic notion which communicated transcendent emotion through discourse. While the critical dialogue between the two authors is seminal, and Racine did employ Boileau's notion of the *merveilleux dans le discours* in his plays, he did not simply mimic Boileau's understanding of a discursive sublime. Rather, Racine also boldly experimented with his own distinctively theatrical version of the sublime. Although some of his theatrical choices went against accepted norms, they served to intensify the emotion of a scene through non-verbal means. For instance, he occasionally portrayed purely silent characters onstage or allowed royal characters to sit as they delivered their monologues. Furthermore, Racine's exploitation of the neoclassical sublime engaged with the related ideals of polite sociability known as *honnêteté* and the *je ne sais quoi*, socially captivating concepts that Racine employed in some of his characters in order to astound his audience. Racine's last two plays, *Esther* and *Athalie* experimented with basing his theatrical productions on a religious sublime, and in doing so daringly equated a religious text with a secular aesthetic notion.

Racine's unusual aesthetic success not only informed neoclassical literary theory, but also forged a path for Enlightenment, Romantic, and even Modernist elaborations of this pivotal concept. Thus, by examining Racine's contribution to the neoclassical sublime, my dissertation uncovers a key critical foundation for the sublime as an aesthetic concept which would later be deployed by Burke, Kant, and others in their development of theories that continue to shape our perceptions of aesthetics today.

Introduction

The sublime strikes us without warning. We see it in storms brewing on the horizon, terrible mountain heights, or wild seascapes. We feel it in the tremolo of a violin sonata, in the surprising movement of actors' hands as they speak, or in the muted colors of a painting in a dusty corner of a shop. We read it in the simple, elegant lines of a haiku, the heroic images of an epic poem, or the familiar setting of a novel. The experience of the sublime resists definition, and yet we have tried for centuries to do so.

Modern criticism credits the seventeenth-century French literary critic, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, with being the first to use the word "sublime" to describe an aesthetic experience that one encounters through the power of language. In 1674, Boileau published his *Traité du Sublime*, a ubiquitously-read translation of Longinus' first-century text, *Peri Hypsos*.[1] In the *Traité* Boileau defines the sublime as the *merveilleux dans le discours*, or the ineffable power of language. Boileau's discursive sublime influenced authors like John Dennis and Joseph Addison, who used the word "sublime" to describe their emotional reaction to the aesthetic greatness of Nature. It then evolved and widened into the Enlightenment sublime in the works of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant who distinguished between the sublime and the beautiful.[2] Burke and Kant's sublime in turn influenced the Romantic period which understood the sublime as the epic power of nature that was then transmuted back into art, be it painting or poetry.

[1] For much of its history, authorship of *Peri Hypsos* was attributed, including by Boileau, to Cassius Longinus, a second-century rhetorician and counselor to queen Zenobia of Palmyra. However, current criticism labels the authorship of this treatise as "unknown" and the author of this treatise is variously given the name Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus. See Doran, *Theory of the Sublime* and Gilby, *Sublime Worlds* for more detail. Here and throughout the dissertation I will refer to this anonymous author as Longinus.

[2] Burke and Kant defined the sublime as the feelings of terror and awe when the finite human mind encountered something inexplicable and limitless in nature that it could not rationally comprehend. They understood the beautiful as the delight and pleasure felt at human-made works of art or poetry.

However, this evolution raises an interesting question: how did the sublime move from Boileau's 1674 discursive notion to the more comprehensive feeling inspired by nature that Dennis and Addison described in 1693 and 1699 respectively, and which Burke and Kant further developed in the mid 1700's? Part of the answer lies in the theater of Jean Racine, a playwright who was a contemporary and friend of Boileau's.

Why is it essential to consider Racine's theater in connection to the neoclassical sublime? Seventeenth-century French theater provides a unique historical and social space in which to answer this question. This period defined theater as the place where word and action became one, or as the critic d'Aubignac put it, "Parler, c'est agir" (*Pratique* 260). The stage is a medium which lends itself to communication of powerful effects through both words and the action of the body. Before Racine entered the scene, the works of Pierre Corneille, a highly successful playwright whose career spanned the years 1629-1674, had often been described as sublime. Corneille's heroic characters often expressed themselves in elaborate, lofty, and usually lengthy speeches which inspired admiration for their heroic qualities.[3] This aspect of Corneille's theater conformed to what the seventeenth century called the sublime style, or the highest of the three levels of rhetoric, the other two being the simple and the mediocre.[4]

But Boileau's *Traité* revolutionized the word "sublime" to mean the transcendent and striking effect in language, regardless of style, and he used Corneille's works as justification for his revolutionary idea. What made Corneille sublime, according to Boileau, was not his characters' long and ornate speeches, but rather how the essence of these great characters was communicated

[3] Corneille's heroic and moral sublime in theater was so effective that even preaching treatises recommended studying and imitating Corneille's grandiose style in sermons in order to move congregations to admiration of God's great virtue. See Hache, *La Langue du ciel* for Corneille's impact on religious treatises.

[4] These rhetorical styles were an inheritance from Cicero and Quintilian who had given each style a particular rhetorical purpose. The simple style was used for didactic purposes; lyric and elegiac poetry was written in the mediocre style; and the sublime style featuring elevated grandiloquence and complex syntax, was reserved for epic poetry, political oratory, and other genres that moved people to great and heroic deeds.

in discursive moments of extreme simplicity that immediately imparted a feeling of greatness to the spectator.[5]

Boileau had articulated the theory of the sublime, Corneille had been described as sublime, but Racine brought the sublime to life on stage and shaped people's perception of it in real space and time. The aim of this dissertation is to examine how Racine functioned as an active practitioner of a theatrical sublime that astonished, surprised, and overwhelmed his audience. Because of his education at Port-Royal, which emphasized original texts, Racine was familiar with Longinus' treatise before its translation into French. As a poet, Racine recognized the possibilities and limits of language; as a playwright, he knew that powerful effects could be created through non-verbal means with the body, with theatrical space, and, as he showed in *Esther* and *Athalie*, with music.

There are some obvious complexities to consider when viewing Racine as a practitioner of the neoclassical sublime. While it is clear that Racine engaged with Longinus' Greek text as well as with Boileau's revolutionized notion of the sublime, Racine's own theatrical sublime may be better understood as a set of experiments than as a linear evolution. This is the motivation behind the non-chronological approach I take in my investigation of Racine's theatrical aesthetic. Boileau's publication of the *Traité* offers a specific historical starting point from which to trace Racine's own understanding of Longinus, which is why I begin with a detailed analysis of *Iphigénie*, published the same year as the *Traité*. Aspects like Racine's early justification of extreme plot simplicity or his situating of ancient sources are evidence of a complicated awareness and implementation of Longinus' techniques in later plays.[6]

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[5] Boileau gives two examples of sublime moments in Corneille's plays, the "Qu'il mourût" in *Horace* and the "Moi, moi dis-je, et c'est assez" in *Médée*. These two examples will be analyzed in chapter one.

[6] I chose to focus on six of Racine's tragedies in this dissertation. However, many of the patterns I consider in *Alexandre*, *Britannicus*, *Bérénice*, *Iphigénie*, *Esther*, and *Athalie* can also be found in his other plays. The remaining five plays, *La Thébaïde, Andromaque*, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, and *Phèdre* will be considered for a revised book version of this dissertation. I will also consider the place comedy has in connection to the neoclassical sublime.

Likewise, Racine's engagement with Corneille is one of both imitation and differentiation. Racine knew of Corneille's reputation for a heroic sublime as well as Corneille's definition of a sublime play. Both of these influenced Racine's work even as he tried to distinguish himself from the older playwright. For instance, in *Alexandre*, Racine imitates the heroic clemency of Corneille's Augustus in *Cinna* when Alexandre demonstrates kindness toward his enemies. But throughout the play, Racine also complicates Corneille's notion of a hero by creating an *honnête* and *galant* Alexandre who shows equal prowess in love and war. Likewise, Racine structures the plot of *Iphigénie* to imitate the kind of play that Corneille considered "peut-être plus sublime" than Aristotle's hierarchy of great tragic plots (*Œuvres Complètes*, *Trois Discours* 834).[7] But parts of *Iphigénie* also conform to the kind of plot that Aristotle considered superior,[8] but which Corneille thought "vicieux," creating a tension between Racine and Corneille's practice of tragedy.

Similarly, the social aesthetic of *honnêteté* clearly influenced the development of Racine's perception of the sublime. *Honnêteté* and *galanterie* were intimately intertwined social concepts that dictated taste and presentation of speech, dress, and actions. But there was a slight difference between an *honnête homme* and a *galant homme*. The latter's g*alanterie* could be seen as an excessive presentation of self, often connected with *préciosité* and a deliberate womanizing. *Honnêteté*, on the other hand had a more virtuous connotation, with transparency and authenticity of self being a major focus. However, because the two terms were often interchangeable, many critics, including Boileau, were troubled by the portrayal of *galanterie* or *honnêteté* in tragic theater. With *Alexandre*, *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, and even *Bérénice*, Racine seems to be thwarting this stance. He takes *honnête* and *galant* tropes and language made popular by Thomas

[7] Hereafter, *OC*.
[8] Aristotle's preferred tragic action was one in which a character is about to kill someone whose identity they are ignorant of, but realize it in time and refrain from the act. This is the plot of *Iphigenia in Tauris* where Iphigenia is about to kill her brother Orestes, but discovers his identity in time.

Corneille's *tragédie galantes* and places them in traditional tragic plots. He also recognizes the theatrical potential for a character based on the *honnête homme*, who, as an accomplished social actor, knew how to adapt and engage with his audience in order to create an aesthetic reaction. But, after *Alexandre*, Racine also plays on the curious tension between the *honnête* and the *galant homme*, and he makes certain characters like Néron walk an ambiguous line between *honnête*, courteous behavior toward women, and *galant* and duplicitous womanizing. The critique he received (and continues to receive) for using *galant* characters indicates that his oscillation between a heroic and transparent *honnêteté* and an inauthentic *galanterie* creates unease.

Finally, as Anne Delehanty points out, the sublime overlaps a great deal with religious transcendence; they share similar language, have parallel emotional effects, and create powerful social repercussions. Racine recognized that he could join the religious sublime with poetic and theatrical elements to create a powerful stage experience. Indeed, Racine's use of a religious sublime in *Esther* and *Athalie* seems to have proven very effective. During its short career, *Esther* was wildly successful, and *Athalie* was considered Racine's best play throughout the 18th century. Madame de Sévigné has a fascinating reaction to *Esther*: she is delighted with Racine's religious subject and his use of Scripture[9] to create the choral parts. But she is equally amazed by the grace and beauty of the young actresses of Saint-Cyr.[10] The question then becomes, was *Esther* popular because of Racine's excellent employment of the religious sublime, or because it was performed by young women who generally were off-limits to the eyes and wiles of the court? These different tensions complicate Racine's understanding and practice of the sublime.

[9] Here and throughout I will capitalize "Scripture" in order to reflect Racine and his contemporaries' use of capitalization.

[10] Racine justifies the crossdressing of the young actresses for male roles by insisting that ancient robes were long and therefore modest enough to adhere to *bienséance*.

Much of Racinian criticism, insofar as it deals with the sublime, focuses on Racine's relationship with Boileau. Critics such as Georges Forestier and Marc Fumaroli graft Racine's perception of the sublime onto Boileau's *merveilleux dans le discours*, leaving out the possibility of a wider and more comprehensive theatrical sublime. Similarly, Gilles Declercq traces rhetorical sources, including Longinus, that influenced Racine, but doesn't connect them to Racine's non-verbal theatrical practice. Others, like Sylvaine Guyot and Jennifer Tamas, examine Racine's use of the body to create powerful effects, and, in the case of Guyot, even acknowledge this practice as having sublime effects. But they don't explore Racine's debt to Longinus. Emma Gilby traces a theatrical sublime in Pierre Corneille's work, but not in Racine's. Robert Doran suggests that the notion of *honnêteté* can be connected to Boileau's perception of the sublime, but he doesn't discuss how Racine's theatrical practice could also contribute to this connection. Anne Delehanty and Sophie Hache consider the importance of religion in Boileau's understanding of transcendent truth, but Racine is again left out of the conversation. Consideration of how Racine envisioned and developed a sublime theatrical practice provides a crucial link in the evolution of the sublime. Racine helps explain how this major aesthetic moved from Boileau's discursive *merveilleux dans le discours* to the wider perception of later authors whose sublime both included and superseded language, connecting it to art, music, and nature.

I first encountered Racine's connection to the sublime through an anonymous letter written to Bussy-Rabutin, a famous seventeenth-century correspondent. This letter describes a toy called the *Chambre Sublime* in which a number of authors and important political figures, known as the *cabale sublime,* are represented in wax miniature. Among these, Boileau and Racine play an especially active role. Boileau wields a pitchfork and fights off seven or eight "bad poets," and

Racine aids him while also beckoning to Jean de La Fontaine, who is possibly among the enemy poets, to join him and Boileau.

Initially I wanted to explore each person in the *Chambre Sublime* and their connection to the sublime. Eventually I narrowed my research to Racine; I was intrigued as to why he was placed alongside Boileau in the active position of defending the other figures from attack by the "bad poets." I wondered why Racine was included in this toy but not Corneille, a peculiar absence since many of their contemporaries considered Corneille more sublime than Racine. I was also curious why these figures were known as the "cabale sublime," as if they were already a polemically charged group, even though the toy appeared only a few months after the début of Racine's *Iphigénie*, and less than a year after Boileau's publication of the *Traité*. Shortly after this letter was penned, Racine and Boileau were bequeathed with the derisive title of "messieurs du sublime" which hints at the prominent role Racine played in the polemics that developed after Boileau's *Traité*.

My first chapter sets the stage as it were for Racine's familiarity with and implementation of Longinus' text, both before and after Boileau's translation.[11] As mentioned above, Boileau defined the sublime as the *merveilleux dans le discours*. By using the word "merveilleux," in his definition, Boileau is both taking into account and altering the traditional seventeenth-century use of *merveilleux*, namely the depiction of the supernatural in fiction.[12] In theater, the *merveilleux* specifically referred to the special effects and complex machinery used to portray supernatural beings descending to the stage. However, Boileau shifts the *merveilleux* to the realm of discourse,

[11] Boileau and Racine's friendship probably began around 1671, although the two writers might have met as early as 1663. As mentioned above, Racine references Longinus in the preface to *Britannicus* as an authoritative "ancien;" *Britannicus* was performed in 1669 and published in 1670.

[12] The *merveilleux* could refer to either the Christian *merveilleux* of angels and miraculous events in the lives of saints, or the far more popular pagan *merveilleux* of gods and goddesses, most often from Greco-Roman antiquity.

redefining it to mean the powerful verbal effect that occurs with language. In particular, I examine three characteristics of the sublime which Boileau privileges for this redefinition: simplicity, the importance of truthful mimesis, and *kairos* (or authorial timing).

In this chapter I also consider how Racine implements these three characteristics of the sublime in his theater. As a playwright, Racine intuitively understood the importance of timing through *kairos*, and he constantly structured his plays so that important events would happen at the most effective moment. He also experimented with simplicity in a number of his plays, the most remarkable example being *Bérénice* where he creates "quelque chose de rien" (*OC*, "Préface de *Bérénice*" 451). Lastly, Racine's perception of mimesis deeply affected his theatrical choices, including his use of striking verbal images, and the delicate balance between *vraisemblance* and *bienséance* that he pursues for certain characters.

Racine's *Iphigénie* premiered in 1674, the same year that the *Traité* was published. In it, Racine creates a curious hybrid of Boileau's notion of the *merveilleux dans le discours* and his own theatrical interpretation of the sublime. For the *dénouement*, he leans on Boileau's notion, preferring to recount the ending of the play through a vivid verbal *récit* instead of depicting the intervention of the goddess Diana with a theatrical machine.[13] Racine puts his own theatrical spin on the sublime with the creation of Ériphile, the antagonist in *Iphigénie*. Ériphile becomes Racine's *merveilleux*; through her he can bring about the ending he desires, a satisfactory and non-machine *merveilleux* ending. Racine also gives Ériphile language Longinus had described as sublime when he appropriates a poem by Sappho to allow Ériphile to describe her love for her captor, Achille. Ériphile also allows Racine to play with the unexpected power of a character present onstage,

[13] Racine's choice is an overt stance against the kind of machine *merveilleux* preferred by the makers of opera, Lully and Quinault, whose *tragédies lyriques*, or opera, abounded in stage machine depictions of the pagan *merveilleux* with added music and dancing to augment the marvelous effects.

silently observing but not verbally interacting with others. Ériphile is the means by which Racine plays with theatrical effects, a character who is simultaneously an apparently passive, observing victim and a lucidly active agent.

My second chapter engages with Boileau's earlier work, the 1669 *Dissertation sur Joconde*, which shares a pivotal overlap with the *Traité du Sublime*.[14] In the *Dissertation*, Boileau lauds La Fontaine's ability to create works whose beauties must be felt and which cannot be proved.[15] Boileau uses the term "je ne sais quoi" both here and in the *Traité* to describe the aesthetic effect of good writing. Richard Scholar describes Racine's use of the *je ne sais quoi* in the character Esther, but Racine dealt with what I call the "social sublime," or *honnêteté* (of which the *je ne sais quoi* is a part) much earlier than *Esther*.[16] Civility texts from the first half of the seventeenth century discussed in detail the necessary qualities of an *honnête homme*. The qualities of emulation, transparency, authenticity, and adaptability are curiously parallel to what an author needs to create the neo-classical sublime.

With these qualities in mind, I examine how Racine engages with the theatrical potential of an *honnête* aesthetic. Not only was the *honnête homme* in vogue in King Louis XIV's court, but the *honnête homme* also offered Racine a way to translate powerful effects through the bearing and actions – and not just the words – of his characters. Corneille had embraced this aesthetic in 1659 with the subplot of *Œdipe* where the characters Thésée and Dircé interacted in an *honnête* and *galant* manner. Racine transformed and complicated this aesthetic when he portrayed Alexandre, the eponymous main character of his play, and a hero who traditionally embodied the

[14] Brody presents this idea in *Boileau and Longinus*.
[15] "Ces beautés sont de celles qu'il faut sentir, et qui ne se prouvent point. C'est ce je ne sais quoi qui nous charme, et sans lequel la beauté même n'aurait ni grâce ni beauté. Mais après tout, c'est un je ne sais quoi; et si votre ami est aveugle, je ne m'engage pas à lui faire voir clair" (OC, *Dissertation sur Joconde* 316).
[16] Père Bouhours, a literary critic contemporary to Racine, describes the *je ne sais quoi* as an indefinable quality which could not be learned or imitated. In order to be considered genuine, the *honnête homme* had to have this *je ne sais quoi*.

heroic grandeur of a warrior, as an *honnête homme*. Alexandre balanced his heroic military ability with a delicate emotional sensibility, verbal prowess, and the inexplicable attraction of the *je ne sais quoi*, resulting in admiration from both his friends and his enemies. Racine's hero appealed to the *honnête* king and his court audience,[17] but *Alexandre* received mixed reviews from critics like Saint-Évremond.[18] As a result, in his next two plays, Racine complicated *honnêteté* even further. He placed the virtuous qualities of the *honnête homme* in the not-so-virtuous Pyrrhus and in the budding-monster Néron, thereby upending the presentation of the social sublime in order to shock and astonish his audience.

Boileau described Racine as sublime before he ever lauded Corneille as such. As mentioned above, many other critics of the seventeenth century considered Corneille superior to Racine for his heroic and moral sublimes. However, in the preface to *Alexandre*, Racine writes that the whole world was overcome with a "silence d'étonnement et d'admiration" for the ancient hero (*OC* 123), an allusion to the two emotions that Longinus claims result from an encounter with the sublime. My third chapter examines the complicated relationship between Racine and Corneille, and how each playwright approached an aesthetic of overwhelming their audiences. I first trace the history of *admiration* and *étonnement* through early dictionaries, civility texts, and René Descartes' *Les passions de l'âme*. These sources paint *admiration* as a positive emotion, an appropriate reaction to anything great and heroic. On the other hand, *étonnement*, or astonishment, was considered a negative emotion because it momentarily stunned the body and deprived the mind of its ability to rationally comprehend something.

[17] Louis XIV gave Racine a royal patronage, and Madame de Sévigné, the famous seventeenth-century correspondent and avid Corneille fan declared, "Jamais [Racine] n'ira plus loin qu'*Alexandre* et qu'*Andromaque*" (*Correspondance*, t.1, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 16 mars 1672," 459).
[18] See Hope, *Saint-Évremond: The Honnête Homme as Critic.*

From this historical examination, I consider how Corneille and Racine used these emotions to shape and create specific effects. Although Corneille seemed to envision an aesthetic of *admiration* for his plays while Racine pursued an aesthetic of *étonnement*, the separation is not clean cut. Corneille and Racine both believed that the main goal of theater was to create spectator pleasure.[19] In order to create this pleasure, Corneille believed the poet needed *le nécessaire*, or the freedom to use whatever means necessary to accomplish their poetic ends. Even if the choices born of *le nécessaire* did not at first seem *vraisemblable*, or probable, Corneille claimed they would allow the poet to surprise spectators and ultimately result in their admiration.

Racine reached the goal of spectator pleasure through a careful balance of *vraisemblance* and unexpected effects that produced *étonnement*. Racine expected his spectators to experience such sudden and overwhelming emotion that it felt as if they were participating in the dramatic events. They became so fully invested in the play that they could not rationally explain the pleasure they felt in the moment, a characteristic of Racine's *Phèdre* that Boileau uses to defend the playwright as sublime. In many ways Racine's vision of *étonnement* echoed Pascal's heart knowledge, in which the heart comprehended truth with an immediacy impossible for the slower-moving mind.

One of the only times Racine actually uses the word "sublime" in his work is in the preface to *Esther*. My fourth chapter focuses on how Racine experimented with a religious approach to the sublime in his two biblical plays, a poetic choice which grapples with the complex problem of using the Bible as source material for theater. Despite a robust medieval tradition of religious plays, in 1546 the Catholic Church restricted dramas based on both biblical and apocryphal religious

[19] In 1660, Corneille published his *Trois Discours sur le poème dramatique* in which he writes, "Ainsi ce que j'ai avancé dès l'entrée de ce discours, que la poésie dramatique a pour but le seul plaisir des spectateurs" (*OC* 822). A decade later, Racine writes in the preface to *Bérénice* that "La principale règle est de plaire et de toucher" (*OC* 452).

events. Boileau, relying both on this religious stance, as well as a long critical tradition, also discouraged use of biblical material for theatrical spectacle. However, Boileau, taking a cue from Longinus' *fiat lux* from Genesis, considered the Bible to be a sublime text because it could overwhelm its readers with its power.

Racine builds on a religious sublime for *Esther* and *Athalie*. In the preface to *Esther*, he claims that his plays were successful because of "la manière sublime dont [les Écritures] sont énoncées" (*OC* 946). But this statement is curiously ambiguous and raises interesting questions about the authorship of the sublime. It is unclear if Racine is attributing sublimity to the Bible itself, or claiming that the play is sublime because of his own skillful rearrangement of Scripture to create the best theatrical effects, or both.

Racine had played with the notion of a proto-sublime character with the *honnête* Alexandre which he later complicated with Pyrrhus and Néron. He continues to complicate the idea of a sublime character with Esther and Joas, who at first glance are seemingly perfect characters whose allure and beauty bring about divine change in the world. But this perfection is tarnished because both Esther and Joas will occasion the violent death of other people, a violence which haunts these plays through *merveilleux* prophetic prediction, though it is not depicted onstage.

In these plays, Racine also reinstituted the ancient chorus. Although current scholarship tends to view this choice as Racine's attempt to mimic opera, the chorus actually allows Racine a number of different ways to experiment with a theatrical sublime. Seventeenth-century critics discouraged placing a large group of people on stage, and particularly disliked a large silent group. But Racine had already played with the theatrical power of a silent, observing character with Ériphile, and the sheer number of people in his chorus allowed him to increase the intensity of this effect exponentially. The chorus also acted as an echo chamber that amplified the emotional

reaction felt by other characters. In his treatise, Longinus discusses the emotive power of music, but claims the harmony of discourse is more moving and powerful. Racine explores this hierarchy with the chorus, which sometimes sings and sometimes speaks beautifully arranged poetry to such great effect that Madame de Sévigné describes it as "d'une beauté qu'on ne soutient pas sans larmes" (*Correspondance*, t. 3, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 21 février 1689," 508).

The way Longinus presents the sublime, it must operate on two levels, which one critic describes as "creative and receptive" (Doran, *Theory of the Sublime* 17). First the author must be high-minded and must cultivate an inner sense of what is poetically and aesthetically great through exposure to external sources. Secondly, the sublime exists when an audience senses and responds to a work that "enlève, ravit, transporte" (Boileau, *OC*, *Traité* 338). Thus, the sublime is "best defined as a movement […] as an experience of an encounter: a transactional moment" (Gilby, *Sublime Worlds* 23). This movement or transactional moment requires a three-sided relationship between an author, a text or other medium, and an audience. Boileau perceived of the medium between author and audience as solely discursive, but Racine understood that theater could offer the possibility of imparting the sublime using techniques specific to theatrical performance that surpassed discourse. His plays demonstrate that he knew how to create an experience that would "plaire" and "toucher" using the full range of human expression, verbal and physical, poetic and musical (*OC*, "Préface de *Bérénice*" 452). By reintegrating Racine to the conversation on the sublime, my dissertation takes a crucial step in explaining the evolution from Boileau's discursive notion of the sublime to the Enlightenment and Romantic perceptions of this concept and beyond.

Chapter One: Setting the Stage for the Sublime

From ancient rhetorical device to modern aesthetic effect, the sublime has vastly evolved over time.[1] The roots of the sublime as an aesthetic category are attributed to the first century B.C.E. author, Pseudo-Longinus. His treatise, *On the Sublime*, marks the transition of the notion of the sublime, what he calls *hypsos*, from the grand oratorical style proffered by Cicero and Quintilian, to an ineffable effect produced in an audience. For Longinus, *hypsos* is found in "truly great and beautiful writing" or discourse (Grube 10).[2] His examples of what causes the sublime are taken from verbally powerful sources of vastly different genres, spanning Euripides' tragedy, Homer's epics and the rhetorical orations of Demosthenes and Cicero. Indeed, "Longinus is well aware that great writing is of many kinds" (Grube xii).[3]

In early-modern France, the word "sublime" referred to the highest, most elevated, and grandest style of rhetoric advanced by Cicero and Quintilian. The French *style sublime* contrasted with the two other rhetorical styles, the simple and the mediocre. Because of its importance, the sublime style was reserved for works of great seriousness such as epic poetry, tragedy, or sermons. For instance, the early-modern playwright Pierre Corneille wrote tragedies that were often lauded as "sublime" by his contemporaries. This referred to either Corneille's capacity for stylistic grandeur in the heroic or politically persuasive speeches, or to the great admiration Corneille invoked in his spectators with his heroic or morally commendable characters.

Then, in 1674, Nicolas Despréaux Boileau published a French translation of Longinus in which he, like the ancient author, defined the sublime as discourse which produced a powerful

[1] See Guerlac, "The Sublime in Theory" and Saint-Girons, *Fiat lux*.
[2] Because of its pertinence to this dissertation, I prefer to cite Boileau's 1674 translation of Longinus, but I will also refer to Grube's 1957 English translation.
[3] Although Longinus focuses mainly on sublime discourse, he hints at the possibility of a similar effect occurring in non-verbal action, painting, and even nature.

emotional and aesthetic effect. When the sublime in discourse occurs, it creates a sense of overwhelmed awareness of greatness. Rather than its traditional stylistic notion where *le style sublime* required grandiose words, Boileau emphasized that the sublime effect is best found in simple formulae. For instance, in his preface to the *Traité du Sublime*, Boileau uses Corneille's undisputed reputation as a sublime author to help him shift the meaning of the word away from the previous stylistic or heroic aspects attributed to the playwright. Instead, Boileau claims that Corneille is sublime because of his ability to create a powerful emotional effect or experience in the spectator through certain simple verbal moments in *Horace* and *Médée*. Similarly, in his *Réflexions*, Boileau cites another playwright, Jean Racine, as sublime, highlighting moments in Racine's plays *Phèdre* and *Athalie* where Racine's poetry creates a profound effect on his audience which is not connected to any particular style but rather to something that transcends style.

Boileau's reference to Corneille as sublime is to be expected, considering how many other contemporaries did the same. But for him to call Jean Racine sublime, is, I believe, of particular importance. In January 1675, not long after Boileau's publication of the *Traité*, an anonymous letter to the notable correspondent Comte Bussy-Rabutin describes a toy called the *Chambre Sublime*. In it, Boileau and Racine, along with several other authors, are depicted in wax miniature. The letter concludes, "On les appelle la cabale sublime" (Bussy-Rabutin, *Correspondance*, t. 2, "Lettre anonyme," 416).[4] After this letter, there are several polemical references to Boileau and Racine as the *Messieurs du Sublime*, a title which implies that both writers were associated with the sublime and with one another.[5] Finally, in 1678, when *Phèdre* failed to produce a positive

[4] Pierre Corneille is conspicuously absent from the *Chambre Sublime*, indicating that either the letter writer is making a polemical statement against the members of this group, or, as I think is likely, it is a description of a social reality where this particular group of people had become associated with Boileau's unique understanding of the sublime as an aesthetic effect.

[5] See McGowan, "Sublime Effects," Dandrey, "Les Deux esthétiques," Haley, *Racine and the Art Poétique*, and Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* for instances of this title.

audience reaction, Boileau comforted Racine in his *Epître VII*, reminding him of his capacity to produce a play like *Iphigénie*, which could "émouvoir, étonner, ravir un spectateur" (*OC* 127). This phrase is a direct allusion to Boileau's definition of the sublime in the *Traité* which is what "fait qu'un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte" (*OC* 338). This is Boileau's first allusion to Racine as a modern sublime author, and it predates the citation of Corneille as sublime by almost 25 years.[6]

The fact that both Boileau and Racine were associated with the neoclassical sublime almost from the date of the publication of the *Traité*, indicates that we cannot understand Boileau's innovative shifting of the sublime to the aesthetic effect created by discourse without considering Racine as well. Most scholars who acknowledge that Racine engaged with the Longinian sublime, tend to see his work as simply mimicking or following Boileau's sublime as an effect which "fait qu'un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte" (*OC* 338). But I will show that Racine's theater is equally vital to Boileau's development of the sublime. Their friendship and literary interaction meant that they mutually shaped each other's understanding of Longinus' theory. For instance, Boileau draws on a particularly poignant moment from Racine's 1667 *Andromaque* to translate Oreste's vision of the Erinyes in the 1674 *Traité*. Similarly, Racine uses poetic quotations from Boileau's translation of Longinus in his *Iphigénie*, produced in the fall of 1674.

In this chapter, I argue that although collaboration with Boileau's work is important for Racine's development, the playwright is not simply continuing to elaborate Boileau's notion of a discursive sublime. Instead, Racine is actually forging a new theatrical practice, based on his own engagement with the Longinian sublime. Racine's early prefaces and plays hint to a developing aesthetic that show a fascination with the powerful effect produced by poetic or theatrical choices. He explores ways to create a fully theatrical sublime which included not only discourse, but also

[6] Boileau first reference to Corneille as sublime is the example taken from *Horace* which was added to the preface of the *Traité* only in the 1701 edition. The allusion to *Médée* as sublime in *Réflexion X* was published in 1713.

experimentation with non-verbal action such as silence, character posture, *peripeteia* and other theatrical devices.

By using Boileau's development of the theory of the sublime as a starting basis, I then consider Racine's dynamic influence on Boileau's theory, particularly through Racine's engagement with aspects of a theatrical sublime prior to the publication of Boileau's *Traité*. Finally, I explore how Racine enriches and transforms Boileau's theory through his theatrical practice, particularly in *Iphigénie*, implementing not only Boileau's discursive sublime, but also Racine's own uniquely theatrical understanding of Longinus.

Boileau's Sublime

Boileau's translation of Longinus' first-century work cemented transformation of the sublime from a stylistic and rhetorical concept to an aesthetic one in the early-modern period. As stated above, prior to the publication of the *Traité du Sublime* in 1674, the word "sublime" in French was used primarily to denote a specific rhetorical style. Drawing from ancient rhetoricians,[7] seventeenth-century treatises on rhetoric enumerated three distinct styles: the *style simple*, the *style mediocre*, and the *style sublime*. Each style had specific characteristics and was meant to be used only in corresponding generic registers. For instance, in theater, the simple (or plain) style, was a quotidian, spoken style that best suited comedy. Pastoral plays, emphasizing love poetry, pretty turns of phrase, and witticisms, were often written in the mediocre style. The sublime style, full of grandiose words, most befitted the solemnity and grandeur of tragedy. In general, these styles were

[7] Cicero's works were a reaction against Attic orators who often took the simple or plain style too far, using it inappropriately and thus ineffectively. Cicero divided oratorical style according to its envisioned purpose: the grand or great style (*genus sublime*) was used to move one's audience to political or moral action; the mediocre style (*genus medium*) was used to please one's listeners; and the simple or plain styles (*genus tenue*) was used primarily for didactic instruction. Quintilian, who considered Cicero to be the greatest orator, also tended to triage oratorical style into these three categories. For more detail, see Von Albrecht, *Cicero's Style*, pp. 22-24.

rigidly defined and deviation from their specific generic purposes was considered inappropriate. L'abbé d'Aubignac outlines this in *La Pratique du Théâtre* where he discusses proper use of style in theatre,

> Le sujet [de la Tragédie] en fut toujours tiré par les Poètes, des Histoires où des Fables sérieuses et illustres & traité en style grave et sublime; Mais cette même Hymne qui demeura dans les villages sous le nom de Comédie commun à des deux Poèmes dans leur origine, ne prenait son Sujet que de la vie du peuple, & n'était traitée qu'en railleries, médisances & termes vulgaires (136).[8]

To use the quotidian or vulgar language of the simple style in tragic poetry would thus greatly reduce the grandeur of such a noble genre.

Boileau distanced himself from this stylistic triage, however, adopting Longinus' use of the word *sublime* to denote a psychological (*ethos*) or an aesthetic (*pathos*) effect rather than the grandiose style. Boileau's re-configuring of the term *sublime* was "an attempt to distinguish sharply between the external characteristics of style and an inner quality" (Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* 90). Boileau was fascinated by the Longinian sublime as something in discourse that could, regardless of its genre, enmesh its listener or reader in intense emotion as they engaged with it.[9] It was a movement of something ineffable from a static text to a dynamic receiver-based experience. In the *Traité du Sublime,* Boileau emphasized several internal qualities or essences of the sublime that allowed him to re-define it as an effect. Three qualities in particular correspond to what were thought to be important characteristics of seventeenth-century classical French theater: simplicity, truth, and the notion of *kairos*, or rightness, aptness, or fittingness.[10]

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[8] I have modernized the spelling of my primary sources.
[9] For more on Boileau's understanding of Longinus, see Brody, *Boileau and Longinus,* Delehanty, *Literary Knowing,* and Doran, *Theory of the Sublime*.
[10] By focusing on these three characteristics, I do not wish to present a reductive version of Boileau's notion of the sublime. Reguig, *Boileau poète* and Gilby, *Sublime Worlds,* have demonstrated that Boileau's notion of the sublime is far more complex than these three aspects. Rather, by focusing on these characteristics in particular, I aim to show how Boileau and Racine mutually influenced each other.

By coupling the sublime with simplicity, Boileau was attempting to free it from the shackles of the loquacious and grandiose style with which it had become associated.[11] For Boileau, simplicity in the sublime was not just substituting the simple style of rhetoric for the grandiose, rather simplicity was at its very heart. In order to emphasize this, Boileau gives examples of a sublime effect caused by powerful but extremely short and simple discursive expressions. For instance, in the 1674 preface to the *Traité,* he discusses the famous *fiat lux* in Genesis, stating that,

> Une chose peut être dans le style sublime et n'être pourtant pas sublime […] Mais, '*Dieu dit: Que la lumière se fasse; et la lumière se fit*': ce tour extraordinaire d'expression, qui marque si bien l'obéissance de la créature aux ordres du créateur, est véritablement sublime, et a quelque chose de divin (*OC* 338).

While this example is taken from the body of the *Traité*, Boileau expands upon it in his preface, emphasizing the importance of the simplicity of the phrase in its communication of the sublime. Later in the preface, and in his subsequent *Réflexions Critiques*, Boileau adds two other examples of the sublime that are remarkable in their simplicity, both taken from Pierre Corneille's work. The first example is from *Horace*, where the Roman king, upon hearing of his son's apparently cowardly retreat from the enemy, is asked what action he would have preferred. The king responds with a brief and bitter, "Qu'il mourût". For Boileau, this expression embodies the sublime in its simplicity, force and power. He says,

> Voilà de fort petites paroles. Cependant il n'y a personne qui ne sente la grandeur héroïque qui est renfermée dans ce mot […] qui est d'autant plus sublime qu'il est simple et naturel, et que par là on voit que c'est du fond du cœur que parle ce vieux héros, et dans les transports d'une colère vraiment romaine (*OC, Traité* 340).

Importantly, Boileau acknowledges Corneille's capacity to communicate a "grandeur héroïque." As stated above, many of Corneille's contemporaries understood his sublime to be a capacity to

[11] See Shuger, "The Grand Style," and Varga, *Rhétorique.*

express this heroic grandeur through a style which impressed an audience as much because of its rhetorical and stylistic grandiosity as the greatness of its message.[12] But Boileau emphasizes instead that the "vieux Horace" communicates his "grandeur" from the "fond du cœur," in other words through unaffected sincerity. The very simplicity of his words powerfully emphasizes the king's deeply authentic emotion with natural speech.

Boileau's second Cornelian example of the sublime is from *Médée*. The sorceress, betrayed on all sides, is asked what resources are left her against her enemies. She answers, "Moi; moi dis-je et c'est assez". Boileau exclaims, "Peut-on nier qu'il n'y ait du sublime, et du sublime le plus relevé, dans ce monosyllabe, moi?" (*OC*, *Réflexions* 549). For Boileau the sublime exists in this moment precisely because Corneille refuses to resort to stylistic grandiosity, and instead uses the simplest of discursive formulas to communicate the "fierté audacieuse de cette magicienne, et la confiance qu'elle a dans son art" (*OC*, *Réflexions* 549).

Boileau's love of simplicity in discourse is not strange for his time; the *Logique* of Port Royal, by Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, advocates for a similar simplicity and a straightforwardness in communication, born of a dislike of potential error and misleading scholastic language.[13] Besides Arnauld and Nicole, many other grammarians and rhetoricians of the time laud simplicity as the most effective means of communication.[14] However, Boileau was the first to systematically connect the word "sublime" to the aesthetic effect caused by simple, clear discourse.[15]

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[12] Hache's work, *La Langue du ciel* lists contemporaries who thought of Corneille as sublime. Gilby gives a review of current scholarship's understanding of Corneille's stylistic sublime in chapter four of *Sublime Worlds*.

[13] See Declercq, "Topique de l'ineffable," and Génetiot, *Le Classicisme* for the importance of simplicity in rhetoric in the seventeenth century.

[14] Although the following most certainly do not comprise an exhaustive list, chief amongst the advocates for simplicity are Claude Favre de Vaugelas, Charles Sorel, Antoine Gambaud chevalier de Méré, Henri de Montfaucon de Villars, Blaise Pascal, and Dominique Bouhours. These authors will be examined in greater detail in my second chapter.

[15] Interestingly, Charles Sorel published *La connaissance des bons livres* in 1671, three years before Boileau's treatise, in which he lauds a certain "style naturel" which is "élevé" and which is very different than the three classical styles

It would be tempting to suggest that Boileau's understanding of the sublime effect is contained in and communicated only by simple discursive formulas. After all, the majority of the examples he cites in the *Traité* seem to meet this stipulation. Indeed, one could argue that simplicity is necessary to the sublime, especially in light of the statement in Boileau's preface, "le sublime se peut trouver dans une seule pensée, dans une seule figure, dans un seul tour de paroles" (*OC, Traité* 338). However, the word "peut*"* in this sentence lends an ambiguity that allows the sublime to be found in a longer selection of discourse.[16]

Boileau is concerned with more than mere simplicity; he is enthralled by the power of mimesis in language. While simplicity can aid this process, the extraordinary force of the sublime occurs anytime there is direct and immediate representation, the shortest possible distance between meaning and form in discourse.[17] Boileau writes that, "par sublime Longin [entend…] cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu'un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte" (*OC, Traité* 338). Sublime language truthfully and accurately represents experience, striking the reader with that inexplicable something – Bouhours calls it the *je ne sais quoi* – of something excellently communicated.[18]

For Boileau, in order to be effective, the poet's language, like that of a visual artist, must be true to Nature. Boileau considered Nature's beauty pleasing because God created it.[19] Thus, Nature's proper re-creation through the mimesis of human art would ensure pleasure for its

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of rhetoric. He labels this style "transcendant," saying that it is common to all three styles, and which is best recognized by its appropriate force and "netteté des paroles." It is in this transcendence that the true elegance of perfect eloquence is found (*Connaissance* 365). However, despite its seeming similarities with Boileau's sublime, Sorel doesn't use the word "sublime" to describe this transcendence, nor does he distinguish it from its stylistic connections.

[16] I will explore this ambiguity more in my discussion of Boileau's defense of Racine where Boileau lauds as sublime the effect of Racine's theatrical timing rather than his use of simple discursive formulas.

[17] See Reguig, *Boileau poète* for a nuanced understanding of Boileau's understanding of mimesis.

[18] "[Boileau] follows Longinus […] in making sublimity not just the lofty, but the well communicated" (Gilby, *Sublime Worlds* 119).

[19] See Haley, *Racine and the Art Poétique*, Delehanty, *Literary Knowing*, and Doran, *Theory of the Sublime* for the importance of religion in Boileau's work.

partakers.[20] Indeed, Boileau writes that the sublime is "jamais dans un plus haut degré de perfection, que lorsqu'il ressemble si fort à la Nature, qu'on le prend pour la Nature même" (*OC* 374). The poet who wants to produce the sublime ought to seek to create a work that reflects the simple and unadorned work of Nature. Such a poet would thus ensure an audience's pleasure. In the *Art Poétique*, Boileau recommends, "Soyez simple avec art, / Sublime sans orgueil, agréable sans fard. / N'offrez rien au lecteur que ce qui peut lui plaire" (*OC* 159).[21]

For Boileau, part of what makes Nature beautiful is that it operates on multiple levels, it is often grasped first through the senses, and then cognitively admired. Boileau writes in *Epître IX*, "Mais la nature est vraie, et *d'abord on la sent*; / C'est elle seule en tout qu'on admire et qu'on aime" (*OC* 135, my emphasis). Like Nature, the sublime makes its presence known both through the senses and the mind, and it can't be reduced to formula or rationally explicable structures. Boileau specifies this in *Réflexion X*, "Le sublime n'est pas proprement une chose qui se prouve et qui se démontre; mais que c'est un merveilleux qui saisit, qui frappe et qui se fait sentir" (*OC* 546).[22] If it imitates Nature rightly, the sublime will also evoke powerful admiration and astonishment; "[le sublime] produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise" (*OC* 341).

For Boileau, the mark of excellent and pleasurable mimesis is found in beautifully imitating the small imperfections seen in Nature. For instance, Boileau's understanding of a tragic hero's moral ambiguity, "stresses the fact that a slight defect in a hero makes us recognize nature and gives pleasure in that way" (Haley, *Racine and the Art Poétique* 202).[23] Similarly, Boileau did not

[20] This is also the premise of Pierre Nicole's *La Vraie beauté*.
[21] Boileau's *Art Poétique* was published in the same volume as the *Traité du Sublime*.
[22] This is a similar formula to what Boileau calls an author's "sel" which is "un je ne sais quoi qu'on peut beaucoup mieux sentir, que dire" (*OC,* "Préface à l'Œuvre" 1).
[23] Racine's understanding of moral ambiguity, influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics*, is similar.

perceive stylistic perfection within a work to be convincing: "dans un discours si poli et si limé, il faut craindre la bassesse" (*OC*, *Traité* 386). The smoothness of an overworked discourse or text implies a superficial self-awareness in a poet who is filled more with *amour propre* than with poetic inspiration.[24] Instead, the greatness of truly sublime authors means that they will have "petites négligences qui leur sont échappée parce que leur esprit, qui ne s'étudiait qu'au grand, ne pouvait pas s'arrêter aux petites choses" (*OC*, *Traité* 386).[25] This is also linked to Boileau's appreciation and emphasis on "natural" language in theater. Although "natural" language was traditionally attributed to the *style mediocre* of pastorals, Boileau thought necessary to conveying the power of pathos in tragedy.[26]

Simplicity and mimesis help create the sublime, but for Boileau, the touchstone of poetic creation is found in "that arch-Longinian word, χαιρός" (kairos) (Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* 41). Although difficult to translate, kairos is best defined as a "sense of timeliness and measure" and which is deeply connected to an author's insight into "the psychological limits of a situation" (Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* 41).[27] *Kairos* is thus very similar to Boileau's understanding of 'raison,' which an author uses to, "estimer justement la situation du sujet et de l'objet poétiques, choisir le registre pertinent, évaluer et rassembler les ressources qui permettent de parvenir à l'œuvre pleinement poétique" (Reguig, *Boileau poète* 123). In the dualistic Cartesian setting of the latter seventeenth century when reason was often privileged over the senses, Boileau's understanding of 'raison' is more holistic, and corresponds better to the idea of a writer's intuition

[24] The concern about *amour propre* in an author's psyche is ubiquitous in the seventeenth century, and Boileau is simply echoing others when he underscores the importance of the quality of the writing reflecting the character of the writer.
[25] Boileau's early work, *Dissertation sur Joconde* lauded such "négligences" and "naïveté" in La Fontaine's writing, to such a degree that Brody considers parts of the *Dissertation* as an early version of the *Traité*.
[26] See Barbafieri, *Atrée et Céladon*, and Viala, *La France galante* for discussions on natural language in theater.
[27] While the use of *kairos* is not limited to Longinus (Cicero, Quintilian, Aristotle and other rhetoricians also make use of it), Longinus is unique in his description of the power of the sublime effect being connected to the timing and rightness of a chosen discourse. See especially Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* 41-53.

rather than a purely cognitive perception. Boileau's understanding of mimesis required an engagement with Nature with the entirety of the person: the senses and the imagination, as well as the reason. Likewise, Boileau's understanding of *kairos* involves the author's imagination, emotions, and even arguably the authors' senses. *Kairos* thus puts the experience of the sublime in the curious position of potentially being fully embodied experience.[28]

One way in which Boileau translates *kairos* is "une passion poussée à propos" and declares that nothing creates quite the same kind of movement and power as this apt and timely use of passion.[29] Longinus' (and by extension, Boileau's) unique understanding of *kairos* takes on a specific "aesthetic intensity" where his metaphors "connote the momentary shock-effect produced by *hypsos*" and equate them to powerful and sudden "events of nature such as thunder and lightning" (Doran, *Theory of the Sublime* 47). The power of these events is in their ephemeral suddenness; a sublime author not only experiences this power, but communicates the experience to the audience in such a way that they feel as if they have lived it. But the power of the ineffable experience could only be communicated if an author intimately knows the expectations and needs of the audience. The author must choose not only the right words but the right moment.[30] If done well, the sublime creates a deep effect and makes the audience feel as if they had produced it themselves.[31]

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[28] This is especially interesting considering the importance of embodied-ness in theater. Racine's sublime, as we will see, not only engaged the mind in the narrative, but also the senses of sight and sound (in both verbal and non-verbal ways).

[29] "J'ose dire qu'il n'y a peut-être rien qui relève avantage un discours qu'un beau mouvement et une passion poussée *à propos*. En effet, c'est comme une espèce d'enthousiasme et de fureur noble qui anime l'oraison, et qui lui donne un feu et une vigueur toute divine" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 350). See Saint-Girons, *Fiat lux* pp. 17-20 for the implications of movement in the word sublime.

[30] One especially interesting example of this right words/right moment marriage is in the discussion of the horrific sublime. Longinus claims that although they should be avoided at other times, vulgar or violent words can, and indeed must, be used to describe violent or horrific events. Otherwise the incongruity of elegant words to describe terrible physical violence renders both the words and the event ridiculous. I will examine this notion of the horrific sublime in chapter four.

[31] "Car tout ce qui est véritablement sublime a cela de propre quand on l'écoute, qu'il élève l'âme, et lui fait concevoir une plus haute opinion d'elle-même, la remplissant de joie et de je ne sais quelle noble orgueil, comme si c'était elle

Boileau's *Réflexion XI* focuses on the right timing of *kairos* when he defends Racine against Houdar de La Motte. La Motte claims that Racine's last *récit* in *Phèdre* is absurd and unbelievable, and breaks the theatrical illusion. La Motte argues that Théramène is caught in the throes of anguish caused by the violent death of his pupil and thus should not be able to produce such elegant and refined poetry as is found in the *récit*.[32] La Motte particularly dislikes the complex metaphor, "Le flot qui l'apporta recule épouvanté" which he says is very pretty, but has no place in a moment of such violent emotion. Boileau objects, quoting Longinus, "Le remède le plus naturel contre l'abondance et l'audace des métaphores, c'est de ne les pas employer *que bien à propos*, je veux dire dans le sublime et dans les grandes passions" (*OC* 560, my emphasis).[33] Boileau then praises Racine's understanding of the dramatic situation, saying that Racine's audacious metaphor does not detract from the passage but rather underscores the passion and emotion felt by Théramène.[34] Indeed, the metaphor allows the emotions of "horreur" and "consternation" Théramène feels at the awful circumstances to be communicated "en quelque sorte aux Spectateurs mêmes" (*OC* 560). Indeed, for Boileau, Racine's use of figurative language here is so powerful that the spectator is swept beyond any logical inconsistency that might be lurking beneath the surface.[35] The proof that the passage adheres to *vraisemblance*, Boileau claims, is in the experience of the spectator. Boileau claims that the entire final *récit*, including the particular line disparaged by La Motte, always caused "une espèce d'acclamation, marque incontestable qu'il

qui eût produit les choses qu'elle vient simplement d'entendre" (Boileau, *OC*, *Traité* 348). Thus, the neoclassical sublime is more than just fully transparent language; there is inevitably a sense of creation involved in it, that the receiver or hearer partakes in the original act of creation through their own experience.

[32] "On est choqué de voir un homme accablé de douleur si recherché dans ses termes, et si attentif à sa description" (cited in Escal, *OC* 1109). See Hawcroft, "Death Récit" for how Racine structures this *récit* rhetorically.

[33] Boileau often translated *kairos* with "à propos" (Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* 47).

[34] "[M. Racine] pouvait-il employer la hardiesse de sa métaphore dans une circonstance plus considérable et plus sublime que dans l'effroyable arrivée de ce monstre, ni au milieu d'une passion plus vive que celle qu'il donne à cet infortune gouverneur d'Hippolyte" (Boileau, *OC, Réflexions* 560).

[35] Boileau claims that Racine, "par son récit […] de sorte que, par l'émotion qu'il leur cause, il ne les laisse pas en état de songer à le chicaner sur l'audace de sa figure" (*OC, Réflexions* 560).

y a là du vrai sublime" (*OC* 560). The emotional reaction created in the spectators would not have been possible if they had felt disengaged with or shocked by its lack of rational *vraisemblance*. However, since Boileau claims that they remain fully engaged in the moment, the *récit* is sublime, disproving La Motte's critique of the passage as *invraisemblable* and theatrically weak.[36]

It isn't surprising that Boileau's preferred contemporary examples of the sublime are drawn from theater. Treatises on theater in the seventeenth century, despite the vast, hyper-complicated, and often convoluted body of works they analyzed, tended to emphasize the same simplicity, mimesis and poetic timing Boileau considers so necessary to the sublime.[37] But despite lacking at times the simplicity he praised, Boileau knew that tragedy could arouse the passions and achieve the same transport that Longinus ascribes to the sublime. Indeed, Longinus emphasizes that events described through discourse are a prime venue for the sublime. Even the non-theatrical example of *fiat lux* – given by Longinus, but commented on and expanded by Boileau – is striking because it portrays a moment of verbally performative action.[38] Where else but theater could action and word be as closely reconciled? As l'abbé d'Aubignac famously states, "Parler, c'est Agir" (*Pratique* 260).

But theater also requires action that is not reflected in discourse. And while Boileau considers tragedy an ideal way to create sublime action through word, his examples of the sublime remain purely discursive.[39] Perhaps because he is not a playwright, Boileau never explores how a

[36] Cook describes this scene as both intellectually and emotionally complex, thus allowing the spectators to "respond to the force of this spectator on stage, [Théramène]" (*French Tragedy* 85).
[37] Authors and critics from the second half of the century were especially apt to claim that their century's theater was "claire et distincte" when in reality theater was neither as simple, nor as clear as they liked to say it was.
[38] "Le trait linguistique du *fiat lux*, c'est son caractère performative, par lequel la parole ne représente pas l'action de Dieu, mais la fait être" (Declercq "Rhétorique classique" 695). Another side of this performative aspect of words is found in the particular way the seventeenth-century theater addressed stage direction. Actors spoke their actions and reactions even as they acted them. So, for instance, Bérénice declares to Titus, "Vous êtes empereur, Seigneur et vous pleurez?" (IV.v.1154). The stage direction is implicit in Bérénice's verbal observation of Titus' physical action.
[39] See Reguig, *Boileau poète* for a thorough discussion of Boileau's discursive philosophy.

larger definition of dramatic action could also contribute to a sublime effect. This will be key in the distinction between Boileau and Racine's understanding of the sublime.

Racine's Theatrical Sublime

Racine's literary relationship with Boileau is widely acknowledged and documented. Their friendship probably began around 1671, although the two writers may have met as early as 1663.[40] However, Racine was familiar with Longinus' text before his friendship with Boileau, and well before Boileau's translation of the treatise.[41] As a student at the monastery of Port Royal, Racine was educated in a rich selection of ancient literature and rhetoric, all read in the original languages. His knowledge of ancient sources of rhetoric greatly influenced his own writing, and he used a large number of different rhetorical skills in the construction of his plays.[42] One of Racine's main rhetorical influences was Quintilian, particularly in the use of *hypotyposis*, or a vivid verbal description of events.[43] But the Longinian sublime, which has much in common with *hypotyposis* – both rely on powerful visual language to inspire their effect – also held an allure for the budding playwright.[44]

Given that Racine had read Longinus as part of his education rich in ancient sources, several questions arise. What special role, if any, does Longinus and the sublime play in the development of Racine's theatrical practice? Is there a distinction between Racine and Boileau's

[40] See Haley, *Racine and the Art Poétique* for the relationship between the two authors.
[41] Knight writes in *Racine et la Grèce* that Longinus was certainly among the authors Racine studied and was familiar with from in his education at Port Royal (232). According to Brody, Jean de La Fontaine claimed Racine owned a copy of Longinus, although the ancient author's name is not explicitly mentioned (*Boileau and Longinus* 17). See also Bonnefon, "La Bibliothèque de Racine."
[42] See France, *Racine's Rhetoric* and Hawcroft, *Word as Action*, and Declercq, *L'Art d'argumenter* for Racine's familiarity with and training in classic rhetoric.
[43] See Declercq, "Quintilien" for the influence of this ancient orator on Racine.
[44] Racine's use of *hypotyposis* in *Iphigénie* will be explored in detail later in this chapter. This structure will also come into play in the next chapter on the power of the visual *je ne sais quoi*.

understanding of the sublime? If so, did Racine's theater have an effect on the development of Boileau's sublime or vice versa? Can we identify moments in Racine's plays where Racine puts into practice his theatrical sublime? These questions will guide the remainder of this chapter.

While Longinus understands rhetoric to be a part of the creation of the sublime, ultimately, he moves the sublime away from rhetoric and into the realm of aesthetics. He describes the sublime above all else as an effect.[45] Longinus says the sublime, "does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself. The startling and the amazing is more powerful than the charming and persuasive, if it is indeed true that to be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience" (Grube 4).[46] Since Longinus describes the sublime as something more than just rhetorical persuasion, Racine, as a playwright would have recognized the potential of theater, with its verbal, visual, emotional, or even spiritual dimensions, to create a multi-faceted theatrical sublime.

Unlike Corneille, Racine writes very little about his own work, other than in his prefaces and the occasional marginalia. This makes it difficult to exactly define what is meant by Racine's "theatrical sublime." However, by studying Racine's perception of spectator pleasure and the means he used to create it, I believe we can draw critical parallels between the playwright and Longinus. In many ways, Racine was deeply concerned with the three aspects of Boileau's sublime analyzed above, simplicity, mimesis, and kairos.

However, where Boileau limits his sublime to discourse, I contend that Racine allows it free reign; it becomes much fuller, more varied, subsuming into itself the visual and non-verbal

[45] Longinus' (and Boileau's) shift of sublime to an aesthetic is vital to Edmund Burke and Emmanuel Kant's Romantic sublime. But I believe Racine is equally necessary in this evolution since he is among the first to opening the realm of the sublime beyond discourse to theatrical performance.

[46] We recall that Boileau's understanding of the sublime surpasses reason and requires the participation of the entire person, including their senses and their imagination.

characteristics of theater. As a playwright, Racine understands the full capacity of the human body as a vehicle for communication. If words can be sublime, why not silence?[47] Why not a physical posture?[48] Could the sublime move beyond the human body? Could the very space of the stage be seen as sublime?[49] Could theatrical décor and props communicate a sublime theatrical moment?[50] Obviously, there is a risk of conflating any theatrical effect with a sublime effect, but Racine definitively understood the potential for the sublime to move beyond a mere discursive medium. The theatrical sublime is thus the experience of a moment on stage that "like a thunderbolt […] carries all before it and reveals the writer's full power in a flash" (Grube 4).

I will address first how Racine understands the notion of *kairos*. That Racine has a deep awareness and sensitivity to what makes theater work is undisputed. But I believe this is due in part to his engagement with Longinus' text, particularly the first of the five sources of the sublime, which according to Longinus is the most important and the source of all sublime greatness. This is "the vigor of mental conception," or a "natural high-mindedness" (Grube 11). Great writing is born when a writer steeps themselves in noble sources and allows their sublime greatness to affect them. In other words, Racine understood that in order to be a writer of the sublime, he had to be affected by sublime writing.

There are a number of different accounts, whether apocryphal or true, that indicate that Racine was perceived (or wanted to be perceived) as someone who was moved by great literature

[47] See Tamas, *Le Silence trahi: Racine ou la déclaration tragique* for Racine's powerful use of silence in theater.
[48] See Maskell, *Racine: A Theatrical Reading* for Racine's use of body posture as visual language.
[49] The symbolic power of the in-between space of the stage in *Bérénice* is analyzed by McClure in "Sovereign Love and Atomism in Racine's *Bérénice*."
[50] Racine's theatrical décor and use of space was normally kept very simple. But the one time it wasn't, in the final moment of revealing in *Athalie*, it would have caused quite a sensation, and indeed it did, see Maskell, *Racine: A Theatrical Reading.*

and the beauty of spoken language.[51] For instance, in the marginalia of his copies of Euripides, Sophocles, and other ancient playwrights, he wrote notes which are "those of a person trying to visualize the action to experience the emotions called forth by the successive dramatic situations and to see into the inner workings of the minds that created those masterpieces" (Haley, *Racine and the Art Poétique* 115).[52] Similarly, in his *Mémoires*, Louis Racine recalls a moment where his father was so carried away by the beauty of the poetry he was reading that he transported his listeners with him.

> [Racine] prend un Sophocle grec, et lit la tragédie d'Œdipe, en la traduisant sur-le-champ. Il s'émut à tel point, dit M. de Valincour, que tous les auditeurs éprouvèrent les sentiments de terreur et de pitié dont cette pièce est pleine. 'J'ai vu, ajoute-t-il, nos meilleures pièces représentées par nos meilleurs acteurs: rien n'a jamais approchée du trouble où me jeta ce récit: et au moment que j'écris, je m'imagine ouïr encore Racine le livre à la main, et nous tous consternés autour de lui' (cited in *OC* Mesnard 100).

There are also accounts of Racine paying close attention to the sound of his poetry, including training his actors to speak just so.[53] He also contemplated leaving "full notes on his major dramatic roles so that future generations of actresses would know how to chant his lines properly and so produce the desired effects" (McGowan, "Sublime Effects" 9).[54] He supposedly even spoke his own lines out loud with such fervor in the gardens of the Tuileries that the gardeners feared for his life.[55] The last anecdote in particular points to Racine's awareness that "to write sublimely

[51] Boileau's only reference to Racine in the *Art Poétique* supports the Longinian notion that an author must both imitate the ancients and be sublime himself in order to produce the sublime. "Que Racine, enfantant des miracles nouveaux, / De ses héros sur lui forme tous les tableaux" (*OC* 184).
[52] See Picard, *OC* which includes a comprehensive study on Racine's reactions in the margins of his books. See also Phillippo, *Silent Witness* for Racine's use of Euripides.
[53] As his son notes in his *Mémoires*, Racine was involved with the formation of *both* actors and actresses. "Comme il avait formé Baron, il avait formé la Champmeslé, mais avec beaucoup plus de peine. Il lui faisait d'abord comprendre les vers qu'elle avait à dire, lui montrait les gestes, et lui dictait les tons, que même il notait" (Mémoires, cited in *OC* Picard 63).
[54] Racine was extremely conscious of the power of voice, its musical quality and the possibility of tonal connotation to produce desired emotional effects. For more on this, see McGowan's "Sublime Effects," Taussat, "En lisant Phèdre," and Bolduc, "*Iphigénie*, de la vaine éloquence."
[55] See Taussat for a more detailed rendition of this anecdote.

about heroic adventure, […] an author must seem to participate fully in the danger portrayed in his or her text" (Gilby, *Sublime Worlds* 23). This Longinian perception of an author also parallels what Aristotle writes, "At the time when he is constructing his Plots, and engaged on the Diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember […] to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate, and be least likely to overlook incongruities" (*Poetics 16* 1471).

In order to be truly high minded, Longinus tells would-be sublime authors to surround themselves with other great authors. "It is really a noble enterprise, to frame such a theater (*theatron*) and tribunal, to sit on our own compositions, and submit them to a scrutiny, in which such celebrated heroes must preside as our judges" (56-57). The metaphorical reference to theater no doubt caught the young playwright's eye, and in the preface to *Britannicus*, published in 1670, Racine paraphrases Longinus' recommendation.[56] Racine writes that he is most truly judged by "les yeux de ces grands hommes de l'antiquité que j'ai choisis pour modèles" (*OC* 375). He then adds, "car, pour me servir de la pensée d'un Ancien, voilà les véritables spectateurs que nous devons nous proposer; et nous devons sans cesse nous demander: 'que diraient Homère et Virgile, s'ils lisaient ces vers? Que dirait Sophocle, s'il voyait représenter cette scène ?'" (*OC* 375). Racine expands the metaphor of theater, describing these ancient authors not only as readers, but also as spectators. He implies that while Homer and Virgil will judge discourse ("ces vers"), Sophocles will also judge the visual representation of the "scène."[57] He thus opens the role of these ancient judges to more than just discourse.

[56] Knight speaks of *Britannicus'* preface as a "passage que lui-même a traduit, un peu librement, de Longin. C'est encore une lecture grecque que nous devons porter à son actif ; Boileau qui sera le premier à traduire en français le *Traité du sublime*, ne présentera sa version qu'en 1674" (*Racine et la Grèce* 293).

[57] Later in the preface to *Britannicus*, Racine also emphasizes the importance of both a spectatorship and a readership, but this time in his modern audience. "Mais ce qui est échappé aux Spectateurs pourra être remarqué par les Lecteurs" (*OC* 375). The distinction between "spectator" vs. "audience" or even "lecteur" has been analyzed by L. Norman in "Du Spectateur au lecteur."

While much of Racine's reputation in connection to the neoclassical sublime is subsequent to the publication of the *Traité*, there is evidence that Racine is already playing with the idea of creating a sublime theatrical effect much earlier than Boileau's translation.[58] As early as *Alexandre le Grand* Racine indicates that he believes simplicity to be an important characteristic to connect to his plays. But unlike Boileau, Racine sees this simplicity as more than just a discursive trait. He connects it primarily to his theatrical action. The plot to *Alexandre* was accused of being "trop simple et trop stérile" (*OC* 127). But Racine responds to his critics that this simplicity is in keeping with the greatness of antiquity "Je ne représente point à ces critiques le goût de l'antiquité" (*OC* 127). Likewise, in the preface to *Britannicus*, Racine claims it is absurd that his critics would prefer him to use a complicated action, "au lieu d'une action simple, chargée de peu de matière, telle que doit être une action qui se passe en un seul jour" (*OC* 374). If he were to listen to the strange censorship of his judges, his play would break the unities of time and be unnatural and unbelievable. Simplicity for Racine thus embodies the spirit of antiquity, as well as everything that adheres to a natural and possible theatrical action.[59]

But it is with *Bérénice* that Racine reaches an apex of his version of Longinian simplicity in theatrical action. In fact, Racine emphasizes the simplicity of this play almost overmuch.[60] He delights in the simplicity of the action, "Mais ce que m'en plut davantage, c'est que je le trouvai extrêmement simple" (*OC* 451). He declares simplicity to be desirable in his work as a playwright, saying, "il y avait longtemps que je voulais essayer si je pourrais faire une Tragédie avec cette simplicité d'Action qui a été si fort du goût des Anciens" (*OC* 451).[61] Simplicity contributed to

[58] In "Sublime Effects," McGowan points out that Racine seems to be definitely drawing on the sublime as an aesthetic with *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre*, and particularly with his two religious plays. But she doesn't acknowledge that Racine commenced experimenting with this aesthetic before the publication of the *Traité* in 1674.
[59] Whether or not these two plays actually exhibit this self-proclaimed simplicity is another question entirely.
[60] Racine use the word "simple" or variations thereof a total of ten times in his preface of 1256 words.
[61] Although there are no explicit references to Longinus as there are in the preface to *Britannicus*, this section of the preface to *Bérénice* is "a conscious echo of Longinus' words on imitation" (Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* 18).

the success of his ancient source, the poet Plautus, who had "cette simplicité merveilleuse qui a attiré […] toute les louanges que les Anciens lui ont données." He again identifies simplicity as a characteristic of antiquity, as "un des premiers préceptes que [les Anciens] nous ont laissés" (*OC* 450). He implies that anyone worth their salt has learned and applied the lesson of Horace, "ce que vous ferez […] soit toujours simple" (*OC* 450).[62] He defends his play's simplicity against those who, "pensent que cette simplicité est une marque de peu d'invention" (*OC* 451). Racine's response to these naysayers is that "toute l'invention consiste à faire quelque chose de rien" (*OC* 451), a response which sounds very similar to the notion of *ex nihilo*, or the divine creation of something from nothing. The *fiat lux* in Genesis is just such a moment. Is Racine implying that he as a poet is capable of *ex nihilo*, or divine creation over his own poetic universe? If so, his subtle audacity is remarkable.

Racine's emphasis on simplicity in *Bérénice*, justified by allusions to two of the five sources of the sublime, indicates that Boileau took a poetic cue from Racine for his *Traité* published four years after *Bérénice*. In *Bérénice* Racine explores the possibility of pathos without the usual violence of death, in other words a place where the physical tragedy of death is replaced with the "tristesse majestueuse qui fait tout le Plaisir de la Tragédie" (*OC* 450). *Bérénice's* stripped-down pathos allows Racine to accomplish "La principale Règle […] de plaire et de toucher" (*OC*, "Préface de *Bérénice*" 452). While tragic pathos isn't equivalent to the sublime, the

Interestingly, of all Racine's prefaces since *Alexandre le Grand*, the preface to *Bérénice* suffered the fewest changes in subsequent editions; in fact, Racine barely changed the content of the original preface, first published in 1671. One implication of this consistency could be that this preface conformed mostly closely to Racine's theory of a theatrical aesthetic of simplicity. See Forestier, "Notice de *Bérénice*."

[62] As analyzed above, the parallel passage in Boileau's *Art Poétique*, "Soyez simple avec art, / Sublime sans orgueil, agréable sans fard. / N'offrez rien au lecteur que ce qui peut lui plaire" (*OC* 159), alludes to the connection between the sublime and simplicity. It also emphasizes the importance of the spectator's pleasure, which is another theme in Racine's preface to *Bérénice*. See Haley, *Racine and the Art Poétique* for a discussion on the potential interaction between Racine and Boileau, and the possible influence of Racine on the writing of the *Art Poétique*.

two are very closely linked.[63] The second source for the sublime, in Boileau's translation, "consiste dans le Pathétique; j'entends par Pathétique, cet Enthousiasme & cette véhémence naturelle qui touche et qui émeut" (*OC* 349).[64] This violent, touching pathos parallels Racine's emotional objective for *Bérénice* which is to inspire the "*violence des passions*" (*OC* 450, my emphasis). He claims empirical evidence that he met this objective since *Bérénice* "a été honorée de tant de larmes" (*OC* 451). Similarly, Racine suggests that a truly gifted poet will rivet his spectators, "par une action simple, soutenue […] de la beauté des sentiments, et de *l'élégance de l'expression*" (*OC* 450-451, my emphasis). Racine's simple theatrical action sustained with elegant language and beautiful emotion shares interesting parallels to Longinus' fourth source of the sublime. Boileau's translation gives it as "*la noblesse de l'expression*, qui a deux parties: le choix des mots, et la diction *élégante et figurée*" (*OC* 349, my emphasis). Racine is clearly envisioning this kind of nobility of expression, "élégante et figurée," in *Bérénice*, considered his most elegiac play, to accompany and reinforce the simplicity of the plot and the violent pathos it inspires.

Interestingly, before his pursuit of the fourth source of the sublime with his "choix des mots" and "diction élégante et figurée" in *Bérénice*, we find hints of Racine making use of the third source of the sublime in *Andromaque*. This third source of the sublime, "les figures tournées d'une certaine manière" uses striking verbal images to create a vivid effect in reader's minds (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 349). Longinus says that Euripides is particularly good at creating the sublime through an internal vision in his spectators. He cites Euripides' *Orestes* encounter with the Erinyes as a poignant example.[65] Racine channels Euripides same horror to great effect at the end of *Andromaque* when he portrays Orestes' mad internal vision,

[63] See Bompaire, "Le Pathos dans le Traité du Sublime," and Declercq, "Poéticité."
[64] The word "toucher" and its variations are also ubiquitous in the preface; Racine employs it five times.
[65] "Le poète en cet endroit ne voyait pas les Furies: cependant, il ne fait une image si naïve, qu'il les fait presque voir aux Auditeurs" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 364).

> Dieux, quels affreux regards elle jette sur moi!
> Quels Démons, quels serpents traîne-t-elle après soi?
> Hé bien, Filles d'Enfer, vos mains sont-elles prêtes?
> Pour qui sont ces Serpents qui sifflent sur vos têtes? (V.v.1635-1638).

In fact, Boileau considered Racine's rendition of Orestes' awful vison so well done that he later used portions of Racine's lines for his translation of this particular quotation of Euripides,

> Mère cruelle, arrête, éloigne de mes yeux
> Ces *filles de l'enfer*, ces spectres odieux.
> Ils viennent: je les vois; mon supplice s'apprête.
> *Quels horribles serpens [sic] leur sifflent sur la tête*! (363, my emphasis).[66]

Racine's deliberate use of at least three of Longinus' five sources of the sublime (high-mindedness, striking figures, and deliberate choice of words), allows us to trace the influence of the ancient author on the playwright's aesthetic.[67]

However, Longinus influences Racine in his understanding of mimesis. A playwright of the seventeenth century theater, Racine adheres strongly to a sense of *vraisemblance*, that is the representation of a subject that does not violate rational expectations.[68] Unlike Corneille who insists that an audience should trust an author to create a coherent story by whatever means the author deems necessary,[69] Racine leans instead into his audience's expectations, preferring to create plays that resonate with their understanding of *vraisemblance*.[70] For Racine, the believability of his plays results when his audience is swept up in the moment, in the strength of a

[66] "En 1674, Boileau, traduisant le Traité du Sublime de Longin, où son cites ces vers d'Euripide, imitera Racine" (Forestier, "Notes et variantes, *Andromaque*" 1369).
[67] In my third chapter, I will analyze how Racine uses Longinus' sources of the sublime contribute to his creation of *étonnement*.
[68] *Bienséance*, on the other hand, occurs when a subject adheres to culturally decorous norms. During the quarrel of Corneille's *Cid* the *Académie Française* vehemently hashed out the nuances between *vérité*, *vraisemblance*, and *bienséance*, and this discussion continued throughout the seventeenth century.
[69] Corneille calls this authorial intuition *le nécessaire*. In the *Trois Discours*, he writes "Je dis donc que le nécessaire en ce qui regarde la Poésie, n'est autre chose que le besoin du Poète pour arriver à son but, ou pour y faire arriver ses Acteurs" (Corneille, *OC* 840). I will discuss the difference between Corneille and Racine's conceptions of the sublime in more detail in chapter 3.
[70] "[La règle de Racine] n'est pas fondée sur la 'fantaisie' (ni même sur l'imitation des modèles dont il veut de se recommander avec un peu d'orgueil), mais sur la vraisemblance." (Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* 294).

character's own conviction and passion.[71] Like Longinus' conviction that it is the power of the real that creates the sublime, Racine claims that he creates characters and events that adhere as closely to lifelike action as possible.[72] However, Racine intuitively understands that what defines "real" requires a poet to have a finely-tuned and delicate understanding of his spectators' expectations. In a number of his prefaces, Racine defends his poetic choices for *vraisemblance* that will ultimately (and paradoxically) contribute to belief in the events of the play. Occasionally, as in the case of *Britannicus*, this form of "real" combines with the aforementioned simplicity to allow spectators the tools they need to enter into imagination and belief.

For instance, Racine's alterations of classical sources parallel the taste of his seventeenth-century audience, but he insists that his changes do not violate the spirit of whatever classical author he is using. Racine's logic is clear: changing his characters makes them more believable and relatable to his spectators, pleasure is partially responsible for the sublime, ergo if Racine's spectators believe the *vraisemblance* of the characters and plots, they will experience pleasure, and possibly the sublime as well, particularly if a balance between alteration and faithfulness can be maintained.[73]

Racine addresses this delicate balance in the first preface to *Andromaque*. He states,

> Toute la liberté que j'ai prise, ç'a été d'adoucir un peu la férocité de Pyrrhus, que Sénèque dans sa *Troade*, et Virgile dans le second de *l'Énéide*, ont poussée beaucoup plus loin, que je n'ai cru le devoir faire. Encore s'est-il trouvé des Gens qui se sont plaints qu'il s'emportât contre Andromaque, et qu'il voulût épouser cette Captive à quelque prix qu'il fût. […] Mais que faire? Pyrrhus n'avait

[71] "Or, l'évidence est ce qui caractérise l'effet sublime: porté par le même souffle d'enthousiasme que l'orateur, l'auditeur éprouve le discours comme s'il en était lui-même l'auteur" (Hache 235).
[72] "Ainsi j'ai tâché de conserver la vraisemblance de l'histoire, sans rien perdre des ornements de la fable, qui fournit extrêmement à la poésie" (*OC* "Préface de *Phèdre*" 818). See Gilby, *Sublime Worlds* for the importance of the interaction between the real world and fictional action in the creation of the sublime.
[73] Racine's commitment to *vraisemblance* is also patterned after Aristotle's recommendation for appropriate behavior of characters in the *Poetics*. For Aristotle's influence on Racine, see Cheyns, "Racine héritier de la Grèce."

> pas lu nos Romans. Il était violent de son naturel. Et tous les Héros ne sont pas faits pour être des Céladons (*OC* 197).

Without the proper balance between his century's notion of appropriate behavior and his own literary understanding of Pyrrhus, theatrical belief – and by extension, the power of the sublime – would have dissipated. The popularity of *Andromaque*, considered Racine's first theatrical success, indicates that he achieved this balance.

Similarly, Racine considered it unthinkable that Phèdre, a princess of noble blood, could falsely malign Hippolyte to his father's face. He instead leaves the dirty work to her nurse Oenone, since "cette bassesse m'a paru plus convenable à une Nourrice, qui pouvait avoir des inclinations plus serviles, et qui néanmoins n'entreprend cette fausse accusation que pour sauver la vie et l'honneur de sa Maîtresse" (*OC* 818). He thus exhibits a sensitivity toward his audience's expectation of social class divisions (however inappropriate that division seems to us today),[74] while still claiming to be true to the essence of Euripides' story.

In the prefaces to *Britannicus* and *Bérénice*, Racine again addresses the need for balance between *vraisemblance* and the values of antiquity. In these particular plays, the key to the balance is keeping to the simplicity of antiquity. The detractors of *Britannicus* complain that it is not a complex play, that the plot is too simple. Racine responds that plays with complex action are stuffed with events which could barely fit feasibly in a month, let alone the 24-hour duration of a proper tragedy.[75] Such a play is incomprehensible and will "trahir le bon sens [et] s'écarter du naturel pour se jeter dans l'extraordinaire" (*OC* 374).[76] The complexity of such a plot might

[74] The tension between noble, bourgeois and lower classes will be further analyzed in the next chapter regarding the appropriate social behavior of the *honnêtes gens*, and who can be *honnête*.
[75] Racine's polemical tirade against complex plot is part of his manifesto to turn "résolument le dos à la forme de la tragédie cornélienne" (Forestier, "Notice de *Britannicus*" 1414). See also Borgerhoff, *Freedom of French Classicism*.
[76] Like Boileau, Racine's notion of "bon sens" is intimately connected how an author pleases an audience. This knowing, this "savoir" implies not only having good taste oneself and having control of the nature of one's own *genie* and *talent*, but also having an intuitive knowledge of what conforms to the "bon sens" inherent in nature itself. See Reguig, *Boileau poète* for more on Boileau's notion of *bon sens*.

surprise an audience, but only in a negative sense. They would be astonished and shocked at the lack of *vraisemblance*, when instead they should be filled with wonder at the balance of a simple and well-constructed play. Similarly, in *Bérénice's* preface, Racine lists a great number of ancient authors who adhere to a "simplicité merveilleuse," a characteristic he desires to replicate in the plot of *Bérénice.* By adhering to a simple tragic action, Racine claims he increases the *vraisemblance* and creates a play that is so successful in its goal of pleasure (since "Il n'y a que le vraisemblable qui touche dans la Tragédie" (*OC* 451)), that even his critics can't help but admit it.[77]

Whatever the technique, whether it be through his rich knowledge of ancient sources, his adherence to a perceived aesthetic of simplicity (although clearly not all of Racine's plays can be defined as simple), or a keen intuition of his spectators' expectations, Racine is acutely aware that the success of a theatrical work is connected to its effect on the audience. Again and again in his prefaces Racine emphasizes that, regardless of the apparent critical reaction to his play, the truth doesn't lie: his critics and his allies alike are inexplicably drawn to his plays, even to multiple viewings. For instance, in the preface to *Alexandre* Racine writes, "J'ai eu le Plaisir de voir plus de six fois de suite à ma Pièce le visage de ses Censeurs. Ils n'ont pas craint de s'exposer si souvent à entendre une chose qui leur déplaisait. Ils ont prodigué libéralement leur temps et leurs peines pour la venir critiquer" (*OC* 125). The censors are either gluttons for punishment, or they are inexplicably and secretly attracted to the play, and are unable to stay away. Similarly, in the preface to *Britannicus*, Racine states that despite the ruckus made by his "censeurs" who claim that his play is badly constructed because "la pièce est finie au récit de la mort de Britannicus, et l'on ne

[77] "Ils ont cru qu'une tragédie qui était si peu chargée d'intrigues ne pouvait être selon les règles du théâtre. Je m'informai s'ils se plaignaient qu'elle les eût ennuyés. On me dit qu'ils avouaient tous qu'elle n'ennuyait point, qu'elle les touchait même en plusieurs endroits et qu'ils la verraient encore avec Plaisir" (Racine, *OC* 450).

devrait écouter le reste," the reality is that the end of his play is a success. He subtly includes these self-same critics in the universal "on" of "on l'écoute [le reste] pourtant, et même avec autant d'attention qu'aucune fin de Tragédie" (*OC* 374). Likewise, in the preface to *Andromaque*, Racine writes again of the (near) universal acclaim he received from a public who had been "trop favorable" toward his play. He can therefore dismiss the "deux ou trois personnes" who can't see the beauty of his play since the rest of his public have responded favorably.

Although this posturing can easily be construed as self-aggrandizement, Racine is actually maneuvering a Longinian aesthetic by claiming that his plays have some inexplicable quality that universally pleases, and that he himself is an author with "la capacité de plaire à tous (Bury, *Littérature et politesse* 106). Racine recognizes that if he can establish that his plays cause a certain universal pleasure, they will resist critique. How does one refute an emotionally powerful yet rationally unprovable quality? Indeed, one of the unmistakable characteristics of the true sublime is universal pleasure.

> The truly great can be pondered again and again; it is difficult, indeed impossible to withstand, for the memory of it is strong and hard to efface. Consider truly great and beautiful writing to be that which satisfies all men at all times; for whenever men of different occupations, lives, interests, generations, and tongues all have one and the same opinion on the same subject, then the agreed verdict of such various elements acquires an authority so strong that the object of its admiration is beyond dispute (Grube 10).[78]

However, Racine knows he's playing a close game with the potentially subjective sublime. To preemptively counter its polemical subjectivity, Racine maneuvers the pleasurable reception of his works in such a way that to reject them was to insult oneself. The argument for universal

[78] Boileau translates this as, "La marque infaillible du sublime c'est […] qu'il fait d'abord un effet sur nous qui est bien difficile, pour ne pas dire impossible, de résister, et qu'ensuite le souvenir nous en dure en ne s'efface qu'avec peine. En un mot, figurez-vous qu'une chose est véritablement sublime, quand vous voyez qu'elle plait universellement […] car lorsque […] tout le monde vient à être frappe également de quelque endroit d'un discours, ce jugement et cette approbation uniforme de tant d'esprits, si discordants d'ailleurs, est une preuve certaine et indubitable qu'il y a là du merveilleux et du grand" (*OC* 426).

pleasure thus goes hand in hand with the appeal to taste. In the preface to *Alexandre* Racine claims it is futile to justify the thought behind his poetic choices (such as simplicity) because his critics are not well-versed in the taste of the ancients, and only "connaissent médiocrement" the "gout de l'Antiquité" (*OC* 127).[79] He similarly frowns on those who demand that *Andromaque*'s "Héros de l'Antiquité" be transformed into "des Héros parfaits" (*OC* 197). Those who expect the absurd modernization of ancient heroes (as opposed to Racine's careful balance of socially appropriate heroes who still adhere to the spirit of antiquity) understand neither tragedy nor antiquity. In *Bérénice*, he pleads with his critics, "Je les conjure d'avoir assez bonne opinion d'eux-mêmes, pour ne pas croire qu'une Pièce qui les touche, et qui leur donne du Plaisir, puisse être absolument contre les Règles" (*OC* 452). To this end, Racine also constantly invokes the superlative nature of his subject matter. In almost every one of his prefaces, he defends his choice of subject by an appeal to some universal quality: either the fact that they are the most known of the ancient poetic world (*La Thébaïde, Bérénice,* and *Iphigénie*); or that they are based on truth, whether historical or biblical (*Bajazet*, *Esther*, and *Athalie*); or that the characters and action are so renowned that, by implication, only the most backwards and uneducated would never have heard of them (*Alexandre le Grand*, *Andromaque*, *Bérénice* and *Mithridate*).[80] By wielding this appeal to

[79] He adds farther on a not-so-subtle condemnation of pedantic critics who claim to know everything about Aristotle, "Mais je n'aurais jamais fait, si je m'arrêtais aux subtilités de quelques Critiques qui prétendent assujettir le gout du Public au dégoûts d'un Esprit malade, qui vont au Théâtre avec un ferme dessin de n'y point prendre Plaisir, et qui croient prouver à tous les spectateurs par un branlement de tête et par des grimaces affectées qu'ils ont étudié à fond la *Poétique* d'Aristote" (*OC* 126).

[80] The following quotes are Racine's justification of greatness in order for the *Thébaïde*, *Alexandre*, *Andromaque*, *Bérénice*, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, *Iphigénie*, *Esther*, and *Athalie*: "Mais aussi c'est la Thébaïde. C'est-à-dire le sujet le plus Tragique de l'Antiquité" (*OC* 119); "Le nom d'Alexandre […] assemble tout ce que […] les Siècles passés nous peuvent fournir de plus Grand" (*OC* 123); "Mais véritablement mes Personnages sont si fameux dans l'Antiquité" (*OC* 197); "Cette Action est très fameuse dans l'Histoire" (*OC* 450); "Quoique le sujet ne soit encore dans aucune Histoire imprimée, il est pourtant très véritable" (*OC* 563). "Il n'y a guère de nom plus connu que celui de Mithridate" (*OC* 629). "Il n'y a rien de plus célèbre dans les Poètes que le Sacrifice d'Iphigénie" (*OC* 697). "Sans altérer aucune des circonstances tant soit peu considérables de l'Écriture sainte, […] je pourrais remplir toute mon Action [d'*Esther*] avec les seules Scènes que Dieu lui-même, pour ainsi dire, a préparées" (*OC* 946). "Tout le monde sait que le Royaume de Juda était composé des deux Tribus de Juda et de Benjamin" (*OC* 1009).

universal taste and knowledge, Racine makes it socially perilous for people to admit their dislike of his work.

Boileau takes up the same argument regarding good taste in his *Réflexions* to condemn Charles Perrault's inability to recognize the sublime where Boileau sets forth the idea that those who disagree with what is sublime are actually blind and mentally incapable of perceiving it. Boileau's tone of derision against Perrault is quite harsh, and is worth quoting at length,

> Concluons donc qu'il n'y a qu'une longue suite d'années qui puisse établir la valeur & le vrai mérite d'un ouvrage. Mais lorsque des écrivains ont été admires durant un fort grand nombre de siècles, et n'ont été méprisés que par quelques gens de gout bizarre, car il se trouve toujours des goûts dépravés, alors non-seulement il y a de la témérité, mais il y a de la folie à vouloir douter du mérite de ces écrivains. Que si vous ne voyez point les beautés de leurs écrits, il ne faut pas conclure qu'elles n'y sont point, mais que vous êtes aveugle, et que vous n'avez pas de gout (*OC* 524).[81]

The violence of Boileau's tone against Perrault, and particularly the unprovability of taste, indicates that the *querelle du sublime*, which in turn was part of the larger quarrel of Ancients versus Moderns, had risen to highly polemical levels.[82]

But this *Réflexion* against Perrault was published in 1694. We must return to the year 1674 to uncover the roots of the *querelle du sublime*, and Racine's part in it. Boileau's *Traité* and *Art Poétique* were published in 1674, creating an "official" rubric for good literature, but establishing at the same time the impossibility of reducing the sublime to formulaic methods. This same year Racine's *Iphigénie* was performed, first in Versailles (to a public whose response was less-than-stellar since there were other, much more interesting and exciting theatrics to draw their attention

[81] Boileau's *Dissertation sur Joconde* has very similar language, "Ces sortes de beautés sont de celles qu'il faut sentir, et qui ne se prouvent point. C'est ce je ne sais quoi qui nous charme, et sans lequel la beauté même n'aurait ni grâce ni beauté. Mais après tout, c'est un je ne sais quoi; et si votre ami est aveugle, je ne m'engage pas à lui faire voir clair" (*OC* 316).

[82] See L. Norman, *Shock of the Ancient* for a discussion of how these two quarrels intertwine. See also Cronk, "La querelle du sublime."

away),[83] then in Paris where the response was much more enthusiastic. Shortly thereafter, Racine and Boileau were given the label *Messieurs du Sublime*, and included into the ranks of the "Cabale Sublime." So what is it about *Iphigénie* that connected Racine so firmly with the sublime in the mind of the seventeenth-century public? We turn now to *Iphigénie* to uncover how Racine used fascinating parallels to Longinus' treatise in his construction of the play.

Racine's Theatrical Sublime in Iphigénie

In 1678, Racine wrote *Phèdre* which he considers to be his masterpiece. In the preface, he writes with typical understated-ness, "Je n'ose encore assurer que cette Pièce soit en effet la meilleure de mes Tragédies" (*OC* 819). But instead of the expected triumph, *Phèdre* produced a series of violent polemical pamphlets accusing Racine and Boileau of creating a literary cabal to ensure Racine's success.[84] Racine was so discouraged by this outcome, that Boileau wrote *Epître VII* to lift his friend's spirits. He reassures Racine that despite his disappointment, neither the play nor Racine is a failure. Boileau begins the *Epître* by encouraging Racine to remember the success of *Iphigénie*. "Que tu sais bien, Racine, à l'aide d'un Acteur, / émouvoir, étonner, ravir un Spectateur!" (*OC* 127).[85] Boileau's language draws a parallel between *Iphigénie* and the preface of the *Traité* in which he defines the sublime as that which "fait qu'un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte" (*OC* 338). Boileau spends the rest of the *Epître* assuring Racine that though his current detractors do not appreciate his genius, his play, like any true sublime work, will stand the test of time. *Phèdre* will place Racine permanently in the ranks of fame in the future, "Le Parnasse

[83] See L. Norman, "*Iphigenia* at Versailles."
[84] This was due in part to the polemics that had already developed around the neoclassical sublime, and around Racine's role in that quarrel.
[85] In this section, instead of Grube's English translation I will use Boileau's translation of Longinus in conjunction with *Iphigénie* to show that the interaction between the two French texts.

Français, ennobli par ta veine, / Contre tous ces complots saura te maintenir, / Et soulever pour toi l'équitable Avenir" (*OC* 128-129).[86] Why does Boileau choose *Iphigénie* as his leading example to convince Racine of his genius? Is it simply because it immediately precedes *Phèdre*? Or is there something intrinsic about *Iphigénie*, something which Racine is trying to recreate in *Phèdre*, that develops specific theatrical aspects of the Longinian sublime?

Iphigénie is where Racine most clearly puts his theatrical sublime aesthetic into practice.[87] In it, he intertwines different techniques to create a theatrical sublime that astonishes and overwhelms his spectators. One way he does this is through reversals of action, or *peripeteia*, to create surprise or *étonnement* in his spectators. The creation of a theatrical sublime in no way reduces Racine's use of powerful discourse,[88] and another means Racine creates the sublime is precisely through Boileau's *merveilleux dans le discours*. Racine uses quotation from the *Traité* at several key moments to create a powerful verbal action that allows him to circumvent using a machine to bring about a supernatural ending.[89] But Racine's *pierre de touche* in *Iphigénie* is his

[86] Indeed, beginning in the latter half of the 18th century, *Phèdre* began to be Racine's most acclaimed and most performed play. For statistics on Racine's plays in the 18th century, see Dupêcher, "Racine à la Comédie Française."
[87] Various critics have recognized Racine's interaction with the sublime, and even his particular pursuit of the sublime in *Iphigénie*. McGowan, for instance, states that Racine "was trying to achieve [the sublime] in *Iphigénie* and in his subsequent poetic dramas" ("Sublime Effects" 3), but she is silent on the possibility that Racine was aware of and interacting with the sublime well before *Iphigénie*. Forestier understands that *Iphigénie* "atteint au sublime sur deux autres plans, celui de la nature du conflit et celui de la souffrance des personnages" ("Notice d'*Iphigénie*" 1567). But Forestier's analysis focuses mainly on the similarity between Boileau and Racine's perceptions of the sublime; he doesn't visit the possibility that Racine's sublime moved beyond Boileau's, or even, as I show, influenced and inspired Boileau. Bénichou acknowledges the debt Racine's tragedy owes to the Longinian influence. His tragedy "peut être considérée comme la rencontre d'un genre littéraire traditionnellement nourri de sublime avec un nouvel esprit naturaliste délibérément hostile à l'idée même du sublime" (*Morales* 131). However, Bénichou's more traditional interpretation in *Morales* equates the sublime with the heroic grandeur and admiration generally associated with the first part of the seventeenth century, and with Corneille's tragic vision in particular. What Bénichou fails to acknowledge is that Racine may have been seeking to create his own variation on the sublime through different strategies than Corneille.
[88] However, I would argue that Racine's understanding of discourse reaches beyond the literal meaning of words. As Leo Spitzer has illustrated, Racine was intuitively and intimately aware of "l'effet de sourdine" in his poetry (209). The visceral power of Racine's language strikes listeners physically and psychologically and makes them feel a truth before they have even cognitively understood it.
[89] This is particularly evident in the final *récit* of *Iphigénie*. As Declercq has shown, this *récit* marks Racine's debt to Quintilian's *hypotyposis* ("Quintilien" 83). But the final récit also draws heavily from Longinus, and uses a Longinian *ekphrasis* to create a particular effect. See Doran, *Theory of the Sublime* 40.

invention of Ériphile through whom Racine develops a dramaturgy of the sublime *dramatis personae*. Ériphile allows Racine to conform his play to the characteristics of the sublime analyzed above, particularly a commitment to *vraisemblance* and authorial poetic choice through *kairos*. Ériphile also gives Racine the opportunity to imitate the sublime poet Sappho lauded so highly by Longinus. Racine uses Sappho's ode to structure Ériphile's sublimely lucid commentary on her circumstances.[90] Finally, Ériphile provides Racine the means to incarnate what I call 'sublime silence,' which examines the paradox of action and inaction of a character through language.[91]

As *Bérénice* experiments with simplicity, so *Iphigénie* is Racine's experimentation with an aesthetic of *étonnement*. Surprise and *étonnement* are key to the Longinian sublime which "produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 341). In fact, the very purpose of poetry is to produce an unexpected turn of events. "Le but qu'on s'y propose dans la poésie, c'est l'étonnement et la surprise" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 363). The surprise created by the sublime parallels Aristotle's definition for powerful tragedy. "The most powerful elements of attraction in Tragedy, [are] the Peripeteias and Discoveries" (*Poetics 6* 1461). More than any of Racine's plays, *Iphigénie* uses the surprising reversals of *peripeteia* and recognition to keep the spectator unbalanced by the *dénouement*. Indeed, the anonymous author of *Remarques sur Iphigénie* describes *Iphigénie's* ending as "une catastrophe la plus surprenante du monde. Tandis que M. Racine fera des semblables dénouements, il sera très assuré qu'on ne pourra les prévoir, et que les spectateurs en seront toujours surpris" (cited in Forestier *OC* 810). While this

[90] "Because "Longinus" cited fr. 31 in its entirety in the *Traité du Sublime*, he both guaranteed the survival of Sappho's poem and made it accessible to scholars through the centuries" (DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho* 84).

[91] Forestier and Tamas have both touched on the sublimity of silence and Racine's recognition that Longinus uses the silence of Ajax as an example of the sublime. But Forestier never associates this silence with Ériphile or its theatrical potential ("Notice d'*Iphigénie*" 1568). While Tamas examines the theatrical power of silence, she mentions Ériphile only briefly on page 142. Escola's presentation to his edition of *Iphigénie* discusses the silence of Ériphile in much greater depth, but he doesn't attach this to any particular attempt on the part of Racine to achieve a Longinian effect or aesthetic. See page 46-47 in particular.

anonymous critic undoubtedly intended this as a scathing attack, his statement also reveals that Racine accomplished his goal of surprising and astonishing his audience. Considering that surprise and suspense are elements usually associated with Cornelian dramaturgy, this creates an interesting complexity.[92] Why did Racine explicitly pursue this aspect of the Longinian sublime in *Iphigénie*, particularly when he had so polemically differentiated himself from Corneille with his pursuit of simplicity with *Bérénice* and *Britannicus*?

The answer lies in the fact that *Iphigénie* allows Racine to insert himself into the discussion Corneille had begun in the *Trois Discours* with Aristotle's definition of the best kind of tragic action. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that there are specific "circumstances which strike us as terrible or pitiful". Within these, there are four different kinds of tragic action:

> The deed of horror may be done by the doer knowingly and consciously, as in the old poets […]. Or he may do it, but in ignorance of his relationship, and discover that afterwards […]. A third possibility is for one meditating some deadly injury to another, in ignorance of his relationship, to make the discovery in time and draw back. […] The worst situation is when the personage is with full knowledge on the point of doing the deed, and leaves it undone (*Poetics 14* 1468-69).[93]

In the *Trois Discours,* Corneille disagrees with Aristotle's hierarchy of these four kinds of tragic action. He thinks it "vicieux" that someone would simply change their mind about killing someone without any outside event or force compelling them. But when,

> ils y font de leur côté tout ce qu'ils peuvent, et qu'ils sont empêchés d'en venir à l'effet par quelque puissance supérieure, ou par quelque

[92] See Knight, *Role of the Unexpected.*

[93] For the sake of simplicity, I have reformulated the Aristotelian kinds of tragedy as follows:
Type 1 – knowingly pursing the death of someone; I will refer to this as "conscious action".
Type 2 – killing someone because of a mistake of identity, and discovering the true identity afterwards; I will call this "unconscious action".
Type 3 – knowingly pursing the death of someone, but being stopped by some outside force or obstacle before the deed is done; I will call this, "conscious inaction". This is the weakest option in Aristotle's opinion.
Type 4 – pursing the death of someone because it is thought that they are someone else, but stopping before the deed is done when the true identity is discovered; I refer to this as "unconscious inaction". This is Aristotle's preferred kind of action.

> changement de fortune qui les fait périr eux−mêmes, ou les réduit sous le pouvoir de ceux qu'ils voulaient perdre, il est hors de doute que cela fait une tragédie d'un genre peut−être plus sublime que les trois qu'Aristote avoue (*OC* 834).

It is telling that Corneille uses the word, "sublime" here. This is overarchingly the kind of action that Racine creates in *Iphigénie*. Ériphile attempts everything in her power to bring about Iphigénie's demise, but she is stopped by the "puissance supérieure" of Calchas and the revelation that the gods intended Ériphile as the sacrifice to fulfill their oracle. This abrupt "changement de fortune" does indeed make her "périr [elle]-même" and she stabs herself on the alter.[94]

But what is fascinating about *Iphigénie* is that Racine also oscillates between Corneille's preferred sublime tragic action, and the other kinds of tragic action. For instance, Agamemnon is both willing and unwilling to knowingly sacrifice his daughter. This creates a violent movement between two different kinds of tragic action. The play opens with Agamemnon admitting that he has knowingly pursued the sacrifice of his daughter (conscious action), but his horror and despair makes him question his decision and attempt to reverse it (which moves him towards conscious inaction). He subsequently gives Arcas a letter and commands him, "Va, dis-je, Sauve-la de ma propre faiblesse" (I.i.142). This resolution to *not* kill his daughter is then upended by the unexpected arrival of Iphigénie and Clytemnestre in the camp. We witness Agamemnon's horror and despair with his exclamation of, "Juste Ciel, c'est ainsi qu'assurant ta vengeance / Tu romps tous les ressorts de ma vaine prudence" (I.v.361-62). Then, the inexorable arguments of Ulysses force Agamemnon to reluctantly and bitterly admit that his daughter must be sacrificed. "Je cède, et laisse aux Dieux opprimer l'innocence" (I.v.390). Thus, Agamemnon moves back to consciously choosing to sacrifice his daughter. But once again we are surprised with a *peripeteia*

[94] Escola remarks aptly that, "Ériphile ne vient ensuite hanter la pièce d'Iphigénie que pour y chercher le visage de sa propre mort" (50). See also Defaux, "Violence et passion dans l'*Iphigénie* de Racine."

when Iphigénie and Clytemnestre discover Agamemnon's plan. The pleading of his daughter and the accusations of his wife prove too much for Agamemnon. They leave him in solitude, wavering once again in his resolve,

> A de moindres fureurs je n'ai pas dû m'attendre.
> Voilà, voilà les cris que je craignais d'entendre. […]
> Hélas! En m'imposant une loi si sévère,
> Grand Dieux, me deviez-vous laisser un cœur de Père! (IV.v.1317-18, 1321-22).

But his solitary thoughts are interrupted by Achille who thunders in with all the brashness and disrespect for which he is legendary. His blustering pride enrages the king and Agamemnon resolves to kill his daughter simply to put Achilles in his place,

> Et voilà ce qui rend sa perte inévitable.
> Ma Fille toute seule était plus redoutable.
> Ton insolent amour, qui croit m'épouvanter,
> Vient de hâter le coup que tu veux arrêter (IV.vii.1425-28).

But once Achille is gone, Agamemnon wavers once again in his resolve. He caves a final time to the pathos in the pleadings of his daughter and wife and exclaims, "Fuyez, vous dis-je" (IV.x.1483).

Aside from his own internal oscillations, two external circumstances work against Agamemnon's final (we hope) resolve. The first is Ériphile's determination to bring about the death of Iphigénie. "Il faut, ou la perdre, ou périr. / Viens, te dis-je. A Calchas je vais tout découvrir" (IV.xi.1491-92). The second external circumstance is Iphigénie's own willingness to sacrifice herself for the glory of her father rather than to live without Achille's love. Agamemnon's ignorance of both Ériphile and Iphigénie's plans makes him effectively helpless to act against them. Both of these circumstances create other layers of uncertainty since the choice for Iphigénie's death is suddenly taken out of Agamemnon's hands. Both Agamemnon's internal indecision and these external circumstances create constant uncertainty and anxiety in the spectator about Iphigénie's possible death until the *dénouement*.

Racine complicates the play's uncertainty and *peripeteia* with Ériphile. Like Agamemnon, she oscillates between two types of tragic action. Almost from her first entrance on stage she declares her hatred of Iphigénie's happiness. But Ériphile doesn't resolve to act on this hatred, to knowingly bring about the death of Iphigénie, until the end of the fourth act. This slow build of tension is different than Agamemnon's more rapidly reversing *peripeteia*. By the end, just when Ériphile is about to accomplish her goal of Iphigénie's demise, it is revealed to that *she* is the other, the real Iphigénie required as a sacrifice by the gods. Suddenly Ériphile finds herself in a strange moment of tragic action reversal. She chooses to stop pursuing Iphigénie before Iphigénie is actually dead (Aristotle's weakest option for tragic action, and Corneille's). But Ériphile also stops her pursuit of Iphigénie's death because Iphigénie is not who Ériphile thought she was. This corresponds to Aristotle's preferred kind of tragic action, namely the pursuit of someone's death because their identity is hidden, but stopping before the deed is done once the true identity is discovered. This is the premise for *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which Aristotle considered to be one of the best tragedies.[95] Oddly, we could argue that Racine's actual *dénouement* is close to the second type of Aristotelian tragic action, or the act of unknowingly killing someone only to discover their identity afterwards.[96] Throughout the play it is understood that Iphigénie's death will fulfill the oracle and satiate the gods. But in reality, Ériphile is pursing (unknowingly, of course) her own death since she is the true victim the oracle requires. Her discovery of this fact and her death at her own hand are almost simultaneous. Iphigénie's tears for her unexpected namesake point to this

[95] Forestier notes that prior to *Iphigénie*, Racine was attempting to write a tragedy based on *Iphigenia in Tauris* because "Dans sa *Poétique*, Aristote avait présenté cette intrigue comme la meilleure de toutes" ("Notice d'*Iphigénie*" 1566). According to the contemporary correspondence of Michel Le Clerc and La Grange-Chancel, Racine began his prose *Iphigénie en Tauride* prior to his other *Iphigénie*, but abandoned the project due to a lack of sufficient material for a satisfying fifth act. In other words, Racine silently agreed with Corneille that Aristotle was mistaken in which kind of tragic action is the most satisfying. But he found a way to integrate this kind of action into Iphigénie all the same.

[96] Zwillenberg comments on this moment, "For Ériphile, the irony is twofold in that she learns her true identity in front of the same altar on which she hoped Iphigénie would die" (365).

type of tragic action, "La seule Iphigénie / Dans ce commun Bonheur pleure son Ennemie" (V.vi.1789-90). Thus, Racine crafts *Iphigénie* according to both Aristotle's and Corneille's disparate understanding of a superior tragedy. In doing so, he creates an end that ensures the *étonnement* of the Longinian sublime. Racine is playing with notions and definitions of older authorities only to break categories and define his own.

In almost every preface, Racine defends his poetic decisions as his take on proper imitation of ancient sources.[97] However, the preface to *Iphigénie* is a particularly prodigious work of source acrobatics. Racine pulls narrative elements from this and that Greek poet, both obscure and famous, cobbling and patchworking them together to create the perfect justification of his own invention. Confident of his prowess in Greek, Racine knows that there are few, if any, critics who can call him out on his artful omissions or rewritings, especially since many of the sources he cites languish in obscurity.[98] As he had already done in *Britannicus*, this is yet another instance of Racine creatively following Longinus' directive to imitate and emulate ancient poets who serve both as guides and judges. As Boileau put it, "Ces grands Hommes que nous nous proposons à imiter, se présentent […] à notre imagination, nous servent comme de flambeau, et nous élèvent l'âme presque aussi haut que l'idée que nous avons conçue de leur génie" (*OC* 362).

Racine's interaction with Euripides' source material for *Iphigénie* reveals a curious adherence to this sublime imitation. In *Iphigénie*'s preface, Racine admits that he didn't follow the exact story line of Euripides' play, but "pour ce qui regarde les Passions, je me suis attaché à le suivre plus exactement" (*OC* 699). Racine chooses to imitate that characteristic of Euripides which Longinus most lauds in the poet, namely his passion which Boileau renders as "pour ce qui regarde

[97] We have already seen in *Britannicus* how Racine invokes the presence of ancient authors to be both his spectatorship and the tribunal for his work.
[98] See Cheyns, "Racine, héritier de la Grèce," Forestier, "Notice d'*Iphigénie*," and Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* for Racine's Greek sources.

l'amour et la fureur, c'est à quoi il [Euripide] s'est étudié particulièrement, et il y a fort bien réussi" (*OC* 364). In imitating Euripides, Racine is establishing himself as a French version of the ancient playwright, a label which he actively sought to cultivate.[99] Racine thus subtly labels himself as sublime through identification with the sublime Euripides.[100]

But Racine also equates his own ability to match Euripides' creation of action which is "extrêmement tragique, τραγικωτατος" (*OC* 699). He cites as evidence the emotional effect his play achieved on the modern audience, and which is the same effect Euripides' work caused. "Mes Spectateurs ont été émus des mêmes choses qui ont mis autrefois en larmes le plus savant peuple de la Grèce" (*OC* 699). Racine creates a flattering parallel between Euripides' "savant" audience and his own modern spectators. By complimenting the Parisians that their taste reflects that of ancient Athens, Racine proves to them that they know quality when they see it, at the same time subtly cementing the similarity between Euripides and himself.

Racine doesn't limit his imitation of the sublime ancient authors to Euripides' tragic passions. As discursive anchors for his tragic ending, Racine also quotes or takes inspiration from several other ancient authors, all of whom Longinus lauds as sublime. Interestingly, most of these quotes are connected to Ériphile, whom I will analyze later as a sublime character. For instance, when Aegine points out that Ériphile was responsible for the deep treachery against Iphigénie, she calls her a "Serpent inhumain". To which Clytemnestre responds with,

> Ô Monstre, que Mégère en ses flancs a porté!
> Monstre! Que dans nos bras les Enfers ont jeté. (V.iv.1679-80).

[99] See Zuber, "Boileau adopte Racine."
[100] In a sense this doubly proves Euripides' sublimity because Racine is paying homage to the long-lasting quality of his work. Acknowledgement by posterity is one of the surest signs of a writer being sublime, "les grand poètes et les écrivains les plus fameux ont […] rempli toute la postérité du bruit de leur gloire" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 341).

Both the words "Serpent" and "Enfers", as well as the invocation of Mégère, one of the Erinyes, reminds the listener that Clytemnestre's death by the hand of her son Orestes will summon these same Erinyes. But Racine is also simultaneously alluding to the end of his own *Andromaque*, when Orestes imagines the Erinyes approaching to torture him, as well as Boileau's imitation of Racine's lines, "Ces filles de l'enfer, ces spectres odieux" (*OC* 363). These allusions serve in turn as a reminder that Longinus considered Euripides' sublime for his use of image in this particular tragic moment.

Just before the final *dénouement*, Ulysse declares to Clytemnestre, "Vous m'en voyez moi-même en cet heureux moment / Saisi d'horreur, de *joie* et de *ravissement*" (V.vi.1731-2 my emphasis). These words recall the effect of the sublime from Boileau's *Traité,* "[Le sublime] *ravit*, transporte, et produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlé d'étonnement et de surprise […] il élève l'âme […] la remplissant de *joie*" (*OC* 341, 348, my emphasis).[101] Racine is cuing his audience that Ulysse has encountered something sublime and is about to relate it to us.[102] This serves as an invitation to the spectator to mentally enter into and theatrically participate via Quintilian *hypotyposis*, or vivid verbal recounting, in the *récit* given by Ulysse.[103]

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[101] Incidentally, they also reflect d'Aubignac's statement on successful tragic action, "Est si par la nécessité du sujet, il fallait faire paraître quelque grande nouveauté dans le milieu d'un Acte, qu'il se souvienne de composer les discours de ses Acteurs en telle sorte qu'ils dissent en ce moment fort peu de paroles, soit d'admiration, d'étonnement, de douleur, ou de joie pour donner quelque loisir à l'émotion des Regardants qu'on ne peut éviter" (326).

[102] Ulysse repeats this emotion later with the lines, "Le Ciel brille d'éclairs, s'entr'ouvre, et parmi nous/ *Jette une sainte horreur*, qui nous rassure tous" (V.vi.1783-4, my emphasis). This quote is yet another nod to a Longinian quotation of Homer, "Tel que Mars en courroux au milieu des batailles/ Ou comme on voit un feu, *jetant partout l'horreur*" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 354). Forestier's "Notice d'*Iphigénie*" acknowledges some of these interactions between Boileau's *Traité* and Racine's play, but Forestier tends to emphasize Boileau's influence on Racine rather than a possible collaboration between the two authors.

[103] Racine uses the inclusive "*on*" in the line, "*On* admire en secret sa naissance, et son sort" (V.vi.1767). The pronoun allows the external spectators to become one with the internal spectators of this drama, and which conforms to Gilby's definition of a participatory sublime, one in which the spectator feels as if they themselves had created the sublime, and where that cognitive interaction with the sublime will "go on to equate further production" (*Sublime Worlds* 25). We are transfixed along with the camp who is "étonné" and "immobile" and who "écoute avec frayeur et regarde Ériphile" (V.vi.1762). In *Les passions de l'âme*, Descartes decries the immobility of the body which comes from an excess of astonishment, "ce qui fait que tout le corps demeure immobile comme une statue, et qu'on ne peut apercevoir de l'objet que la première face qui s'est présentée, ni par conséquent en acquérir une plus particulière connaissance" (*OC* 729). The importance of *étonnement*, and spectator immobility will be discussed in chapter three.

If we were wondering if Racine is cuing the spectator to encounter the sublime in this passage, his next two lines eliminate any doubt. Ulysse continues, "Déjà de tout le Camp la Discorde maîtresse / Avait sur tous les yeux mis son bandeau fatal, / Et donné du combat le funeste signal" (V.vi.1734-36). This image recalls the lines in Homer's *Iliad* which describe the goddess Discord striding among the soldiers, stirring discontent and dissonance. It is key that when Longinus references this moment, he is speaking specifically of Homer's capacity for sublime thoughts.[104] Through Ulysse, Racine connects this discursive moment to Ériphile, equating her action of fomenting anger and death among the Greek soldiers to Homer's goddess of Discord.[105] This allusion is even more firmly cemented when we consider the meaning of Ériphile's name, "lover (*phile*) of discord (*eri*)" (Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* 318).[106] Racine's erudite audience would have understood many of these associations, particularly since the recent publication of the *Traité* was causing such a polemical stir.

Racine uses two other key quotations in the final *récit* by Ulysse. The first echoes Longinus' description of Euripides, who is a poet so "tragique et relevé" that Longinus feels the need to quote another poet's verse in order to properly describe Euripides. Longinus chooses Homer's description of Achilles in battle to describe the level to which Euripides is inspired in his writing. "A l'aspect du péril, au combat il s'anime; / Et, le *poil hérissé, les yeux étincelants*" (364, my emphasis). Racine then uses a variation of Longinus' quote to construct his own description of Calchas confronting Achilles. Racine states in the midst of the carnage caused by "Achille

[104] Boileau describes this as "Et c'est en cette partie [la première source du sublime] qu'a principalement excellé Homère, dont les pensées sont toutes sublimes, comme on le peut voir dans la description de la déesse Discorde, qui a, dit-il, 'La tête dans les cieux et les pieds sur la terre" (*OC, Traité* 351).
[105] Zwillenberg notes the odd tragedy of Ériphile in this moment, "Secondly that final speech seems to say that the suffering was not really significant because the world will continue, unchanged and undisturbed by the tragic figure of discord" (365).
[106] See also Pfohl *Racine's Iphigénie* pp.167-168 for a detailed analysis surrounding Ériphile and the implication of her name.

furieux," "Calchas s'est avancé, / L'œil farouche, l'air sombre, et le poil hérissé" (V.vi.1743-44). By poetic association, Racine is entwining his play with what some will remember from reading the *Traité*, as well as directly from Homer.

Racine's next quotation is a combination of two different Longinian examples of sublimity. Racine describes the storm resulting from Ériphile's act of suicide/sacrifice as,

> Les Dieux font sur l'Autel entendre le tonnerre
> *Les Vents* agitent l'air d'heureux *frémissements*,
> Et la Mer leur répond par ses mugissements.
> La Rive *au loin gémit blanchissante d'écume* (V.vi 1778-1781, my emphasis).[107]

Racine is drawing here from both Homer and Euripides as quoted by Longinus in Boileau's translation. The quote from Homer describes the violence of a tempest, "*Le vent* avec fureur dans les voiles *frémit* / *La mer blanchit d'écume*, et *l'air au loin gémit*" (*OC* 358, my emphasis). Racine's line "Et la Mer leur répond par ses mugissements," gleans heavy poetic inspiration from Euripides' line, "La montagne à leurs cris répond en mugissant" (*OC* 365). Indeed, this line shows how much Racine is attempting to "atteindre dans ce récit d'Ulysse le sublime" where he allowed Ulysse to "voir des *visions* poétiques au moment où il faisait le récit d'un miracle" (Forestier 1598). Racine desires his *dénouement* to be a description of a sublime event. By peppering it with quotes connected by Longinus, he ensures a certain association with the sublime.

Racine creates one other pertinent parallel between himself and Euripides by describing Euripides as one who "savait merveilleusement exciter la compassion et la terreur qui sont les véritables effets de la Tragédie" (*OC* 699). Although he is quoting Aristotle's definition of tragedy here, the connections to Longinus become clear with Racine's subsequent condemnation of the "merveilleux," in opera, the *deus ex machina* brought about by machines.[108] If Euripides' tragic

[107] See Bruyer, *Le Sang et les larmes* for more detail on the use of suicide in Racine's plays.
[108] Forestier, "Notice d'*Iphigénie*," McGowan, "Sublime Effects," Dandrey, *Phèdre de Jean Racine*, as well as many others have discussed Racine's position against machine plays.

power is found with his capacity to produce the sublime without machines, in other words to create a "merveilleux dans le discours" (Boileau's definition of the sublime), Racine has all the justification he needs to end his play in a similar manner through the creation and mortification of Ériphile, and end that he has "tiré du fond même de la Pièce" (*OC* 698).

The role of the *merveilleux*, or the marvelous and the supernatural, had a long and complicated place in theater before Racine entered the scene. As a reader of d'Aubignac, Racine understood the difficult balance that had to be struck between the *vraisemblable* and the *merveilleux*. He was familiar with the abbé's thought that, "la vraisemblance du Théâtre n'oblige pas à représenter seulement les choses qui arrivent selon le cours de la vie commune des hommes; mais qu'elle enveloppe en soi le *Merveilleux* qui rend les événements d'autant plus nobles qu'ils sont imprévus, *quoique toutefois vraisemblables*" (67, my emphasis).[109] If a play is to be striking, it must have something *merveilleux* about it, but it must also remain within the realm of reason and believability, since unreasonable emotion, like unreasonable events, would simply provoke the spectators to mockery.[110] Because *vraisemblance* is easily unsettled by overreaching supernatural elements, as he emphasizes in the preface to *Iphigénie*, Racine tries to balance

[109] D'Aubignac speaks of the inexplicable power of theater "Ce n'est pas assez d'avoir ébranlé les esprits des Spectateurs, mais il faut les enlever; & pour le faire, il en faut chercher la matière, ou dans la grandeur du Sujet s'il la peut fournir; ou dans les divers motifs qui l'environnent; mais surtout dans la force de l'imagination, qui doit s'échauffer, se presser & se donner un travail égal à celui de l'enfantement pour produire des choses dignes d'admiration" (306). Lyons states that, "If we consider that d'Aubignac, like Longinus, was attempting to teach a method for producing this effect, we can see that both the teacher of rhetoric and the teacher of dramatic composition suppose that what is produced by skill on the part of the artist with human craft must appear something quite different from that to the viewer. On one side will be order and predictability, and on the other will be the appearance of something near the outside edge of the possible" ("Sublime Accidents" 102).

[110] "Il ne suffit pas que la cause d'un mouvement d'esprit, qu'on veut porter agréablement sur le Théâtre, soit vraie, il faut encore qu'elle soit raisonnable, selon le sentiment commun des hommes. Si quelqu'un s'affligeait se désespérait ou prenait des sentiments de colère sans raison, on s'en moquerait comme d'un insensé, au lieu de le plaindre comme un malheureux" (d'Aubignac 300). Racine wrestled with this balance between the reasonable *vraisemblance* and the powerful *merveilleux* in a number of his plays. Striking a balance between the *merveilleux dans le discours* and the reasonable *vraisemblable* is also something that Boileau discussed. See Reguig, *Boileau poète*.

vraisemblance and the *merveilleux* in other ways, through the *merveilleux dans le discours*, of course, but also through the character of Ériphile.

In the play's preface, Racine writes of Ériphile, "Je puis dire donc que j'ai été très heureux de trouver dans les Anciens cette autre Iphigénie" (*OC* 698). Despite all his fancy apologetics of the ancient sources where he claims he discovered "l'heureux Personnage d'Ériphile," in reality, she is Racine's poetic invention, his own creation *ex nihilo*.[111] Racine can thus represent her "telle qu'il m'a plu" (*OC* 698). One could almost say she is Racine's *fiat lux*, his means of speaking into existence the possibility of his own version of Euripides' play, believable to his audience. Indeed, Racine admits that without her "je n'aurais jamais osé entreprendre cette Tragédie", since her very existence allows a modern *dénouement* of the dramatic action (*OC* 698).[112]

Besides this justified existence albeit nearly *ex nihilo*, Ériphile meets two other so-called "neoclassical" criteria. First, through Ériphile, Racine creates a *dénouement* which is "tiré du fond même de la Pièce," and which allows him to avoid the merveilleux of a *deus ex machina*, or machine ending, that he claims would have been "trop incroyable" for his seventeenth-century audience (*OC* 698).[113] As we saw earlier, *vraisemblance* is a particular concern for Racine; it meant the difference between submersion into the theatrical world and a skepticism that would break theatrical belief. By avoiding a *dénouement* with a machine ending, Racine is attempting to conform to his century's understanding of the *vraisemblable*.[114] At the same time, Racine's

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[111] Despite Racine's statement in the preface to *Bérénice*, where true poetic invention "consiste à faire quelque chose de rien" (*OC* 451), it was actually very dangerous in the seventeenth century for an author to take credit for creation *ex nihilo*, a trait reserved for the Divine Creator alone. Racine must therefore justify his poetic creation of Ériphile through ancient sources. See McClure, *The Logic of Idolatry*, pp. 11-14.

[112] Barthes states, "la tragédie est ici tout entière est réfugiée dans Ériphile" (*Sur Racine* 109).

[113] Racine's statement is almost directly quoted from Aristotle. "From this one sees (to digress for a moment) that the *dénouement* also should arise out of the plot itself, and not depend on a stage-artifice, as in *Medea*, or in the story of the (arrested) departure of the Greeks in the *Iliad*" (*Poetics 15* 1470).

[114] Using a *récit* also allows the stage to be simplified, denuded of what Racine considers the unnecessary distractions of machines and décor, allowing instead the voices and bodies of his characters to communicate powerfully in and of themselves (Hawcroft, *Word as Action* 2).

rhetorical training and his own understanding of authorial timing, or *kairos*, had taught him that a verbal rendition of a sublime event could be structured to transfer great passion and the appropriate emotions to his audience. Indeed, Racine's end *récit* in *Iphigénie*, with its vivid *hypotyposis* detailing the circumstances surrounding Ériphile's death, is a dramatic tactic to create just such a moment. The *récit* effectively transfers the action from the stage into each spectator's mind, discursively transporting the audience with the same emotion of "sainte horreur" which Ulysse feels. The spectators are "épris d'une commune fureur avec celui qui parle" (Boileau *OC, Traité* 383). It creates a dramatic result which adheres to the Longinian sublime, a pathos carried to the *n*th degree, which seizes the soul in its grip and exceeds its rational limits.[115] This is especially true since Racine's timing of the *récit* makes it also the dramatic *coup de théâtre*, thereby intensifying the effect.

Secondly, much more than Iphigénie, Ériphile conforms to the moral mediocrity of an Aristotelian tragic hero.[116] Racine claims that Ériphile "mérite en quelque façon d'être punie, sans être pourtant tout à fait indigne de compassion," while Iphigénie is too "vertueuse" and "aimable" to kill off (*OC*, "Préface d'*Iphigénie*" 698). As Aristotle's notion of character ambiguity needs to be rooted in the believable events of reality, so Longinus sees the sublime as connected to "the myriad details of 'real life'" (Gilby, *Sublime Worlds* 26). Through her moral ambiguity, Ériphile again satisfies the requirement of *vraisemblance*. But she also satisfies the spectator's need for

[115] In this way, Racine's *récit* is catering to the immobility of the Cartesian *étonnement*, whereby he is freezing his audience in place with their own astonishment as they imagine the scene in their minds. This will be discussed further in chapter three.

[116] "There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not be vice and depravity but by some error of judgement…" (Aristotle, *Poetics 13* 1467). This also recalls Boileau's understanding of imperfections in good writing which create pleasure because in them one recognizes nature.

emotional justice, since realistically she deserves her death, while still invoking a sense of compassion for her fate.[117]

More than a poetic creation, however, Ériphile incarnates the poetic voice of one of Longinus' most celebrated examples of the sublime: Sappho. Longinus praises Sappho's ode as the epitome of someone describing "les fureurs de l'Amour" (*OC*, *Traité* 356). This ode is key to Ériphile for two reasons. First, although Longepierre connects Phèdre's agonies for Hippolyte to Sappho's ode,[118] and Ériphile is often seen as a foreshadowing of Phèdre, no one has connected Ériphile with Sappho, despite the fact that she uses very similar language in her description of her love for Achilles.[119] The parallel between the two merits a closer look.[120] Secondly, Ériphile's declaration of love shares remarkable similarities to Boileau's translation of the ode, hinting at another poetic connection between Boileau and Racine.

Longinus declares that Sappho is sublime because she is able to simultaneously partake in and lucidly describe her experience.[121] Longinus asks "N'admirez-vous point comment elle ramasse toutes ces choses, l'âme, le corps, l'ouïe, la langue, la vue, la couleur, comme si c'étaient autant de personnes différentes et prêtes à expirer?" (*OC*, *Traité* 356). Like Sappho, Ériphile has the same strange and compelling power of simultaneousness and paradox, of victimhood and agency, that is found in the ode.

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[117] At least this is what Racine seems to be envisioning. Many critics have decried the emotional connection we are supposed to feel for this character. Racine's own possible self-skepticism may be read in the line, "La seule Iphigénie/ Dans ce commun bonheur pleure son Ennemie" (V.vi. 1789-90, 763).

[118] See DeJean, "Great French Classics" in *Fictions of Sappho*.

[119] DeJean criticizes Racine for this connection between Phèdre and Longinus' Sappho since it transforms a powerful speaker, lucid in her description of her emotions, to someone humiliated and embarrassed by her own passions. In other words, essentially the opposite of Sappho. See *Fictions*, pp. 86-87.

[120] See Pfohl pp. 159-198 for a detailed analysis of Ériphile, including a comparison between Ériphile and Phèdre.

[121] Racine uses a similar trop with other characters as well. "Ériphile, Phèdre, and Athalie hold at least one thing in common in that they themselves lucidly proclaim their doom when their destruction becomes inevitable" (Zwillenberg 365). I would add to this repertoire, Néron, who, when describing the moment he caught sight of the beautiful Junie, claims he is frozen in wonder. All four characters describe their physical immobility and the inability to speak, all the while still describing this moment with a powerful lucidity.

When Ériphile confesses her love for Achille to Doris, her discourse hovers around the same metaphors found in Sappho's ode, metaphors of blindness and vision, immobility and movement, fire and ice, silence and expression. Her moment of transfixion and silence gives birth to a beautiful moment of poetry. Interestingly, Racine reverses the stanzas of Sappho's ode in order to structure Ériphile's account of her experience. In Boileau's rendition, Sappho's last stanza of her poem reads,

> Un nuage confus se répand sur ma vue ;
> Je n'entends plus ; je tombe en de douces langueurs :
> Et pâle, sans haleine, interdite, éperdue,
> Un frisson me saisit, je tremble, je me meurs (*OC* 357).

Ériphile begins her encounter with Achille in similar language,

> Je demeurai longtemps sans lumière et sans vie.
> Enfin mes faibles yeux cherchèrent la clarté.
> Et me voyant presser d'un bras ensanglanté,
> Je frémissais… (II.i.490-493).

Sappho's middle stanza recounts her physical immobility:

> Je sens de veine en veine une subtile flamme[122]
> Courir par tout mon corps sitôt que je te vois.
> Et, dans les doux transports où s'égare mon âme,
> Je ne saurais trouver de langue ni de voix (*OC* 356).

Like a crossing helix, the middle of Ériphile's description matches the ancient poet's, emphasizing her frozen, silent transfixion at the sight of her captor:

> Je le vis. Son aspect n'avait rien de farouche.[123]

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[122] While fire does not figure in this particular section of Ériphile's description of her capture by Achille, it is nevertheless very prevalent in her story. Other characters recall the burning of her homeland. The exchange between her and Iphigénie is particularly telling; both women refer constantly to fire, burning, flames and other words of similar linguistic connotation. Ériphile's death also recalls fire, since at the moment her blood stains the altar, "La flamme du Bûcher d'elle-même s'allume" (*OC* 1782).

[123] These three lines are very similar to Phèdre's famous avowal of her love for Hippolyte:

> Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue.
> Un trouble s'éleva dans mon âme éperdue.
> Mes yeux ne voyaient plus, je ne pouvais parler,
> Je sentis tout mon corps et transir, et brûler (I.iii.273-276).

Forestier notes similarities between Ériphile's line and Bérénice's lament "Je l'aime, je le fuis; Titus m'aime, il me quitte" (V.vii.1512). See "Notice d'*Iphigénie*" p. 1587.

Je sentis le reproche expirer dans ma bouche.
Je sentis contre moi mon cœur se déclarer,
J'oubliai ma colère, et ne sus que pleurer (II.i.497-500).

Finally, Sappho's first stanza describes her simultaneous longing for her lover and jealousy for whoever is nearer to the beloved than herself:

Heureux qui près de toi pour toi seule soupire
Qui jouit du Plaisir de t'entendre parler,
Qui te voit quelquefois doucement lui sourire!
Les dieux dans son Bonheur peuvent-ils égaler? (*OC* 356).

While the end of Ériphile's confession is not quite the same poetic parallel as the previous stanzas, the same longing that Sappho feels and her desire to be constantly close to her beloved become Ériphile's motivation for her desire Achille, and her unrelenting pursuit of Iphigénie's death.[124] One could say that Ériphile's last two lines reflect the spirit of Sappho's longing:

Je me laissai conduire à cet aimable guide.
Je l'aimais à Lesbos, et je l'aime en Aulide.

Ériphile's declaration echoes the same vital and dangerous characteristic of a woman in love as Sappho's ode does.[125] Her fury at her captivity, combined with her verbal transport as she describes Achille, creates a complex web of sensations, very unlike those of Andromaque, whose sonorous allusions she is echoing.[126] More importantly for our study, perhaps, Ériphile's word of love becomes the impetus for action against her lover's lover, Iphigénie. Her transformation of

[124] Ériphile introduces her hatred and jealousy of her rival Iphigénie a few lines before her declaration of her love for Achille, "Que dirais-tu, Doris, si passant tout le reste / Cet hymen de mes maux était le plus funeste?" (II.i.465-466).
[125] Although Ériphile is often thought of as a precursor to Phèdre, Ériphile has more agency.
[126] Dubu notes in "Prosodie" that Ériphile's bloody memories of Lesbos lyrically recall Andromaque's vision of Troy's terrible end:

J'ai vu mon père mort, et nos murs embrasés.
J'ai vu trancher les jours de ma famille entière,
Et mon époux sanglant traîné sur la poussière,
Son fils seul avec moi réservé pour les fers (*OC*, *Andromaque,* III.vi.932-935).

word into action accounts for her being noted as one of the most active and powerful character in Racine's œuvre.[127]

Racine's vision for a sublime character in Ériphile takes on a particularly interesting theatrical angle in her non-verbal devices. While a playwright might fear silence, that of his actors forgetting their lines, or the silence of spectators who don't react to a poignant moment, Racine knows that silence is the intermediary between the word and the deed, and thus is extremely effective when it is practiced properly in a theatrical medium.[128] The theatrical potential for silence is almost as endless as theater's poetic structures: a dramatic pause in a monologue can alter a performance; a character quietly absorbing the information given by another opens a world of nonverbal intimations that, fleshed out give soul to the words on stage.[129]

Racine envisions Ériphile's silence as similar to that described by Longinus, "C'est pourquoi nous admirons la seule pensée d'un homme encore qu'il ne parle point, à cause de cette grandeur de courage que nous voyons: par exemple, le silence d'Ajax aux enfers, dans l'Odyssée; car ce silence a je ne sais quoi de plus grand que tout ce qu'il aurait pu dire" (*OC* 351). While Ériphile is not Racine's first silent character onstage,[130] she is one of his most powerful and active. He juxtaposes her physical presence with her silence, and the moments she is most responsible for the tragic action are remarkable because she is physically absent from the stage, and thus literally silent. In creating a silent yet physically present character, Racine is breaking with tradition. D'Aubignac's *Pratique* strongly discourages unnecessary actors on stage since such presence

[127] See Escola, "Introduction" as well as Barbafieri, *Atrée et Céladon* pp. 309-341.
[128] Tamas' study on Racinian silence is a vital critical work. However, Tamas only mentions Ériphile in two limited analyses, neither of which examines the character's unique position of a silent and yet extremely active character.
[129] See Maskell, *Racine*, pp. 144-153 for the non-verbal reaction of the listener in Racine's plays.
[130] Racine has already used the power of the silent observer with Néron. However, Néron is hidden from Britannicus' view behind a curtain, while Ériphile is present on stage, visible to all the other characters as well as to the spectator.

detracts from the focus and action of the play and simply confuses the spectator.[131] But Racine uses Ériphile's silence to unsettle his spectators in a powerful way.

Ériphile's unspeaking presence and her silent, watching eyes make her more of a spectator in her own play than a character.[132] As a spectator-character, she incarnates the privileged two-fold position of being able to speak and act within the play itself, while simultaneously becoming one of the spectators, caught up in the observation of the drama. She is the expression of the in-between, a silent presence that can move between two worlds. This in-between-ness creates a vital link of self-identification the spectator feels with Ériphile-the-spectator. It becomes the spectator's motivation for the compassion, or at least the pity, they feel for her plight, and her "detached yet intimate figure" creates a "searing image of isolation" (Zwillenberg 365).

From the first act, Racine connects Ériphile to silence. Agamemnon, in his second reference to Ériphile, describes her to Achille,

> […] Cette jeune Beauté
> Garde en vain un secret que trahit sa fierté,
> Et *son silence même accusant sa noblesse*,
> *Nous dit* qu'elle nous cache une illustre Princesse (I.ii.239-242, my emphasis).

Thus, like Longinus' Ajax, Ériphile's silence speaks more than words could, telling the story of her secret nobility. This in turn foreshadows the admiration the characters feel for her high birth and destiny at the *dénouement*, "On admire en secret sa naissance et son sort" (V.vi.1767). When Ériphile uses silence as a self-descriptor, it is a sign of powerlessness rather than privilege. Ériphile tells Doris that she knows she is fated to be a silent witness, "un témoin si tranquille," to Iphigénie's moment of happy reunion with her father, a happiness from which Ériphile is excluded (II.i.418).

[131] "Il n'y a point de plus grand défaut au Théâtre que de le rendre muet; […] [laisser] quelquefois plusieurs Acteurs sur le Théâtre sans parole, […]est de très-mauvaise grâce." And again "il y a péril de porter quelque désordre dans l'intelligence des Spectateurs quand on excède ce nombre [de trois Acteurs sur scène]" (d'Aubignac 238-239, 250).
[132] Or as Barthes puts it, "Autour d'Ériphile, ou plutôt devant elle, tout un monde bouge" (*Sur Racine* 110.)

When Ériphile's confession of her secret love for Achille falls from her lips, her frustration is evident at her inability to keep it hidden, "je me flattais sans cesse / Qu'un silence éternel cacherait ma faiblesse" (II.i.477-79).

Her silence is not simply a prescriptive part of her noble (or powerless) status, it is also significant in her dramatic presence. Ériphile is present but silent (or nearly so) in five scenes,[133] as well as absent (and thus literally silent) for the entire last act.[134] As she had foretold to Doris, she is indeed a silent witness, "un témoin si tranquille" to the reunion between father and daughter (II.i.418). As Iphigénie rushes to embrace her father, Ériphile is a human body simply watching, a participating spectator. She nevertheless intensifies the tragic moment since her silence highlights Agamemnon's own struggle to greet the daughter he knows he will have to slaughter.[135]

In the short scene of reunion between Achille and Iphigénie, Ériphile's silence again has a powerful theatrical effect. It not only makes for an awkward lovers' rendezvous to have a third person spectating (especially considering that the two women had just exchanged violent accusations of rivalry in the previous scene), but Ériphile's silence acts as a backdrop to theatrically highlight the miscommunication and misunderstanding between Achille and Iphigénie. She watches as Achille approaches Iphigénie with a welcoming, "Il est donc vrai, Madame, et c'est

[133] Considering that Ériphile is only present in 13 of the total 37 scenes of the play, the fact that she is silent (or nearly so) for almost half of her time on stage is fascinating.

[134] Twice she has single half-lines that are more of an aside than a true interlocution. In reaction to Clytemnestre's statement that Achille has rejected Iphigénie as a bride, she gasps a broken alexandrine in aside, "Qu'entends-je?" (II.iv.637). Similarly, when the news arrives that Agamemnon is planning on sacrificing his daughter, a shocked alexandrine is split between Achille (Lui!), Clytemnestre (Sa Fille!), Iphigénie (Mon Père!), and Ériphile (Ô ciel! Quelle nouvelle!) (III.v.913). Interestingly, Ériphile's portion of this line can be interpreted either positively or negatively, the ambiguity of her reaction to this news separates her from the clear horror of the other characters. Ériphile's triple internal rhyme "ciel-quelle-nouvelle," also cuts her off starkly from the other characters. Lastly, the grammatical link between Achille's pronoun 'lui' and the possessive adjectives "Sa Fille" and "Mon Père" highlights the relationship each of the other characters have with Agamemnon, and in contrast, the stark solitude of Ériphile who is doomed to move in a world where she is utterly alone. Thus, "instead of a release of tensions, the situation is rendered even more taut by the fact that [Ériphile] is perceived to be alone in a hostile environment" (Zwillenberg 365).

[135] Escola notes Racine's depth of poetic intuition in keeping Ériphile silent since, "un dialogue à trois aurait nui à la tension dramatique de ce premier face à face entre le père et la fille" ("Présentation" 46).

vous que je vois!" (II.vi.723). She watches Iphigénie, who, believing his greeting to be one of a disgusted ex-lover, lashes out with, "Seigneur, rassurez-vous. Vos vœux seront contents / Iphigénie encore n'y sera pas longtemps" (II.vi.727-28), a self-fulfilling statement as she storms from the stage, as well as a clever theatrical foreshadowing of her possible death.

The last scene where Ériphile is a silent, observing presence, albeit far from passive, occurs when Agamemnon capitulates to the combined pressure of Iphigénie and Clytemnestre. On one hand, Ériphile's silence in this scene is filled with a certain pathos since she is, yet again, reduced to watching that which she longs for most – a loving family – tear itself apart in shattered emotion.[136] But her presence is also menacing since her silence juxtaposes with what she says in the very next scene, her last directly spoken lines. Here she predicts her own death as well as the end of the play: "Plus de raisons. Il faut, ou la perdre, ou périr. / Viens, te dis-je. A Calchas je vais tout découvrir" (IV.xi.1491-92).

Ériphile is physically absent, although extremely active in the entire last act, an unusual theatrical choice; when she becomes most active, she paradoxically disappears. But as the embodiment of the in-between, she must be either the silent spectator or the powerful actor; to be both at the same time would blur the line between theater and real life too much. We know she is wreaking havoc because other characters tell us so.[137] She has, we are told, a powerful voice that rebukes even the priest of the gods.[138] As spectators, we witness her violent death, her acting out

[136] "[Elle est une] figure de réticence (et non d'impuissance), qui donne au mutisme sa valeur sublime" (Declercq, "Topique de l'ineffable" 200).

[137] We recall that Aegine calls her a "Serpent inhumain" who "a seule à tous les Grecs révélé votre fuite" (V.v.1675, 1678), as well as Ulysses' description of her to Clytemnestre as "la Discorde maîtresse/ avait sur tous les yeux mis son bandeau fatal, / Et donné du combat le funeste signal" (V.v.1734-1736).

[138] Ulysses transmits her words to us, "Arrête, a-t-elle dit, et ne m'approche pas. / Le sang de ces Héros, dont tu me fais descendre, / Sans tes profanes mains saura bien se répandre" (V.vi.1772-1774). Forestier notes that Racine is alluding to two different daughters of kings, Euripides' Iphigenia and Polyxena in *Hecuba* who choose to die willingly and freely ("Notice d'*Iphigénie*"1598). Ériphile, as a Princess of Troy, dies by her own hand in an act of free will, thus making her what Barthes calls "le seul être libre du théâtre racinien" (*Sur Racine* 110). Longinus claims that freedom is the greatest motivation for the sublime, "Il n'y a peut-être rien qui élève davantage l'âme des grands

of her destiny, but only in the confines of our own imaginations. While this absence of visible violence conforms to French neo-classical *bienséance*, it also highlights Ériphile's last moments as a marriage of action and word.[139] Ériphile thus becomes the means to both the *merveilleux dans le discours*, and the way for Racine to allow the human body into his understanding of a theatrical sublime.[140]

Longinus' five sources of the sublime, greatness of the mind, pathos, figures of speech, graceful and elegant expressions, and dignity of composition are so important to Racine's aesthetic that, "Le *Traité du Sublime* semble avoir été écrit, seize siècles à l'avance, pour la gloire de Racine" (Zuber, "Boileau Traducteur" 292). Racine's quotation of Longinus in the preface of *Britannicus*, his use of a striking theatrical simplicity in *Bérénice*, his emphasis that *vraisemblance* is what truly gives a spectator pleasure, and his intuitive understanding of the appropriate, or aptness of a poet's choices which mirror Longinus' *kairos*, all point to his familiarity with Longinus prior to the publication of Boileau's *Traité*. In fact, thanks to Racine's effective playwriting, Boileau "rompt avec toutes les bonnes règles" and confidently switches the traditional hierarchy of epic and tragedy, placing tragedy first in his *Art Poétique* (Zuber, "Boileau adopte Racine" 289).

There are moments when Boileau's *Traité* draws poetically from Racine, and moments in *Iphigénie* when Racine quotes Boileau's translation, hinting to a wider collaboration between the two poets than is normally conjectured. But more than Boileau, Racine expands the sublime

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hommes que la liberté, ni qui excite et éveille plus puissamment en nous ce sentiment naturel qui nous porte à l'émulation, et cette noble ardeur de se voir élevé au-dessus des autres (*OC*, *Traité* 399). Ériphile's death is sublime because it reflects the liberty of choice that can only be undertaken by a truly free person.

[139] Racine's interest in *hypotyposis* for his final *récits* owed a certain aesthetic debt to Poussin's artistic theory. See Marin *Sublime Poussin*. Forestier notes that the entire description of "Le triste Agamemnon, qui n'ose l'avouer, / Pour détourner ses yeux des meurtres qu'il présage, / ou pour cacher ses pleurs, s'est voilé le visage" (V.v.1708-1710), is a moment that is particularly emblematic of the visual sublime rendered verbal. See Forestier, "Notice d'*Iphigénie*" p. 1568.

[140] As Guyot says, Racine has managed to "faire entrer le corps dans le débat sur le sublime." Indeed, the theatrical possibilities of a sublime character test "les frontières du moi, les pouvoirs du discours et la limite entre la fiction et réel" (*Corps tragique* 30, 36).

beyond its verbal confines into its full theatrical potential, exploring its possibilities in theatrical plot movement, the imitation of great authors, and powerful visual action. His invention of Ériphile as a sublime character, with her complex physical stage presence and active silence is but one example where he explores the theatrical sublime to create powerful effects that would earn him the accolade of being able to "émouvoir, étonner, ravir" his spectators (Boileau *OC* 149).

Chapter Two: Racine and the Social Sublime

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I established how Racine understood the Longinian sublime as a theatrical notion that included but also broadened Boileau's discursive sublime. In this chapter, I will examine how in his earlier plays, Racine deliberately engaged with *honnêteté*, a social concept that at first glance seems at odds with the neoclassical sublime, but which also has considerable parallels to it. I argue that Racine recognized these parallels and maneuvered what I call the "social sublime" of *honnêteté* to evolve his own aesthetic.

Much of seventeenth-century French theater of Racine's time already utilized tropes of *honnêteté* and its synonymous notion *galanterie*. Although there was a slight difference between an *honnête homme* and a *galant homme* which connected *galanterie* with love-making and *honnêteté* with a more virtuous stance towards society, the two terms were still generally interchangeable.[1] Because of this, the fashionable *tragédies galantes* of Thomas Corneille and Philippe Quinault, where love reigned supreme, portrayed *honnête* heroes wooing heroines with *galant* language.[2] The popularity of the *tragédie galante* indicates that Racine's public enjoyed and even expected *honnêteté* to make an appearance in theatrical productions. Even Racine's rival in tragedy, Pierre Corneille, who was thought to prefer an aesthetic of heroic grandeur, was accused of including a certain amount of *honnêteté* and *galanterie* in plays like *Polyeucte* and *Œdipe*. Thus

[1] For instance, one author defines the *galant* homme as someone who "n'est autre chose qu'un honnête homme un peu plus brillant ou plus enjoué qu'à son ordinaire, et qui sait faire en sorte que tout lui sied bien" (Méré 20). Another says "Il faut que chacun sache que le parfait Courtisan, qu'un Italien a voulu décrire en l'honnête homme, que l'on nous a dépeint en français ne sont autres chose qu'un vrai Galant, tellement que toutes les bonnes qualités que l'on a souhaitées, à d'autres séparément doivent être toutes réunies en lui" (Sorel, *Loix* 4). The critical distinction between the two terms significantly increased beginning in the 18th century as *galanterie* was seen as an excessive, even obsessive, presentation of the self, versus the more chaste or unpretentious notion of *honnêteté*. *Galanterie* didn't gain its fully negative connotation until the late 18th and early 19th centuries. See Barbafieri, *Atrée et Céladon*, Viala, *La France galante*, Stanton, *The Aristocrat as Art*, Bury, *Littérature et politesse*, and Dens, *L'Honnête homme* for the distinction between these two concepts.

[2] See Le Chevalier, *La Conquête des publics* for more on Thomas Corneille's *tragedies galantes*.

it is not surprising that Racine's *Alexandre* and *Britannicus*, the two plays which we will examine more closely later, were clearly influenced by this social expectation.[3]

Some critics, however, considered the portrayal of *honnêteté* and *galanterie* incompatible with tragedy, claiming that it reduced the gravity of a tragic subject to frivolity. Saint-Évremond, for instance, declared that Racine's *Alexandre* inappropriately mixed tragedy with "le mauvais usage des tendresses de l'amour" and reduced the Aristotelian pity and fear to emotions that were "recherchées avec trop de délicatesse par ceux qui n'ont de goût" (cited in Forestier *OC*, "Sur le Grand Alexandre" 189). For Saint-Évremond, giving tragic heroes an *honnête* or *galant* air, particularly heroes inspired by antiquity, acquiesced to the public's bad taste.

Similarly, Nicolas Boileau warned against the use of the *galanterie* on stage. The *galant* hero was all well and good for a novel, and "dans un roman frivole aisément tout s'excuse" but "la scène demande une exacte raison" (*OC*, *Art Poétique* 172). Boileau resisted the representation of the *honnête* hero because he was cognizant of the civilizing effects of *honnêteté*, and its parallel to the diminishment of the violence of antiquity. Ancient heroes should be presented as they were by ancient authors, "Conservez à chacun son propre caractère" (*OC*, *Art Poétique* 172). Boileau thought it was far more engaging to watch heroic actions of characters trapped in tragic dilemmas than those focused on or motivated by love. Love could be depicted, but only as a "faiblesse et non une vertu;" to do otherwise, to portray "doucereux" heroes was a lazy way to ensure acclaim with audiences (particularly female ones) who read novels.

However, here we find an interesting tension. Boileau is reluctant for tragedy to showcase *honnête* and *galant* heroes motivated solely by love. However, in the preface to the *Traité du Sublime*, his translation of Longinus' first-century text, Boileau describes Longinus as an "honnête

[3] In *Atrée et Céladon*, Barbafieri formulates an excellent discussion of the tension between tragic heroism and the expected social *honnêteté* in theater.

homme" whose "sentiments ont je ne sais quoi qui marque non-seulement un esprit sublime, mais une âme fort élevée au-dessus du commun" (*OC* 336). How is it possible that Longinus is both a sublime author and an *honnête homme*, considering that the self-effacing, socially adapting, and chameleon-like charm of *honnêteté* seems to be incongruous with the powerfully undeniable effect of the sublime?

This chapter examines the complex tension between *honnêteté* and the sublime. Despite their seeming differences, they share curiously parallel characteristics. In the first part of this chapter, I will examine four aspects of *honnêteté*, or the "social sublime," that also pertain to Boileau's poetic sublime. For the sake of simplicity, I have harnessed four terms to describe these characteristics that are found neither in the civility texts I refer to, nor in Boileau's *Traité du Sublime*. These terms are: emulation, transparency, authenticity, and adaptability.

The second part of my chapter explores how Racine, acutely aware of his public's taste for *honnêteté*, attempted to reconcile it with the violence and pathos traditionally attributed to tragedy. Racine knew there was theatrical potential in the seeming contradiction between *honnêteté* and classical tragedy, and beginning with *Alexandre le Grand*, he began to explore *honnêteté*, particularly the ineffable power of the *honnête homme* in the character of Alexandre, as a way to create certain theatrical effects on the tragic stage. Despite Saint-Évremond's disparagement of *Alexandre* for its *galant* frivolousness, Racine's play was a success and remained one of his most regularly performed works during his life time.[4]

Perhaps partially in response to Saint-Évremond's reaction to *Alexandre*, Racine explored *honnêteté* from a negative point of view in his next two plays, and especially in *Britannicus*.[5] The

[4] See Dupêcher, "Racine à la Comédie Française" for statistics on Racine's plays.
[5] See Barbafieri, *Atrée et Celadon* and Viala, *La France galante* for how Racine's contemporaries disparaged his *galanterie*.

most *honnête* or *galant* character in this play is the antagonist, Néron, a choice that complicated *honnêteté*'s traditional association with virtue. The spectator cannot help but be simultaneously enthralled and repulsed by Néron's powerful but paradoxically monstrous *honnêteté*.

A brief historical overview of *honnêteté* will illustrate how the emulation, transparency, authenticity, and adaptability necessary to the *honnête homme* parallels certain aspects of the sublime. This will also explain how Racine realized the potential for the "social sublime" in *Alexandre* and *Britannicus* to create new theatrical effects that both paralleled and superseded the notion of a purely discursive sublime.

Honnêteté traces its root back to antiquity, the Latin adjective *honestum* described a person of virtuous character, usually of noble birth or of great social eminence whose virtuous qualities inherently affected their behavior. For instance, Cicero required an orator to have *honestum* in order to create effective oration.[6] During the development of the medieval French court, the Latin notion began to describe the courtly behavior of nobility.[7] For example, Anne de Graville's *La Belle Dame Sans Mercy* associated *honneur* (and by extension *honnêteté*) with an ability to adapt one's language to one's interlocutors. Graville implied that women were the most capable of this quality, but that *honnêteté* could extend "to a community of all those who are honorable, reasonable and who employ language appropriately" (Delogu 482). During the sixteenth century, Montaigne considered *honestum* as the way to achieve, "la plus grande chose du monde" which was the ability to "savoir être à soi" (quoted in Nash 205).

[6] See Nash, "Stoicism" and J. Moore, "Utility" for the history of *honestum* in ancient oratory.
[7] *Honnêtes gens* were often described as people having *qualité*, *vertu*, *noblesse, courtoisie*. Traditionally only noble members of the court were referred to as *honnête* since nobles were thought to intrinsically embody greater honor and courtesy than those of low birth. See Viala, *France galante*, Dens, *L'Honnête homme*, and Stanton, *The Aristocrat as Art* for the role nobility and aristocracy played in the formation and perpetuation of *honnêteté*.

By the seventeenth century, *honnêteté* still reflected certain aspects of Latin antiquity. Treatises on rhetoric leaned on the ethical aspect of the *honnête homme*, particularly the role virtue played in the execution of clear and beautiful language. Although it unfortunately became very gendered by the seventeenth century, it still retained traces of its medieval association with women.[8] For instance, language treatises described how the French language developed in an *honnête* society and was shaped by women's influencing taste. *Honnêteté* had also become entangled with the qualities necessary for an aspiring courtier as outlined by the Italian Baldassare Castiglione in his *Cortigiano*, published in 1574. *Il Cortigiano* was widely-read in France, and influenced French civility texts which use it to outline their own version of the best ways of speaking, acting, and being that befitted those who wished to be known as *honnête*; Montaigne's trueness-to-self had become a complex blend of artifice and reality.

All forms of texts that dealt with *honnêteté*, whether civility, linguistic, or rhetorical, describe it as a complex and paradoxical social aesthetic that is simultaneously self-effacing and remarkable. *Honnêteté* combined innate virtue with excellent capacity for language, keen social awareness and adaptability. The *honnête homme* excelled both physically on the field of battle, and socially in polite company. But his mental, physical, and ethical superiority brought pleasure to those around him because his excellent judgment and incredible social awareness enabled him

[8] Despite Sorel's claim to the contrary, the term *honnête femme* generally referred to a woman who was modest, chaste and who avoided public engagement with the world or court – in other words, virtually the opposite of what made an excellent *honnête homme*. While women's direct engagement in the public sphere was frowned upon, they were considered arbiters and judges of the *honnête homme*, and were included in the more generic grouping of *honnêtes gens*. This paradoxical stance on women will be addressed later. In this chapter, I will use *honnêteté* or *honnêtes gens* when I can in order to avoid male-centric language. However, I will primarily use the term *honnête homme* and its corresponding adjectives since the individuality and uniqueness of the *honnête homme* are important. For a wider examination of the gender issues facing *honnêteté* see Maclean, "Feminist Thought and Society: *Honnêteté* and the *Salons*" in *Woman Triumphant,* Conroy, "Gender, Power and Authority," Denis, *La Muse galante*, Birberick, *Reading Undercover*, and Desnain, "Les Faux Miroirs."

to represent himself well. Even as he outshone everyone, he made every individual feel uniquely appreciated.

The *honnête homme* spoke French with an exquisite ability, charming and even overwhelming his listeners. He carefully obeyed the mores of his society, never shocking the *bienséance* of those around him, and knew how to correctly judge his spectators, adapting to their expectations or needs. He was absolutely free from any visible signs of artifice, whether it be the physical artifice of being too put-together (or too negligent) in his dress, the linguistic artifice of over-used words, or the social artifice of pretending to care about his listeners when in reality he might be showing them deference solely for his own social advancement. As a pleasing, genuine, verbally, and physically superior person, the *honnête homme* walked a paradoxical line of self-creation and natural talent, presentation and being, fiction and truth. An adroit *honnête homme* was an accomplished actor, and could present himself as he wanted to be perceived. Yet paradoxically, an intrinsic part of his act was having genuine quality and virtue. The person who could resolve the conflict between being and perception was truly *honnête*.

Emulation

Again and again, seventeenth-century civility texts stress that a would-be *honnête homme* must surround himself with and partake in the company of "les Grands," or other *honnêtes gens*. This would ensure him the necessary models of excellence and *honnêteté* he needed to imitate in order to cultivate brilliant conversation and impeccable behavior. For instance, Nicolas Faret, author of the *L'Honnête homme, ou l'art de plaire à la cour* (1630), declares that, "la première et la plus utile leçon que l'on doit pratiquer c'est de gagner d'abord l'opinion des Grands et des honnêtes gens" (48). Similarly, Claude Favre de Vaugelas, in his *Remarques sur la langue*

française (1647), identifies a specific characteristic of the *honnête homme*, as a "je ne sais quoi" that is "accompagné d'un certain air, qu'on prend à la Cour, et qui ne s'acquiert qu'à force de hanter les Grands" (419).[9] The need for an *honnête homme* to imitate "les Grands" and "les honnêtes gens" combines elements of Platonic and Aristotelian mimesis, both of which were being debated and discussed in the early-to-mid seventeenth century. On one hand, Plato viewed imitation as negative because it distracted "the viewer from the fact that the highest truths lie in the realm of the intelligible which is, by definition, not representable" (Delehanty 10). Imitation could only be "a style of behavior that would fool others, a way of making oneself look like some person or another, by adopting his (or her) traits. Rather than a representation, "the act of *mimesthai* was a performance, a demonstration" (Vernant 165). Hence Plato's dismissal of the arts. Aristotelian mimesis, on the other hand, gave imitation a higher purpose, allowing one to emotionally and ethically self-regulate, and leading to a virtuous life. The *honnête homme* was required to strike a paradoxical balance between these two forms of imitation. He had to imitate and adopt the traits his *honnête* milieu in order to imitate the best and fool the rest. But a truly *honnête homme* must do so with the Aristotelian ideal of becoming virtuous and great himself.

However, more than just imitating other *honnêtes gens*, the person who aspired to be *honnête* had be scrutinized and judged by them, since *honnêtes gens* were the only audience who could be appropriately affected by *honnêteté* and thus recognize true quality from any inauthentic variation. As La Rochefoucauld, an accomplished *honnête homme*, writes, "C'est être véritable honnête homme que de vouloir être toujours exposé à la vue des honnêtes gens" (*OC*, *Maximes* 434). Even though the category of *honnête femme* was virtually the opposite of the *honnête homme*,

[9] Charles Sorel, author of *Les Loix de la galanterie* (1644) and *La Connaissance des bons livres* (1671), Antione Gombaud, the Chevalier de Méré who wrote *Les Conversations* (1668), and Dominique Bouhours' *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671) all contain similar discussions.

women of quality were invariably among the *honnêtes gens*, and were considered essential for the acquisition of true *honnêteté*.[10] Women, according to the authors of civility texts, were the arbiters of social taste. For instance, Vaugelas claims that along with the exposure to the aforementioned "Grands", one also needs to "hanter […] les Dames" to acquire the necessary "air" that makes one *honnête* (419). Faret insists that besides, "l'opinion des Grands," one must try to "mériter les bonnes grâces des femmes," since women had the authority to determine the validity of *honnêteté* (48).[11] Likewise, Méré claimed women had a finely tuned judgement of excellence and a "délicatesse d'esprit" that eluded most men (17). Since the ultimate goal of *honnêteté* was to please, and women were thought to have both an innate ability to please and a capacity to recognize and judge those who desired to please, interaction with women of good taste and quality was paramount for an *honnête homme*. Vaugelas also views women as the arbiters of language; even if many of them did not have formal training in rhetoric. He equates women's intuitive understanding of quality with that of ancient orators. "Leur sentiment est conforme à celui de Quintilien et de tous les grands orateurs, qui veulent que les métaphores se tirent des images les plus nobles et des objets let plus agréables" (Vaugelas 101). Similarly, Sorel counsels any aspiring writer, particularly those who wanted to write works of poetry, to gain the approbation of women since women "aiment ces sortes de choses" and were "accoutumé de leur donner le prix" (*Connaissance* 19).

[10] The paradox is that women could not stand alone as *honnête*. They were the judges of the *honnête homme*, they could be included as part of the collective *honnêtes gens*, but an *honnête femme* was not a social actor. She was modest and reserved. She acted behind the scenes, passively calling out the fraudulent *honnêtes hommes*, but not permitted to engage with the public sphere in the same way. When a woman acted according to the rules of male-centric *honnêteté*, it did not sit well with authorities. This was the case with Corneille's heroine, Chimène, who passionately defended her honor in a public way, using her verbal elegance to engage in rhetoric and formal argument, and most importantly her inexplicably universal appeal (both intra and extra scenic). was Corneille's attempt to create a woman who fit the category of *honnête* in a visible way. The resulting condemnation of Chimène as "invraisemblable" and lacking in "bienséance" indicate that a woman in this position was threatening.

[11] [Les femmes] ont la réputation de donner le prix aux hommes, et de les faire passer pour tels que bon leur semble, comme il s'en trouve quelques-unes qui se sont acquises cette autorité" (Faret 48).

Aside from women, the court with its plethora of nobility, was a necessary setting for *honnêteté*, since nobility were thought to have innate *honnête* qualities, and were more likely to recognize this quality in others. Although civility texts claimed that nobility was not technically a prerequisite to *honnêteté*, the "grâce naturelle" of an *honnête homme* was far more likely to exist in a person of noble birth.[12] In theory, any accomplished *honnête homme* could present himself to the court; and an *honnête homme* of common birth could potentially efface his lack of nobility through the effects of his linguistic and social prowess. However, the court scrutinized and judged an aspiring *honnête homme* on the quality of his attributes. Since it was unlikely that a person of common birth would have been exposed either to the same level of education available to the nobility, or to the milieu of the court from an early age, a non-noble *honnête homme* must be gifted indeed in order to be recognized as an equal by the nobility. As Faret would have it, "celui qui prétende passer pour honnête homme" has to pass "devant d'yeux [sic] dont l'on est éclairé à la Cour, et parmi un si grand nombre d'esprits délicats, à qui les défauts les plus cachés ne le sauraient être longtemps" (16).

Civility texts often equate the ability to recognize an *honnête homme* to the ability to comprehend good literature. Méré composes a fictional conversation between two interlocutors, the Chevalier and the Maréchal, both of whom are recognized as *honnêtes hommes*. The Maréchal

[12] Faret states, "Je dirai premièrement qu'il me semble très-nécessaire que celui qui veut entrer dans ce grand commerce du monde soit né Gentilhomme et d'un maison qui ait quelque bonne marque. Ce n'est pas que j'en veuille bannir ceux à qui la nature a dénié ce bonheur. La vertu n'a point de condition affectée et les exemples sont assez communs de ceux qui d'une baisse naissance se font élevés à des actions héroïques et à des grandeurs illustres. Néanmoins il faut avouer que ceux qui sont de bon lieu ont d'ordinaire les bonnes inclinations, que les autres n'ont que rarement, et semble qu'elles arrivent à ceux-ci naturellement et ne se rencontrent aux autres que par hasard" (13). Sorel remarks with a tongue-in-cheek tone, "Nous n'entendons point qu'aucune soit si hardi de prétendre en Galanterie s'il ne vient d'une race fort relevée en noblesse et en honneurs, et s'il n'a l'esprit excellent, ou s'il n'a beaucoup de richesse qui brillent aux yeux du Monde pour l'éblouir et l'empêcher de voir ses défauts […] La Noblesse s'étant attribué principalement cette prérogative de s'élever au-dessus des autres hommes, il n'y a point de doute que la Galanterie lui sied mieux qu'à qui que ce soit, principalement lorsqu'elle s'est conservée de temps immémorial par l'exercice des armes, de sorte que les enfants des hommes de robe, et des riches financiers n'ont point tant d grâce à faire des Galands [sic] et ce [sic] leur est une vertu moins naturelle" (*Loix* 2).

tells the Chevalier of an eavesdropped conversation between two men, "fort savants, qui feraient d'assez bonne compagnie, s'ils avaient le sens commun." He complains that these two men say that they couldn't see what was so special about him. To which the Chevalier responds, "Ils me font souvenir […] d'un fort habile homme que je connais, qui avait lu tout le Tasse avec beaucoup d'attention sans y avoir remarque ni esprit ni agrément" (66). The Maréchal comforts both himself and the Chevalier by admitting, "On ne s'éclaircit de rien avec ce sortes de gens, […] il ne prennent jamais bien les choses qu'on leur dit ; celles qui n'ont point de sens ne laissent pas d'en avoir pour eux et tout ce qu'on leur propose de bien claire, leur parait obscur" (66). For Sorel as well, reading excellent books and understanding quality language go hand-in-hand with *honnêteté* since both require a refined taste, in order to learn "les ornements du discours pour plaire à ceux avec qu'ils [les hommes de bonne condition] […] ont quelque habitude" (*Connaissance* 62).

An ethics of emulation also informed the aesthetic of the neoclassical sublime. Just as the *honnêtes gens* must immerse themselves in the *honnête* milieu of the court in order to emulate "les Grands," so authors who aspired to be sublime needed to imagine themselves surrounded by a tribunal of ancient, sublime writers who would judge their work.[13] According to Longinus, the first and foremost source of the sublime consists of an author's high-mindedness, or *noesis*.[14] This "vigor of mental conception," operated on two axes, an imitation of authoritative models (*zêlôsis-mimêsis*) and a defined conception of self (*megalophrosynê*) (Doran, *Theory of the Sublime* 58). Like the *honnête homme*, the aspiring author must bask in the presence of "les Grands;" to write the sublime, they must first read sublime authors. Through the process of "*zêlôsis-mimêsis*," or

[13] Boileau's translation renders this as, "En effet, nous ne croirons pas avoir un médiocre prix à disputer, si nous pouvons nous figurer que nous allons, mais sérieusement, rendre compte de nos écrits devant un si célèbre tribunal, et sur un théâtre où nous avons de tels héros pour juges et pour témoins" (*OC, Traité* 362).

[14] Out of this high-mindedness proceed the four other sources of the sublime. These are, in Boileau's translation, "Le Pathétique […] cet Enthousiasme, et cette véhémence naturelle qui touche et qui émeut. […], les Figures tournées d'une certaine manière […], la noblesse de l'expression, la composition et l'arrangement des paroles dans toute leur magnificence et leur dignité" (*OC, Traité* 349-350).

immersion in great writing, a writer learns sublime thought patterns through emulation. They become impregnated, so to speak, with a resulting high-mindedness, or "*megalophrosynê*," eventually giving birth to their own sublime work (Doran, *Theory of the Sublime* 62). We see this process in Boileau's preface to the *Traité*. He first describes Longinus as a heroic man with a great mind, an excellent orator who is familiar with great, sublime authors. But through exposure to the beauties of the authors he is discussing, Longinus becomes sublime in his own right. Boileau writes in his preface, "Souvent il fait la figure qu'il enseigne; et en parlant du Sublime, il est lui-même très-sublime" (*OC* 333).

Some writers, however, assumed they could forgo this first and most important step of emulation and depend on their own natural ability.[15] Boileau addresses these authors in the opening lines of the *Art Poétique*. "C'est en vain qu'au Parnasse un téméraire Auteur / Pense de l'Art des Vers atteindre la hauteur" (*OC* 157).[16] They ought instead to walk in the steps of great authors; even contemporary authors like Malherbe could serve as a "guide fidèle" because of their "pureté" and "clarté" (*OC* 160). Boileau understood that the sublime was remarkably elusive, but an inability or unwillingness to emulate great models resulted in obscure writing. Such authors risked wandering blind in a "nuage épais" where "le jour de la raison ne le saurait percer" (*OC* 160). They would never achieve "la hauteur" of true sublimity.

[15] Charles Perrault was one who refused to recognize the sublime in ancient authors. Boileau's frustration with Perrault, who rejected Homer and other ancient authors as lesser than their modern counterparts, provoked him to write the *Refléxions* where he systematically takes Perrault to task for his blindness. Perrault's constant rejection of the ancients is one of the roots of the quarrel between the ancients and moderns. See L. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient*, Guion, "Du Sublime chez les modernes," and Lewis, "L'Anti-sublime."

[16] Boileau is deliberately recalling the meaning of the word Longinus uses for the sublime; the Greek word *hypsos* means height or elevation.

Transparency

One way in which an *honnête homme* emulated those around him was by using *honnête* language. However, his language had to correspond with his actions and his inner person; it had to reflect who he claimed he was.[1] Much ink was spilt in the seventeenth century discussing French as the epitome of a transparent language. Texts teaching rhetoric, such as Nicole and Arnauld's *La Logique de Port Royal* (1662), attempted to define logical and beautiful language. They claimed that in order for language to be logical, it had to be accurate in its expression. But language became beautiful when it expressed what was true, particularly in its expression of moral or divine truth.[2] Clear representation was of uttermost importance, and in the minds of French grammarians, French excelled in mimesis, much more than other European languages, thanks to its "natural" order and its "naïve" way of communicating the essence of a thing.[3] Without these characteristics, a language turned to frivolity and vanity.[4]

While rhetoricians like Nicole and Arnauld discussed French's ability to communicate truth, authors of civility texts focused instead on the increasing tension between the grammatical theory of French and its practice. An *honnête homme* needed both a formal and social education in order to create pleasure through his language. Vaugelas, for instance, acknowledged that while the newly-minted *Académie Française* determined the technical rules of French, the court was the center of social authority on *goût*, or taste, and thus ultimately determined what was considered

[1] See Bury, *Littérature et politesse*, Jaouën, *De l'art de plaire*, and Clément, "Écrire singulièrement" for the importance of transparent language and its reflection in the virtue of the *honnête homme*.
[2] Pascal also was concerned with the communication of truth. His philosophy of "l'esprit de géométrie" and "l'esprit de finesse" were two distinct methods people had of achieving this communication. See Delehanty, "The Heart Knowledge of Pascal" in *Literary Knowing*.
[3] The Dictionnaire de l'Académie française (1694) defines "naïf/naïve" as: "Naturel, sans fard, sans artifice. […] Il signifie aussi, Qui représente bien la vérité, qui imite bien la nature. […] Il signifie aussi, Qui n' est pas concerté, qui n' est pas étudié" (*Dictionnaires d'autrefois*, ARTFL).
[4] In many ways, authors of civility and rhetoric texts anticipated modern linguistics since they believed that French as linguistic signifier closed the gap between signified and sign. See Jaouën, *De l'art de plaire*, Muratore, *Mimesis*, and Nau, *Le Temps du sublime* for the perception of French as the most transparent language.

beautiful. In the *Remarques*, he describes "l'usage" as the French employed by the court and the salons (55). However, Vaugelas distinguishes between "un bon et un mauvais usage," the latter of which is "composé de la pluralité des voix" while "le bon usage" is found in "la plus saine partie de la Cour et des Écrivains du temps" (55). Vaugelas underscored time and again that the "bel usage" of French doesn't smack of pedantry or scholastic heaviness. So, while every courtier was expected to have excellent French, someone who relied purely on grammatical and rhetorical knowledge without showing deference to "l'usage" was considered a "pedant" (Denis, *Parnasse* 150). *Honnêteté*, on the other hand, was achieved through a careful combination of different kinds of education, a social one that included "la fréquentation des gens de bien" and a classical training in "bonnes lettres" (Faret 29). Only the true *honnête homme* could maneuver his classical training and combine it with his natural social grace to intuitively speak in ways that delighted and tickled the ear, surprising and astonishing his court audience with his verbal prowess.[5] In this way, the *honnête homme* resolved the tension between the Académie and the court, between a technically correct and a socially stunning language.[6]

This verbal prowess was often showcased in the *honnête* conversation, or what Dens calls the "suprême rituel de la société polie," because it created a pleasurable balance between rhetoric and *l'usage* (*Honnête Homme* 21). *Honnête* conversation was the place where theory met practice. Saint-Évremond writes, "c'est l'étude qui augmente les talents de la Nature, mais c'est la conversation qui les met en œuvre et qui les polit" (*Oeuvres Meslées*, T. 2 30). Indeed, in a witty and brilliant conversation an *honnête homme* had to employ all the rhetorical techniques his

[5] See Viala, *La France galante*, pp. 129-139 for the importance of *éblouissement* in language.
[6] Génetiot describes this crossover phenomenon where "chaque participant fréquentant plusieurs cercles, et, ce qui est plus important, ayant souvent la possibilité d'accéder, moyennant l'abandon de toute attitude pédante, aux salons de conversations aristocratiques qui, par cette médiation des 'nouveaux doctes,' reçoivent, filtré et traduit, l'essentiel de la culture antique" (*Poétique* 131). See also Reiss, "Sublimity and the Ends of Art" in *Toward Dramatic Illusion*.

classical education provided.[7] Sorel notes that "on emploie aux endroits nécessaire toutes les puissances attribuées aux discours éloquents" (*Connaissance* 289). But training in rhetoric alone was not sufficient, and the *honnête homme* had to dance carefully between deliberate technique and wit, all while maintaining as unstudied an air as possible. Méré warns of the difficulty of this balance, "il se faut pourtant bien garder de paraitre toujours prêt à dire de bons mots ou de jolies choses" (9). But when it was done well, an *honnête homme*'s conversation seemed completely natural, as if "les choses qu'on y voit semblent y être venues d'elles-mêmes" (Sorel, *Connaissance* 363).[8]

However, an *honnête homme* didn't simply overwhelm his audience with a torrent of witty words, he knew when and how to use them. He knew how to accurately portray his *honnêteté* through his simplicity of style, his use of appropriate silence, and even his non-verbal engagement.

The *honnête homme* possessed a certain elegant simplicity in his speech, which, Sorel admits, can appear overly stark to what he calls the "esprits vulgaires," who are fond of grandiloquence. But in reality, the unstudied effect of the *honnête homme*'s simple, natural language is much more difficult to achieve than the "langages enflés dont la plupart du monde fait tant d'estime" (*Connaissance* 361). The *honnête homme* also knew the importance of silence. Méré emphasizes that *honnêteté* meant knowing how to be silent "à propos et de bonne grâce" and how to "laisser comprendre de certaine chose sans le dire" (45, 62). By knowing when and how to speak, the *honnête homme* avoided saying something which "sent l'artifice," which could jeopardize his reputation and "puisse faire douter de ce qu'on dit" (Méré 58).

Even more than giving a good impression, an *honnête homme*'s silence was key to discretion. Those who were discrete controlled information, and an *honnête homme*'s ability to be

[7] See Strosetzki, *Rhétorique de la conversation*.
[8] In *honnête* conversation "on ne dit rien d'inutile, et le bon sens et les connaissances s'y font remarquer" (Méré 43).

silent could have political repercussions. Bouhours writes that the greatest master of discretion in France is the king, who is "admirablement secret" and whose heart is "fidèle, impénétrable, & muni de tous côtés du silence (*Entretiens* 210). Faret insists that silence one of the harder virtues to accomplish, "il se trouve beaucoup plus de personnes vaillants, plus de libérales, plus de chastes, et plus de modérées en leurs plus violentes passions qu'il ne s'en voit de celles qui savent observer le silence comme il faut" (84). By knowing when to be silent, an *honnête homme* could master himself, and thus could master those around him.[9]

As an accomplished social actor, the *honnête homme* was skilled in communicating with his entire body, using graceful gesture, facial expression, tone of voice, and other non-verbal communication as much as words.[10] These became a kind of secondary speech, allowing his merit to shine through and provide silent witness to the veracity of his words.[11] Sorel claims that as much as verbal eloquence is needed to be *honnête*, the "action des mains, des yeux, de la tête et de tout le corps," are necessary to complete the picture and "donner de l'accomplissement à la vraie éloquence" (*Connaissance* 319). Bouhours later equates this nonverbal effect with the *je ne sais quoi* that is "bien plus aisé de le sentir que de connaître" (*Entretiens* 280). This communication of a feeling through the senses, one that occurred without a rational explanation, meant that the *honnête homme* transmuted himself not only through words, but through his entire being.

Boileau emphasized a similar transparency in the sublime. Unlike most of his contemporaries, who considered the sublime as the highest level of classical rhetoric and synonymous with the grandiloquence, Boileau redefined the sublime as a transcendent form of

[9] "Soyons donc maitres de nous-mêmes et sachons commander à nos propres affections si nous désirons gagner celles d'autrui" (Faret 79).
[10] See Stanton, *The Aristocrat as Art*, and Dens, *L'Honnête homme,* for a discussion on the paradox of the *honnête homme* presenting himself as genuine through his skilled social acting.
[11] Méré writes, "L'action […] est une espèce d'expression, et comme les paroles bien choisies sont agréables quand elles expriment des choses qui plaisent, tout ce qu'on fait de la mine ou du geste est bien reçu quand on le fait de bonne grâce et qu'il y parait du mérite ou de l'esprit" (42).

communication that superseded style. It was the experience of an effective instance of communication. Boileau insisted that part of the sublime's effect was contingent on its clarity and its simplicity. He writes that "une chose peut être dans le style sublime et n'être pourtant pas sublime" (OC, "Préface du *Traité*" 338). But "un discours tout simple exprimera quelquefois mieux la chose que toute la pompe et toute l'ornement" (*OC*, *Traité* 382). Indeed, as I explored in my first chapter, Boileau's preferred conduits for the sublime were simple direct formulae such as the *fiat lux* in Genesis, and Corneille's "Qu'il mourût" from *Horace*.

There is a fascinating parallel between Boileau's sublime and an earlier notion that Sorel develops which he calls the "transcendant" (*Connaissance* 364).[12] Just as Boileau's sublime was not affixed to any particular style, Sorel's "transcendant" was "commun à tous [les trois sortes de styles]" (*Connaissance* 364). Boileau's sublime writer had an intuitive sense of *kairos*, or appropriate poetic timing, as well as a keen understanding of what constituted an authentic tone for the right poetic emotion communicated.[13] This sense of poetic appropriateness is also in the *transcendant* whose communicative power stems from an author's use of proper tone and timing of subject and style.[14] According to Sorel, the *transcendant* was the key to true eloquence, and the mark of the *honnête homme* whose speech has "la vraie élévation [qui] n'est pas connue de nos rhétoriciens vulgaires" (*Connaissance* 364). It is little wonder that when Boileau describes Longinus as an author whose "sentiments ont je ne sais quoi qui marque […] une âme fort élevée

[12] Sorel's 1671 treatise predates Boileau's *Traité* by three years.
[13] See Doran, *Theory of the Sublime* and Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* for a discussion of Boileau's translation and use of *kairos*.
[14] "Tout y doit être solide et grave et convenable au sujet. En ce qui est des choses basses, il les décrit naïvement et véritablement sans pourtant abaisser sa dignité; et pour les choses hautes, il ne les exprime point par l'enflure et par des ornements vains, mais par la force et la netteté des paroles. C'est en cela que se trouve l'élégance du discours avec la vraie et parfaite éloquence" (Sorel, *Connaissance* 364).

au-dessus du commun," he is also an "honnête homme" (*OC*, "Préface du *Traité*" 336). Sorel's *transcendant* contextualizes Longinus' sublime eloquence, as well as his noble character.

Although Racine will make greater use of it for theatrical effects, silence also appears in Boileau's *Traité* as a way to communicate the sublime. He gives the example of Ajax in Hell, whose "seule pensée […] encore qu'il ne parle point" has a certain "grandeur de courage" (351). Like an *honnête homme* whose "manière de s'expliquer est noble et parfaite" even when he is silent (Méré 62), so Ajax's silence has "je ne sais quoi de plus grand que tout ce qu'il aurait pu dire" (*OC, Traité* 428).

Boileau's sublime focuses primarily on discourse, and thus would seemingly not evoke the non-verbal, in the preface to the *Traité*. However, he defines the sublime as "cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu'un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte" (*OC* 338). The word "discours" is ambiguous in the seventeenth century, meaning both the written and the spoken word.[15] Thus, there are occasional moments in the *Traité* when Boileau addresses the importance of non-verbal delivery. He speaks of a "tour extraordinaire d'expression […] [qui] a quelque chose de divin" which displays "une espèce d'enthousiasme et de fureur noble qui anime l'oraison, et qui lui donne un feu et une vigueur toute divine" (*OC* 338, 350). This element of divine transcendence in Boileau's sublime echoes Faret's notion that the *honnête homme*'s capacities are covered by "un petit rayon de Divinité" (24).

Authenticity

A truly *honnête homme* must be authentic and natural. This authenticity was born from an inner virtue that accurately reflected in the representation of the social exterior. Only by having

[15] See Zoberman, "Introduction" in *Les Cérémonies de la parole*.

"le cœur droit et sincère" could the *honnête homme* hope to communicate who he was through his language (Méré 52). The true *honnête homme* found the rare balance between the "bien faire" of virtue and the "bien dire" (Méré 46), and his ability to "bien parler" stemmed from his "pureté des paroles et des pensées" (Sorel, *Connaissance* 278).[16] This authenticity was so powerful that it endowed the *honnête homme* with an almost supernatural ability to say or do everything with a "grâce naturelle" (Faret 24). Bouhours calls this incredible ability the "je ne sais quoi" which inexplicably and ineffably draws others to the *honnête homme*, and without which there is "rien qui frappe, rien qui touche" (*Entretiens* 282). Indeed, it is only by means of his authenticity that the *honnête homme* can instill admiration and respect in "les plus intelligents […] et les plus simples" (*Entretiens* 247). With it he can conquer the hearts of everyone around him, even "l'âme des méchants" (Faret 28).

Although a true *honnête homme* ought to have a natural "grâce" or *je ne sais quoi* (Faret 25), many of his qualities were also constructed or learned. Innate as well as learned qualities all had to be presented well to convince the "esprits délicats" of his authenticity. The portrayal of a "natural" authenticity was perhaps the hardest quality for an *honnête homme* to attain.[17] The most accomplished *honnête homme* was remarkably unremarkable. He understood that "le plus grand art qu'il y ait c'est de savoir cacher l'art" (Sorel, *Connaissance* 300), and masked every effort it took to show himself "sous une apparence naturelle" (Méré 47). Only in this way could the *honnête homme* "ravit les hommes en admiration, leur faisant croire que l'on parle bien naturellement et sans affectation aucune" (Sorel, *Connaissance* 300).

[16] The civility texts are universal in their call to inner authenticity that reflects itself to the outer person.
[17] See Jakobs, "Le Concept de la *négligence*" and Muratore, *Mimesis* for the importance of authenticity in a *honnête homme*'s self-representation.

In order to be socially acceptable, the *honnête homme* had to keep his space and his body pleasingly clean and cared for. "Car si l'on a tant de soin de faire nettoyer des habits et même de tenir des chambres nettes et tous les meubles d'une maison, à plus forte raison se doit-on soucier de son propre corps" (Sorel, *Loix* 11). However, if it looked like the he put too much thought and effort into his outward appearance, he risked being accused of affectation. Similarly, if his speech was too polished, he risked sounding unnatural and would "perdre peu à peu l'usage naturel qui consiste à donner à tout ce qu'on dit les mouvements qu'on sent dans son cœur" (Méré 71).

Paradoxically, the best way to approach this complexity was through a physical *négligence* and a verbal *naïveté* which were both carefully constructed and hidden arts.[18] An *honnête homme* could achieve a physical *negligence* through an "agréable simplicité, qui doit reluire en toutes les actions du corps et de l'esprit" (Faret 27). For instance, to avoid looking affected in one's physical dress, Sorel admonishes that "il faut qu'un vrai Galant n'ait rien qui soit neuf et beau, et fait exprès" (*Loix* 16). His physical *négligence* allowed the *honnête homme* to communicate that "l'on ne fait rien que comme sans y penser et sans aucune sorte de peine" (Faret 25).

Similarly, *honnêtes gens* spoke "d'une manière qui ne sentait ni l'art ni l'étude mais si claire et si naturelle que pour les entendre d'abord il ne fallait qu'avoir de l'esprit" (Méré 28). The *honnête homme* could accomplish this "excellence d'un style naïf" in his speech by imitating nature since "l'art ne saurait imiter s'il ne suit les traces de la Nature même" (Sorel, *Connaissance* 362). But an *honnête homme*'s speech, while appearing effortless and natural, should not actually be incorrect in grammar and syntax. Vaugelas warns that while "la naïveté est bien une des premières perfections et des plus grands charmes de l'éloquence," negligence in grammar communicated a carelessness or laziness that was a vice for the truly *honnête* (303). But the

[18] See Stanton, "Pre-Texts and Prototypes the Parameters of Self-Definition" in *The Aristocrat as Art* for a discussion on the importance of physical and verbal imperfections.

"franchise" and the "simplicité" of an *honnête homme*'s "naïve" and "natural" way of speaking was sure to please and impress other *honnêtes gens* and members of the court, particularly women (Méré 52). Women were considered better judges of "natural" speech and action because women were thought to be closer to nature than men were. Thus, they were not fooled by the affectations in the language, actions, and physical appearance of someone was pretending to be *honnête*. Méré reports that women often did the work to "désabuser la Cour de la fausse galanterie" (18).

Authenticity was not just important for the *honnête homme*, it also played a key role in the production of the sublime, and a writer's accurate mimesis of nature ensured a sublime effect. Indeed, in the *Traité*, Boileau assures his reader that the sublime was "jamais dans un plus haut degré de perfection, que lorsqu'il ressemble si fort à la Nature, qu'on le prend pour la Nature même" (*OC* 374). Like the *naïveté* and *négligence* of the *honnête homme*, the sublime had to appear completely natural, although it was created through a carefully structured and hidden art. The more a writer imitated nature, the more likely they were to create a convincing, astonishing, and overwhelming sublime effect, since nature itself produces that effect on us.[19] Boileau describes this in *Epître IX*, "Mais la nature est vraie, et d'abord on la sent; / C'est elle seule en tout qu'on admire et qu'on aime" (*OC* 135).

Like the pretend *honnête homme* who pays too much attention to himself, Boileau claims that the sublime could not appear in a work that was too polished. In writing that was "si poli et si limé […] il faut craindre la bassesse," because it meant an author did not have the ability to hide the appearance of effort in their work (*OC*, *Traité* 386). Instead an author aspiring to write the

[19] While Boileau's influence on the Romantic sublime has been thoroughly studied, I argue that the civility texts on *honnête* imitation of nature equally anticipate Burke's notion of the sublime. For instance, Méré says, "Mais si nous regardons les divers ouvrages de la nature, le coucher du Soleil, une nuit tranquille, et ces astres qui roulent si majestueusement sur nos têtes, nous en sommes toujours étonnés" (36). Likewise, Bouhours writes about the ineffable nature of the sea in the first chapter of his *Entretiens*. For more on the use and perspective of Nature in the seventeenth century, see Tocanne, *L'Idée de la nature en France*.

sublime must imitate the "petites négligences," the small errors found in the work of the most gifted authors. These errors are difficult to fake, and are proof of someone's sublime mind, of someone who, "parce que leur esprit, qui ne s'étudiait qu'au grand, ne pouvait pas s'arrêter aux petites choses" (*OC*, *Traité* 386).

For Boileau, one author who excelled in this kind of naïve and *négligent* writing was Jean de La Fontaine. La Fontaine was universally known and lauded as an *honnête homme* and an excellent writer. Boileau describes the beauty, the excellence, and the pleasure which La Fontaine imparts to his reader through his writing. La Fontaine's work was filled with beauties that were "de celles qu'il faut sentir, et qui ne se prouvent point," and had a "je ne sais quoi qui nous charme, et sans lequel la beauté même n'aurait ni grâce ni beauté" (*OC*, *Dissertation sur Joconde* 316). Boileau's description of La Fontaine's writing describes what would later become his definition of the sublime, namely something which makes itself felt by its effect. In his *Réflexion X*, Boileau writes "Le Sublime n'est pas proprement une chose qui se prouve et qui se démontre; mais […] c'est un Merveilleux qui saisit, qui frappe et qui se fait sentir" (*OC* 546). Likewise, as an *honnête homme* who drew from "un grand fonds d'esprit ou de mérite qui se répand sur tout ce qu'on dit et sur toutes les actions de la vie" (Méré 75). La Fontaine prefigured Boileau's description of Longinus as both an *honnête homme* and as an author whose thoughts had a "je ne sais quoi qui marque […] un esprit sublime" (*OC*, "Préface du *Traité*" 336).

Adaptability

Creating the desired effect on an audience with their language took exceptional relational skill and uncanny adaptability for both the *honnête homme* and the author of a sublime work. For the *honnête homme*, this meant more than simply being in court, or even being of noble blood; it

required the ability to interact with and please "toutes sortes de gens" (Méré 77). For this, he needed an intuitive sense of his audience, an ability to read their every mood, and a quick judgement to change himself to meet their needs.[20] One of his greatest abilities was his adaptability, or what Faret called "souplesse" (81), which allowed him to "traiter les gens selon leur esprit et s'accommoder à leur goût" (Méré 53). His quick perception gave him keen awareness of the appropriate expectations of *bienséance*, which he ought never to abuse for fear of unnecessarily shocking or disgusting his audience and risk losing belief in his authenticity.[21] For instance, he knew not to use military language in front of women to whom such things were often unknown and thus boring.[22]

A true *honnête homme* also never lost touch with his place in the hierarchy around him. He never disrespected those above his station, but neither did he neglect or mistreat those whom he considered his inferiors. In fact, it went without saying that *honnêtes gens* were genuinely and impeccably "civils et courtois" to all (Faret 90). His exquisite charm and social discernment made every person feel like the individual object of his interest (or conquest).[23]

Although all of the *honnête homme*'s qualities together made him "un homme accompli," it was his adaptability which allowed him to accurately read his audience in order to achieve his

[20] Faret describes the attention to detail this requires, "j'ajoute pour dernier et général précepte, que jamais il n'entreprenne d'entretenir personne pour lui plaire qu'il n'ait premièrement bien considéré son humeur, ses inclinations, et de quelle trempe il a l'esprit, afin de n'aller point plus bas ni plus haut qu'il ne faut, mais de l'accompagner de si près que tous ses discours s'ajuste à sa portée" (102).

[21] Faret warns to this effect, "Jamais un honnête homme n'abusera ni de ce qu'il peut dire, ni des actions de bienséance dont il saura l'usage et sur tout en la fréquentation des grands, qui se dégouteront aussi tôt des cérémonies superflues dont il penserait les obliger" (76). Similarly, Bouhours writes "[J]'entends par honnêteté une certaine politesse naturelle qui fait que les honnêtes gens ne gardent pas moins de bienséance dans ce qu'ils disent que dans ce qu'ils font" (*Entretiens* 180).

[22] Vaugelas often emphasizes the relational understanding of the *honnêtes gens* which involved knowing how to limit language so as not tire or bore the audience, and how to properly match words to their subject. "[La personne qui sait user la langue d'une belle sorte] ne multiplie point les synonymes des mots ni des phrase, qui arrêtent l'esprit du Lecteur […] il soutient […] bien la grandeur et […] de son style selon la dignité du sujet" (467).

[23] "Un esprit bien fait s'ajuste à tout ce qu'il rencontre, et comme on disait d'Alcibiade, il est si accommodant, et fait toutes choses d'une certaine sorte qu'il semble qu'il ait une particulière inclination à chacune e celle qu'on lui voit faire" (Faret 81).

primary purpose: to give them pleasure (Faret 22).[24] Faret writes tellingly, "Je trouve que le plus assuré moyen est de prévenir les opinions de ceux de qui nous désirons être aimés. C'est ici l'un des plus hauts mystères de notre Art […] que doit avoir celui qui prétende passer pour Honnête homme" (16). The pleasure the *honnête homme* gave others was something that had to be experienced. It had a "quelque chose d'inexplicable" and a "je ne sais quoi de noble" which "se connait mieux à le voir pratiquer qu'à le dire" (Méré 77). The *honnêtes gens* had an innate sense of adaptability and relational awareness of what would "ravit les yeux et les Cours de tout le monde" (Faret 24). In fact, although true *honnêteté* could take infinite forms, depending on the *honnête homme*'s intended audience, it was recognizable precisely because it "[honnêteté] plait toujours, et c'est à cela principalement qu'on la peut reconnaitre" (Méré 75).

The *honnêtes gens* were not the only ones who exhibited adaptability toward their audience for the purpose of producing pleasure. Much of Boileau's *Traité* describes the sublime in terms of the relationship between an author and their audience, a significant part of which is an author's intuition regarding what language speaks most directly to their audience. This intuition shows much of the same social judgement and "souplesse" demonstrated by the *honnête homme*. The unquestionable sign of the sublime in an author's creation is pleasure. Indeed, Boileau writes that when the sublime occurs it will "plait universellement et dans toutes ses parties" (*OC, Traité* 349). Like the *honnête homme*, the author of the sublime had to know and adapt to their audience in order to understand what would create the greatest pleasure. In other words, sublime pleasure isn't formulaic, it's relational.

Boileau's *Art Poétique*, published in tandem with the *Traité,* is often thought to be the epitome of neoclassical formulaic rules for good writing. However, the very length and detail to

[24] Faret's very title, *L'Honnête homme, ou l'art de plaire à la cour*, indicates that the creation of pleasure is intimately tied to what made the *honnête homme* what he was.

which Boileau goes – the *Art Poétique* is over a thousand lines long – emphasizes the impossibility of reducing the creation of an excellent text to a formulaic process.[25] References to the language of *ravissement*, the touch of the divine, admiration, and *étonnement* of the soul are scattered throughout the *Art Poétique*, recalling Boileau's definition of the sublime in the *Traité* as, that which "ravit, il transporte, et produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise" (*OC* 342). Pleasure plays a complicated role in the *Art Poétique*. Boileau gives difficult and almost contradictory instructions regarding it, first warning the writer against the "vain plaisir les trompeuses amorces" (*OC* 157), and then insisting, "N'offrez rien au lecteur que ce qui peut lui plaire" (*OC* 159). His clearest emphasis on the importance of pleasure comes in Chant III, the portion where he speaks of theater, implying that perhaps more than any other kind of writing, a playwright must know what will produce pleasure.[26] Boileau explains that to create good theater, "Le secret est d'abord de plaire et de toucher" (*OC* 169). This is done not by rhetorical precision, but by knowing one's spectatorship. Boileau engages with his fictional would-be playwright and asks, "Voulez-vous longtemps plaire et jamais ne lasser ? / Faites choix d'un héros propre à m'intéresser" (*OC* 174). He tells his writer, "Étudiez la cour, et connaissez la Ville. / L'une et l'autre est toujours en modèles fertile" (*OC* 178). Likewise, a good playwright will adhere to *bienséance*, and will "sans se diffamer aux yeux du Spectateur / plait par la raison seule, et jamais ne la choque" (*OC* 179).[27]

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[25] The very first lines of the *Art Poétique* warn the writer of the vanity of an easy writing career,

> C'est en vain qu'au Parnasse un téméraire auteur
> Pense de l'art des vers atteindre la hauteur :
> S'il ne sent point du ciel l'influence secrète,
> Si son astre en naissant ne l'a formé poète (*OC* 157).

I agree with Brody who argues in *Boileau and Longinus* that one cannot read the *Art Poétique* without the *Traité du Sublime*, and to read them separately impoverishes them both.

[26] In Chant III, Boileau uses the word "plaire" seven times. In contrast, he only uses it once in Chant I, while in Chant II and Chant IV, he avoids it entirely. The use of "plaisir" follows a similar pattern with 6 uses in Chant III, one use in Chant I, two in Chant II, and none in Chant IV.

[27] "Mais la scène demande une exacte raison; / L'étroite bienséance y veut être gardée" (*OC, Art Poétique* 172).

Racine, Playwright of Honnêteté and the Sublime

In 1665, Racine was an up-and-coming author, who wanted to strike a balance between *honnêteté* and heroism, between something which would appeal to the court, but which would also be acceptable to critics such as Saint-Évremond and the Abbé de Villars. These critics much preferred the heroic grandeur and politically motivated plots of Cornelian tragedy.[28] They identified *honnêteté* and *galanterie* with lighter genres, *galanterie* could be used for pastoral plays, and *honnêteté* was excellent for engagement with one's love interest via conversation, letters, or poems. But the *honnête homme* whose desire was to be "seulement un amant fidèle" was incompatible with serious focus of the tragic hero (cited in Forestier *OC*, "Critique de *Bérénice*" 515). They thought Racine's plays emphasized love too much, and his use of *galant* and *tendre* language and were thus incongruous with tragic action.[29] However, Racine knew that a good author ought to consider the audience's taste, and he knew what tropes his *honnête* spectators enjoyed.[30]

Thus, after the relative obscurity of his first play, *La Thébaïde*, Racine changed his approach for *Alexandre le Grand*. In it, Racine attempted to bridge two seemingly contradictory genres, creating a play that, because of its hero, should belong to the "registre de la tragédie historique," but whose language and presentation is more of a "tragédie galante teintée

[28] Incidentally, these critics also condemned Corneille for his use of *galanterie* in *Œdipe* and other plays.

[29] As his prefaces indicate, these accusations against Racine's *galant* reputation occurred throughout his lifetime. Pyrrhus (1667), Néron (1669), Antiochus (1670), the whole cast of characters in *Bajazet* (1672), Achille (1674), and Hippolyte (1677) were all considered too *galant* for characters of tragedy. Whether because Racine focuses on their internal passions instead of their warrior characteristics (as in the cases of Pyrrhus and Achille), or because he conforms a foreign court too much to reflect the French social aesthetic (as in the case of *Bajazet*). While an in-depth study of the *galanterie* and *honnêteté* in each of these plays is beyond the scope of this chapter, Racine made use of his century's aesthetic to create specific effects in each of these plays.

[30] Sorel writes that the most accomplished authors knew how to balance the taste of their readers with excellent writing technique, both by reading excellent books and by conforming to their context. "Ce sont véritablement les Auteurs étant créateurs de leurs Ouvrages comme on a dit d'un de nos plus fameux écrivains […] Pour premier fondement il faut que la matière et le style des Livres symbolisent *aux humeurs du siècle*. […] Les auteurs qui recherchent la *gloire et le crédit doivent être des gens qui s'introduisent dans toute sorte de compagnie*" (*Connaissance* 19, my emphasis).

d'héroïsme" (Forestier, "Notice d'*Alexandre*" 1292). Although Racine took a cue from Corneille's *Œdipe*, whose subplot features two secondary characters interacting in a *galant* manner, Racine takes a dramatic risk by placing the *honnête* and *galant* Alexandre front and center as the main character.[31] Although this was a bold theatrical move, seventeenth-century historical perception was on Racine's side. Alexandre was not only one of the greatest warrior heroes of antiquity, but was also considered "un Prince des plus galants que l'antiquité ait produits" (Sorel, *Loix* 5). Saint-Évremond, despite his condemnation of Racine's *Alexandre* as a tragic subject, does believe the ancient warrior to be *honnête*, citing Alexandre's civility which was "antithetical to the 'barbarian princes' of old" and was one of the "fascinating figures" that were the subject of *honnête* conversation (Stanton 65). By drawing on this well-established tradition of Alexandre as an *honnête homme*, Racine is not only anchoring *honnêteté* in antiquity, but also creating a flattering sense of continuity between his contemporary audience's taste and the past.

More than just redefining Alexandre's *honnêteté* to be applicable to classical tragedy, however, Racine is also nodding to Longinus' recognition of Alexandre as a sublime voice. In the *Traité*, Longinus describes Alexandre as one of those "grands hommes" who have "hautes et solides pensées," and who say sublime and extraordinary things (*OC*, *Traité* 351). As evidence of Alexandre's ability to create the sublime, Longinus describes the anecdote of Alexandre's response to Parmenion. Parmenion, astounded that Alexandre is refusing Darius' offer of half of Asia and marriage to his daughter states, "Pour moi, si j'étais Alexandre, j'accepterai ces offres." To which Alexandre replies, "Et moi aussi […] si j'étais Parménion" (*OC, Traité* 351). Longinus describes the witty, humorous response of this extraordinary and "high spirited" man as "'plein d'entrain,

[31] In fact, all of the characters in *Alexandre* employ *galant* and *honnête* tropes. For instance, Taxile complains to his sister that, "Les beaux yeux d'Axiane, ennemis de la Paix / Contre votre Alexandre arment tous leurs attraits" (I.i.71-72). Mixing metaphors of love and war was common in *honnête* conversation. See Stanton, "Self-Assertion and Metaphors of War" in *The Aristocrat as Art*.

de vivacité'" (Gilby, "Du sublime chez Corneille" 495).[32] Not only is Alexandre's response funny, but his wit allows us to identify with his point of view. Like the *honnête homme*, the person capable of creating the sublime had to understand exactly how to communicate to his audience, and both imply "une conscience aiguë d'autres êtres humains" (Gilby, "Du sublime chez Corneille" 495). Racine knows Longinus considers Alexandre capable of the sublime, and he combines this with the conqueror's reputation as an *honnête homme* to create a play that Madame de Sévigné would consider among Racine's best works. She writes to her daughter, "jamais il n'ira plus loin qu'*Alexandre* et qu'*Andromaque*" (*Correspondance,* t. 1, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 16 mars 1672," 459).

But Racine knew he was walking a fine line between novelty and tradition, and he was aware of the potential backlash of creating an *honnête* tragic hero. Racine thus tried to give Alexandre the verbal and social abilities of a well-educated seventeenth-century *honnête homme* without losing the heroic glory of the ancient warrior, catering to the "tastes for the heroic and the galant" (France, *Rhetoric and Truth* 175). In the preface to *Alexandre*, he carefully distinguishes those who condemned his hero as too *galant* from those who recognized Alexandre's historical reputation for conquest of all forms. The former, Racine claims, had clearly only read history in novels where a hero "ne doit jamais faire un pas sans la permission de sa Maitresse" (*OC* 126). But the latter, like the *galant* young King Louis XIV, to whom Racine dedicates his play, were themselves "de grands Héros" who "ont droit de juger de la vertu de leurs pareils" (*OC* 126). These were Racine's intended audience because they understood that Alexandre's *honnêteté* was part of what made him a great man.

[32] Interestingly, although in this article Gilby describes the relationship this scene has to Corneille's theater, she leaves out any reference to Racine's play and how he may have been envisioning a sublime character for Alexandre.

As part of his creation of Alexandre as a tragic and sublime *honnête homme*, Racine placed him among other *honnêtes gens*, whose reactions to the complex political situation reflected the appropriate values of Racine's contemporary context. This is particularly evident in the central role the Racine's female characters play. According to the civility texts, it was vitally important that an *honnête homme* frequent women's company because women not only imparted social niceties and socially elegant language, but also taught the *honnête homme* the art of diplomacy and how to navigate delicate interpersonal or political situations.[33] The *honnête homme* must also treat women with great respect, since they cemented his reputation.[34]

It is telling then that in creating Alexandre as an *honnête homme*, this play is the first in Racine's corpus where women have primacy both social and political arbiters.[35] Unlike the *Thébaïde*, where Jocaste and Antigone bewail the decisions made by their male counterparts but are powerless against them, Cléofile and Axiane in *Alexandre* take a much more active political role. As befits characters in an *honnête* play, they hold positions as pivotal political influencers in the affairs of their male counterparts.

The action of the play centers on Alexandre's impending attack on two Indian kings, Porus and Taxile. He holds back for love of Cléofile, Taxile's sister, who hopes to persuade her brother to make an alliance with the Greek conqueror. Axiane, lover of Porus and ex-lover of Taxile, hopes to create a united front between Porus and Taxile in order to drive Alexandre out of their lands. Each woman holds emotional sway over one of the three men. Cléofile believes she can influence Alexandre, and she tells her brother Taxile,

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[33] See Bury, *Littérature* and DeJean, *Ancients* for the importance of diplomacy for *honnêteté*. See also Biet, "Women and Power" which explores the political power of women's tears and the resulting pity in men.

[34] Faret puts it thus, "Or la première et la plus utile leçon que l'on doit pratiquer c'est […] de tacher à mériter les bonnes grâces des femmes qui ont la réputation de donner le prix aux hommes, et de les faire passer pour tels que bon leur semble" (48).

[35] See Conroy, "Gender, Power, and Authority," and Desnain, "Les Faux Miroirs" for the role of social arbitration women play in Racine's plays.

Vous connaissez les soins qu'il me rend tous les jours,
Il ne tenait qu'à vous d'en arrêter le cours.
Vous me voyez ici Maitresse de son âme,
Cent messages secrets m'assurent de sa flamme (I.i.47-50, my emphasis).

Similarly, Axiane is certain of her control over Porus, since he uses similar *galant* language to describe his passion for her,

Ah! Madame, arrêtez, et connaissez ma flamme,
Ordonnez de mes jours, disposez de mon âme,
La Gloire y peut beaucoup, je ne m'en cache pas,
Mais que n'y peuvent point tant de divins appas! (I.iii.329-332, my emphasis).

But the wild card is Taxile, and the two women wrestle to influence him knowing that eventual political victory hinges on their ability to convince him to give his allegiance to their respective lovers.

From the first scene of the play, Taxile recognizes that both Cléofile and Axiane hold political sway over the men. He tells his sister that, "Vous pouvez, sans rougir du pouvoir de vos charmes, / Forcer ce grand Guerrier à vous rendre les armes" (I.i.61-62). Cléofile uses various tactics to convince Taxile to surrender to Alexandre, including jealousy and his fear of political inferiority. But while he is tempted to obey his sister's plea for peace, he knows he is equally susceptible to Axiane whom he describes as "Reine de tous les cœurs" including his own heart (I.i.73).

In some ways, Axiane is more confident in her political influence than Cléofile. She is so sure of her power over Taxile that she declares to Porus, "Sais-je pas que sans moi sa timide valeur / Succomberait bientôt aux ruses de sa Sœur?" (I.iii.299-300). Where Cléofile was forced to engage Taxile using carefully structured arguments, Axiane is certain that Taxile's love for her will allow her to maneuver him into rejoining Porus in the fight against Alexandre. She tells Porus, "Laissez agir mes soins sur l'esprit de Taxile," promising him that, "Je le vais engager à combattre pour vous" (I.iii. 346, 348).

Her charms don't work, however, and Taxile responds coldly to her plea, "Madame, je m'en vais disposer mon armée. […] Porus fait son devoir, et je ferai le mien" (II.iv.625,626). Axiane is shocked at her lack of power and cries that Taxile's "sombre froideur" is treasonous (II.v.628). But she regains confidence in her persuasive abilities, hoping to move Taxile's subjects instead who are "plus braves que leur Maître" (II.v.666).

However, when Taxile claims to have killed Porus, Axiane finally realizes the extent of her failure to influence him. She scathingly lowers her register to the informal "tu," giving him all the reasons why he should have listened to her, including that he should have rescued her, his "Maîtresse en danger," a title she had dangled just out of his reach before (III.ii.787). She then denounces him as impotent, claiming that it is Cléofile, and not Taxile, who is the actual political power who has triumphed. "Va, tu sers bien le Maître à qui ta sœur te donne" (III.ii.789). Axiane's subsequent exchanges with Taxile are entirely in the informal register, giving this play Racine's most violent use of "tu."[36] Her, "Adieu, tu me connais. Aime-moi si tu veux" emphasizes not only

[36] Of the 27 instances the word "tu" is used in this play, Axiane uses 18 of them in direct engagement with Taxile. Most of the Racine's other plays uses the informal register in keeping with social hierarchy, a royal speaking to their confidant, a greater hero speaking to a lesser (as in the case of Oreste and Pylade), a monologue where the intimacy of such a register would not be heard by the interlocutor. There are two other times when Racine's use of "tu" is almost as violent as it is in *Alexandre*. The first is in *Britannicus*, where Agrippine berates Néron. But this exchange is as much a mother correcting her son's disrespect (and thus a proper use of "tu") as it is an attempt of a powerful woman to put a powerful man in his place. The second, in *Bajazet*, is when Roxane talks to Bajazet. But even here, Roxane oscillates between her desire to woo the prince (when she uses "vous") and when she attempts to force him to bend to her will (at which point she uses "tu"). All data was gathered through ARTFL.

her deliberate disrespect of Taxile's royal status,[37] but of her mocking indifference, one of the great enemies of love in the seventeenth century (III.ii.799). [38]

When it becomes clear that Taxile is dead and Porus is his killer, each woman's interaction with Alexandre indicates her political savvy. Cléofile uses an indirect interrogative approach. Her questions indicates her deliberate diplomatic deference to Alexandre. She knows she could call on her privileged position as the Emperor's lover to demand vengeance for her brother, but she chooses instead to give Alexandre the freedom to act of his own accord. "Qui lui sert au tombeau l'amitié d'Alexandre? / Sans le venger, Seigneur, l'y verrez-vous descendre?" (V.iii.1525-26).

In contrast, Axiane frames all of her demands toward Alexandre as imperatives. She is desperate to force Alexandre's hand into condemning Porus and herself to death, thereby inadvertently granting them the final glorious victory. She thus constructs her argument in a way meant to remind Alexandre that as Cléofile's lover, he ought to obey her. "Oui, Seigneur, écoutez les pleurs de Cléofile" (V.iii.1529).

But Axiane's overconfidence is once again her demise and she assumes that Cléofile's uncertainly phrased petition means that Cléofile has ultimately failed in her political influence over Alexandre. Axiane triumphantly thinks that her own political influence will take precedent and she gets carried away in her insults of the deceased Taxile, "Tous ses efforts en vain l'ont voulu conserver, / Elle en a fait un lâche, et ne l'a pu sauver" (V.iii.1531-1532). Alexandre sees through

[37] Civility texts used proper use of register to defend French as the greatest European language, superior even to Latin. "Quant aux titres de grandeur, moindre la Royal, on ne doit faire aucune difficulté de mêler l'un avec l'autre, notre Langue s'étant réservé cette liberté, que l'Italienne ni l'Espagnole n'ont pas, à cause que *vous*, en ces deux langues est un terme incompatible avec la civilité […] Les Latins sont bien encore moins cérémonieux, qui dissent toujours tu à qui que ce soit, et il me semble que nous avons pris un milieu et un tempérament bien raisonnable entre ces deux extrémités, en donnant par honneur le nombre pluriel à une seul personne, quand nous lui disons *vous* et en évitant dans le commerce continuel de la vie la fréquent et importune répétition des termes dont les Italiens et les Espagnols se servent en sa place" (Vaugelas 441).

[38] Racine would have been familiar with Madeleine de Scudéry's cartography of love, *La Carte de tendre* where the *Lac d'indifférence* and the town of *Oublie* are situated in close proximity. See Barbafieri, *Atrée et Céladon* and Viala, "Racine et la carte de tendre."

Axiane's ruse and grants Porus his life, thus robbing him of his ultimate victory, but also proving that Cléofile has read her audience better and used her political influence more astutely. Axiane demands, forces and bluntly throws her influence around. But ultimately her over-confidence and her assumptive amour-propre lose her the political battle. In the end, Cléofile knows how to properly wield her influence over Alexandre, acting in an *honnête* way that gives the Emperor the impression of being the one to choose.[39]

While the overall structure of *Alexandre* illustrates aspects of an *honnête* society, Racine also crafts the character of Alexandre as the epitome of the true *honnête homme*, contrasted to the extremes of Porus, a militant nobleman, and Taxile, a *galant homme*.

Porus represents the warrior aristocrat whose driving ambition is glory and freedom. His was a character type commonly found in French theater before and during the Fronde, including many of Corneille's heroic characters like Médée, Horace, and Cinna. However, an autonomous nobility posed a threat to the centralized power that Louis XIV wanted to create in his absolutist court.[40] *Alexandre* was produced in 1665, a mere four years after the death of Mazarin and after Louis XIV had begun his personal reign. A power-hungry character like Porus, who did not hesitate to question and antagonize the authority of the king for his own personal glory, would have rung alarm bells in the young king's head. Porus is defeated by Alexandre in the end with an important and flattering *dénouement*. But equally important is that his defeat does not occur through war (although Alexandre is perfectly capable of military strength), but that instead Porus recognizes Alexandre as the greater man, and therefore worthy of his obedience. Racine thus

[39] Axiane thus conforms to the domineering characteristics of the *maîtresse* of the novels that Racine condemns in his preface, whose lover "ne doit jamais faire un pas sans la permission de sa Maîtresse" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Alexandre*" 126). While it is easy to fault the misogynistic viewpoint that diminishes the possibility of a powerfully vocal woman, it is also important to recognize that the self-effacing and diplomatic characteristics that Cléofile exhibits are the same ones that the civility writers lauded as exemplary in the *honnête homme*.

[40] See Barabafieri, "Introduction" in *Atrée et Céladon* for character types before and after the Fronde. Similarly, see Ranum, "Patronage and History from Richelieu to Colbert" in *Artisans of Glory* for a description of this shift in power.

underlines both the nobility of Porus and Alexandre's *honnêteté* by having the former submit of his own volition to the latter's authority.

Taxile is a different kind of hero than Porus. Whereas Porus embodies the heroic qualities of the autonomous aristocrat, Taxile represents the *galant homme*. On the one hand, he recognizes from the beginning of the play that Alexandre is a man of superior quality, and acknowledges the wisdom of surrendering to the "Maître de l'Univers" (I.i.19). But this desire to acquiesce to Alexandre's greater glory is overshadowed by what he feels for Axiane. He is tempted to give up what he knows is right for the sake of his mistress, and is thus more like the kind of novelesque hero Racine critiques in his preface. Taxile's language is far more *galant* than that of Porus, and his first description of Axiane is filled with *galant* metaphors. Her "beaux yeux" more than just beautiful, they are deadly "ennemis de la Paix," tyrants that arm themselves against Alexandre and all who support him (I.i.71). She is "reine de tous les cœurs" whom Taxile longs to serve, and yet he fears her "illustre colère" (I.i.73, 77). Ultimately Taxile's recognition of Alexandre's greatness wins out, and he resists Axiane's political maneuvering (as we saw above), despite his love of her. In contrast to these two characters, Racine presents Alexandre as the perfect *honnête homme*.

Racine introduces his play with a dedicatory letter to the king where he draws a parallel between Alexandre and Louis XIV. But Racine claims that Louis XIV has superseded Alexandre because he is following a path "plus nouveau et plus difficile que celui par où Alexandre y est monté" (*OC* 123). Louis XIV is conquering the world, not by prowess in battle (although Racine is careful to avoid any implication that Louis lacks military ability), but by reducing the world to admiration by his "éclatante" reputation based solely on the force of his virtue (*OC* 123). Racine sees Louis as greater than Alexandre because he begins where the other left off, he can convince the world of his greatness without having to physically conquer it. He can remain at home, "sans

s'éloigner presque du centre de son royaume," maintaining his *honnête* image with his court, while simultaneously spreading the "lumière" of his reputation of glory "jusqu'au bout du monde" (*OC* 124). Where posterity praised the prowess of Alexandre after his death, Louis XIV's greater virtues are extolled within his lifetime. By associating Alexandre and Louis XIV, Racine is creating a double layer of expectation: he is currying Louis XIV's royal favor by equating the young king with Alexandre's historical reputation for glory and honor, and he is simultaneously ensuring that his audience will recognize in Alexandre the same *galanterie* and *honnêteté* for which Louis XIV was already famous.[41]

Racine fashions Alexandre as the quintessential *honnête homme*, before whom the whole world is silent with "un silence d'étonnement et d'admiration" (*OC*, "Au Roi" 123). This is the language of the Longinian sublime, and Racine envisions Alexandre as one who will have a powerful impact on those around him. Alexandre's reputation for virtue and authenticity precedes him, and both Porus and Taxile desire to emulate his superiority. He is savvy in his judgement and adapts his speech according to his audience; he engages with *galant* dialogues with his lover Cléofile; he speaks wisely to Porus as a warrior, and respectfully to Axiane as a woman. Alexandre thus embodies all the *honnête homme* characteristics of being worthy of emulation, of having transparency and being authentic and adaptable to his audience. Indeed, Racine's *dénouement* paints a man that no one, friend or enemy, can remain indifferent to.[42]

[41] The civility texts portray the court as the natural habitat of the *honnête homme*, and the natural center of the court as the king. In other words, what better example of *honnêteté* could there be than the king himself? Méré writes, "Ce que je voudrais principalement pour un Roi ce ferait qu'il eut de l'esprit et qu'il fut honnête homme, selon mon sens on ne saurait être assez achevé dans l'un ni dans l'autre" (32). See Bilis, *Passing Judgement*, and Denis, *Le Parnasse galant*, especially chapter one where she speaks of cartographies of *galanterie*.

[42] Alexandre fits Faret's description of the *honnête gens* whose "conduite est si accompagnée de tant de prudence, qu'il n'y a guère de ténèbres si obscures qui la puissent faire égarer, et particulièrement celle de leur langue est si certaine que jamais elle ne se précipite. Leur jugement la fait toujours demeurer dans la raison […] ils sont civils et courtois non seulement à servir et respecter ceux qui sont au-dessus de leur condition et à honorer leurs égaux, mais encore jusques à déférer plusieurs choses à ceux qui leur sont inférieurs" (90).

The *honnête homme* was simultaneously a "savant et soldat" and his "disposition de corps" allowed him to "accommoder à toutes sortes d'exercices de guerre et de plaisir" (Faret 29, 21). Indeed, there was "rien de plus beau" than for a young prince to excel in "les amours et les armes" (Méré 82). Historically, Alexandre was depicted as a warrior and a lover whose conquests generated great "admiration" (Méré 28). Méré was of the opinion that everyone, and "particulièrement les Dames" preferred Alexandre to other ancient heroes like Cesar. Where Cesar's "sentiment de gloire joint à l'amour lui fit regarder les Dames comme des conquêtes," Alexandre was an "honnête homme" who had "de l'esprit," hiding his pursuit of women behind sweeter and more socially acceptable language (90, 32).

Porus and Taxile recognize Alexandre's superior quality as a warrior. Taxile argues that to ignore the peace offering of a king of such great military prowess would be idiotic. Alexandre's military power which "fait trembler tant d'États sous ses lois," will also grant honor to those who recognize his power (I.ii.155). Porus agrees, "Oui je consens qu'au Ciel on élève Alexandre" but then adds that the only way to equal such greatness is to conquer it, "Mais si je puis, Seigneur, je l'en ferai descendre" (I.ii.161-162). Cléofile and Axiane also extol Alexandre's military merits. In the beginning lines of the play, Cléofile uses Alexandre's military capacity to discourage Taxile from fighting against him, and thus maneuver her brother into an alliance with her lover,

> Quoi, vous allez combattre un Roi dont la puissance
> Semble forcer le Ciel à prendre sa défense,
> Sous qui toute l'Asie a vu tomber ses Rois,
> Et qui tient la Fortune attaché à ses Lois ? (I.i.1-4)

Axiane, on the other hand, leverages Alexandre's military prowess to push Porus in conflict, and to achieve a greatness equal to that of the conqueror,

> Vous verrai-je accablé du soin de nos Provinces,
> Attaquer seul un Roi vainqueur de tant de Princes? […]
> Contre un fier Ennemi précipitez vos pas. (I.iii.309-310, 343)

As much as he is a warrior, Alexandre is also unapologetically a lover. Many of Racine's critics were confused by Alexandre who was so confident of his military superiority that he could pause in his pursuit of glory to make verbal love to his mistress. When he first engages in conversation with Cléofile, Alexandre uses *galant* tropes and metaphors, referring to her "divins appas" that have given him the strength to conquer the world since "l'amour a combattu pour moi" (III.vi.884, 887). She is paradoxically both his conqueror and his conquered victim. He declares,

> Tout cède autour de vous. C'est à vous de vous rendre
> Votre cœur l'a promis, voudra-t-il s'en défendre?
> Et lui seul pourrait-il échapper aujourd'hui
> A l'ardeur d'un vainqueur qui ne cherche que lui? (III.vi.889-892).[43]

Alexandre's engagement with Cléofile is a conversation between equals. Cléofile knows that as a warrior, Alexandre is driven by glory, "La Gloire fit toujours vos transports les plus doux" (III.vi.907). She worries that perhaps she is nothing more than another kind of conquest for him that, "La Gloire de me vaincre est tout ce qu'il désire" (III.vi.910). Alexandre responds to his lover's concerns with a serious answer. He honestly admits that he is motivated by glory, an answer which legitimizes Cléofile's concerns and subtly flatters her accurate perception of him. But he rhetorically transforms Cléofile's fear of being yet another of his conquests, and reminds her that she has equally conquered him,

> Mais hélas, que vos yeux, ces aimables tyrans,
> Ont produit sur mon cœur des effets différents!
> Ce grand nom de Vainqueur n'est plus ce qu'il souhaite,
> Il vient avec Plaisir avouer sa défaite (III.vi.923-926).

This engagement between equals contrasts starkly with a conversation between Taxile and Axiane. Taxile, tired of Axiane's constant refusal of him despite Porus' supposed death, attempts to push her into submission by threatening force,

[43] Alexandre is not the only character to use *galant* language. As we have seen, both Porus and Taxile refer to Axiane using *galant* metaphors.

Tout Amant que je suis, vous oubliez peut-être
Que si vous m'y forcez, je puis parler en Maître,
Que je puis me lasser de souffrir vos dédains,
Que vous et vos États tous est entre mes mains,
Qu'après tant de respects qui vous rendent plus fière,
Je pourrai… (IV.iii.1237-1242)

His forceful words anger Axiane who responds in scathing tones, her lowered register assuring him that his threats diminished any chance he might have had of winning her over emotionally.

Je t'entends. Je suis ta Prisonnière,
Tu veux peut-être encore captive mes désirs,
Que mon Cœur en tremblant réponde à tes soupirs.
Hé bien, dépouille enfin cette douceur contrainte. […]
Ma haine ne peut croître, et tu peux tout tenter" (IV.iii.1242-1245, 1248).

The rules for neoclassical French theater generally preferred that all characters be introduced physically in the first act. However, Alexandre doesn't appear on stage during the first two acts. Instead Racine builds a theatrical tension around his hero, letting Alexandre's reputation verbally precede him, and creating a character whose effect reverberates for two acts without ever appearing. In a strange way, Racine is putting into practice La Bruyère's idea that an *honnête homme* out to be capable of making "something out of nothing" (Stanton 143).[44] Racine references a "bruit" of Alexandre's magnetism, qualities, and exploits, creating a verbal portrait of the emperor through the praises of the other characters, and an early version of the *merveilleux dans le discours*, or the sublime effect through words.

For instance, in the first scene, Taxile, who is still technically Alexandre's enemy, describes him as "Maître de l'Univers," a "grand Guerrier," and "Le Vainqueur de l'Asie" (I.i.19, 62, 64). Taxile encourages Porus,

Flattons par des respects ce Prince ambitieux […]
C'est un Torrent qui passe, et dont la violence
Sur tout ce qui l'arrête exerce sa puissance,

[44] *Alexandre* thus prefigures *Bérénice* where "toute l'invention consiste à faire quelque chose de rien" (*OC*, "Préface de *Bérénice*" 451).

Qui grossi du débris de cent Peuples divers,
Veut *du bruit de son Cour* remplir l'Univers" (I.ii.191,193-196, my emphasis).

Porus also acknowledges the rumor of Alexandre's worth, "*Du bruit de ses exploits* mon âme importune, / Attend depuis longtemps cette heureuse journée" (I.ii.245-245). He tells Taxile that Alexandre's reputation makes him worthy as an enemy, "Loin de le mépriser, j'admire son courage / Je rends à sa valeur un légitime hommage" (I.ii.157-158). Porus understands that the only way to surpass Alexandre in greatness is to imitate his exploits. "Mais je veux à mon tour, mériter les tributs / Que je me sens forcé de rendre à ses Vertus" (I.ii.159-160). Porus can only imagine gaining this glory because Alexandre has already proved his authenticity by being the first to conquer the world. and thus become worthy of imitation.

Axiane also acknowledges that Alexandre is great, admiring him even while she hates him. During one of her encounters with Alexandre, she lists exploit after exploit as if she can't help herself, and finally bursts out,

Non, Seigneur, je vous hais d'autant qu'on vous aime,
D'autant plus qu'il me faut vous admirer moi-même,
Que l'Univers entier m'en impose la loi,
Et que personne enfin ne vous hait avec moi (IV.ii.1149-1152).

As is proper behavior toward their *honnête* conqueror, both Porus and Axiane surrender to Alexandre's "true greatness of heart and breadth of spirit" (Stanton 65). Axiane's admission of defeat to Cléofile is tinged with awe and even a hint of jealousy:

Oui Madame, régnez, et souffrez que moi-même
J'admire le grand cœur d'un Héros qui vous aime.
Aimez, et possédez *l'avantage charmant*
De voir toute la terre adorer votre Amant. (V.iii.1593-1596, my emphasis)

Porus, too acknowledges that his admiration for Alexandre's prowess as a warrior has transformed to include admiration for Alexandre's virtues.[45]

> Seigneur, jusqu'à ce jour, l'Univers en alarmes
> Me forçait d'admirer le Bonheur de vos armes.
> Mais rien ne me forçait en ce commun effroi,
> De reconnaître en vous plus de vertus que moi.
> Je me rends. Je vous cède une pleine Victoire.
> Vos vertus, je l'avoue, égalent votre gloire (V.iii.1597-1602).

Alexandre's "grand cœur" and his "vertus" make him a true *honnête homme*, permitting him to "think upon matters which ordinary conquerors never seriously entertain" (Stanton 65). Like the "mouvement intérieur" of divine grace which converts human hearts to acknowledge God's greatness, Alexandre's victory over his two enemies results from the inexplicable power of his character and virtue that moves the hearts of his enemies and converts them to deeper admiration (Dens 43).

Alexandre's authenticity gains him respect and admiration, but this is due in part to his capacity to converse with everyone around him with equal ease and courtesy. This is most evident when he engages with Axiane. Despite her violent hatred of him, he treats her in a kind and perceptive way. She verbally baits him, trying to make him angry by reducing the greatness of his exploits and calling him a "Tyran" (IV.ii.1122). But using his keen ability to read people, Alexandre guesses her motives, and refuses to rise to her verbal challenge "Je le vois bien, Madame, / Vous voulez que saisi d'un indigne courroux / En reproches honteux j'éclate contre vous" (IV.ii.1122-1124).[46] He also recognizes and respects her deep sorrow for the supposedly dead Porus. "Mon âme malgré vous à plaindre engagée / Respecte le malheur où vous êtes plongée

[45] In a sense, by exemplifying virtue to his enemies, Alexandre is living out Faret's notion that those who love without artifice inspire others to love them in the same way. "Au contraire ceux qui aiment sans artifice, sont ordinairement aimé de la même sorte et comme c'est un effet de la vertu de se reproduire soi-même, ce trésor d'amitié se multiplie aussi jusqu'à l'infini, lorsqu'il est en sa pureté" (49).

[46] Alexandre is the kind of *honnête homme* that La Rochefoucauld praises in his famous maxime, "Le vrai honnête homme est celui qui ne se pique de rien" (*OC*, *Maximes* 434).

(IV.ii.1129-1130). His kindness and deference overwhelm her, and she begs him "Ah, Seigneur, puis-je ne les point voir / Ces Vertus dont l'éclat aigrit mon désespoir?" (IV.ii.1135-1136), as if the kindness with which he treats her threatens to topple the hatred she feels. Interestingly, Axiane, despite her hatred for Alexandre, never breaks from the formal register with him as she does with Taxile, proving that she cannot be as indifferent to him as she was to her former lover. Alexandre almost magically conjures admiration in her, as one of her final lines, spoken to Cléofile, admits, "J'admire le grand cœur d'un Héros qui vous aime" (V.iii.1594).[47]

Axiane's formality with Alexandre stands in stark contrast to Porus who only faces Alexandre directly for the first time in the last scene of the play. His first interaction with the conqueror drips with sarcastic disdain and irreverence in its register.

> Tu fais bien. Et j'approuve tes soins.
> Ce qu'il a fait pour toi ne mérite pas moins.
> C'est lui qui m'a des mains arraché la Victoire.
> Il t'a donné sa Sœur. Il t'a vendu sa Gloire.
> Il t'a livré Porus. Que feras-tu jamais
> Qui te puisse acquitter d'un seul de ses bienfaits? (V.iii.1483-1488)

Porus' tone, words, and register are all meant to insult Alexandre and belittle his exploits, but his attack is much more pointed than Axiane's was. Thinking to sting him into anger, Porus dares the conqueror to speak, "Parle, et sans espérer que je blesse ma gloire, / Voyons comme tu sais user de la Victoire" (V.iii.15611562). But once again, Alexandre's extraordinary social perception and self-restraint makes him impeccably courteous. Repeating Porus' command to speak but in the formal register, Alexandre responds, "Parlez donc, Dites-moi, / Comment prétendez-vous que je vous traite?" (V.iii.1567-1568). Despite Porus curt reply, "En Roi," Alexandre generously gives Porus what he asks for and more, "Régnez toujours Porus, je vous rends vos États. / Avec mon

[47] The civility texts often use magical terminology to describe the inexplicable power of the *honnête gens* to create admiration in those around them. See Stanton, "Art de Plaire" in *The Aristocrat as Art*.

amitié recevez Axiane" (V.iii.1573-1574). Racine paints Alexandre as one of those "Héros" who even in vanquishing his enemies does so "d'une manière qui plaise et mêmes aux vaincus" (Méré 52).

When *Alexandre* was produced in 1665, Racine was not established enough at court to have gained a reputation like Corneille's for tragedy, nor that of *honnêteté*, like La Rochefoucauld or La Fontaine.[48] However, young as he was, Racine intuitively knew the benefit (and danger) of using public opinion to bolster his plays. He knew the popularity of Thomas Corneille's *tragédie galantes*, and of Pierre Corneille's heroic tragedies. *Alexandre le Grand* was Racine's strategy to bridge these two seemingly incompatible genres, to create a play that appealed to and resonated with the court's *honnêtes gens* while still allowing him to access the tropes of classical tragedy.[49] Alexandre, as the universally recognized *galant* hero of antiquity, was the perfect solution to create a classical tragedy whose main character exhibited all the recognizable and pleasure-giving qualities of an *honnête homme*. But if we believe Racine's preface to *Alexandre*, his play, like the character Alexandre, had an inexplicable power to move people to admiration, even the admiration of his critics who were drawn to the play "malgré eux depuis le commencement jusqu'à la fin" (*OC* 125). Indeed, Racine claimed that his critics, despite their determination to be displeased with his play, couldn't stay away, some of them attending "plus de six fois de suite" (*OC* 127). Racine's transformation of the greatest *honnête homme* of antiquity for the tragic stage had its intended sublime effect.

[48] See Génetiot, "Introduction" in *Poétique*.
[49] "Pour bien faire une chose, il ne suffit pas de la savoir, il faut s'y plaire et ne s'en pas ennuyer" (Méré 57).

Néron, the Anti-honnête Homme

As we have seen with *Alexandre le Grand*, Racine took a professional risk when he portrayed Alexandre as both an *honnête homme* and a classical tragic hero. But his next two plays pushed the limits of tragedy even further, and he transformed the use of *honnêteté* even more drastically. In these plays, Pyrrhus and Néron exemplify similar qualities as Alexandre, but to a very different end. Perhaps because immoral characters are often much more interesting than virtuous heroes, Racine was willing to take a not insignificant theatrical risk and splice the exemplary characteristics of the *honnête homme* to morally corrupt antagonists. Racine makes Pyrrhus and Néron *honnêtes hommes* lacking virtue who use their linguistic prowess and social magnetism for destructive and tragic ends.

As with Alexandre, Racine imbued Pyrrhus' language with many *honnête* and *galant* metaphors.[1] Racine's critics didn't know what to make of this. Confused by an antagonist declaring love in an *honnête* way, some considered the son of Achilles, "un héros à la Scudéry" (Barbafieri, *Atrée et Céladon* 24). Others, frustrated that his linguistic and social *honnêteté* was not coupled with moral boundaries, thought Pyrrhus far too violent, particularly toward Andromaque. Racine justifies Pyrrhus' ambiguous *honnêteté* in the preface, "Pyrrhus n'avait pas lu nos romans, il était violent de son naturel" (*OC* 197). Although explaining Pyrrhus' violence as necessary, and continuing the distinction of his tragedies from the *galant* novels, Racine still admits that he

[1] Racine's dedicatory letter, to Madame Henriette d'Angleterre, the king's sister-in-law, gives us another glimpse into the young playwright's growing aesthetic. Racine's inclusion of women as linguistic and political arbiters in his plays has moved into reality, and he himself has benefitted from the abilities of such a woman. He writes that Henriette has played a part in his creative process, "On savait que vous m'aviez prêté quelques-unes de vos lumières pour y ajouter de nouveaux ornements" (*OC* 195). She is a paragon of talent that men aspire to be like, "il semble que vous ayez voulu avoir autant d'avantage sur notre sexe par les connaissances et par la solidité de votre esprits, que vous excellez dans le vôtre par toutes les grâces qui vous environnent" (*OC* 196). But even more importantly, "La cour vous regarde comme l'arbitre de tout ce qui se fait d'agréable. […] La règle souveraine est de plaire à V.A.R." (*OC* 196). By placing Madame in this key position of receiving pleasure by his play, we can say that Racine is positing himself as an *honnête* writer who has benefitted from one of the keenest minds and wits in the court.

softened his character somewhat for the sake of *bienséance*. "Toute la liberté que j'ai prise, ç'a été d'adoucir un peu la férocité de Pyrrhus" which the ancients had "poussée beaucoup plus loin que je n'ai cru le devoir faire" (*OC* 197). *Andromaque* was Racine's first clear success; perhaps due to his experimentation with the appeal of an *honnête homme,* and its complicated bestowal upon the antagonist.[2]

Even more than in *Andromaque*, Racine pushed the notion of a morally compromised *honnête homme* in *Britannicus*. Racine's Pyrrhus is not actually evil, although his relationship with Andromaque is morally ambiguously,[3] but Racine states in the preface to the play that Néron, as a historically recognized "monstre" has "quelque chose de plus que cruel" (*OC* 372). As with Pyrrhus, Néron had two sets of critics, those who thought Racine had made him too cruel, and those who thought him "trop bon" (*OC* 372). Racine answered the former by saying that they wanted the impossible, they desired Néron to have been an "honnête homme dans ses premières années" (*OC* 372). This is rather tongue-in-cheek since, as we will see, Racine gifts Néron with some of the most lyrical language to be found in his corpus, and a set of social graces that complicate his violent character. Racine answered the latter critics by positing that although Néron is a "monstre", he is a "monstre naissant" who hasn't yet murdered his own mother but in whom there are "assez de cruautés" to clearly identify the evil emperor who begins to torture and kill those around him as he cements his power (*OC* 372).

The confusion expressed by Racine's critics presents an excellent framework for the paradox of Néron's character. Haley describes an apocryphal story in which Racine, discussing

[2] After *Alexandre*, Racine's *honnête* characters became his less desirable ones. We study here Pyrrhus and Néron, but we can add to the list Antiochus and Mithridate. See Barbafieri's discussion on the complicated relationship between heroism and the *galant* ideal in *Atrée et Céladon* pp. 270-75.

[3] Pyrrhus is also arguably the tragic victim of *Andromaque*. In a sense his death justifies him, redeeming his *honnêteté*. Néron, however, is never punished for Britannicus' death or Junie's exile, and thus embodies *honnêteté* in a truly villainous way.

poetics with Madame de Lafayette, tells her that a good poet should be able to make a villain relatable, excusable, and even likeable (*Racine and the Art Poétique* 134). And indeed, Racine invokes the characteristics of an *honnête homme* for Néron.[4]

Racine delayed Alexandre's appearance until the third act, thereby creating a feeling of anticipation for the hero. With Néron, who doesn't step on stage until the second act, Racine instead sets a tone of frustration as we are forced to wait with Agrippine for Néron's appearance. Like Alexandre, Néron has a profound effect on other characters, even before his physical appearance onstage, he is the crux around which the play turns. But unlike Alexandre whom everyone admires because of his virtue, Néron holds the attention of every character in the play because of his vice. They gravitate toward him as moths to a flame, hoping for his favor and fearing his malice. He sometimes blinds the other characters to his evil nature (as in the case of Burrhus), and sometimes aligns them to his own vile cause (as he does with Narcisse), but he draws them all inexorably to himself.[5]

When we as spectators first see Néron on stage, he is "amoureux" and his lyrical description of his nocturnal encounter with Junie conveys a powerful verbal magnetism (II.ii.382). At first the sight of Junie abducted from her bed leaves Néron speechless, "J'ai voulu lui parler, et ma voix s'est perdue," and he is rendered "immobile, saisi d'un long étonnement" (II.ii.396-397). He retreats to his room but Junie's tears haunt him so violently that he cannot distinguish between his solitary reality and his memory of her, "De son image en vain j'ai voulu me distraire: / Trop présente à mes yeux, je croyais lui parler" (II.ii.401).

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[4] See May, *Tragédie cornélienne, tragédie racinienne* for a discussion of potential sources for Racine's *honnête* Néron. These include Corneille's play *Othon,* and Gilbert's play *Les Amours de Néron*.

[5] Burrhus continually makes excuses for the emperor, particularly to Agrippine. It isn't until the last scene that Burrhus' eyes are opened, and he is horrified that Néron watched his brother die "sans changer de couleur" (V.viii.1730). Agrippine, on the other hand, is the only character who clearly sees Néron for what he is. See Schröder, *La Tragédie du sang d'Auguste*.

As he tells Narcisse of his experience with Junie, Néron's confession becomes a moment of the Longinian sublime, in which a sublime encounter results in a sublime recounting. Removed from Junie's presence, Néron is longer stunned to silence, and he vividly recreates his recollection of "Les ombres, les flambeaux, les cris et le silence" which leave him, "ravi d'une si belle vue" (II.ii.395). Like Longinus' Sappho, he relives the moment with a vivid lucidity and transports the spectator into his experience. The depth of Néron's passion which initially rendered him speechless, now gives him the ability to create one of the most remarkable moments of *hypotyposis* in Racine's theater.

Néron's nighttime glimpse of Junie also depends heavily on the vocabulary of *honnêteté*, and his spectators would have immediately recognized the lyrical magnetism of the *honnête homme* in Néron's seeming unstudied description of Junie.[6] Junie staggers Néron with her "negligence" (II.ii.391). She is dressed in a "simple appareil," and her un-made-up beauty is "belle, sans ornement," the vulnerable beauty of someone who "on vient d'arracher au sommeil" (II.ii.389-390). The "timides douceurs" of her eyes haunt Néron and in vain he tries to distract himself from the memory "de son image" (II.ii.394, 400).

Yet here lies Racine's paradoxical depiction of Néron. Does a virtuous *honnête homme* abduct a woman in the middle of the night? Does he dwell on her pain to create riveting poetry from the experience? Does he claim "j'aimais jusqu'à ses pleurs que je faisais couler" (II.ii.402)? The *honnête homme*'s respect and awareness of women required that he treat them with deference. To see Junie simply as a body to be conquered, and to delight in "les timides douceurs" that her "fier ravisseurs / relevaient de ses yeux" (II.ii.393-394) creates a jarring disconnect between the

[6] "Ceux qui sont heureux Poètes arrangent les mots dans les vers comme s'ils y étaient nés. La nature y surpasse l'artifice" (Sorel, *Connaissance* 218)

compelling verbal power of the scene and the vicious lack of respect which Néron exhibits towards Junie.

Women, as we saw in *Alexandre*, often held positions of influence over men. Néron admits that Junie holds sway over him, "J'aime, […] j'idolâtre Junie" (II.ii.384). But he is unwilling to use his *honnêteté* to gallantly conquer Junie; if he had, she may have felt at least as much admiration as Axiane felt for Alexandre. Indeed, Néron's method of conquering Junie is anything but *honnête*. He emotionally confuses and manipulates her, mixing verbal allure with brute force. When they appear together onstage, Néron, like Alexandre, shows an *honnête* ability to read his interlocutor. He sees and acknowledges Junie's complex feelings, "Vous vous troublez, Madame et changez de visage. / Lisez-vous dans mes yeux quelque triste présage?" (II.iii.527-528). His lucid description of her emotion forces her to admit, "Seigneur, je ne vous puis déguiser mon erreur" (II.iii.529). Néron then attempts to woo her by piling up *honnête* metaphors, promising to, "quelquefois respirer à vos pieds" and declaring that he has been "de vos beaux yeux trop longtemps captivés" (II.iii.594, 601). Junie acknowledges her confusion at his un-*honnête* behavior in abducting her only to offer her the crown as empress, "Je n'ai mérité / ni cet excès d'honneur ni cette indignité" (II.iii.609-610). Néron can handle neither her gentle accusation nor her humble refusal, and he brutally replies, "Ayez moins de frayeur, ou moins de modestie" (II.iii.620).

Néron's inability to remain *galant* when his wishes are denied reveals his nascent cruelty, and we begin to see the fulfillment the ominous prediction Agrippine makes, "Las de se faire aimer, il veut se faire craindre" (I.i.12). When Junie refuses to accept his love, Néron punishes her for her refusal by forcing her to tell Britannicus of his banishment, telling her that it will be more dramatic if he hears it from her, from "la bouche qu'il aime" (II.iii.668). As an *honnête* villain, Néron can hide in a cowardice unthinkable to the *honnête homme*, shifting Britannicus' potential

hatred and blame to Junie, "De son bannissement prenez sur vous l'offense" (II.iii.671). His villainy proves effective; Junie moves from a respectful recognition of Néron's "vertus" which have made her feel "toujours rassurée," to horror and fear of his tyranny (II.iii.663).

As if this is not enough, Néron mocks the role of the gentle but invisible actor as a good *honnête homme* should be. He becomes instead a brutal and invisible spectator to Junie's pain as she is forced to convince Britannicus of her indifference to him. Néron informs her that he will be watching her performance: to succeed will mean banishment for her lover, if she fails, she will lose him to death. But Néron's brutality is too much, and Junie begs to be relieved of such an impossible task, preferring to never see Britannicus again than to deny her love, "Seigneur, permettez-moi de ne le voir jamais" (II.iii.686). But he forces her to tell Britannicus of her rejection, and threatens "J'entendrai des regards que vous croirez muets" (II.iii.682). He thus becomes "both listener and watcher […increasing] the precariousness and instability of Junie's situation in which, not only her speech, but her gestures and glances must be made in the aura of constraint imposed by Néron's unseen presence" (Lapp 142).

Junie is not the only woman whose influence Néron fights to control. Racine constructs a power struggle between Néron and his mother, Agrippine. The play opens with Agrippine lurking outside her son's door at night, hoping to surprise him into speaking with her. Néron has been avoiding his mother because he is afraid of her ability to control him. He admits, "Mon génie étonné tremble devant le sien" (II.ii.506). Agrippine, on the other hand, constantly tries to engage with her son because she alone sees his possible transformation from *honnête homme* to *honnête* villain. She insists throughout the play to both Albine and Burrhus that Néron has a dangerous lust for power and needs to be stopped. But she fears that her influence is slipping and admits "je le

craindrais bientôt, s'il ne me craignait plus" (I.i.74). Indeed, nobody listens to her, and throughout the first three acts, Néron manages to evade his mother at every turn.

It is only in the fourth act that Néron agrees to see his mother. Burrhus tries to remind Agrippine that Néron holds authority over her, "Il est votre Empereur" (IV.i.1109). But Agrippine desires to remind her son that she is the one in charge, that as a woman (and his mother), she formed him into *honnête homme* he is supposed to be, and is the true power behind the throne. When he arrives to see her, she issues an imperious, "Qu'on me laisse avec lui," and then takes an authoritative seat (IV.i.1114). It is one of the rare moments a Racinian character sits on stage, and it is a clear power move.[7]

The monologue which follows is one of the longest in Racine's repertoire, 108 lines strong. It is another testament to Néron's *honnête* abilities that he knows his mother and predicted this monologue long before it happens. He tells Narcisse that one of the reasons he is avoiding her is because she will tyrannize him with "un long récit de mes ingratitudes" and that he finds it difficult to keep calm under "ce fâcheux entretien?" (II.ii.488-489). Indeed, after she gives lip-service to his authority, "Vous régnez" (IV.ii.1119), Agrippine moves into a long reminiscing account of her role in establishing his power. Although she attempts to calmly remind him of his debt to her, the tone Agrippine uses becomes more and more accusing, and she ends with a scathing, "C'est vous qui m'ordonnez de me justifier" (IV.ii.1222).[8]

Néron remains silent throughout her tirade, submitting to his mother with his silence and his posture. Even as emperor, he respectfully stands in her seated presence, recognizing her as an

[7] "From her [Agrippine's] opening action of sitting down before the emperor […], contrary to seventeenth-century etiquette, she shows an attacking spirit" (Hawcroft, *Rhetoric* 99). See also Maskell, *Theatrical Reading* for a discussion on the importance of seated characters.

[8] A study of pronouns in ARTFL shows how carefully Agrippine constructs a power balance between herself and her son; she uses "je/j'" and "vous" equally 30 times each. Each block of first-person pronouns is counter balanced with the second person pronoun.

authority who has always directed him and whom he both respects and fears.[9] Here he plays the *honnête homme* who has always treated his mother as she desires to be treated. Even when he finally answers her monologue, his response is a third the length of hers (35 lines), with a much stronger emphasis on her authoritative role (he uses 'vous' 16 times, and 'je/j' only six times). He begins with a very polite "Je me souviens toujours que je vous dois l'Empire," and acknowledges her "bonté," assuring her that she can "reposer" on his "fidélité" (IV.ii.1223, 1225-1226). With a conspiratorial, "J'ose ici vous le dire entre nous," Néron simultaneously grants Agrippine what she wants, a privileged position of secret intimacy with the emperor, all the while subtly shifting the blame for his own mistrust of her to others (IV.ii.1229). He tells her exactly what he thinks of her by claiming that others are saying these things. This gossipy source who "disaient-ils" oscillates from "Rome," to "le sénat," to "le peuple," to "nos soldats" (IV.ii.1231, 1239, 1241, 1245). He apologetically reminds her that, "Rome veut un maître, et non une maîtresse" (IV.ii.1239). He flatters her strong personality saying, "toute autre se serait rendue à leur discours" (IV.ii.1249), subtly implying that he must follow her iron-willed example and thwart her authority, to do otherwise would be insulting to her name. He remains cool almost to the end of his answer but he cannot hide his growing passion for Junie, and the *honnête homme* mask drops. He suddenly and directly insults her and accuses her of manipulation, "Mais si vous ne régnez, vous vous plaignez toujours / Avec Britannicus contre moi réunie, / Vous le fortifiez du parti de Junie" (IV.ii.1250-1252).[10] His sudden lapse in courtesy pushes Agrippine over the edge. She assails him

[9] He admits to Narcisse that,

> Éloigné de ses yeux, j'ordonne, je menace, […]
> Sitôt que mon malheur me ramène à sa vue,
> Soit que je n'ose encor démentir le pouvoir
> De ces yeux, où j'ai lu si longtemps mon devoir,
> Soit qu'à tant de bienfaits ma mémoire fidèle,
> Lui soumette en secret tout ce que je tiens d'elle (II.ii.496,500-504).

[10] Néron takes and reverses Agrippine's words "vous régnez" creating both a rhetorical power-shift and a reminder that he has been listening to her from the beginning.

with insult after insult, including accusing him numerous times of being "ingrate," until Néron, exasperated but in control of himself again, gives in, asking, "Que voulez-vous qu'on fasse?" (IV.ii.1287). But her list of demands sounds almost childish after the elegant control of his single line question. His acquiescence to her demands is structured in a very polite response which only emphasizes the contrast between his *honnête* behavior and Agrippine's violent river of insults. Somehow, despite bowing to her verbal assault, he has managed to make her look ridiculous.

We leave the scene amazed at Néron's civility with Agrippine. But after his seeming acquiescence to reconcile with Britannicus, according to the demands of his mother, we are as shocked as Burrhus when he reveals his brutal plan to kill his adopted brother. We suddenly realize that Néron has at last managed to fool his own mother, the one who distrusted his motives from the beginning.

But as Burrhus makes an impassioned appeal to his better nature, we begin to believe again in Néron's authenticity, we see the man behind the mask. We believe him when he says he is weary of constantly attempting to gain "je ne sais quel amour / que le hasard nous donne et nous ôte en un jour" (IV.iii.1334). His surprisingly poignant question, "suis-je leur empereur seulement pour leur plaire?" shows just how tired he is of playing the *honnête homme* to please those around him, of pretending to be a good emperor for the benefit of the people (IV.iii.1336). Instead, Néron decides to be himself, to fully embrace his monstrosity. As the play's *dénouement* begins to unfold, we look on in horror as Néron's nascent monstrosity causes the destruction of those around him, and that horror holds us captive in its mesmerizing power. In a sense, with Néron's transformation Racine creates a parallel to Longinus' horrific sublime where he describes Cleomène who in his insanity "prit un couteau dont il se hacha la chair en petits morceaux; et s'étant ainsi déchiqueté lui-même, il mourut" (Boileau, *Traité* 382). We cannot look away as Néron begins to hack away

at his own flesh and blood, murdering his adopted brother Britannicus and eventually even killing his own mother.

Schooled by Longinus, Racine understood the strange attraction which well-depicted vice and violence could hold on the human psyche. As an *honnête* villain, his Néron embodies the enthralling sides of both good and evil, and the spectator feels a paradoxical pleasure as Néron displays a sublime evil that both repulses and invokes admiration.[11]

Conclusion

The ineffable in seventeenth-century France is a complex phenomenon in which *honnêteté*, or what I have called here the "social sublime" plays a significant part. The goal of the *honnête homme* was to overwhelm, or *éblouir*, his audience with pleasure through an encounter with himself. His linguistic prowess surprised his listeners with its powerful transparency. His exposure to a specific milieu, particularly women, gave him the social knowledge and the *je ne sais quoi* he needed to impress his audience. His keen judgement allowed him to quickly read his audience, understanding their values and tastes. Using this knowledge, his adapted quickly and with "souplesse" to each person he encountered, creating the impression of caring for each individual personally. His simplicity, natural grace, and striking authenticity enthralled those around him, making everyone want to emulate him.

Like the *honnête homme,* an author needed to cultivate an authentic high-mindedness in order to produce the sublime. This required frequenting the "company" of great authors, learning their beauties and imitating their turns of phrase in order to become like them. Boileau says that

[11] Although this kind of sublime horror will be much more fully developed in the 19th century with the Romantic gothic, part of its evolution is found in Racine's Néron. Much like Corneille's Médée, whom Boileau praises as sublime, the emperor's nascent monstrosity is powerful in its grandeur and repugnant in its cruelty.

the sublime is communicated with an immediacy, a suddenness of lightning that happens best through simple, clear words. A sublime author, like the *honnêtes gens*, needed a certain "souplesse," or what Longinus calls *kairos*, to intuitively adapt their writing to the tastes of their audience, through a keen awareness of timing and context. But perhaps the most important similarity between the two aesthetics is the pleasure resulting from effective communication of something ineffable. Whether originating from beautiful language or authenticity, hidden mimesis, or creative choices made with excellently executed audience awareness, the *honnête homme* and the sublime are two aesthetics with fascinating parallels.

Into this context steps the young Jean Racine. Racine knew that the spectators in the court delighted in, and even expected *honnête* behavior on stage, as the popular *tragedies galantes* by established and successful playwrights like Thomas Corneille and Philippe Quinault attested. But Racine wanted to write tragedy based on classical sources, and classical tragedy was not traditionally seen as compatible with *honnêteté*. But Racine senses the theatrical possibilities of the *honnête homme*, and his *Alexandre le Grand*, a classical tragedy with a historically acknowledged *honnête homme* as the main character, became an experiment in the unexpected. For *Alexandre*, Racine hoped to access the *honnête* tropes of a warrior/lover who conquered the hearts (as well as the territory) of friend and enemy alike, while keeping the power and grandeur of a hero of antiquity whose his words, virtue, and military prowess inspired admiration.

Although his attempt in *Alexandre* received mixed reviews, Racine amended his approach in his next two plays and began to experiment with other ways to create the powerful effect of the social sublime. He continued using *galant* and *honnête* language, but upended it even further by creating *honnête* antagonists in Pyrrhus and Néron who used their social magnetism for selfish ends. Racine's depiction of Néron was particularly troubling. As he had done with Alexandre,

Racine portrays Néron with the poetic power and magnetic personality of an *honnête homme*. Néron's *galant* inclination and tenderness toward his love interest, Junie, results in beautiful poetry, and his respect toward his mother, Agrippine, allows him to suffer insulting tirades. But Néron is a "monstre naissant," whose elegant language eventually turns to violent threats, shattering the illusion of *honnêteté*. Racine's use of *galant* language and *honnêteté* in Néron surprises and mesmerizes us, creating what any playwright would desire, the unexpected pleasure that comes from the sublime.

Chapter Three: Sublime *Admiration* and *Étonnement* in Corneille and Racine

In my last chapter, I examined Racine's use of *honnêteté* as a way to bring a new dimension to the classical tragic stage. For instance, in *Alexandre*, Racine took the *honnête* and *galant* tropes which Corneille had employed for his secondary characters and subplot of *Œdipe*, and placed them in the central character. Then with *Andromaque* and *Britannicus*, Racine complicated the already-controversial *honnête* aspects of his tragedy by making Pyrrhus and Néron into morally ambiguous *honnêtes hommes*.

Racine's experimentation earned him both praise and censure. Critics like Saint-Évremond condemned the *galant* Alexandre while Madame de Sévigné declared that Racine would never achieve anything like *Alexandre* and *Andromaque*. Despite Racine's imitation of Corneille's *honnête* tropes from *Œdipe* as well as basing Alexandre's clemency of his enemies on *Cinna*'s Auguste, the younger playwright knew he would have to distinguish himself from the work of Corneille.

Almost from the first moment they were simultaneously writing for the stage, Corneille and Racine were known for the effects of *admiration* and *étonnement* they created with their works. Praise for one is often echoed for the other: La Bruyère writes that Corneille's works "élève, étonne, maîtrise" (*OC*, *Les Caractères* 84), while Boileau declares that Racine can "émouvoir, étonner, ravir" his spectators (*OC*, *Epîtres* 127). Bayle celebrated "tous ces admirables ouvrages" created by Corneille, and Racine was an "admirable auteur" according to Juillard du Jary (Quoted in Hache 477 and 465). Longepierre states, "Les Ouvrages des deux grands hommes dont je parle sont les délices et l'admiration de leur siècle" (*Parallèle* 183). With their works described as being able to "émouvoir," "ravir," and "élever" and evoke reactions of "admiration" and "étonnement,"

it is not surprising that Corneille and Racine were considered sublime by their contemporaries.[1] Indeed, Nicolas Boileau defined the sublime as that which "ravit, transporte, et produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise […] il élève l'âme" (*OC*, *Traité* 341, 349). In this chapter, I will use *admiration* and *étonnement*, two words which share many parallels in the seventeenth century, but also some curious differences, to examine how Corneille and Racine achieved the distinction of "sublime" authors.

The first section of this chapter will follow the evolution of *admiration* and *étonnement* over the course of the seventeenth century through their wider use in early dictionaries, civility manuals and rhetoric texts, clarifying the various aesthetic, philosophical, and moral connotations each word had. These words were also employed by the two playwright's poetic and religious influences, Jesuit for Corneille and Jansenist for Racine. While it would be reductive to say that Corneille and Racine's aesthetic motivations stem solely from their respective religious training, this training cannot be ignored either, and can help clarify each author's perception of *admiration* and *étonnement*. For instance, Corneille's Jesuit upbringing partially influenced his understanding of the creator poet's visibility through his work, and the admiration that work produces. In the same way, Pascal, Nicole, and others in Racine's Jansenist education emphasized the importance of the hidden and invisible author whose writing speaks for itself, its poetic *merveilles* resulting in belief and powerful emotion.

The second part of this chapter will build a case for how Corneille and Racine understood the sublime in theater through the lens of *admiration* and *étonnement*, with Corneille primarily envisioning an aesthetic of *admiration* and Racine preferring to produce *étonnement*. In the *Trois Discours*, Corneille fleshes out his poetic practice, exploring particularly what he calls "le

[1] See Hache, "Annexe: Anthologie des auteures et des textes du XVIIe siècle mentionnés comme exemples du sublime" in *La Langue du ciel*.

nécessaire" to develop *nouveautés*, to take poetic license with plots in order to make them seem believable, and to create larger-than-life characters that would result in admiration and surprise. Racine knew that he had to distinguish himself from Corneille while still achieving powerful emotional effects, and structured his notion around *étonnement* through an evolved use of the word, plot simplicity, and his use of *récits*.

Admiration and Étonnement

In order to better grasp how the seventeenth century (including Corneille and Racine) understood the words "admiration" and "étonnement," as well as how these words came to be connected to the effect of the sublime, I consider how they were defined in several early dictionaries. For the word study on "admiration" and "étonnement," I use two pre-*Académie* and two post-*Académie* dictionaries. The early dictionaries were Jean Nicot's Latin-French dictionary, *Thrésor de la Langue Francoyse tant ancienne que modern* (1606) and Randel Cotgrave's English-French dictionary (1611). The two dictionaries I consulted from the latter half of the century are: Pierre Richelet's *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* (1680), and Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* (1690). In addition to these dictionaries, I also examine the way these words were used in treatises on passions or rhetoric, as well as civility texts in order to get a fuller picture of how these words were perceived as well as their curious evolution over the course of the century.[2]

In the earlier dictionaries, the words have distinct, if related, definitions. For instance, Nicot's Latin-French dictionary defines "admirer" as the emotion one feels for the deeds of a great

[2] For general studies on emotions in the seventeenth century, see James, *Passion and Action*, and Merlin-Kajman, *Les Émotions publiques et leurs langages.*

man or a person of great reputation.[3] He connects the noun "admiration" to the Latin, "miraculum," which connotes emotion for something divine or the miraculous.[4] On the other hand, Nicot's entry for "étonnement," is decidedly physical, and is a synonym for apoplexy or physical stupor.[5] The verb "étonner," of which Nicot gives fifteen examples, expresses some element of limitation either to a person's reason or to their physical ability to react to a situation. Similarly, the adjective "étonné" describes someone's physical state. It can refer to someone who has lost all sense of orientation and is "tout éperdu" or who "ne sait où il en est" (265); it can describe someone whose physical sensation and capacities are diminished, who is "étourdi tellement qu' il n' a nul sentiment;" and lastly, it can mean someone whose verbal abilities are significantly reduced, if not absent entirely. For instance something can be "si nouvelle et si soudaine, qu' il ne pouvait parler" (265).

Similarly, 'admiration' in Randel Cotgrave's English-French dictionary has a more positive connotation and clearly affects the mind and emotions but not the body. He defines the French 'admiration' and 'admirer' as the English "admiration, wonder, marveling" and "to wonder, admire, marvel at" respectively.[6] With 'étonner' Cotgrave also implies a limiting physical or mental effect, and defines it as "to astonish, to amaze, daunt, appall, abash, put out of countenance, make aghast, to stonny, benumb, to dull the senses of."[7] The noun 'étonnement' has an even more physical connotation with its definition being "an astonishment, astonishing, or

[3] "*Admirer* un homme, et l' avoir en admiration et grande reputation" (Nicot 15).
[4] "Chose digne d'admiration, *Miraculum*, être cause d'admiration, esse *miraculo*" (Nicot 15). Although I do not address it in this chapter in detail, the miraculous and its representation are a critical and complex issue in Corneille and Racine's works. They use various methods to treat mythological and miraculous elements in their plays. Corneille occasionally resorts to machines, but he prefers historically based plots. Racine avoids direct representation of the divine, instead relegating any marvelous or miraculous element of the *merveilleux* to the realm of the imagination.
[5] Here and throughout I have modernized the spelling of these sources.
[6] The Google books edition did not have pagination.
[7] "Stonny" is an archaic form of astone, which can mean "to stun, to strike senseless with a blow, or partially senseless with a loud noise […] to strike mute with amazement, overwhelm one's presence of mind, to confound, astound" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 729).

stonnying, a sleepiness, numbness or benumbing, a senselessness, dullness, amazedness, dulling, amazing."[8]

Prior to the establishment of the *Académie Française*, most dictionaries were not very systematic and thus can only be so helpful in tracing the evolution of *admiration* and *étonnement*. However, the significant use of these two words in other texts from the first half of the seventeenth century echo the distinction between a positive, emotional *admiration* and a negative, physical *étonnement*. For instance, in René Descartes' *Les passions de l'âme*, published in 1649, admiration is a positive passion, permitting the subject to partake in aesthetic beauty and enjoyment without losing their cognition or will. He defines 'admiration' as, "une subite surprise de l'âme qui fait qu'elle le porte à considérer avec attention les objets qui les semble rares et extraordinaires" (*OC* 728). 'Étonnement,' however, is a different story; it begins as admiration but quickly surpasses the limits of the mind, becoming "un excès d'admiration qui ne peut jamais être que mauvais" (*OC* 729). It seeps instead down into the muscles and sinews of the body, freezing them so that "le corps demeure immobile comme une statue, et qu'on ne peut apercevoir de l'objet que la première face qui s'est présentée, ni par conséquent en acquérir une plus particulière connaissance" (*OC* 729). This state of immobility is terrible in Descartes' opinion, because the senses have overwhelmed the mind, reduced the observer to a state of pure observation, unable to make cognitive judgements about the object seen or perceived.[9]

Similarly, Claude Favre de Vaugelas, in his *Remarques sur la Langue Française* (1647), uses *admiration* in an exclusively positive sense, and *étonner* (or *s'étonner*) in an almost exclusively negative sense. For Vaugelas, the eloquence of an excellent speaker or writer inevitably moves the audience to admiration. They are "nos maitres" and we should not only

[8] As with the French, I have chosen to modernize the Cotgrave's English spelling.
[9] See DeJean, "A Short History of the Human Heart" in *Ancients Against Moderns*.

admire their writing but consider them "comme les plus parfaites modèles de notre langue et de notre éloquence" and imitate them in everything (Vaugelas *Préface*).[10] But he is "étonné*"* again and again by bad writers, particularly those who claim to be good writers despite clear evidence to the contrary. Mirroring Descartes' *étonnement*, Vaugelas is left without rational explanation for how someone could continue so deliberately in the error of their ways.

Curiously, not everyone perceived of *admiration* as purely positive nor *étonnement* as solely negative. Unlike most of his contemporaries, the Jansenist Pierre Nicole, considered *admiration* for anything but God a risky game to play because it came dangerously close to idolatry.[11] Likewise, when people feel "étonnement" for "l'infinité des voies de Dieu" they will come to understand the "ténèbres" and the "faiblesse de l'esprit humain" (*Œuvres philosophiques*, *Téméraires* 301).[12] Nicole states that because humanity is created in the image of God, it received the ability to admire beautiful things and to despise lowly ones, "il [l'homme] admire l'excellence, il méprise la bassesse" (*Vraie beauté* 63). But through their sinful nature, people became "tous infectés" by a "concupiscence" which destroyed human understanding and made all their judgements "faux et déraisonnables" (*Logique* 93). Instead of admiring God's image in other people, which would give praise to God, Nicole claims that humanity instead seeks their own praise, "[l'homme] se fait le centre de tout; il voudrait dominer sur tout, et que toutes les créatures ne fussent occupées qu'à le contenter, à le louer, à l'admirer" (*OP*, *De la Charité* 179). In desiring only their own adulation, their own *amour-propre*, people have transformed human relationship into a kind of theater, in which they admire "toutes sortes de biens, d'honneurs, de plaisirs" (*OP*, *De la Charité* 179). Someone full of *amour-propre* must be an accomplished actor, their

[10] Vaugelas' preface in the Google books version I used did not have page numbers.
[11] For a discussion on Nicole's perception of idolatry, see McClure, *Idolatry* pp. 164-167.
[12] Hereafter I will refer to *Œuvres philosophiques* as *OP*.

consummate ability lies in "se dissimuler en ne se dissimulant pas," and their seeming lack of artifice convinces so thoroughly because it is akin to virtue (Laude 255). But Nicole it especially insidious that person with *amour-propre* whose focus is pleasing others can be so similar to one who demonstrates true altruistic love of others, or *charité*. He warns that such a person can erase "avec une adresse merveilleuse toutes les traces et tous les caractères de l'amour-propre dont elle naît, parce qu'elle voit bien qu'elle n'obtiendrait rien de ce qu'elle prétend s'ils étaient remarqués" (*OP*, *De la Charité* 185). Distinguishing between the godly and the worldly endeavor thus becomes very difficult.

It is precisely because of this confusion between *charité* and *amour-propre* that theater, according to Nicole, is especially dangerous. Since the goal of seventeenth-century French theater is to "plaire et toucher" it leads down a duplicitous path. Where *charité* places "Dieu comme centre" of society, theatre with its idolatrous *amour-propre* substitutes "le moi" to create a worldly, human-centered society in which pleasing others is one of the prime motivations (Laude 244). The stage, Nicole argues, corrupts because it lures the unsuspecting and the well-guarded alike into a lustful desire to admire the human creature and not the Creator to whom the admiration is truly due. One playwright Nicole condemns is Corneille whom he sees as particularly dangerous because his plays seem so full of admirable qualities, but they "corrompent l'esprit et le cœur par les sentiments païens" (*Les Visionnaires* 22).

Another author deeply concerned with *amour-propre* and the passions it inspires is François de La Rochefoucauld. Like Nicole La Rochefoucauld's *amour-propre* also recognizes its connection to idolatry "il rend les hommes idolâtres d'eux-mêmes," but he is also deeply concerned with human hypocrisy and duplicity (*OC*, *Maximes supprimés* 489). La Rochefoucauld thought it impossible for true altruistic concern for the other to exist without some obscured motive

of *amour-propre*. The human heart always has its self-interest in mind, "Nous ne pouvons rien aimer que par rapport à nous" (*OC*, *Maximes* 418). *Amour-propre* inclines a person to hide their faults in order to gain other people's admiration and respect; it makes a person "se transformer lui même" so well that "il y est lui-même trompé" (*OC*, *Maximes* 324). Even civility becomes nothing more than "un désir d'en recevoir et d'être estimé poli" (*OC, Maximes* 442). Because *amour-propre* hinges on the gaze and approbation of others, it inevitably intermingles with people's motives and contaminates any element of true virtue. *Admiration* and *étonnement* become the negative by-products of social posturing instead of the result of virtue that they ought to be.

But despite their general pessimism, La Rochefoucauld and Nicole still belong to the earlier half of the century in which *admiration* was positive and *étonnement* negative, provided the object was the proper one.[13] In the latter half of the seventeenth century, however, there is a subtle shift in the connotation of these two words, both in dictionary definitions and in the way other texts use them. Pierre Richelet's *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* (1680) defines "admirer" as "avoir de l'admiration pour quelque chose. S'étonner, être surprise*"* (13). That fact that Richelet uses "étonner" to nuance admiration indicates a positive shift in the meaning of "étonner." There are many possible explanations for this. However, two stand out as particularly interesting: first, Descartes' focus on human reason and the mind had resulted in significant polemical exchanges with various writers, including Pierre Gassendi and Blaise Pascal.[14] The publication of these exchanges brought Descartes' hierarchy of the mind over the body to public attention, allowing many to contemplate the stakes of this hierarchy. Second, Boileau's *Traité du Sublime*, published in 1674, was extremely popular. In it, Boileau translates Longinus' definition of sublime saying

[13] See Guion, *Pierre Nicole moraliste*, and Van Delft, *Les Spectateurs de la vie*.
[14] See Braider, "The Ghost in the Machine" in *The Matter of the Mind*, for Descartes' polemical exchanges with religious authorities on the nature of the human mind.

"il ravit, il transporte, et produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise" (*OC, Traité* 341). By connecting both *admiration* and *étonnement* to the sublime, Boileau shifts the étonnement to a positive connotation.

Interestingly, Richelet's definition for "admiration" reflects both Descartes' and Boileau's influence; he says it is the "action de l'esprit qui admire," and then gives the example sentence, "*Ravir tout le monde en admiration*" (13). Since admiration requires the "esprit" (the French word for mind), Richelet's "admiration" is an action of the mind's reason. But by using the word "ravir" in conjunction with admiration, he pays homage to Boileau's definition of the sublime, an effect which impresses itself immediately on the heart, bypassing the mind's slower cognitive path to knowing the greatness of something.[15]

Similarly, Richelet's "étonnement," while still maintaining aspects of Cartesian immobility and irrationality, also shows a much more nuanced definition. Richelet defines 'étonner' as "épouvanter, surprendre d'une certaine manière qui touche" (307). Richelet thus creates an interesting tension in his definition between the fear-connoting "épouvante," and the lighter, emotionally softer and more positive "surprendre d'une certaine manière qui touche."[16] This use of "toucher" alludes again to Boileau who describes one of the sources of the sublime which creates *admiration*, *étonnement* and *surprise*, as the "pathétique" which is "cet enthousiasme et cette véhémence naturelle qui *touche* et qui émeut" (*OC*, *Traité* 349).[17]

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[15] See Delehanty, "The Heart's Knowledge" in *Literary Knowing*.

[16] Richelet defines 'épouvante' as "crainte, peur, terreur" (298). Interestingly, uses of the word "épouvante" in Richelet's dictionary are constantly connected to the irrational, the indefinable, the otherworldly, and the mythical. For instance, he uses it to describe the effect of the mythical Basilic "qui par son sifflement épouvante les autres dragons" (67). There is another use that implies a loss of reason through the "dérèglement des saisons" which gives people "l'épouvante" (232). Another occurrence of this word is the definition of a "fantôme," which is a "vision fausse qu'on a la nuit de quelque chose qui épouvante" (324).

[17] One could ask the question, what part of us does the sublime "touche" and "émeut" exactly? Longinus answers at various points in the *Traité* that the sublime touches both the mind, or "esprit" and the heart, or the "passions". The sublime moves everything all at once, it "renverse tout comme un foudre" (*OC*, *Traité* 342).

Another dictionary that also gives us an interesting glimpse into this shift toward a positive *étonnement* is Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel*.[18] Furetière defines 'admiration' as a "mouvement, passion de l'âme; action par laquelle on regarde ou avec une haute estime ou avec étonnement quelque chose de beau, de grand et de surprenant."[19] Similarly, Furetière writes that to 'admirer' is to "considérer avec surprise, regarder avec étonnement quelque chose de surprenant ou dont on ignore les causes." Thus, like Richelet, Furetière alludes to the Boileauvian sublime with his definition which combines the notions of *admiration* and *étonnement* to describe a reaction to something "surprenant."

Furetière's definition of 'étonner' demonstrates the same tension as Richelet's; it still retains a bit of the Cartesian immobility since "étonner se dit […] des émotions des corps qui sont ébranlés, et attaqués par quelque violence." But it also means to "surprendre, épouvanter, causer à l'âme de l'émotion, soit par surprise, soit par admiration, soit par crainte." Again, by nuancing the previously negative connotation of *étonnement* with the more positive *admiration* and surprise, Furetière indicates a shift in the word's meaning. Furetière's definition for 'étonnement' also leans in both a positive and negative direction. It can mean something "imprévu qui cause de la surprise, de la terreur," and which is "mêlé de surprise, de crainte de douleur et de désespoir."[20] But 'étonnement' can also be positive, and "se prend aussi pour Admiration" which will impress "des siècles futures" or describes an emotion which one has for "une personne extraordinaire" and which leaves one "ravi d'étonnement."

[18] Although Furetière's dictionary was published after his death in 1690, he most likely began compiling it in the mid 1670s, and was thus roughly contemporary to Boileau's *Traité* and Richelet's dictionary. See Reynier's "Antoine Furetière, imagier de la culture classique" for details on this dictionary.
[19] The Google books edition I used did not have pagination.
[20] In his example, Furetière connects this negative version of 'étonnement' to fear and to a loss of speech, "Ils étaient tous interdits de crainte et d'étonnement."

Similar to Richelet and Furetière's definitions, the *Dictionnaire de Académie Française* also points to the evolution of *admiration* and *étonnement* over the course of the century. Published in 1694, the *Académie*'s dictionary defines 'admiration' as "action par laquelle on admire. *Quand il voit un beau tableau il est en admiration, il est ravi en admiration.*"[21] Similarly, 'admirer' is to "considérer avec surprise, avec étonnement une chose qui est extraordinaire en quelque manière que ce soit." Likewise, the *Académie*'s notion of 'étonnement' is "surprise causée par quelque chose d' inopiné," but which also "signifie quelquefois, admiration." This definition is followed by the example sentence, "Cette action fera l'étonnement des siècles futurs. La grandeur & la magnificence de ce Palais me frappèrent d'étonnement." Thus, *étonnement* no longer implies a purely negative implication. However, "étonner" still connotes the effect on or limitation to the physical being, and means "ébranler, faire trembler," but it can be a physical reaction to something positive as well as something negative since one can be *étonné* "par quelque grande, par quelque violente commotion." The intermingling of *admiration* and *étonnement*, the shift from a negative to a positive *étonnement*, and the connection of these two passions with the words "ravir*"* and "frapper," all allude to the influence of Boileau's *Traité* and the importance of the neoclassical sublime on the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Paralleling the dictionaries, authors from the latter half of the century demonstrate the shifting meaning in these two words. In his book, *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671), Dominique Bouhours still maintains the theatrical aspects of *admiration* and *étonnement* implied by Nicole and La Rochefoucauld, but Bouhours' does not consider them dangerous or duplicitous concepts, and his use of both of these words is generally positive. Instead, he connects them to the virtues of authentic relationship and truthful, excellent communication. Similarly, René Rapin in

[21] I used ARTFL's version of the dictionary of the *Académie* which does not give the pagination.

his work, *Œuvres* (1676), uses both *admiration* and *étonnement* in a positive light. Both Bouhours and Rapin were Jesuit priests, and thus had a more optimistic worldview than either Nicole as a Jansenist or La Rochefoucauld as a *moraliste*.[22]

Bouhours structures much of the *Entretiens* around what creates admiration; his use of the word "admiration" as well as its variations is significant.[23] He begins with his two interlocutors, Ariste and Eugène, discussing the sea, whose nature is paradoxically ever changing but constant. It never tires the eyes with its beauty and power, and "l'esprit y trouve toujours de quoi admirer" (56). Ariste solemnly declares that "il faudrait être ou aveugle ou stupide" to be unmoved by the sea (54).[24] Part of what makes the sea so admirable is that there is very little distance between the thing and the representation of the thing, which Bouhours states as, "Ils conclurent qu'il n'y avait rien de plus admirable dans la mer que la mer même" (87). The sea escapes all definition, which allows it to be an excellent reflection of the ineffable nature of God. Indeed, the sea "représente non seulement [la] grandeur [de Dieu], son immensité, les abîmes de sa providence et de sa sagesse, mais encore sa miséricorde et sa justice, la pureté et la plénitude de son être" (72).

Bouhours' admiration for the sea is mirrored in a similar admiration for the French language. Like the sea, which is itself its own best representation, Bouhours believes that French, more than any other language, conveys human thought most exactly, diminishing the space

[22] At the risk of being overly simplistic, the Jansenist worldview was Augustinian, meaning that it understood humanity incapable of arriving at a knowledge of God on its own without the direct intervention of divine grace in an individual's life. On the other hand, the Jesuits considered God's grace as evident everywhere, and the individual human played an important part in the salvific process which was the recognition of this grace. As such any admiration of creation (including admiration of humanity) inevitably led the mind upwards to the creator God. See Parish, *Catholic Particularity*.

[23] Bouhours uses "admir*" 15 times in the first *Entretien* and another 29 times throughout the rest of the book.

[24] Boileau takes up Bouhours' line of argument in the *Réflexions* when he argues against Perrault that Homer and other ancient texts have a universal sublime effect, and anyone (like Perrault) who rejects them is either blind or incapable of emotion.

between thought and word. It can be used equally for great and noble works and light and frivolous ones, and yet still maintains its simplicity and naïveté in both kinds of expression.[25]

Bouhours uses the word "étonner" far less than "admiration," and except for a few instances, he limits it to simple expressions of surprise.[26] However, unlike Vaugelas, the surprise felt by Bouhours' 'étonner' is almost exclusively positive. Curiously, one of Bouhours' rare negative uses of the word "étonner" is to describe the inexplicable nature of the *je ne sais quoi*. Ariste acknowledges, "on s'étonne quelquefois pourquoi un homme ne plaît point, on s'en demande une raison à soi-même, on en trouve mille qui sont qu'il devrait plaire, et on n'en trouve pas une pourquoi il déplait, sinon je ne sais quoi de choquant" (289). Like earlier uses of the word, Bouhours' use of 'étonner' evokes something that still evades rational understanding, it's a reaction to why, for no apparent reason, someone fails to please us. However, the negativity connected to the word lies with the "*je ne sais quoi* de choquant" which in turn creates a negative reaction of surprise rather than the feeling of surprise being negative in itself because it escapes rational thought.

Tellingly, Bouhours' only use of the noun "étonnement" is clearly positive. He describes the marvelous and pleasing result of a well-constructed devise, which he describes as a short "métaphore […] qui représente un objet par un autre avec lequel il a de la ressemblance" (315). Such a devise results when "le merveilleux" of a metaphorical figure of speech causes "de l'étonnement et du plaisir tout ensemble" (370).

[25] "Dans nos bagatelles, dans nos folies ingénieuses, dans tout ce qu'on appelle jolies choses, que de noblesse, que d'élévation, que de bon sens! Notre langue y est en quelque façon plus admirable que dans les grands ouvrages où la matière la soutient, où les choses donnent de la force et de la dignité aux paroles. Mais ce qu'il y a de plus merveilleux en notre langue, ajouta-t-il c'est qu'étant si noble et si majestueuse, elle ne laisse pas d'être la plus simple et la plus naïve langue du monde" (*Entretiens* 112).

[26] Bouhours uses *étonn** a total of 20 times.

Like Bouhours and the dictionaries from the latter part of the century, Rapin closes the gap between *admiration* and *étonnement*. He uses both to describe the marvelous, or *merveilleux*, effects of good writing. For Rapin, like for Bouhours, admiration is warranted when a poet represents something so well that one becomes convinced that one is experiencing reality. For instance, in his *Œuvres*, he says that Sophocles' *Oedipus* causes "une émotion si universelle de l'âme par les surprises, les étonnements, les admirations" that it is no wonder Aristotle praises the play so highly (163). But Rapin decries modern tragedies because they do not have this same effect. They lack, "ces objets étonnants et terribles qui donnaient de la frayeur aux spectateurs en leur donnant du Plaisir et qui faisait ces grandes impressions sur l'âme par le ministère des plus fortes passions" (167). While Rapin retains an element of the Cartesian *étonnement* which freezes the body with fear when confronted with something overwhelming, he paints this aspect of ancient tragedy as a positive effect, far more preferable than the insipid emotions inspired by modern tragedy. Ancient tragedy reflects much more closely the Boileauvian sublime which produces "admiration," "étonnement," and "surprise" and which gives great pleasure.

To summarize, there are three ways in which these two words are used over the course of the century. First, the earlier sources, including Nicot, Descartes, and Vaugelas, give *admiration* a positive and moral quality, while *étonnement* is negative because it is a reaction that limits the body and the mind – the person who is *étonné* loses capacity for speech or at least for coherent expression, and might even lose their physical movement. Secondly, Nicole and La Rochefoucauld lump *admiration* and *étonnement* together, considering both passions negative. They focus, not on the distinction between mind and body, but rather on the distinction of the human self and the other; a person attempts to gain *admiration* and *étonnement* from other people. For Nicole, this is born of idolatry for the created human instead of God, for La Rochefoucauld this is a result of the

duplicitous *amour-propre* that deceives even itself. Lastly, toward the latter half of the century, *admiration* and *étonnement* become intertwined and were often used to describe the effect of an encounter with the ineffable, particularly after the publication of Boileau's *Traité du Sublime*. Richelet, Furetière, and the *Académie's* dictionaries all define *admiration* and *étonnement* in a positive way, the two concepts intermingling and becoming more synonymous, although *étonnement* still maintains aspects of a physical reaction in the body. The Jesuits, Bouhours and Rapin, also reflect this positive shift. Bouhours portrays both emotions as an interaction with something good, whether natural, like the sea, or human-created like language. Rapin, like Boileau, speaks of *admiration* and *étonnement* as the positive effects created by great poetry.

What are the implications of both this temporal shift which blurred the two terms, and the religious and philosophical transformations (in which the Jansenists and the Jesuits were implicated as much as anyone else) that were taking place over the course of the seventeenth century? Part of the answer to this question is found in the theater of Corneille and Racine. Theater is a profoundly verbal and physical art; the language and bodies of the actors create effects on the minds as well as the bodies of the spectators. Perhaps because theater in the seventeenth century, and Corneille and Racine's theater in particular, was an incredibly successful art, we begin to see a shift in the understanding of how a physical reaction to theatrical productions could begin to be described as both an admiration and an *étonnement*. After all, a physically immobile and generally silent marveling was an acceptable reaction to the wonders being acted out on stage.[27] In the seventeenth century, French theater was also an extremely polemical art. As we have seen, Nicole thought it dangerous because it placed human bodies on display, creating both a sensually lustful

[27] It should be noted that silent and passive spectatorship for stage productions were not the normal occurrence in the seventeenth century. Many important spectators sat on the stage itself and were often so drawn into the action of the play that they inadvertently participated in it. See Lyons, "The 'Unities' and the Classical Spectator" in *Kingdom of Disorder*.

reaction, and not-less sinful idolatrous admiration of human accomplishment. Many Jesuits, on the other hand, argued that theater could educate about virtue and vice, and teach people to imitate the admirable qualities they saw represented on stage.[28]

Corneille and Racine were both lauded by their contemporaries as sublime authors, capable of a great and powerful *merveilleux* in their works which caused both *admiration* and *étonnement*. This parallels Boileau definition of the sublime as the "merveilleux dans le discours" which "ravit, transporte, et produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise" (*OC, Traité* 341). As early as 1638, Guez de Balzac writes that Corneille is capable of "magie" that "éblouit les yeux du Monde" (cited in Hache 475). Boileau praises Corneille's *Horace* as having "la grandeur héroïque […] qui est d'autant plus sublime qu'il est simple et naturel" (*OC*, "Préface du *Traité*" 340). Boileau also cites Corneille's *Médée* as having "du Sublime le plus relevé" (*OC*, *Réflexions* 549). Madame de Sévigné's vehement devotion to Corneille finds something in his "tirades" which makes her "frissonner" (*Correspondance*, t. 1, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 16 mars 1672," 459). Corneille's nephew Fontenelle says that the playwright wrote, "des divines et sublimes beautés qui nous transportent" (cited in Hache 476). Racine says Corneille's work has "une certaine force, une certaine élévation qui surprend, qui enlève, et qui rend jusqu'à ses défauts, si on lui en peut reprocher quelques-uns, plus estimables que les vertus des autres" (*OC*, t. 2, ed. Picard "*Discours prononcé à l'académie*" 345).[29]

Racine, too, was seen as a sublime author, and capable of great *merveilles*. Jean-Baptiste Morvan de Bellegarde praises his writing as "de plus magnifique, de plus noble, de plus grand" as being "aussi hardie et aussi sublime" as that of the ancients (cited in Hache 465). Boileau praises Racine's which could "émouvoir, étonner, ravir un spectateur," the same words he had used in his

[28] Bouhours describes the sea as "le théâtre de la puissance divine" (*Entretiens* 77).
[29] Hache includes many other examples in the "Annexe" in *La Langue du ciel.*

definition of the sublime in the *Traité* (*OC, Epîtres* 127). Boileau also defends Racine against those who would unjustly compare him to Corneille.

> Je conclus que c'est avec très-peu de fondement que les admirateurs outrez de Monsieur Corneille veulent insinuer que Monsieur Racine est beaucoup inferieur pour le Sublime; […] il ne me paraît pas que toute cette grandeur de vertu Romaine tant vantée que ce premier a si bien exprimée dans plusieurs de ces pièces, et qui ont fait son excessive réputation; soit au-dessus de l'intrépidité plus qu'héroïque, et de la parfait confiance en Dieu de ce véritablement pieux, grand, sage et courageux Israélite (*OC*, *Réflexions* 563).

Thus, both playwrights are connected again and again to the sublime, which manifests as an obvious aesthetic effect in their plays, although their contemporaries differ as to who did it better.

Despite many of their contemporaries insisting otherwise, Corneille and Racine shared similar poetic goals. First and foremost, they understood tragedy as a genre distinct from the didactic. Horace declared it necessary to "plaire et instruire" in theater, but both Corneille and Racine take a rather flexible approach toward "instruire." In fact, in the *Discours*, Corneille "expressly denies that drama should have a moral aim" (Yarrow 228). Rather than teaching a moral lesson, tragedy could simply recount a historical or a mythical event. It could demonstrate the consequences of human action, whether moral or immoral, but without making a one-to-one correlation of evil punished, good rewarded. A sermon or a textbook on morality could teach proper human conduct, but Corneille and Racine were much more concerned with excellent representation, with creating an illusion which elicited a unified response from an audience.[30] Likewise, for the playwrights, tragedy was more than a formulaic engagement with the Aristotelian unities, or a flat representation of "sufficiently lofty subjects" whose characters behaved "with the dignity and virtue proper to their high rank," as many of their non-playwright critics seemed to

[30] See Gilby, "'Émotions' and the Ethics of Response," Brooks, "Aesthetics of Astonishment," and Forestier, "Introduction" in *Œuvres complètes de Racine* for how Corneille and Racine interacted with audience emotion.

think it was (Pocock 13). Both Corneille and Racine were more interested in creating a complex and emotionally powerful representative act. Even if it meant portraying horrific and tragic events, or vile human character, if it was done well, it would result in the pleasurable theatrical experience they thought paramount. [31] Indeed, both playwrights claim that pleasure is their central aim; Corneille writes that "la poésie dramatique a pour but le seul plaisir des spectateurs" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 821), and Racine likewise claims that "la principale règle est de plaire et de toucher" (*OC,* "Préface de *Bérénice*" 452). Each playwright clearly attempts to create certain emotional effects in their audiences in order to achieve this goal.

Corneille's Sublime Admiration

While Corneille is credited as envisioning a "poetics of admiration" (Lyons, "Corneille" 6), this often means limiting him to the narrow confines of neoclassicism which prefers to acknowledge the greatness of four of his tragedies, *Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Cinna*, and *Polyeucte*, also known as the Tetralogy, and politely ignore the rest of his works. Even Corneille's contemporaries complained that his earlier plays were more admirable than his later plays because they possessed a certain heroic quality and sublime grandeur that the others lacked. These four plays adhere more or less to the classical unities,[32] and their heroes "are *généreux* (passionately devoted to honour) but not faultless models" who inspire admiration in spectators (Knight, *Unexpected* 42).[33]

[31] Both Corneille and Racine experimented with loss other than death, a trope that earned them the criticism and censure of many. But by expanding tragedy beyond the loss of death to include other forms of human loss, Corneille and Racine essentially opened up a world in which their spectators could identify and understand loss on a personal level, not just one experienced by great heads of state, as was dictated by the seventeenth-century understanding of tragic action. Only illustrious and noble persons could be the subjects of tragedy. See Pocock, "Introduction" in *Corneille and Racine* for these two authors' perceptions of tragic emotion.

[32] The polemics between Corneille and the *Académie* regarding *Le Cid* hinged on these unities and partially established them as absolutely necessary for neoclassical tragedy. See Bray, *La Formation*.

[33] *Le Cid*, in 1637, marked Corneille's first highly successful play, followed by *Horace* (1640), *Polyeucte* (1642), and *Cinna* (1643).

However, Corneille's notion of admiration is far more complex than simply adhering to classical unities and social rules of *bienséance*. He speaks of admiration as the driving purpose behind his works, and even dares to place it on par with the fear and pity required by Aristotle. In the *Examen* to *Nicomède*, he writes

> La fermeté des grands cœurs, qui n'excite que de l'admiration dans l'âme du spectateur, est quelquefois aussi agréable que la compassion que notre art nous ordonne d'y produire par la représentation de leurs malheurs. […] Dans l'admiration qu'on a pour sa vertu, je trouve une manière de purger les passions dont n'a point parlé Aristote, et qui est peut-être plus sûre que celle qu'il prescrit à la tragédie par le moyen de la pitié et de la crainte (*OC* 521).

Indeed, Corneille's constant desire was to provoke admiration in his spectators through an emotive theatrical experience, and he experimented with countless ways of doing so across the entirety of his poetic corpus.[34]

This study will examine three approaches Corneille used to create spectator admiration: the unexpected of the *nouveauté* in his plots, a preference for complex plots that adhered to historic "vérité" over *vraisemblance*, and the remarkable personality of his characters. These approaches often resulted in tension between his plays and expectations of his critical public. They also recur in many of his plays, but my analyses will focus primarily on *Le Cid*, *Médée, Cinna*, and *Rodogune*. The logic behind this choice is as follows. *Le Cid* was one of Corneille's most popular and most polemical plays; *Médée* was cited by Boileau as exemplary of Corneille's sublime; *Cinna* is often considered Corneille's most classically conforming play; and *Rodogune* was Corneille's personal favorite and it adhered to his definition of the "genre le plus sublime" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 834).

[34] See Knight, *Unexpected* as well as Carlin, "A Life of Distinction" in *Pierre Corneille Revisited*, for how Corneille envisioned a poetics of admiration across his entire corpus and not just in the famous Tetralogy.

The first approach Corneille uses to create spectator admiration is the unexpected of the *nouveauté*. Corneille knew, as Descartes claimed, that admiration was "une subite surprise de l'âme qui fait qu'elle le porte à considérer avec attention les objets qui les semble rares et extraordinaires" (*OC*, *Les passions de l'âme* 728). One way to create admiration was to invoke surprise through plot, and he often took his spectators through "un cours sinueux et inquiétant du suspense à une catastrophe admirable" (Tobari 136). But the surprising *nouveautés* of his plots often did not conform to the Aristotelian unities in the way his critics thought they ought, and many of his plays, particularly his more surprising later ones, received censure for this.

Secondly, he thought historic or mythic "vérité," even if it was shocking, had more poetic manipulability and would "persuade avec empire," than anything that adhered to the socially acceptable "vraisemblable" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 822). However, his commitment to a convincing theatrical reality meant that some decried the liberty he took with plot, claiming that his choices were *invraisemblable*; others bemoaned the immorality of his plays which set aside socially acceptable and *bienséant* behavior for the titillating, unfiltered reality of ancient history and myth.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, Corneille's commitment to admiration meant that his greatest characters were a complicated marriage between appropriate poetic construction and the communication of a personality in its fullest sense.[35] But again, balancing these two aspects of character portrayal often created a provocative tension. On the one hand, seventeenth-century sensibilities and *bienséance* dictated that a character must act in accordance with their portrayed characteristics (their age, gender, or class), thus conforming to the Aristotelian *bonté de moeurs*.[36] However, Corneille, preferred to put his own spin on this Aristotelian goodness, preferring to

[35] For how this relates to the moral communication of heroism, see Fumaroli, "L'héroïsme cornélien et l'idéal de la magnanimité," Ranum, *Artisans of Glory*, and Rohou, "Dramaturgie, morale et politique chez Corneille."
[36] See Zsák, "La Médée de Corneille" for how Corneille develops this tension in Médée.

represent historic or mythic characters in all their complex glory, in other words to "peindre telles que nous les y trouvons" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 826). His re-invented definition allowed him to create exceptional and memorable, but not exactly socially-conforming, characters. Characters like Médée, Horace, and Cléopâtre give the impression that they have a deep sense of self, an almost lucid self-awareness, which they follow with an authenticity and consistency that convinces an audience of their depth more than anything else. Many praised his singularly memorable characters, but they often got him in trouble. As the polemics surrounding *Le Cid* testify, when Corneille created characters like Chimène, whose actions critics like Scudéry thought completely vicious and therefore impossible to imitate, he was accused of ruining Horace's second purpose of theater: to teach a moral lesson.

In order to justify the poetic license he takes in his plays to create admiration, Corneille invents what he calls "le necessaire," which he lays out, with brilliant rhetorical acrobatics and defends with his typical reinterpretation of Aristotle in the *Trois Discours*. He begins by complaining that poetic terms are unclear and that, according to Aristotle "et tous ses interprètes," every poet must write "selon le vraisemblable et le nécessaire" (*OC* 822). But all these people, including Aristotle, believe these terms are "si clairs et si intelligibles," that no one takes the time to explain, "ce que c'est que ce vraisemblable et ce nécessaire" (*OC* 822). Corneille, with all the authority of his experience as a playwright, then takes it upon himself to clarify what these terms mean. He is particularly concerned because too much attention has been given to establishing "une maxime très fausse, qu'il faut que le sujet d'une tragédie soit vraisemblable" and not enough given to the "nécessaire" (*OC* 822).

After expounding on the "utitilité et des parties du poème dramatique," Corneille concludes his first discours with a very subtle but very key shift in his argument for le "nécessaire." He had

begun the *Discours* claiming that everyone, including Aristotle, requires the "le vraisemblable *et* le nécessaire" for good drama; he ends it by introducing his second *Discours* in which he will discuss tragedy and "la manière de le traiter selon le vraisemblable *ou* le nécessaire" (*OC* 830). By shifting the "et" to an "ou," Corneille creates a way for his own redefinition of *vraisemblable* in relation to the *nécessaire*.[37] Indeed, a bit further on, Corneille claims that Aristotle gave poets this so-called choice in order to give them "liberté" to choose which of the two they might need. "Si nous pouvons traiter les choses selon le vraisemblable ou selon le nécessaire, nous pouvons quitter le vraisemblable pour suivre le nécessaire; et cette alternative met en notre choix de nous servir de celui des deux que nous jugerons le plus à propos" (*OC* 837). He then goes on to distinguish between the two. He claims that the "ornements de la vraisemblance" give the poet a nice option to "donner une meilleure forme aux actions de la tragédie" (*OC* 837). But *vraisemblance* is just that, pretty embellishment and ornamentation. The much more crucial "nécessaire," on the other hand, is the very means by which a poet can accomplish the creative act. "Je dis donc que le nécessaire, en ce qui regarde la poésie, n'est autre chose que le besoin du poète pour arriver à son but ou pour y faire arriver ses acteurs" (*OC* 840).

The "nécessaire" can thus mean adding *nouveautés* to make a play more interesting or surprising. It can mean rewriting a historical event, so long as the primary action remains the same, to make a coherent tragic plot. After all, sometimes history (or myth) doesn't give enough information and the poet needs to fill in the blanks. Or sometime events are too horrific to be played out on stage, and the poet must rework them so as not to shock the spectators and "diminuer quelque chose de la croyance que l'auditeur doit à l'histoire" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 836). It can mean creating characters which the spectators will find relatable and memorable, even if they don't

[37] See Doubrovsky *Dialectique du héros*, Fumaroli, *Héros et orateurs*, and Forestier, *Essai de génétique* for Corneille's complicated poetics of *nécessité*.

adhere to *bienséance*. In short, the *nécessaire* is whatever the poet's intuition tells them will make their work believable, relatable and worthy of admiration. But regardless of how the poet chooses to use the freedom of the *nécessaire*, the proof that the work was done well, will be its acceptance and judgement by the audience.

In this regard, it is remarkably reminiscent of the Longinian *kairos*, or the "sense of timeliness and measure" which is connected deeply to the author's intuition of what is appropriate for his audience and his insight into "the psychological limits of a situation" (Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* 41). Likewise, Corneille's intuitive use of the *nécessaire* was extremely effective in taking fictions that by themselves were unbelievable, but, when coupled with appropriate poetic maneuvering, transformed them into plays that overwhelmed spectators with admiration and pleasure. In fact, Corneille so effectively instilled belief in his spectators that seventeenth-century preaching treatises encouraged the imitation of his rhetoric to create the same belief in their religious congregations.[38] It was Corneille's poetic "nécessaire" that allowed him to understand how to create plays that would "manifester sa force et puissance bref, l'emporter par un effet de célérité et de promptitude foudroyant et sublime qui renverse la causalité psychologique ordinaire et suscite l'admiration par l'événement merveilleux, extraordinaire dont elle est la cause imprévue et secrète" (Fumaroli, "Rhétorique, dramaturgie et spiritualité" 283-284).

Corneille's first approach to creating this sublime admiration was through unexpected surprise and suspense, which he creates specifically with his signature *nouveautés*. Corneille defends his unorthodoxy to M. de Zuylichem, "grand personnage, à la fois diplomate, savant, critique d'art et poète" (Lote 197). Corneille writes that the perfect opportunity for a playwright to

[38] See particularly Hache, "Le Choix de modèles sublimes" in *La Langue du ciel*. Another critic calls this Corneille's "merveilleux méta-poétique, qui serait l'exhibition des contours de toute fiction, qui désignerait le pacte de croyance, d'adhésion du spectateur, et paradoxalement le convertirait à la fiction tout en définissant constamment celle-ci comme incroyable" (Naudeix 477).

give his spectators "le plaisir entier de la surprise" is through "la grâce de la nouveauté" (*OC*, "Lettre à M. de Zuylichem" 854). Corneille used a variety of theatrical techniques for his *nouveautés*. He often based his plays on a recognized subjects but introduced novel characters, new character motivations, or unexpectedly changed the order of the events.[39] Indeed, Corneille "frequently prides himself on his 'inventions,' always suggesting that they do not actually contradict history and often that they are directed toward the arousal of particular emotions" (Barnwell 14).

The *nouveauté* of *Le Cid* completely unsettled spectators' expectations of *bienséance*. Not only did Rodrigue commit an unspeakably terrible action by killing the father of his beloved Chimène, he then dares to visit her privately, not once, but twice, in order to try to speak with her. To a seventeenth century audience, the audacity Rodrigue exhibits bordered on the absurd, and the *Académie* condemned Chimène for deigning even to see, let alone speak with her former lover. Corneille admits in the *Au Lecteur* of *Le Cid* that these two visits, "ont quelque chose qui choque cette bienséance de la part de celle qui les souffre" (*OC* 219). This is the closest Corneille comes to admitting that his poetic choices may have been as unorthodox as the *Académie* claimed. However, he defends this absurdity with Aristotelian authority, "Aristote dit qu'il y a des absurdités qu'il faut laisser dans un poème, quand on peut espérer qu'elles seront bien reçues; et il est du devoir du poète, en ce cas, de les couvrir de tant de brillants, qu'elles puissent éblouir" (*OC* 219). The absurd encounters between Rodrigue and Chimène become just such a "brilliant" theatrical moment, and their tension creates a powerful emotional *éblouissement* in the spectators. These scenes resulted in "un certain frémissement dans l'assemblée," and which produced "une curiosité

[39] See May, "Surprise et curiosité" in *Tragédie cornélienne*.

merveilleuse […] et un redoublement d'attention" for how the tragic interaction between the lovers would play out (*OC* 219).

In *Cinna* the *nouveauté* consists of the order in which Corneille presents the actions of Auguste. We know from the beginning that Emilie and Cinna are conspiring to kill their emperor, Auguste. We also know, nearly from the beginning that, unbeknownst to the two conspirators, Auguste has discovered their treachery. The spectators know the motivations and the reactions of each of the characters. At first, Corneille seems to be faithful to Seneca's historical order, showing us Auguste's deliberation on a course of action. The emperor oscillates between his options, either Cinna and Emilie are justified in their anger at his tyranny, and he must allow the regicide to take place, or he must arrest and kill Cinna for his treason. He questions, "Qui des deux dois-je suivre et duquel m'éloigner? / Ou laissez-moi périr, ou laissez-moi régner" (IV.ii.1191-92). Auguste finally chooses a course of action and announces to his wife Livie, "Le ciel m'inspirera ce qu'ici je dois faire. Adieu, nous perdons temps" (IV.iii.1258-59). But what exactly his choice will be is not revealed, building tension and curiosity in the minds of the spectators. Corneille then deviates from Seneca's order, and creates a *nouveauté* in his plot by hiding until the very end Auguste's divinely inspired choice. First, Corneille brilliantly has Auguste invoke a promise from Cinna to remain silent while Auguste tells what he is about to tell him, which ironically is his knowledge of Cinna's treachery. In order to keep his word of honor, Cinna cannot defend himself against this accusation of treachery until Auguste has finished, and the spectator becomes more and more uncertain of Auguste's intentions toward Cinna. Auguste reveals to Cinna that he knows everything, and that Cinna (and Emilie) ought to perish for their treason, "Cinna tu t'en souviens, et veux m'assassiner" (V.i.1476). He lays out the case and ends the scene with a wrathful, "Tu sais ce qui t'est dû, tu vois que je sais tout, / Fais ton arrêt toi-même, et choisis tes supplices" (V.i.1560-

61). The spectator, like Cinna himself, is in the throes of uncertainty; will Corneille follow Seneca's history and have Auguste pardon Cinna, or, as seems more likely, will he instead justly punish him? By reordering *Cinna*'s plot from its historical source, Corneille leads spectator expectation in one direction with a rhetorical *fausse piste*, thereby building an intense and pleasurable theatrical suspense, and allowing him to wait until the very last moment to reveal his choice to follow Seneca's ending after all with his *dénouement*.

Nouveautés were not the only means Corneille used to create surprise and admiration. He also employed complex plots to develop and maintain spectators' curiosity.[40] Although a complex plot, Corneille notes, can be frustrating for the occasional spectator who prefers "s'abandonner à l'action présente" and not have to remember all its twists and turns (*OC,* "Examen de *Cinna*" 269), for the involved and intelligent spectator, such a plot keeps their curiosity engaged. Corneille was nothing if not confident that his audiences had enough *esprit* to follow a logically structured play, even if it was complicated. Part of Corneille's justification for his involved plots was the concern that tragedy was too often based on familiar "événements publics et éclatants" that were potentially uninteresting (*OC*, "Examen de *Médée*" 174). If a spectator discerned the end before the appropriate time they would cease being curious "et son attention languit durant tout le reste" (*OC, Trois Discours* 829). Corneille addressed this issue in one of two ways; either he reordered the events of a known story, or he based his plots on lesser-known historical events. Both allowed him to avoid the terrible trap of the too-knowledgeable spectator.[41]

[40] See Moriarty, "Boileau: Taste and the Institution of 'Literature'" in *Taste and Ideology,* and D. Clarke, *Poetics and Political Drama* for Corneille's use of spectator curiosity.

[41] "Corneille, lui, voulait cacher son dénouement, et il avait pour cela d'excellentes raisons dramatiques […] Laisser entendre le mot de cette énigme eût été priver le spectateur d'une des plus grandes sources de son plaisir" (May 97-98).

Corneille also much preferred complexity because he found that the strangeness of "les grands sujets" of history or myth, although they went "au-delà du vraisemblable," nevertheless "remuent fortement les passions" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 822). Complex plots founded on "l'autorité de l'histoire qui persuade avec empire, ou par la préoccupation de l'opinion commune" provided Corneille with more pliable subject matter since he didn't have to worry about spectator belief; they were already "déjà tous persuadés" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 822). He found such complexity more interesting to write because it required "plus d'esprit pour les imaginer, et de plus d'art pour les conduire" on the part of the playwright (*OC*, "Examen de *Cinna*" 270).

Despite their potential to create great emotion, Corneille generally avoided myths as subject matter for his plays because myths were artistically structured narratives that he found difficult to manipulate. After *Médée*, he only used them when commissioned.[42] He does this by claiming that Aristotle recommended "qu'il ne faut point changer les sujets reçus, et que Clytemnestre ne doit point être tuée par un autre qu'Oreste, ni Eriphyle par un autre qu'Alcméon" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 836). Instead, Corneille preferred historical subjects that could be reordered and restructured to his liking and "history took precedence over poetic fiction as repertory of possibilities" (Lyons, *Origins* 5). Historical plots also provided Corneille with naturally occurring *peripeteia*, or reversals of action, that were "important not only to one individual but to the state as a whole," characterizing the rise and fall of all great regimes. (Lyons, *Origins* 6). Corneille liked historic sources because of their dual nature to be both supple in the hands of a talented poet, and to convince with their plausibility since they were based in historic "vérité."

Corneille freely admits to taking liberty with his arrangement of events. His justification is that as long as the final outcome of a historical event is respected, poetic license allows him to

[42] This occurred only three times after *Médée*, *Andromède* in 1650, *Œdipe* in 1659 and *Psychée* in 1671.

rearrange its order of sequence as he sees fit so that it will "produce certain dramatic effects and emotional responses" (Barnwell 35). Indeed, the Aristotelian unities restricted the theatrical universe so much that, in order to create a logical and consistent plot, the poet was obligated to change the order of events to make them believable, interesting, and, most importantly, surprising for his spectators. Using the *nécessaire* a poet can do what "n'est pas au pouvoir de Dieu même," that is change the past according to his will (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 838). The resulting plot makes seemingly impossible events believable, creating poetically altered but theatrically interesting plots.

Corneille's perception of manipulatable history came from his Jesuit upbringing whose influence, both rhetorical and theological, remained with him throughout his life.[43] The Jesuits believed that God was a benevolent Creator who loved his creation and had a "universal desire to save humankind" (Parish 151). In order to be known by people, he had not only revealed himself through the Bible and the Catholic Church, but had also gave proof of his existence through nature.[44] God invited humanity to recognize him and enter into his divine act of grace by participating in their salvation through good works. Thus the Jesuits believed that contemplation of God's creation could elicit admiration and wonder, and move the human mind into belief in the divine.[45]

Jesuit theology fascinated Corneille from a young age and influenced his perception of the author-creator.[46] Like the Jesuit creator God, Corneille wanted his creative presence to be felt in

[43] See Tjoelker, Bénichou, *Morals*, and Parish, *Catholic Particularity* for Corneille's religious background.
[44] Bouhours argues in the *Entretiens* that the sea is the reflection of God's character and glory.
[45] Because of this philosophical understanding, the Jesuits often encouraged syncretistic methods in their missionary endeavors. They would use pre-existing religious belief systems to build an understanding of God's existence and draw adherents to the catholic faith, a practice which put them at risk of being considered universalists by the more austere Jansenists such as Pascal. See Parish, "Particularity and Polemic (i): Jansenism" in *Catholic Particularlity.*
[46] According to Zuber, even the language of Cornellian characters, their commitment to *devoir*, *gloire*, and *raison*, as well as their hope in the possibility of change through acts of their own will, reflects the Jesuit worldview, which

his writing, if only his spectators would look for it, particularly in the orchestration of theatrical events.[47] The poet's choice of history inspires admiration in two ways; first for the work itself, and then for the poet's own genius in creating novelty within real *vérité historique*, in which.[48] As Guez de Balzac claims of Corneille's *Cinna*, "Vous nous faites voire Rome tout ce qu'elle peut être à Paris" (cited in Barnwell 63).

One of the ways Corneille most excelled in creating admiration was his depiction of characters, and he writes in the *Trois Discours*, "Pour nous faciliter les moyens de faire naître cette pitié et cette crainte où Aristote semble nous obliger, il nous aide à choisir les personnes […] qui peuvent exciter l'une et l'autre" (*OC* 831). But in the seventeenth century, a "good" character was one who conformed to Aristotle's "bonté de mœurs," meaning one whose age and gender dictated what behavior was appropriate for them. But Corneille disliked the notion that characters ought to act in a certain way based on fixed attitudes of social *mœurs*. Instead, as he had done with the *nécessaire*, Corneille claimed that Aristotle's "bonté de mœurs" was too vague to limit it to *bienséance*, or socially acceptable behavior. Instead, Corneille glossed his own definition of "bonté" meaning consistent-to-the-character. For instance, when Aristotle recommends that a poet portray Médée "fière et indomptable," Corneille insists that Aristotle did not mean to give Médée "de grandes vertus," but rather one has to find "une bonté compatible" with the character of Médée (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 826). By accurately and consistently depicting a character's vice or virtue, the playwright need never stoop to the obvious didactic end of "faire récompenser les bonnes

"croit la nature humaine capable par ses propres forces de rejoindre la grâce" ("Classicisme" 164). See also, Lebègue, "Préface" in *Œuvres complètes de Corneille*.

[47] The more times spectators see a play, the more they understand the logic and the structure of it, entering into different levels of enjoyment. "Il est à présumer qu'ils [les ouvrages] donneront la même satisfaction à toutes les lectures qu'on en voudra faire, qu'ils auraient donnée à la première où l'on aurait été préparé par un argument. J'avoue que nous en voyons presque au-devant de tous ceux que nous ont laissé nos Anciens" (*OC*, "Lettre à M. de Zuylichem" 854).

[48] See Barnwell, "Sources," in *Tragic Drama*, Lyons, *Origins*, and Forestier, *Esthétique de l'identité*.

actions, et punir les mauvaises" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 823). Instead, "la naïve peinture des vices et des vertus," speaks for itself and "ne manque jamais à faire son effet," (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 823). After all, the purpose of poetry is to describe "indifféremment les bonnes et les mauvaises actions, sans nous proposer les dernières pour exemple" (*OC,* "Adresse de *Médée*" 173). Corneille understands who he wants his characters to be, and chooses to depict them as "dignes d'eux-mêmes" without social or moral commentary (Bénichou 17).[49] This kind of representation, Corneille explains, is like painting a portrait, "il n'est pas question si un visage est beau, mais s'il ressemble; et dans la poésie, il ne faut pas considérer si les mœurs sont vertueuses, mais si elles sont pareilles à celles de la personne qu'elle introduit" (*OC*, "Adresse de *Médée*" 173).

Corneille skillfully created very memorable characters, characters whose nature was "supérieure à la simple nature," by keeping them internally consistent to the historic or mythic idea they were inspired from (Bénichou 25). They create an illusion of a remarkable interiority in which one can remark complex motivations which give them "le caractère brillant et élevé d'une habitude vertueuse ou criminelle, selon qu'elle est propre et convenable à la personne qu'on introduit" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 826). Indeed, Corneille's contemporaries often praise his depiction of characters. Longepierre lauds Corneille's ability to create characters whose "traits singuliers" are "plus grands que nature," and "toujours merveilleux." Such characters "brillent et se font admirer par ce qu'ils ont de rare et d'extraordinaire (*Parallèle* 168). Likewise, Guez de Balzac describes Corneille's Cinna of having "cette noble et magnanime fierté" found only in "les ruines de la république" (cited in Barnwell 63). Similarly, Boileau, praises the old king Horace whose brief and bitter

[49] Corneille does consider it important to adhere to a certain amount of social decorum for character behavior, but only for the sake of maintaining the theatrical illusion. After all, excessive violence on stage risks horrifying the spectators too much and breaking their belief. Thus, "il faut examiner en même temps si elle [l'action] n'est point si cruelle, ou si difficile à représenter, qu'elle puisse diminuer quelque chose de la croyance que l'auditeur doit à l'histoire […]. Lorsque cet inconvénient est à craindre, il est bon de cacher l'événement à la vue, et de le faire savoir par un récit" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 836).

words, “Qu’il mourût” embody the sublime because they perfectly represent “la grandeur héroïque” of the “vieux héros,” who speaks “dans les transports d’une colère vraiment romaine (*OC*, “Préface du *Traité*” 340).

Two characters Corneille created using his redefinition of Aristotelian “bonté” are Médée and Cléopâtre, whose very moral complexity, he claims in the *Trois Discours*, is why we admire them. They seem to spring from “une situation naturelle de l’âme” and their vices seem born out of them, “plus souvent spontané que volontaire” (Bénichou 27). Corneille understood that Médée did not fit the seventeenth century’s perception of a model woman and mother, after all, “il n'est pas vraisemblable que Médée tue ses enfants” (*OC* 822). But he knew that an excellent “représentation de ces grands crimes” would “ne trouve point d'incrédules” (*OC* 822). Thus Corneille chooses to portray Médée as she is, in all her intensity and in all her moral complexity, and doesn’t try to excuse or soften her actions. In *Médée*’s dedicatory letter, Corneille writes, “Je vous donne Médée, toute méchante qu'elle est, et ne vous dirai rien pour sa justification” (*OC* 173).

But even if Corneille depicts Médée as “toute méchante,” he gives her an authenticity that makes her more than simply a purely evil woman who kills her own children. There is something ineffable in her character which creates a profound and sublime effect. Corneille’s *Examen de Médée* clearly shows how much Médée’s complex character affected his spectators in the way he intended. Médée’s horrific actions and speech harmonize so remarkably with her own self-perception, her own audacious self-reliance, that something in her attracted “toute la faveur de l'auditoire” (*OC* 174). Indeed, she suffered so much from “la perfidie de Jason et la violence du roi de Corinthe” and their actions make her seem so unjustly oppressed that Corneille’s spectators found themselves on her side. He writes that she invoked in them “plus de compassion du désespoir où ils l'ont réduite que de tout ce qu'elle leur fait souffrir” (*OC* 174). Even the deaths of Médée’s

enemies, Créon and Créuse, were troubling to Corneille's audience because they were depicted with agonizing "cris" and "gémissements," and not because the audience believed they deserved pity for their plight (*OC* 175).

Thus, despite his declaration that he won't justify Médée, Corneille does exactly that; he "describes her emotions, even analyzes them" in an attempt to understand them (Knight, *Unexpected* 13). But in capturing the essence of Médée's character, her "luminosity of moral significance," is "central to the specific pleasure" she causes (D.R. Clarke 558). She forces everyone who encounters her, even her own author, to grapple with her moral complexity. We are troubled by our inability to condemn her violent and unnatural actions. We feel compassion for her; we think she is justified in her vengeance against Créon and Créuse, yet she has murdered her children in cold blood. Suddenly our confidence in a predictable morality is shaken and we are faced with an ethically gray world that disrupts our sense of normalcy and flies away from our grasp, just like Médée on her chariot drawn by dragons.

Médée's "extraordinaire du personnage" translates into an "extraordinaire du discours," making her a key example of the sublime, according to Boileau (*OC*, *Réflexions* 549). Boileau describes the effect of this "fameuse enchanteresse" who stands strong when faced with the desertion of all her allies (*OC* 549). When Nérine asks her "Votre pays vous hait, votre époux est sans foi / Dans un si grand revers que vous reste-ti-il?" Médée responds with, "Moi, moi dis-je et c'est assez" (II.v.318-320). Boileau claims that her words are sublime because they communicate exactly who Médée is. Her words harmonize so perfectly with her sense of self that she communicates her very essence to us in a "transmutation soudaine […] où toute la passion se retrouve métamorphosée" (Bénichou 24).[50] Boileau asks, "Qu'est-ce donc qui frappe dans ce

[50] See also Gilby, *Sublime Worlds* and Forestier, *Esthétique de l'identité*.

passage?" He finds that it is Médée's "fierté audacieuse," her astounding ability to face without flinching the terrifying prospect of fundamental human isolation. It is the deep confidence that she has "dans son art," her pagan magical art that troubles and intrigues because it allows her to be sufficient to herself without reliance on a Christian God to rescue her. Boileau marvels, "Peut-on nier qu'il y ait du sublime, et du sublime le plus relevé, dans ce monosyllabe, moi?" (*OC* 549).

Like Médée, Cléopâtre in *Rodogune* is another morally complex and admirable character whose intensity results in "a final impressive *coup de théâtre*" (Carlin, "The Woman as Heavy" 397). She too is "très méchante," and we are meant to be properly horrified that she is willing to kill her own sons and commit the sin of parricide to keep her throne "qu'elle préfère à toutes choses" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 826). But despite her lust for power and her pursuit of violence, there is something ineffable about her.[51] Corneille writes, "Tous ses crimes sont accompagnés d'une grandeur d'âme qui a quelque chose de si haut, qu'en même temps qu'on déteste ses actions, on admire la source dont elles partent" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 826). The language Corneille uses here to describe Cléopâtre is reminiscent of Longinus' Greek word for the sublime; in Greek *hypsos* literally translates as height. In the *Traité*, Boileau renders this as the first and foremost characteristic necessary for sublime utterance, is "cette élévation d'esprit [qui est] une image de la grandeur d'âme" (*OC* 351). Cléopâtre inspires admiration in the spectator precisely because Corneille felt and communicated her "grandeur d'âme" which has "quelque chose de si haut," and a spectator who is "porté par le même souffle d'enthousiasme que l'orateur" will "éprouve le discours comme s'il en était lui-même l'auteur" (Hache 235).

Part of what gives Cléopâtre her sublime "grandeur d'âme" in Corneille's mind is her violent and single-minded pursuit of power. She is willing to sacrifice the lives of those who share

[51] "La soif du pouvoir de Cléopâtre inspirerait au spectateur la stupeur devant le "sublime inverse" d'une âme porté à l'absolu du mal" (Miernowski 792).

her "proximité du sang," with a violence that increases our suspense and "exciter la commisération" we feel toward those she wants to kill (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 833). The play opens as Cléopâtre, "reine de Syrie" refuses to reveal to her twin sons, Antiochus and Séleucus, which one will rule after her. Both sons love Rodogune, whom Cléopâtre sees as the real rival to her power because of the influence Rodogune holds over Antiochus and Séleucus. Rodogune knows that Cléopâtre will do anything to keep her power, and warns the princes that their mother is not above regicide, "Tremblez, Princes, tremblez au nom de votre père: / Il est mort, et pour moi, par les mains d'une mère" (III.iv.1019-20). Indeed, the queen tries to psychologically manipulate her two sons, cornering them and promising them the inheritance of the crown to the one who succeeds in murdering Rodogune. At first, she tries to hide the violence of her request in maternal language, calling them, "O fils vraiment mes fils" and herself "ô mère trop heureuse" (II.iv.624).[52] She then invites them to prove their fidelity to her as sons and "embrasser ma querelle" (II.iv 644). But the horror of their response ("Quoi! Vous montrez tous deux un visage étonné!"), shifts her maternal invitation into a livid ultimatum, "Mais si vous me devez et le sceptre et le jour, / Ce doit être envers moi le sceau de votre amour" (II.iv.646, 665-66).

When her first attempt fails, Cléopâtre approaches each of her sons individually, trying to ascertain how she can maneuver each brother against the other to achieve her goal. She attempts to fan into flame a brotherly jealousy that might push them into action against each other and Rodogune. Instead, she finds their brotherly love and loyalty united in a front so solid she cannot pierce it, "Leur amour m'offensait, leur amitié m'accable / Et contre mes fureurs je trouve en mes deux fils / Deux enfants révoltés et deux rivaux unis" (IV.vii.1477-78). Their love for each other thwarts her, and she is forced to attempt Rodogune's assassination herself through poison.

[52] She is what Goulbourne calls, "a skilled illusion-maker" ("Visual Effects" 538).

Cléopâtre is not the only one scheming to kill in this play, and Corneille uses "divers personnages pour faire naître [les] deux sentiments [de crainte et pitié]" (*OC*, *Trois Discours* 832). Rodogune demands that, for love of her, the brothers kill their own mother, committing the double sin of regicide and matricide. Mirroring Cléopâtre's strategy, she first addresses them together, giving them a choice to prove their love to her, "C'est à vous de choisir mon amour ou ma haine. / J'aime les fils du Roi, je hais ceux de la Reine" (III.iv.1023-24). She frames their love for her as political as well as personal justice, they must avenge their father, the king, assassinated by the queen's hand, "Pour gagner Rodogune, il faut venger un père" (III.iv.1045). At their shocked reaction to her suggestion, she, like Cléopâtre, uses her disappointment in them as an attempt to shame them into action, "Quoi, cette ardeur s'éteint! L'un et l'autre soupire! / J'avais su le prévoir, j'avais su le prédire" (III.iv.1039-1040).

But when Rodogune speaks alone with Antiochus, she, unlike Cléopâtre, does not attempt a second manipulation. Instead, when she reminds him that, "Prince, il faut le venger," she seems genuinely surprised to hear him accept, "Quel mystère / vous fait, en l'acceptant, méconnaître une mère?" (IV.i.1175-76). This reaction of incredulity is what Corneille uses as justification of Rodogune's virtuous character. While she charges the brothers to kill their mother, "Elle ne la fait pas, comme Cléopâtre, avec espoir de la voir exécuter par les princes" (*OC*, "Examen de *Rodogune*" 418). Her political aim is to avoid the civil war that would inevitably result if she were to marry one brother over the other. She recognizes the moral complexity of her demand for matricide, and realizes she would have had equal difficulty loving Antiochus if he had killed his own mother, "Votre refus est juste autant que mon demande, / A force de respect votre amour s'est trahi. / Je voudrais vous haïr s'il m'avait obéi" (IV.i.1220-22).

But both women are thwarted in their attempt to take the other's life by the hand of the princes. Rodogune's love for Antiochus and the horror he would feel for killing his mother overcomes her desire for revenge. Cléopâtre, on the other hand, almost succeeds in her goal in killing everyone who threatens her power. She has already had her son Séleucus assassinated. She then offers poisoned drink to Rodogune and Antiochus as a toast to celebrate their union, "Recevez de ma main la coupe nuptial" (V.iii.1591). But when he receives the sudden news of Séleucus' violent death, possibly at his mother's hand, Antiochus hesitates to drink the cup. Cléopâtre, in an attempt to trick him and Rodogune into believing that it is harmless, and to prove herself innocent of Séleucus' death, takes a sip herself. Antiochus believes her protestation, and reaches for the cup. But Rodogune wisely guesses at Cléopâtre's trick, "Ah, bons Dieux, quelle rage! / Pour vous perdre après elle, elle a voulu périr" (V.1807-08). Rodogune's insight thwarts Cléopâtre, who is overcome by the poison. Before she leaves the stage to die, seeing Rodogune and Antiochus alive, her "grande âme" rages in anger, and she curses them, "Puissiez-vous ne trouver dedans votre union / Qu'horreur, que jalousie, et que confusion! / Et pour vous souhaiter tous les malheurs ensemble, puisse naître de vous un fils qui me ressemble (V.iii.1821-24).

Because both Rodogune and Cléopâtre do not succeed in their murderous goals, *Rodogune* corresponds to Corneille's preferred kind of tragedy, one he says is "d'un genre peut−être plus sublime que les trois qu'Aristote avoue" (*OC, Trois Discours* 834). In this kind of sublime tragedy, a character, or better yet, several characters, are doing their best to kill those who share "proximité de sang" but then they are "empêchés d'en venir à l'effet par quelque puissance supérieure, ou par quelque changement de fortune qui les fait périr eux−mêmes, ou les réduit sous le pouvoir de ceux qu'ils voulaient perdre" (*OC, Trois Discours* 834).

In the *Examen de Rodogune*, Corneille admits that he feels more "tendresse" for this play than any of his other plays because it is almost entirely his own invention. "Cette tragédie me semble être un peu plus à moi que celles qui l'ont précédée" (*OC* 417). Although he still grounds his play in *vérité historique* taken from Justin and Josephus, "le reste sont des épisodes d'invention, qui ne sont pas incompatibles avec l'histoire" (*OC* 417). He creates and molds little-known or new characters and events to his heart's content, filling his play with "des incidents surprenants qui sont purement de mon invention et n'avaient jamais été vus au théâtre" (*OC* 417). Rodogune's character is a particularly excellent invention because she has "l'éclat que la nouveauté de l'invention fait au théâtre" (*OC* 418). The play contains "tout ensemble la beauté du sujet, la nouveauté des fictions, la force des vers, la facilité de l'expression, la solidité du raisonnement, la chaleur des passions, les tendresses de l'amour et de l'amitié" (*OC* 418). The Aristotelian unities are respected, and "l'action y est une, grande, complète" (*OC* 418). With this perfect combination the play "s'élève d'acte en acte" (*OC* 418). *Rodogune* provides Corneille with the perfect chance to exercise his full poetic freedom through the *nécessaire*, and make it truly, "d'un genre plus sublime" (*OC, Trois Discours* 834).

Thus far I have shown how Corneille strove for a poetics of *admiration*. But how did he understand *étonnement* to be different from *admiration*, if at all? Considering that his career spanned much of the seventeenth century (1625-1674), does his use of the word *étonnement* give an indication that he perceived this emotion to be different (and possibly less preferable) than *admiration*? Here we run into an interesting phenomenon. In his earlier plays (up to *Rodogune* which was produced in 1644) Corneille follows the trend of the earlier half of the century. He uses

admiration for positive things and *étonnement* (or its variations) to express a negative reaction to a negative cause.[53]

For instance, Corneille's four uses of *étonn** in *Le Cid* refer to mental shock and/or physical limitation as the characters describe their reactions to various morally or emotionally complicated circumstances.[54] *Horace* increases this number to seven times and adds "vertu étonné" to the list of things that can be frozen in surprise by a negative cause. *Cinna* uses it six times, with similar connotations. *Polyeucte* and *Théodore* use *étonn** four and five times respectively. These are both "Tragédies Chrétiennes," and *étonn** describes the reactions to the conversion and martyrdom of the two eponymous characters. Thus, the prospect of death does not frighten or overwhelm Polyeucte and he dies "En bravant les tourments, en dédaignant la vie, / sans regret, sans murmure, et sans étonnement" (III.iv.994-95). Similarly, Théodore is encouraged to face her martyr's death bravely, and is told "gardez de pâlir et de vous étonner" (II.iii.585). These are climatic and "exceptional feats of (in this case Christian) heroism" which Corneille hoped would "elicit the response of admiration – that is astonishment – from his audience" (Parish 192).

After *Polyeucte*, there is an notable increase of use of *étonn** and a subtle shift in its meaning; while there are still plenty of negative uses of *étonnement*, there are occasional positive ones. For instance, in *La Mort de Pompée* (1643), César twice acknowledges the power of Cornélie's courage with *étonn**. In *Héraclius*, *étonn** is used eleven times in a mostly negative sense. However, there is a curious moment of mixed positive and negative *étonn** when Héraclius discovers the truth of his identity as the son of the murdered Maurice. He is confused by the kindness of his adopted father, Phocas, who is also the murderer of his real father. His stances of

[53] I will use *étonn** from here on out to describe both the use of *étonnement* and its various forms.
[54] One of these is when Rodrigue arrives to talk to Chimène, and tells Elvire, "Ne me regarde plus d'un visage étonné" (III.i.751).

eight syllables (instead of the usual 12-syllable alexandrine) break against the ear and underscore his uncertainty, “Cette grâce qu'il veut me faire / étonne et trouble ma colère” (V.i.1538-39). Is this kindness good or not, should his reaction be anger or thankfulness? Similarly, *Rodogune*, uses *étonn** eight times, almost in an exclusively negative sense except for a certain ambiguous use in conjunction to the crown. Cléopâtre acknowledges that wearing the crown can be overwhelming, and “son trop d'éclat ou son poids vous étonne” (II.iii.616). After *Rodogune*, Corneille lapses back into an average of using *étonn** 4 times per play, usually in a negative way, but the occasional subtle positive use persists. However, after 1661 there is an especially remarkable trend; In almost every play Corneille links *étonn** to positive emotions like “bonheur,” “amour,” and “tendresse.” This trend increases even more after 1665, the year when Racine’s *Alexandre* reduced the people he conquered in love and war to a “silence d’étonnement et d’admiration” (Racine, *OC*, “Préface d’*Alexandre*” 123).

In his *Trois Discours*, Corneille recognizes the power of “human vulnerability as one of the cruxes of ethics,” and understands that “grandes et fortes émotions” can play a “critical […] role in moral life” (Gilby, “‘Émotions’” 71). But if he aspires to use *admiration* to engage with his spectators’ ethical values, he also understood that a poet’s employment of *nouveautés*, plot structure, and remarkable characters created pleasure. Corneille’s pursuit of aesthetic admiration is underscored by his evolving use of *étonnement*. Corneille knew that theater which communicates emotion succeeds, and he adapted his plays accordingly as *étonnement* was shifting to become a positive emotion.

Racine's Sublime Étonnement

Racine understood as well as Corneille did the importance of creating powerful emotional responses in his spectators.[1] Racine knew the Longinian definition of the sublime as that which "produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 341). He knew Corneille aspired to create admiration in his spectators, but he also knew that Corneille's formidable reputation posed a tremendous challenge to his own development. In order to not fall under the shadow of his older contemporary, I argue that Racine sought to create an emotion of *étonnement*. He took advantage of the positive connotation shift around *étonnement* as well as its similarity to *admiration* to create surprise, in order to both build on and distinguish himself from his older contemporary. Like Corneille, Racine knew that his spectators' pleasure was vital to a play's success, and that a primary way they felt pleasure was when they experienced surprise. Instead of using Corneille's approach of creating surprise using *nouveautés*, complicated plots based in historic "vérité," or larger-than-life theatrical personalities, Racine took a different angle.

In this section I will explore three different ways that Racine uses to create *étonnement*. First, he employed the word (or its variants) regularly and in positive ways to communicate characters' strong physiological responses resulting from their encounter with something sublime or ineffable. Secondly, Racine embraced a unique simplicity in many of his plays which surprised for their vibrant emotional tension rather than complicated plot twists. Simple or not, most of his plays were based on narratives that were very familiar to his spectators. Racine strove to develop intense emotional suspense as spectators anticipated from the beginning of the play the impending doom of the end.[2] Finally, Racine regularly created *étonnement* through a *récit*, a theatrical

[1] See Guyot, "Éblouissement."
[2] See Racevskis, *Tragic Passages*.

moment, usually violent and often supernatural in nature, recounted by a character and which results in a vivid mental picture of the events, or *hypotyposis*. Through the *récit*, Racine structured what Boileau calls the *merveilleux dans le discours*, in which the sublime overwhelms with its verbal power. But the *récit* also engages the spectator's imagination; as a character narrates the events, they "occur" in the spectators' minds, as they "see" what is happening they are frozen into a physically immobile moment of *étonnement*.

After the relative failure of his first play, *La Thébaïde* (1664), Racine began tasting his first moments of success with *Alexandre* (1665), and experienced a thorough breakthrough with *Andromaque* (1667). These two triumphs gave Racine the stability he needed to distinguish himself from Corneille, and it isn't accidental that in the preface to his next play, *Britannicus*, he dares to take a stance against the older playwright.[3] He critiques Corneille's poetic process and choices, and then defends himself with an allusion to Longinus, although he doesn't name him, and only calls him "un Ancien" (*OC* 375). But this allusion is significant because Racine is maneuvering Longinus' authority on the sublime which creates "admiration mêlée d'étonnement" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 341). Instead of Corneille's sublime *admiration*, however, Racine is setting up *Britannicus* as an opportunity to experiment with sublime *étonnement*.

Prior to *Britannicus*, Racine tended to employ *admiration* instead of *étonnement* to express a sentiment of surprise. When all variants of the words are allowed for (*admir** and *étonn**), the pattern is quite interesting. In *La Thébaïde*, admir* is employed seven times compared to four times for *étonn**. *Alexandre* uses *admir** seven times while *étonn** appears only twice. *Andromaque* uses *admir** four times, but *étonn** not at all. But in *Britannicus*, there is a decided switch; *admir** disappears entirely from the body of the play (Racine only uses it once in the

[3] See Barnwell, "La Vraisemblance" in *Tragic Drama*, and Forestier, "Notice de *Britannicus*" in *OC*.

dedicatory letter and once in the preface). But *étonn** is employed nine times by characters in the play, most often to paradoxically express their inability to speak.[4] The most famous of these moments is Néron's account of Junie's abduction to Narcisse.

The scene opens when Narcisse notices Néron and asks, "Mais que vois-je? Vous-même inquiet, *étonné*, / Plus que Britannicus paraissez consterné" (Ii.ii.378-79, my emphasis). Narcisse knows that Néron is not easily flustered, and his comment reveals Néron's uncharacteristic agitation. Narcisse not only calls him "inquiet" and "étonné," he compares him to Britannicus, Néron's adopted brother and Narcisse's very young student. He concludes correctly that Néron is in the throes of some great and overwhelming emotion.

This is, in fact, the case, and Néron tells Narcisse "J'aime (que dis-je aimer?) j'idolâtre Junie" (II.ii.384). Racine's deliberate use of the term "idolâtre" is a clear power move in the "long, intimate, and uncomfortable relationship between theater and idolatry" (McClure, *Idolatry* 182). Néron's word recalls Nicole's accusation that theater fosters idolatrous thoughts based on the admirable human representation on stage. But Racine is very cleverly thwarting Nicole; the scene that follows Néron's declaration does indeed represent a moment of striking physical beauty, but without the corporeal form of Junie present. Any image that the spectator has of Junie they imagine in their own head, the body of Junie is not actually present to cause lust. Thus, the blame lies with the spectator; if they imagined Junie as Néron describes her, "belle, sans ornement" with a beautiful "négligence," it is their own fault, and Racine is not to blame since he has not actually put a scantily clad woman inappropriately on stage.

[4] After *Britannicus*, the pattern reverses, with Racine's employment of *étonn** outweighing *admir** by almost double. *Bérénice* has by far the fewest, *étonn** occurs twice and *admir** only once. *Bajazet* uses *étonn** eleven times and *admir** only once. *Mithridate*, the exception to the rule, uses them equally, four times each. *Iphigénie* uses *étonn** eleven times and *admir** only twice, with one instance being a context where Racine is actually paraphrasing Longinus. *Phèdre* uses *étonn** six times and *admir** only once.

Néron recreates for Narcisse the experience he had had the night before when he had ordered Junie abducted from her room. He tells Narcisse that his encounter with Junie began with "un désir curieux" (II.ii.385). But the sight of Junie's vulnerable "beauté qu'on vient d'arracher au sommeil" (II.ii.390), as any sublime source ought, moves Néron and inspires him to poetry. He recounts the experience as if he still sees Junie before him. The sight of her, and the effect of "les ombres, les flambeaux, les cris, et le silence" fills Néron with wonder and leaves him "ravi d'une si belle vue" (II.ii.395). He tries to talk to her but his voice "s'est perdue" (II.ii.396), and he is left, "Immobile, saisi d'un long étonnement" which, like the Cartesian immobility described in the first half of the century, leaves him in an irrational state of mind (II.ii.397). He spends the rest of the night alone in his room, trying to make sense of what he saw. He tries to reason with himself, "De son image en vain j'ai voulu me distraire" (II.ii.400). But like one who has gazed too long at the sun, her image is seared in his mind and he believes it is the real thing, "Trop présente à mes yeux je croyais lui parler" (II.ii.401).

Néron's encounter with Junie is not the only time he expresses his experience of being at a loss for words. Later in the same scene, he admits to Narcisse that whenever finds himself before his mother, Agrippine, her powerful being cows him into silence and he is left mutely shaking, "Mon génie étonné tremble devant le sien" (II.ii.506). In order to avoid this feeling of powerlessness, he avoids her, admitting "je la fuis partout" (II.ii.508).

Other characters also experience *étonnement*. For instance, Junie faces Néron with trepidation and is unable to speak when he shockingly offers her his hand in marriage despite the fact that Néron is already married to Octavie, and Junie is in love with Britannicus. He waxes eloquent for twenty lines before she is able to respond, "Seigneur, avec raison je demeure étonnée" (II.iii.603). Conversely, Britannicus earns Néron's hatred when he defies the emperor, knowing

full well that Néron is his rival in love for Junie. He dares to tell Néron that he is not afraid of him, "Et l'aspect de ces lieux où vous la retenez, / N'a rien dont mes regards doivent être étonnés" (III.viii.1033-35). Finally, Burrhus, Néron's *gouverneur* recounts to Agrippine how Néron poisoned his brother in cold blood. While Britannicus' death throws everyone into a panic, "ce coup frappe tous les esprits / la moitié s'épouvante, et sort avec des cris" (V.v.1641-42), Néron watches calmly "d'aucun étonnement il ne paraît touché" (V.v.1638). This utter lack of emotion is the first sign that Néron is moving from "un monstre naissant" to his full and monstrous self (*OC*, "Préface de *Britannicus*" 372).

Racine's use of the word *étonn** in his plays is not the only way he interacts with this side of Longinus' aesthetic and distinguishes himself from Corneille.[5] As I stated earlier, the preface to *Britannicus* is the first time Racine takes Corneille to task (without naming him, of course), for the complexity of his plays. Racine complains that in these plays there are "grand nombre de jeux de théâtre d'autant plus surprenants qu'ils seraient moins vraisemblables," (*OC* 374). Racine deliberately juxtaposes the words *surprenants* and *vraisembables*, both of which Corneille discusses in great detail in the *Trois Discours*. Instead of this complexity, Racine prefers a plot that has "une action simple, chargée de peu de matière" (374). Racine's simplicity of plot directly opposes Corneille's complex plots full of *nouveautés surprenants*.[6]

But it is with *Bérénice*, the play after *Britannicus*, that Racine reaches the apex of his poetic of simplicity. This play was a particularly public moment of confrontation between Corneille and Racine because both poets had been separately commissioned by Henriette d'Angleterre to write a variation of the story. If Racine used the preface of *Britannicus* to take issue with Corneille's

[5] See Forestier, "Notice d'*Alexandre*" in *OC*.
[6] Racine's self-proclaimed preference for a simple plot goes back to *Alexandre*. Despite his critics' accusation that the play's subject matter is "trop simple et trop stérile," Racine defends it because it is actually in conformity with "le goût de l'antiquité" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Alexandre*" 126).

complex plots, the preface to *Bérénice* becomes Racine's stance against Corneille's aesthetic of *admiration* where tragic action meant something extraordinary had to happen. Indeed, Corneille disliked Racine's *Bérénice* and considered it "unworthy of the name [tragedy]" because "nothing happens at all, at least nothing extraordinary" (Defaux, "Case of Bérénice" 215).[7] In the *Examen* to *Cinna*, Corneille claims that complex plots require "plus d'esprit pour les imaginer, et de plus d'art pour les conduire" while simple ones "n'ayant pas le même secours du côté du sujet, demandent plus de force de vers, de raisonnement, et de sentiments pour les soutenir (*OC* 269). The preface to *Bérénice* is Racine's answer, and he pointedly writes, "Il y en a qui pensent que cette simplicité est une marque de peu d'invention" (*OC* 451). But in reality, he argues, simplicity is the mark of a superior writer since only poets "qui ne sentaient dans leur génie ni assez d'abondance ni assez de force" resort to complex plots and a "grand nombre d'incidents" to "attacher durant cinq actes leurs spectateurs" (*OC* 451). A truly talented poet, however, knows that "Toute l'invention consiste à faire quelque chose de rien" and focuses on "une action simple, soutenue de la violence des passions, de la beauté des sentiments et de l'élégance de l'expression" (*OC* 451). Racine's short manifesto against Corneille is another allusion to Longinus, although he doesn't invoke the ancient author here as openly as he did in *Britannicus*. Although simplicity is not absolutely necessary to the Longinian sublime, the "suddenness with which it enmeshes the listener or reader in its arousal of emotion" is often characterized by its simplicity (Gilby, *Sublime Worlds* 22). Racine leans into this simplicity in *Bérénice*, deliberately linking it to Boileau's preferred variation of the Longinian sublime.[8] The subject of *Bérénice* is "extrêmement simple,"

[7] It is also a response to Saint-Évremond and other critics who prefer Corneille.
[8] *Bérénice* is possibly also a commentary on Pascal's *Pensées* which had come out earlier that same year. Humanity's motives and heart are unknowable, according to Pascal and *Bérénice*'s simple structure throws that human complexity into stark relief.

and its "simplicité d'action" reflects the "goût des anciens" who appreciated the "simplicité merveilleuse" found in their own poets (*OC* 451).[9]

To *Bérénice*'s simplicity, Racine adds an unusual rendition of violent pathos, and a careful rhetorical structuring that all indicate his awareness of the Longinian sublime, so much so that some consider the preface "a conscious echo of Longinus' words on imitation" (Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* 18). Indeed, in the preface, Racine alludes obliquely to Longinus' five sources of the sublime. He paraphrases a number of these sources as the "*violence des passions*," the "*beauté des sentiments*," and the "*élégance de l'expression*" (*OC* 451).

Racine's "violence des passions," alludes to Longinus' "pathéthique" which is "cet enthousiasme, cette véhémence naturelle qui touche et qui émeut" (Boileau, *OC*, *Traité* 349). This touching and moving motion is created especially in the last goodbye between Bérénice and Titus, a scene which Racine claims, "n'est pas le moins tragique de la pièce" (*OC*, "Préface de *Bérénice*" 450).[10] Both Titus and Bérénice heroically express deep anguish at the loss of their love. The violent emotion of this scene, an emotion sustained throughout the entire play, is what creates an especially unique form of pathos, that "tristesse majestueuse qui fait tout le plaisir de la tragédie" (*OC*, "Préface de *Bérénice*" 450).

Racine's "beauté des sentiments" and "élégance de l'expression" refer to Longinus' fourth source of the sublime which is "la noblesse de l'expression qui a deux parties: le choix des mots, et la diction élégante et figurée" (Boileau *OC*, *Traité* 349). One example of these deliberately chosen expressions is found in the language employed by the emperor Titus. Titus knows that in

[9] Racine's emphasis on simplicity earned him a moment of praise from Pierre de Villiers in 1675, "J'approuve fort le sentiment d'un de nos plus excellent poètes qui dit dans la préface d'une de ses pièces que l'action d'une Tragédie ne saurait être trop simple" (cited in Forestier *OC* 790).

[10] Racine created a violence of emotion in more ways than one, the language between Bérénice and Titus is a one long sustained verbal duel, complete with literal allusions to stabbings, woundings, and death. See my article, "Duels féminins."

order to be emperor, he must deny his love for Bérénice and send her away from Rome. But to deny his love for her is to deny himself. He oscillates throughout the play between duty to Rome and love for Bérénice. His speech is full of allusions that are "scrupulously mimetic," and he speaks "in sublime sentences that have all been heard elsewhere," either in Racine's previous plays or in the works of other playwrights (Defaux, "Case of *Bérénice*" 217). For instance, Titus alludes a number of times to Néron in whose court he was raised. His "jeunesse nourrie à la cour de Néron" would have exposed him to the licentious behavior Néron exhibited toward women like Junie (II.ii.506). Titus refuses to be an "indigne empereur" who makes a "vil spectacle aux humains des faiblesses d'amour" (V.vi.1417-18), an oblique reference to Néron which is meant to recall Racine's play from the previous year, *Britannicus*. Ironically, although he has not been a "vil spectacle" of an evil emperor prey to the weakness of love, Titus has been a spectacle of an honorable emperor whose various monologues" have been replete with the "beauté de sentiments" caused by love's "tourments, dont [s]on âme est la proie" (V.vi.1419).

The simplicity and familiarity of his plots permitted Racine to focus on transmitting remarkable emotional tension during his plays. Corneille kept his spectators guessing with plots based on little-known historic sources. But, other than *Bajazet* and *Mithridate*, Racine's plotlines were nearly universally known accounts of ancient myth or history which allowed him to "confier à son public […] le canevas extérieur du drame qui va se jouer devant ses yeux" (May 116). But precisely because of this familiarity, spectators of Racine's plays felt an impending sense of the inevitable doom of the end of the play. Racine's spectators were less concerned with guessing the twists and turns of the plot, and more aware of the raw passions they encountered throughout the play. The focus on emotion rather than plot creates a greater effect of pathos in the spectator, allowing everyone to feel pleasure. For Longepierre, surprising emotions are better than

unexpected plot twists because they allow the heart, which is "un juge bien plus sincère et bien meilleur que l'esprit," to avoid being "ébloui[t] par des faux brillants" and to judge more aptly the quality of the play (*Parallèle* 169). By stripping away distractions of plot, Racine focused his audience's emotion on the sheer pathos of the play.

One of Racine's greatest achievements in this regard is *Iphigénie*, although ironically, this is also one of his least simple plays. In the very first scene, an agonized Agamemnon predicts the end of the play, that in order to gain the shores of Troy, he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigénie ("pour obtenir les vents que le Ciel vous dénie / Sacrifiez Iphigénie" (I.i.61-62)). Racine's audience knew that the Trojan war took place, and as they heard Agamemnon's words, they realized that there were two logical endings to the play they were about to see: either Iphigénie will be sacrificed (an emotionally difficult possibility), or Racine will have the gods intervene via a *deus ex machina*. But Racine's aversion for machine endings was well known, and his avoidance of visible divine intervention made this is a very unlikely option.[11] The spectator was thus forced to contemplate the logical but terrible conclusion that Agamemnon would murder his own daughter.

Racine increases the tension of this seemingly unavoidable end by repeatedly having Iphigénie almost escape, only to repeatedly thwart that escape through the actions of different characters, first Agamemnon, then Ulysses, then Achilles (inadvertently), then Ériphile. This constant reversal, or *peripeteia*, in *Iphigénie* is different than Jean-François Sarasin's definition of "un changement inopiné de l'action et un événement tout contraire à celui que l'on s'était proposé" (quoted in May 69), which conforms more to Corneille's addition of unexpected events. Rather, Racine uses the same event – Iphigénie's escape - but reverses its possibility over and over. Finally,

[11] Indeed, the preface to *Iphigénie* is one of Racine's stronger articulations against the use of machines to create the *merveilleux* in theater or opera. He believes putting gods physically on stage would be incoherent with his spectators' beliefs and would be "trop incroyable parmi nous" (*OC* 698).

after her last attempted escape, Iphigénie accepts that her sacrifice is inevitable and surrenders to it. In a moment of remarkable *sang-froid*, and one of the only times Racine uses the word "sublime," Iphigénie tells her mother, "Daignez m'ouvrir vos bras pour la dernière fois, / Madame, et rappelant votre vertu sublime" and then turns to her servant to say, "Eurybate, à l'autel conduisez la victime" (V.v.1664-66).[12]

In the preface to *Iphigénie*, Racine acknowledges the pleasurable tension he created with Iphigénie's seemingly inevitable death and its eventual resolution. One has only to see his play, he claims "pour comprendre quel plaisir j'ai fait au spectateur en sauvant à la fin une princesse vertueuse […], et en la sauvant par une autre voie que par un miracle" (*OC* 698). Indeed, *Iphigénie* proved such a wild and emotional success that Boileau used it to remind Racine of his abilities after *Phèdre* failed to produce the acclaim than Racine hoped it would. Boileau writes,

> Que tu sais bien, Racine, à l'aide d'un acteur,
> Émouvoir, étonner, ravir un spectateur !
> Jamais Iphigénie, en Aulide immolée,
> N'a coûté tant de pleurs à la Grèce assemblée (*OC*, *Epîtres* 149).

In these lines, Boileau is referencing a number of different things. First, he is recalling the sublime which "*ravit*, transporte, et produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée *d'étonnement* et de surprise;" he is also referencing the second source of the sublime, or pathos, which is "cette véhémence naturelle qui touche et qui *émeut*" (*OC, Traité* 341). Finally, Boileau is also echoing Racine's own preface to *Iphigénie*, where he analyzes the cause of its the powerful emotional effect. "Mes spectateurs," Racine writes, "ont été émus des mêmes choses qui ont mis autrefois en larmes le plus savant people de la Grèce, et qui ont fait dire qu'entre les Poètes, Euripide était

[12] By tying the rhyme "sublime" to "victime," Racine is foreshadowing the sublime *dénouement* where Iphigénie must necessarily meet some sort of end.

extrêmement tragique, τραγικωτατος, c'est-à-dire qu'il savait merveilleusement exciter la compassion et la terreur qui sont les véritables effets de la Tragédie" (*OC* 699).[13]

By setting his plays in mythical or historical worlds familiar to his spectators, Racine also reduced the amount of theatrical narration required to explain the backstory of an event. This allowed him to focus on dynamic dialogue which increased the emotional connection between characters, and the tragic pathos created by the *récit*, a theatrical device which simplifies theatrical action. All of this hid his presence as a poet from his audience.

The value of a hidden poetic presence was one Racine had gained from the writers of Port Royal, where he was raised and educated under the tutelage of Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole from the age of ten. Just as Corneille's poetic reflected to some extent the Jesuit perception of God, so aspects of Racine's aesthetic corresponded with the hidden Jansenist God whose mysterious "présence est méconnue ou 'imperceptible' (Laude 242). Like this imperceptible God who didn't trumpet his existence, Port Royal's preferred writer was one who disappeared, leaving the beauty of their work as the only evidence of their presence. Nicole condemned writers, who for the sake of being admired try too hard to flaunt their knowledge. They gather "un amas de ces préceptes [des anciens] mal digérées," thinking it will make them "judicieux;" but in reality, they smack of "l'esprit de pédanterie" and it would better if they knew nothing at all (*Vraie beauté* 142). Pascal too, condemned the "concupiscence" of attention-seeking authors, "ces auteurs qui, parlant de leurs ouvrages, disent mon livre, mon commentaire, mon histoire, etc." (*OC*, *Pensées 64*, 1101). Pascal's poet should take as a rule "l'honnêteté" but had to be careful not to become too

[13] Racine's stance that "le goût de Paris s'est trouvé conforme au goût d'Athènes" ("Préface d'*Iphigénie*" 699), is very different than Corneille who justifies the poetic changes he makes precisely because the tastes of his century are different than the tastes of antiquity. "Je ne puis empêcher de dire que le goût de notre siècle n'est point celui du sien [d'Aristote] sur cette préférence d'une espèce à l'autre, ou du moins que ce qui plaisait au dernier point à ses Athéniens ne plaît pas également à nos Français" (*OC, Trois Discours* 835).

"enflé" with what Pascal considered the disingenuous posturing of the *honnête homme*; only by keeping his heart pure could he truly be "Poète et non honnête homme" (*OC*, *Pensées 32*, 1096).

Despite Pascal's condemnation of its duplicity, the *honnête* court culture also valued the invisibility of authorship and of the creative act. Politically, after the Fronde, creative visibility had become dangerous, and a courtier could no longer afford to outshine the king.[14] Instead, the true power lay in the chameleon-like character of the *honnête homme*, who became "'universel'" by carefully erasing "les distinctions de naissance" in order to made himself paradoxically remarkable to everyone (Bury, *Littérature et politesse* 178).[15] Racine, raised at Port Royal and immersed in the *honnête* culture of the court, wanted to be a hidden and *honnête* author, one whose "omniscience" allowed him to perfectly engage the tastes and needs of his spectators, while also enabling them to forget his existence even as they were fully immersed in the reality of the theatrical moment.[16]

One of the ways Racine achieves this balance is through his *récits*. Generally, Racine's *récits* did two things, they enabled him to conform to the expectations of *bienséance*, avoiding the visible representation of particularly violent, horrific, or licentious events on stage. The second reason Racine used the *récit* was to replace a supernatural or miraculous *merveilleux* moment with a vividly recounted version, transforming the physical representation of the divine to a verbal

[14] This was made evident by the arrest of Nicolas Fouquet, King Louis XIV's superintendent of finance in 1661. Fouquet had been imprisoned on charges of mismanagement of royal funds and lèse-majesté, but it was commonly believed that King Louis was jealous of Fouquet's ambition and beautiful palace, Vaux-le-Vicomte, which rivaled anything the king had. It was shortly after Fouquet had given a *fête* at Vaux-le-Vicomte that he was arrested. See Pitts, "Fall of a Titan" in *Embezzlement*. Fouquet had failed in his role as an honnête homme to "éviter de froisser ceux qui nous entourent par l'étalage de notre supériorité" (Magendie 761).

[15] Although Nicolas Faret's *L'Honnête Homme* was published in 1630, other works on *honnêteté* begin to multiply rapidly from the 1660's onward. The year 1661 is especially key since it is both the year Louis XIV began his personal reign, as well as the year Nicolas Fouquet was imprisoned. Among these we have La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* (1665), the Chevalier de Méré's *Les Conversations* (1668), La Fontaine's *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon* (1669), Charles Sorel's *De la connaissance de bons livres* (1671), Dominique Bouhours' *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671), La Bruyère's *Caractères* (1688) among others.

[16] See Viala, *Racine: La Stratégie du caméléon*.

depiction of it.[17] Sometimes, as in the case of *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre*, and later in *Athalie*, the *récit* combined these two purposes.

However, the *récit* also played a delicate and complicated game of poetic creation. As we saw with *Britannicus*, when Néron describes his nocturnal encounter with Junie, he is stunned and stands "immobile, saisi d'un long étonnement" (II.ii.397). But then he overcomes his frozen shock and transforms his sudden passion for Junie into a compelling and sensually stimulating *récit*. As spectators listen to Néron's incredibly vivid description, they unconsciously mimic his immobility; they sit frozen their seats, transported by his words into the world of their imaginations where they too see the beautiful Junie in that dark night full of shadows and dancing torches, full of silence and cries. The spectators are thus complicit with Néron's seductive, lyrical account of Junie's abduction, ultimately becoming a creative participant whose imaginations flesh out in mental images what is verbally depicted.

The end *récit* of *Iphigénie* is even more explicit in its spectator participation, and Ulysse uses the inclusive *on* as he narrates the events of the miraculous salvation Iphigénie experiences through the death of Ériphile. "*On* admire en secret sa naissance, et son sort" (V.vi.1767). The pronoun allows the external spectators to become one with the internal spectators of this drama. They are transfixed along with the entire camp who is "étonné" and "immobile" and who "écoute avec frayeur et regarde Ériphile" (V.vi.1762). But their "regard" is internal, and although they participate in the action of the *récit* through their imaginations, they are again immobilized physically as they do.

[17] See Declercq, "A l'école de Quintilien" for Racine's use of *hypotyposis*.

When Houdar de la Motte scoffs at the end of *Phèdre*, saying that no one in the throes of agony could use such beautiful and poetic hyperbole as Théramène does in his *récit*, Boileau disagrees. In his *Réflexion XI*, he defends Racine, and responds that the moment when the actors recited the particular line criticized, "Le flot qui l'apporta recule épouvanté," there was a universal reaction, "*on* y fait une espèce d'acclamation; marque incontestable a là du vrai sublime" (*OC* 560). Boileau claims that is "*par son récit*" that Racine is able to do this (*OC* 560, my emphasis). Racine captures in this moment the sublime emotion Théramène feels who is "plein d'une horreur et d'une consternation," and then somehow inexplicably transfers this emotion to the spectators, "il communique *en quelque sorte* aux spectateurs mêmes" (*OC* 560, my emphasis). For Boileau, Racine's genius lies in paralleling the spectator experience with what the characters themselves are feeling.[18] The result is an emotion so powerful that the spectators are filled with *étonnement*, their reason obscured and their senses *éblouis* to the point that they are blinded to technical or rhetorical defects, and are in no state "de songer à le chicaner sur l'audace de sa figure" (*OC* 560). Thus, through his *récits*, Racine inevitably invokes a sense of participatory creation, the receiver or hearer partakes in the original creative act through their own experience.

Gilby writes that there is a "cognitive dimension in the production of the sublime […] which may […] go on to equate further production" (*Sublime Worlds* 25). Racine's *récits* allow this cognitive dimension that results in an ongoing moment of creative production: spectators, encountering a sublime verbal moment are able in their minds to participate in off-stage events almost as if they were present in the real-time occurrence. They feel as if they themselves had created the sublime, or Boileau writes, "Car tout ce qui est véritablement sublime a cela de propre

[18] See Steiner, "Tragedy Reconsidered."

quand on l'écoute, qu'il élève l'âme, […] *comme si c'était elle qui eût produit les choses qu'elle vient simplement d'entendre*" (*OC*, *Traité* 348, my emphasis).

Conclusion

In his dedicatory epistle for *Alexandre le Grand*, Racine describes the world's reaction to the Greek conqueror, "tous les Peuples du Monde se taisent, comme l'Écriture l'a dit" before Alexandre with a "silence d'étonnement et d'admiration" (*OC* 123). He intentionally takes the negative and condemning sense of the original quote,[19] and transforms it to a Longinian reaction of the astonishment and admiration that accompany the feats of a great man. Perhaps also intentional is Racine's reversal of Longinus' definition of the sublime as that which "produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement" (Boileau, *OC, Traité* 341). By placing *étonnement* before *admiration*, Racine is setting up a subtle hierarchy of *étonnement* over admiration, a point of distinction that Racine will make much more explicit in the preface of *Britannicus* to distinguish between Corneille's aesthetic of *admiration* and his own *étonnement*.

Racine's hierarchy reflects the transition of the way *admiration* and *étonnement* had evolved and changed over the century. In dictionaries and theoretical texts from the first half of the century, there was a clear demarcation between the two words: *admiration* was positive and *étonnement* was negative. Although Corneille's work follows this trend, and his uses of the two words mirrored the concurrent meaning, his "poetics of admiration" is more complicated than a narrow neoclassical commitment to moral greatness. Instead, Corneille works to create an admiration through what he calls poetic "nécessité." Through it, he surprises and unseats his audience's expectations through constant experimentation with unexpected *nouveautés* and plot

[19] See Forestier, "Notice d'*Alexandre*."

twists. He uses it to insist that the poet's version of truth, no matter how extraordinary or altered, will create excellent plays that result in spectator belief. With it, he builds characters who adhere to his version of Aristotelian "bonté de moeurs," in other words they act in ways consistent to their own character and desires, even if those desires contradicted seventeenth-century notions of *bienséance*.

But as the century progressed, the use of the two words became intertwined, often with complications and unexpected connotations. Some writers, like Pierre Nicole and François de la Rochefoucauld, diminished admiration, thereby drawing it more closely to the negative connotation of *étonnement*. Nicole argued that admiration detracted from worship of the true God, while La Rochefoucauld thought it poisoned a genuine presentation of self. Others, like Dominique Bouhours, considered *admiration* to *étonnement* primarily as the emotions one felt upon encountering nature. Poetic creation that properly imitated nature would also induce *admiration* and *étonnement* because it reflected the goodness of God's creation.

Racine, working in the latter half of the century, reflects this complexity between the words. He wanted to create an aesthetic of *étonnement* that distinguished him from Corneille's poetics of admiration. In the 1669 preface to *Britannicus* he uses a paraphrase of Longinus to justify his preference for a simple plot. Unlike Corneille's *nouveautés* which surprise with their complicated twists and turns, Racine's simplicity focuses his audience's attention and emotions on the pathos of the play rather than on the events. Likewise, Racine's use of familiar storylines deliberately increased spectator suspense. Finally, Racine's *récits* create spectator *étonnement*, in both the immobile Cartesian sense of the term (since the audience is frozen in place as they "see" what is occurring in the récit), and in the Longinian sense, allowing his audience to participate in the creation of the sublime through their own imaginations.

Both Corneille and Racine are lauded by Boileau as sublime, because they created emotions of *admiration* and *étonnement* in their work. But more importantly, the plays of Corneille and Racine will lead the charge in the Enlightenment and Romantic understandings of the sublime. Racine, especially will become the paragon for the Romantic stand against neoclassical rigidity. In the plays of a romantic Racine, we find moments of *étonnement*, where rational cognition stops, and where one is forced to accept the mystery of creation through one's own experience of it.

Chapter Four: The Sublime in Racine's Biblical Plays

Racine's aesthetic of *étonnement* was a seemingly foolproof approach, and Racine's plays were increasingly popular. Then came the unsuccessful reception of *Phèdre*'s 1678 début. After this disappointment, Boileau comforts Racine with *Epître VII* in which he reminds his friend of the success of his previous play, *Iphigénie*. "Que tu sais bien, Racine, à l'aide d'un Acteur / Émouvoir, étonner, ravir un Spectateur!" (*OC* 127). Boileau assures Racine that time would prove *Phèdre's* worth.

> Le Parnasse François anobli par ta veine
> Contre tous ces complots saure te maintenir
> Et soulever pour toi l'équitable Avenir" (*OC* 129).

Despite Boileau's encouragement, Racine did not again publicly pick up the playwright's pen until 1688.[1] That year, Madame de Maintenon, the king's mistress-become-morganatic-wife, asked Racine to write a play for her pupils at Saint-Cyr. Thus, Racine's last two plays, *Esther* and *Athalie*, were born.

The subjects for both *Esther* and *Athalie* are drawn from the Old Testament Scriptures. The choice of a biblical source for a play is a curious one on Racine's part since subjects for neoclassical French tragedy were generally taken from ancient Greek or Roman mythology or history. But in the preface to *Esther*, Racine justifies his choice of biblical subject because his illustrious patroness had wanted him to write "sur quelque sujet de piété et de morale une espèce de Poème où le chant fût mêlé avec le récit" (*OC* 946). The Old Testament provided Racine not just ample dramatic material, but also Psalms, Laments, and other lyrical genres from which he could build his choral portions. In addition, just prior to Madame de Maintenon's request, a French

[1] Although older critics tend to attribute this authorial silence to Racine's discouragement regarding *Phèdre*, it is more likely due to his rather all-consuming work as the king's historiographer. Racine was not entirely disconnected from theater during this time, and was involved in a number of theatrical works that never took flight. See Brereton, "Racine Librettist."

translation of the Old Testament had been published by Lemaître de Sacy, a Port Royal "Solitaire." Racine's education at Port Royal meant that he was intimately familiar with Sacy's work.[2] Indeed, much of the text for these plays, particularly the choral portions, quoted heavily from Sacy's translation.

But Racine's choice of biblical subject was not uncontroversial.[3] Although religious theater had a long and vibrant history, particularly in the mystery plays of the medieval period, the Catholic Church had become wary of the addition of apocryphal (including many non-orthodox) elements to the biblical story lines. Following the Council of Trent in 1546, mystery plays were forbidden from being played in churches, and the parliament of Paris placed its own ban on them in 1550.[4] While this didn't keep some playwrights from treating biblical subjects in secular theater in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this practice was generally frowned upon. Boileau's *Art Poétique* in 1674 followed this trend and recommended that playwrights avoid religious subjects for their plays. Beyond this, theater itself held a controversial place in the eyes of many religious authorities. Racine had split from Port Royal because of their stance on theater; in 1666, shortly after Racine's career began, Pierre Nicole, one of Racine's Port Royal teachers, condemned what he considered the immoral and socially corrupting nature of theater, calling any playwright "un empoisonneur public" (*Les Visionnaires* 51). Although Nicole was actually targeting Jean

[2] Port Royal was famous for its emphasis on education of classics in the original languages, and Sacy's translation included the Hebrew text as well as the Septuagint version. The Septuagint, or Greek, version of the Old Testament dated from early 2nd to late first centuries BCE. It was canonized by the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in 1546. However, several portions of the Septuagint, including the additions to the book of Esther, were not acknowledged as canonical by Protestant Churches (Dubu, *Églises* 162). This was a particularly interesting development considering that the exiled Protestant Huguenots felt a great affiliation with Racine's *Esther*. See Forestier "Notice d'*Esther*" p. 1685.

[3] According to Parish, "The access of the laity to the Bible was […] a point of intra-Catholic polemic in the period; but its apostolic use in a range of devotional writing and above all, in pulpit oratory is at once extensive and effective" (70-71). Racine's use of Sacy's translation for theater is another example of why access of the laity to Scripture was concerning for some religious authorities.

[4] See Loukovitch, *L'Évolution de la tragédie religieuse classique en France*.

Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, Racine took Nicole's condemnation as a personal attack and broke with Port Royal until 1678 when Boileau helped effect a reconciliation. So, for Racine to treat a biblical subject in a tragedy, especially for an audience of young, impressionable students at Saint-Cyr, must have been a quiet moment of personal triumph.

However, despite its uncertain place in seventeenth-century French theater, Scripture was considered by many people, including non-clergy, to be extremely effective in the communication of truth. Its status as a divinely inspired text, as well as its simple and unadorned style, were celebrated as sublime in many treatises on rhetoric.[5] For instance, in the preface to his 1674 *Traité du Sublime*, Boileau elaborates on a moment in the book of Genesis where God speaks light into existence with the words "*fiat lux.*" This divine moment of verbal creative action, says Boileau, is a prime example of the sublime. Boileau's declaration that Scripture could be sublime caused a polemical exchange between him and the Dutch priest Pierre Daniel Huet, known as the *querelle du sublime*.[6] Racine seems to side with Boileau in this quarrel when he writes in the preface to *Esther* that the great truths of Scripture and "la manière sublime dont elle y sont énoncées" create a great effect on those who interact with them (*OC* 946).

This chapter examines the tension of Racine's choice of biblical subject in the context of the polemics surrounding the Bible as a sublime text, as well as the controversial stance on Scripture-based theater. I argue that Racine is leaning into both of these complexities in order to experiment with new ways to create sublime dramatic effects. He does this in a number of ways.

[5] The stance on Scripture's simple style dates back to Augustine. However, contrary to general thought in the seventeenth century, Augustine thought that the Bible's very simplicity obscured its message instead of making it evident to the common person. See Woshinksy "Biblical Discourse," Hache, *La Langue du ciel*, and Reguig-Naya, *Le Corps des idées*.

[6] Fumaroli outlines the nature of this quarrel along with its place in the larger quarrel of Ancients versus Moderns in his essay, "Les abeilles et les araignées." L. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient*, Delehanty, *Literary Knowing*, and Hache, *La Langue du ciel*, and Cronk, *The Classical Sublime* also give significant attention, albeit from diverse perspectives to the exchanges in this quarrel.

First, his dramatic action was "tirée de l'Écriture Sainte" whose scenes "Dieu lui-même, pour ainsi dire, a préparées" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Esther*" 946). By aligning himself with divine authorship, Racine is guaranteeing a certain immunity against critique, as well as taking a subtle stance on the importance of his own authorship. One way he does this is by incorporating miraculous dreams or visions into *Esther* and *Athalie*, elements of the Christian *merveilleux* that were not present in the original biblical narrative.[7] But Racine justifies their addition as the poetic to intensify the drama of his plots, and therefor the impact of the biblical message. Racine's use of the Christian *merveilleux* is curious considering his career-long resistance to the depiction of the supernatural on stage in the form of marvelous machines. From early on, Racine embraced Boileau's *merveilleux dans le discours*, or the description of supernatural events in verbal form. But he also enhanced this kind of *merveilleux* with other theatrical effects. The dream and vision sequences in his biblical plays are yet another instance of Racine's playing with a theatrical sublime *merveilleux*.

Secondly, Racine incarnates a theatrical sublime in his two characters, Esther and Joas, who both have inherent qualities of social and physical *grâce* that create a singular effect, a *je ne sais quoi*, on other characters. Their ineffable qualities are those of the *honnêtes gens*. As I explored in chapter three, Racine experimented with *honnête* characters in *Alexandre* and *Britannicus* both to have an aesthetic impact and to engage with political entities. He will revisit these aspects in Esther and Joas. However, these characters also follow the *topos* of sacrificial victim which Racine had exploited to great tragic effect in *Iphigénie*.[8] By giving these characters

[7] There are generally three different kinds of *merveilleux*, or treatment of the supernatural, found in seventeenth-century French drama: the pagan *merveilleux*, which was the presence of ancient gods and goddesses physically manifested on stage via theatrical machines; the Christian *merveilleux*, which involved the depiction of miraculous events or entities (such as angelic or demonic beings) drawn from the Judeo/Christian tradition, also physically represented onstage; and the *merveilleux dans le discours*, which was a translation of either of these first two into a verbal (and therefore non-physical) representation, recounted by a character to another. The latter was Racine's (and Boileau's) preferred method of treating the supernatural. See Woshinsky, "Image, Representation, Idea."

[8] It could be argued that he also uses this *topos* in *Andromaque* with the invisible character of Astyanax, the child who may be sacrificed if Andromaque doesn't acquiesce to Pyrrhus' advances.

an *honnête* as well as a tragic sacrificial aesthetic, Racine is creating a fascinating tension between the different values placed on physical and moral beauty in his context.

Finally, I argue that Racine performs a theatrical experiment with the choruses of *Esther* and *Athalie*, one which allows him to take a stance against the increasingly popular genre of opera. Even though Racine justifies his chorus as an imitation of ancient Greek tragedy, he knows he is playing a dangerous game since the chorus was a key feature of Lully and Quinault's *tragédie lyrique*, or opera, and which Racine (and Boileau) had previously mocked as lacking the sublime. But Racine also knows that music has a great ability to stir the passions. In fact, in the *Traité du Sublime*, Longinus speaks of the effectiveness of music to move its listeners. Racine claims that he had long wanted to include a chorus in his tragedies. But in order to do so, he had to find a way that would allow him to distinguish himself from opera, and particularly from its use of machines to create a *merveilleux* effect.[9] Racine's solution is to restructure the chorus, giving it a unique sound as well as an important role. Unlike opera, the members of Racine's chorus both sing and speak their lines, thus allowing him to access both the power of music to move the passions, and the harmony of a well-shaped discourse, which was one of the principal sources of the Longinian sublime. Racine's chorus also interacts with the other characters of the play, something which opera choruses did not do. By introducing a chorus in his tragedies, Racine tries to re-appropriate the ancient chorus from the musical hegemony of the *tragédie lyrique*.

Whether it is through his use of Scripture, the creation of ineffable characters like Esther and Joas, or by reclaiming the chorus as means to move the passions both through music and discourse, I argue that Racine has a keen theatrical intuition for creating certain effects. This

[9] Despite his best efforts, many people didn't see the difference between what Racine was doing and opera. For instance, Dangeau called Racine's work "un opéra […] chanté et récité par les petites filles de Saint-Cyr" (cited in Forestier, *OC*, "Notice d'*Esther*" 1673).

chapter will examine how Racine maneuvers each of these three aspects in an attempt to increase the sublime impact of his two biblical plays.

Sublime Scripture

In his 1674 preface to the *Traité du Sublime*, Nicholas Boileau writes, "Une chose peut être dans le style Sublime, et n'être pourtant pas Sublime, c'est-à-dire n'avoir rien d'extraordinaire ni de surprenant" (*OC* 338). Boileau then goes on to describe the moment of the *fiat lux*, or the moment when God speaks light into existence in Genesis. For Boileau this moment is sublime because it communicates an immediacy of action, in this case "l'obéissance de la Créature aux ordres du Créateur" (*OC* 338). It creates a sublime experience in the mind of the reader that has nothing to do with grandiose words, and everything to do with the simplicity of the expression mirroring the simplicity of the moment when light comes into existence. Boileau was not the first (nor the last) to remark upon Scripture having a sublime effect. Pascal understood Scripture as a place where "the divine perspective allows language truly to mean what it says" (Delehanty 50).[10] Pascal distinguished between two kinds of knowing: reason follows the slow path of logic in the mind, while the heart simply grasps understanding immediately.[11] Scripture reveals truth to the heart as much as to the mind, a fact which for Pascal explained its ability to reveal knowledge of God to someone that resulted in the suddenness of conversion.[12] Likewise, the suddenness of the Boileauvian sublime which reverses "tout comme un foudre" (*OC* 342), also works because of its ability to communicate immediately to the heart.

[10] See also Michel's two articles, "La Grandeur et l'humilité," and "Sublime et parole de Dieu."
[11] "La raison agit avec lenteur, et avec tant de vues, sur tant de principes, lesquels il faut qu'ils soient toujours présents, qu'à toute heure elle s'assoupit ou s'égare, manque d'avoir tous ses principes présents. Le sentiment n'agit pas ainsi: il agit en un instant, et toujours est prêt à agir" (*OC*, *Pensées 470*, 1220).
[12] "Ainsi, sans l'Écriture qui n'a que Jésus-Christ pour objet, nous ne connaissons rien, et ne voyons qu'obscurité et confusion dans la nature de Dieu et dans la propre nature" (*OC*, *Pensées 729*, 1310).

Other writers also acknowledge Scripture's special capacity to communicate something "grand et merveilleux."[13] For instance, in 1681, the famed preacher Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet writes in the *Histoire universelle* that Moses, "élevé au-dessus par le Saint-Esprit, a écrit les œuvres de Dieu avec une exactitude et une simplicité qui attire la croyance et l'admiration, non-pas à lui, mais à Dieu même" (184). Similarly, Lemaitre de Sacy in the preface to his 1682 translation of Genesis, states "On ne s'arrêta pas ici à représenter ce qu'il a de grand dans le style de cette histoire, qui étant mêlé avec une simplicité divine, porte par tout un caractère de vérité" (quoted in Hache 234).[14] Simplicity and clarity of style is thus an assumed aspect of Scripture and its ability to communicate sublime truth.[15]

Despite this general understanding of Scripture, however, some balked at the idea of giving Scripture the label "sublime." The Dutch theologian, Pierre-Daniel Huet, objects to Boileau's discussion of the *fiat lux* in a 1678 letter, "Ce que Longin rapporte ici de Moïse comme une expression sublime et figurée, me semble très simple. Il est vrai que Moïse rapporte une chose qui est grande, mais il l'exprime d'une façon que ne l'est nullement" (cited in Hache 104). Huet's response is based on his perception of the sublime as part of the classical hierarchy which traditionally divided rhetoric into the simple, the mediocre and the sublime styles.[16] For Huet, this latter was the highest level of rhetoric and meant that something was expressed with grandiose words and significant loquaciousness. Since the simple phrase *fiat lux* was the opposite of this definition, it could not be sublime. In addition, Huet considered the sublime to be a human creation, a rhetorical device born of human logic. The sublime thus could not exist in the Bible, a work that

[13] For a comprehensive list of these authors, see Hache, "Sublime et sacré, questions du style" in *La langue du ciel*.
[14] Sacy's translation of the full Old Testament was published in 1688 and was used by Racine for the text of his biblical plays. See Forestier, "Notice d'*Esther*."
[15] Parish quotes Fenelon saying, "although simple and informal, it [Christ's style] is sublime and figurative in several places" (89).
[16] See Declercq, "Rhétorique classique" for how this division of rhetoric affected literary engagement.

Huet believed predated Greek rhetorical theory and was of divine origin.[17] And yet, Huet allows, there is a certain sublime greatness in Moses' words. Huet then establishes a set of different kinds of sublime, "le sublime des termes, le sublime du tour de l'expression, le sublime des pensées et le sublime des choses" (cited in Hache 104). The first three types of Huet's sublime necessitate human art or technê, and correspond to the Longinian sources of the sublime, which Huet see as connected to rhetoric. The "sublime des choses," on the other hand, is entirely outside of human creation, a form of non-expressed greatness found in nature.[18] Only this kind of sublime can extend to God. So, Huet acknowledges, the act of God's creation of light is something which would fall under the "sublime des choses," but the enunciation of this act by Moses could not technically be classified as sublime because it was not expressed in the highest rhetorical style.

Boileau responds to Huet's objections in his *Réflexion X* in which he accuses Huet (and another detractor, Le Clerc) of having responded to a work they hadn't even read properly.[19] Boileau then reiterates his definition in the *Traité*,

> Par Sublime en cet endroit Longin n'entend pas ce que nous appelons le style sublime, mais cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui se trouvent souvent dans les paroles les plus simples, et dont la simplicité même fait quelquefois la sublimité […] Le simple et le sublime dans le Discours ne sont nullement opposés (*OC* 547).

The sublime was thus not something connected to human *technê* in rhetoric, but rather an aesthetic and emotional effect created through discourse.[20] By disassociating the sublime from human-made

[17] "Huet and Le Clerc saw it as specious to think of Moses consulting a style manual in his writing of Genesis" (Delehanty 94).
[18] For a more detailed discussion of Boileau and Huet's polemics, see Doran, "Boileau: the Birth of a Concept" in *Theory of the Sublime*, and Declercq, "Boileau-Huet: la querelle du fiat lux."
[19] The scathing tone Boileau uses is well in keeping with his role as a satirist. "Avant d'aller plus loin, souffrez, Monsieur, que je vous demande comment il se peut faire qu'un aussi habile homme que vous, voulant écrire contre un endroit de ma Préface aussi considérable que l'est celui que vous attaquez, ne se soit pas donné la peine de lire cet endroit, auquel il ne parait pas même que vous ayez fait aucune attention" (*OC*, *Réflexions*, 547).
[20] In this way, Boileau is painting Longinus as a kind of "rhéteur qui s'oppose à la rhétorique, comme le rhéteur qui ouvre la voie à une pensée nouvelle, celle du pathos" (Hache 202).

rhetoric and stylistic rules, and by emphasizing "a purely experiential model of the sublime" (Delehanty 95), Boileau allows Scripture to be sublime, indeed to be "le plus éloquent, le plus sublime, et le plus simple de tous les Livres" (*OC, Réflexions* 554).

What is more, Boileau insists that the sublime "n'est pas proprement une chose qui se prouve et qui se démontre; mais […] c'est un Merveilleux qui saisit, qui frappe et qui se fait sentir" (*OC, Réflexions* 546). Boileau is thus reminding Huet that the sublime is something which can, and indeed must, be felt and recognized by all.[21] Boileau thus creates an excellent case for the capacity of Scripture to affect and change the hearts and minds of people, a view which many theologians, including Huet, were in agreement with.[22] By defending Scripture as sublime, Boileau creates a space to include the sacred in what was quickly becoming a non-religious aesthetic of transcendence.[23]

However, despite his insistence in the *Traité du Sublime* and in the *Réflexions* that Scripture is sublime, in the *Art Poétique*, Boileau directly advises poets not to use Scripture and especially

[21] Delehanty notes that, in order to avoid the accusation of human agency in the writing of Scripture and thus a diminishing of its divinely revealed element, "Boileau, like Bouhours before him, is careful to suggest that humans are only able to produce the sublime by dint of divine gift" (97). This is in keeping with other theologians such as Bossuet who writes of Moses, "On remarque dans ses écrits un caractère tout particulier, et je ne sais quoi d'original qu'on ne trouve en nul autre écrit; Il y a dans sa simplicité un sublime si majestueux que rien, ne le peut égaler; et si en entendant les autres prophètes on croit entendre des hommes inspirés de Dieu, c'est pour ainsi dire Dieu même en personne qu'on croit entendre dans la voix et dans les écrits de Moïse" (*Histoire universelle* 192). See also Litman, *Sublime en France* who argues that Bouhours influenced Boileau.

[22] Although Bossuet considered the truth of Scripture to be sublime, he felt that as humans we cannot escape our sense-driven imagination which limits our interaction with the sublime truth. But the more people become attuned to the perceptions of God through the reading and interaction with Scripture, the more human thoughts are aligned with divine thoughts, and the more they are able to grasp this sublime truth. "Il n'est pas donné à tous de bien entendre ces sublimes vérités, ni de voir parfaitement en lui-même cette merveilleuse image des choses divines, que saint Augustin et les autres Pères ont cru si certaine. Les sens nous gouvernent trop; et notre imagination, qui se veut mêler dans toutes nos pensées, ne nous permet pas toujours de nous arrêter sur une lumière si pure" (*Histoire universelle* 260). See Calvet, Bossuet, *L'homme et l'œuvre* and Beuzart.

[23] Phillips claims that this is why religious theater caused such divided polemics at the time. Theater had become the space where "the spectator is in fact seeking an alternative to the religious experience found in a church" (232). By creating the notion of a non-religious transcendence in the sublime, Boileau contributed to this non-sacred transcendence. As Fumaroli states, "cette doctrine [de Longin relative au sublime] antique devait d'autant plus retenir l'attention de Racine qu'elle faisait entrer dans sa définition le statut des dieux antiques dans la poésie, et notamment dans la tragédie. […] [Longin] a un sens très vif du sacré et du numineux" ("Dieux païens" 241).

the miracles contained within, the Christian *merveilleux*, as source material for their work. The polemics surrounding religious theater were not unique to Boileau. Although much of the drama from the middle ages was comprised of mystery plays, based on events drawn from Scripture, and miracle plays, which recounted religious moments from the lives of the saints, this kind of theater experienced a sharp decline in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The parliament of Paris had explicitly banned mystery plays around 1550. As early as 1632, author and founding member of the French *Académie*, Guez de Balzac had vehemently attacked Daniel Heinsius' *Herodes Infanticida* for mixing the pagan *merveilleux* with the Christian *merveilleux*. At one point in the play, Heinsius had the pagan Erinyes, the furies, enter onstage to attack and torture Herod for ordering a slaughter of infants in an attempt to also kill the infant Christ. What bothered Balzac was not the furies themselves, but the embodied appearance of the pagan goddesses alongside a biblical character. Their incarnation on stage made it impossible for the spectator to interpret them as allegorical forces, (which was the stance taken by Heinsius' defenders). Balzac stipulates, "Le grand Pan est mort par la naissance du Fils du Dieu, ou plutôt par celle de sa Doctrine. Il ne faut pas le ressusciter" (cited in Kapp 160). D'Aubignac also objected to using religious subjects for theater, namely because theater ought to be a "divertissement public" which "n'a plus de part aux choses saintes et ne peut souffrir ce mélange sans profanation" (cited in Phillips 231). For d'Aubignac, treating religious subjects in a ridiculous manner risked weakening the faith of the spectator. Besides, the pleasure experienced by a spectator was paramount for the success of theater, and d'Aubignac considered religious subjects too preachy or boring to give pleasure. Saint-Évremond also objected to religious subjects in theater but on the grounds of *vraisemblance*. For Saint-Évremond, miraculous events in the Bible such as the crossing of the Red Sea ought to be

taken by faith as real, but when presented on stage, "les choses saintes perdent beaucoup de la religieuse opinion qu'on leur doit" (*Oeuvres*, t. iv 174-75).[24]

Thus Boileau, taking his cue from these earlier objecting authors, considered it too risky to use the Bible as a source for theater. Boileau disliked the idea of any poetic source being mangled by a shoddy poet. But religious source material badly presented had the added peril of making ridiculous something that should be held in reverence. Boileau writes in the *Art Poétique* that a poet might take too much imaginative liberty and "faire agir Dieu, ses saints et ses prophètes, / Comme ces dieux éclos du cerveau des poètes," filling a faith full of "mystères terribles" with "ornements égayés," and thus "Du Dieu de vérité faire un Dieu de mensonges" (*OC* 174). Like Guez de Balzac, Boileau also objected to mixing the different kinds of *merveilleux*. Pagan gods could adequately be represented on stage either by machines or via words (Boileau's preference was for the latter). To use the same method for the Christian *merveilleux*, is to make a "mélange coupable" and give the "vérités" of the divinely-inspired Bible "l'air de la fable" (*OC* 174).[25] Boileau didn't necessarily consider it theologically ridiculous, although he did think it theatrically absurd, if a machine on which a pagan god was perched failed through mechanical difficulties.[26] But to expose a saint or an angel to the same fate chanced not only ridicule, but unbelief. Seventeenth-century playwrights already had a fraught relationship with influential theatrophobic writers such as Pierre Nicole and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet. To use the Christian *merveilleux* on stage meant that writers could potentially add the charge of sacrilege to the accusations of moral

[24] For a more in-depth discussion of religious reaction to theater, see Phillips, "Religious Drama" in *The Theatre and Its Critics in Seventeenth-century France*.
[25] For further discussion on the role of the *Art Poétique* in the quarrel of the Christian *merveilleux*, see Reguig, *Boileau poète*, Fumaroli, "Les abeilles et les araignées," and L. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient*.
[26] Avoiding the ridiculous is perhaps the rationale behind Racine's personal preference for putting the divine offstage into an unseen but still aesthetically effective space. See Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder* for a discussion of the use of offstage space.

degradation that already haunted the tragic stage.[27] Indeed, many Christian tragedies of Boileau's day preferred to avoid external miraculous moments and instead focused on the internal miracle of conversion (Corneille's *Polyeucte* and Rotrou's *Saint Genest* being two examples).[28]

When Madame de Maintenon and other "Personnes Illustres" approached Racine about writing a play whose subject was one "de piété et de morale" his choice of an Old Testament subject was thus not necessarily the obvious one, and there was a curious reaction to his choice (*OC,* "Préface d'*Esther*" 946). Racine writes "Je leur proposai le sujet d'Esther, qui les frappa d'abord" implying the shock his illustrious patroness might have felt at his rejection of his friend and colleague Boileau's recommendation in the *Art Poétique*, that the Bible was not a particularly good choice of subject for the theater (*OC* 946). But Madame de Maintenon warms to Racine's suggestion, realizing that the story of Esther is "pleine de grandes leçons d'amour de Dieu, et de détachement du monde au milieu du monde même" (*OC* 946). The latter half of Racine's sentence glosses the verb "frapper" with a second meaning. Boileau had often used this verb to describe the effect caused by the sublime, including that of the Longinian *kairos*, or the sublime power of the right words chosen for the right audience and employed at the right moment. The initial intended audience (and actors) of *Esther* were the students at Saint-Cyr, the daughters of impoverished aristocrats. Their education needed to include elements that would create in them a natural bent toward devotion ("de grandes leçons d'amour de Dieu" (*OC* 946)), as well as an ability to reject worldly enticements, especially considering that their school was located next to the wonders and

[27] La Mesnardière wrote in 1639 that if a poet chose to draw from the 'Archives sacrées' as his source, he ought to faithfully adhere to the text. To "renverser insolemment un ordre mystérieux de qui même l'esprit de Dieu s'est rendu le secrétaire" was akin to sacrilege (cited in Phillips 221).

[28] Even these plays were considered problematic in the way they mixed Christianity and non-religious theatrical values. Saint-Évremond and d'Aubignac both decried the use of love in *Polyeucte* because it tainted the sacred love the martyr Polyeucte displays for God through his death *with* the profane love between Pauline and Sévère. *Saint Genest* recounts the story of an actor who is convinced and converted by the role of a Christian he is playing. Theatrophobic critics argued that a reverse conversion could also occur; a spectator could be "converted" to the vices they were seeing acted out onstage, particularly if the vices were mixed with sacred material.

temptations of Versailles ("de détachement du monde au milieu du monde même" (*OC* 946)). Racine's description of Madame de Maintenon's reaction to the suggestion of the story of Esther as subject hints at the sublime effect it would have on his audience.

But Esther didn't just impact the young women who were his original audience, and Racine continues, "À dire vrai, je ne pensais guère que la chose dût être aussi publique qu'elle l'a été. Mais les grandes vérités de l'Écriture, et la manière sublime dont elles y sont énoncées, pour peu qu'on les présente, même imparfaitement, aux yeux des hommes, sont si propres à les frapper" (*OC* 946).[29] This is a curious statement. On one hand, Racine seems to be aligning himself with Boileau's stance on the sublime and universal effect of Scripture. After all, "les grandes vérités de l'Écriture" had resulted in a wildly popular play. But Racine subtly emphasizes that these truths were enunciated, and presented to the "yeux des hommes," both words imply more than a mere reading of Scripture. It is ambiguous if Racine thinks Scripture alone would have had this effect, or if the sublime exists instead in the theatrical presentation of *Esther*. Racine's subtext is that he, the playwright, contributed to the sublime of *Esther* because he put it on stage.

However, in the paragraph before this ambiguous sentence with its potentially polemical subtext, Racine had taken pains to position himself out of the reach of condemnation by religious authority. In the previous paragraph, he insists that changing Scripture for theatrical purposes would be blasphemous and "une espèce de sacrilège" (*OC* 946). Racine claims vehemently that he had made no alteration to "aucune des circonstances tant soit peu considérables" (*OC* 946).[30] He is able to "remplir toute mon Action avec les seules Scènes, que Dieu lui-même, pour ainsi dire, a

[29] Some claim that in *Esther* and *Athalie*, Racine was imitating the simple and clear style of the biblical text (Fumaroli, "Dieux païens" 242). Indeed, considering that large sections of these plays, particularly the parts of the chorus, are quoted from Sacy's translation, this stylistic imitation could hardly be avoided. See Kapp and Forestier's "Notices" on *Esther* and *Athalie*.

[30] There were a variety of views playwrights took on how much Scripture should or could be changed for the purpose of theatrical pleasure. See Phillips, "Religious Drama" in *The Theater and Its Critics*, for a more detailed study on these perspectives.

préparées" (*OC* 946). By shielding himself behind the Great Playwright, so to speak, the message is clear: critics and enemies could argue with him about his poetic choices regarding pagan sources, but *Esther*'s divinely inspired source made Racine's work sacrosanct and untouchable. What was more, Racine insists that whatever additions he had made did not "mêler le profane avec le sacré," something he had "évité soigneusement," but were instead taken from sources that did not contradict Scripture, and were accepted by "plusieurs savants interprètes de l'Écriture" (*OC* 947).

Thus, whether it is because he supposedly stuck so closely to the text of Scripture, or because of his own authorial poetic abilities, Racine goes on to describe the unexpected effect of *Esther* on the court.[31] The remarkable popularity of the play, he claims, was due partly to the "grande vérités de l'Écriture et la manière sublime dont elles y sont énoncées" and in part to the ability of "ces jeunes demoiselles" who had "déclamé et chanté cet ouvrage avec tant de grâce, tant de modestie et tant de piété" (*OC* 946). Again, his statement is subtly ambiguous. Were the truths of Scripture sublime themselves, or was the sublime found in the declamation of these young, beautiful, innocent actresses, whose training Racine himself had undertaken?[32] Regardless, the effect of *Esther* was so powerful that what should have remained in the secret confines of the convent school became instead "l'empressement de toute la Cour" (*OC* 946). Racine concludes this paragraph with satisfaction, noting that "on se peut aussi bien divertir aux choses de piété qu'à tous les spectacles profanes" (*OC* 946). This may be a tongue-in-cheek response to d'Aubignac, Saint-Évremond, and other critics who had previously deprecated religious theater as corrupting, or as inherently boring because it could not conform to the requirements for good public

[31] With *Esther* particularly, Racine makes certain to be very conservative in his poetic changes to the biblical narrative. In fact, *Esther* shows the least alterations to any source, religious or pagan, of Racine's repertoire. See Forestier, "Notice d'*Esther*" p. 1687. However, despite following Sacy's translation very closely, Racine curated it for his own poetic ends, rearranging biblical passages to emphasize certain powerful emotions, and even at times smoothing Sacy's translation to be more fitting to the theatrical moment. See Vianey, p. 120.

[32] Racine was famous for training his actors and actresses in the proper declamation of his poetry, and the young women at Saint-Cyr were no exception.

entertainment. At least one of these deprecators, Bossuet, was among those "plus grands seigneurs" who were permitted by the king to see *Esther* (*OC*, "Préface d'*Esther*" 946).[33] By taking his play's subject from Scripture, Racine sets himself a challenge: could he create a play that satisfied the piety of Madame de Maintenon, without sacrificing pleasure? Could the Bible, with its reputation as a sublime text, and its plethora of dramatic and miraculous events, provide a new medium for Racine to continue exploring a theatrical sublime, an aesthetic he had developed since early in his career?

Indeed, Racine's two biblical plays are consistent with the approach on the *merveilleux,* or the supernatural, he had previously taken in his secular works.[34] The divine elements in *Esther* and *Athalie* are not *merveilleux* in the traditional sense of the term. Although *Esther* is set in Persia, and *Athalie* in Canaan (both ancient settings had ample gods Racine could have depicted), as always Racine is careful to avoid all embodied supernatural elements onstage.[35] However, verbal allusions to the pagan gods abound.[36] This is a deliberate poetic choice on Racine's part, since a good poet "must be what he writes" (Phillips 229). It would be strange for characters such as Aman or Athalie to never reference their gods, particularly when the whole crux of these two dramas hinges on the triumph of the Judeo-Christian God in the pagan context of the play. Similarly, throughout the plays, the pious characters allude to, pray to, and otherwise constantly invoke the

[33] Fowlie notes that Bossuet was present at both the first and the last staging of *Esther* (399).
[34] Fumaroli outlines this consistency in his article "Dieux païens."
[35] In this way he neatly skirts potential censure, both Balzac's objection to embodied pagan elements, and Voisin's conjecture that a Christian should not "publier des maximes Païennes qui ne peuvent servir qu'à corrompre les mœurs et à violer les lois" (cited in Phillips 228). By using the *merveilleux dans le discours,* Racine is also able to reconcile the poetics of Aristotle and the Christian needs of his context. "Il veut être poète, mais poète français et modern, s'adressant à un public chrétien" (Fumaroli, "Dieux païens" 243).
[36] In *Esther*, Aman claims that the Jewish God is "ennemi de tous les autres dieux" (III.i.496); Assuérus calls on his "Dieux puissants" when Esther faints in front of him (II.vii.635); and Aman cries out "Dieux" two different times in distress, the first when Assuérus tells him to pay homage to his enemy Mardochée (II.v.623), and the second when Esther reveals her identity to the king (III.iv.1035). Similarly, in *Athalie*, there are numerous references to "Baal," the Canaanite god of storms.

Judeo-Christian God with a variety of verbal injunctions.[37] Although for theological reasons, Racine could not represent this God on stage in an embodied way, he found ways to keep the divine at the forefront of the spectator's mind. For instance, Racine adds messianic allusions to both *Esther* and *Athalie*, creating a kind of *longue-durée* view of the coming incarnation of Christ.[38]

By taking events in *Esther* and *Athalie* that occur during moments of God's intervention in religious conflict, Racine is tapping into both the intense religious emotion as well as the dramatic potential. However, the storylines of both plays are also moments when divine intervention is conveniently ambiguous. The interpretation of the events thus depends on the spectator's faith.[39] For the believer, these plays took on the familiar tone of Bossuet's *Histoire universelle*, a world in which events were providentially arranged by the God of the Bible intervening in human affairs in a miraculous (albeit invisible) way.[40] For others who, like d'Aubignac and Saint-Évremond, might be squeamish of an overly preachy religious theatre, the actions of the human characters of the play could be interpreted as personal choice.[41] Racine's dramatic action turned on an ambiguity that still divides critical conversation.

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[37] Interestingly, the Hebrew version of Esther never mentions God and is much more about political machinations and the overthrow of Aman than it is about the religious triumph of the Jews. Scholar notes that this lack of reference to God was uncomfortable to Sacy who tried to "sacralize the Hebrew narrative" in his translation ("Je ne sais quelle grâce" 322).

[38] The chorus plays an especially pivotal part in invoking the divine presence of God and emphasizing the messianic aspect of Esther and Joas' roles as sacrificial victims. I will analyze the role of the chorus later in this chapter.

[39] Dubu points out that in 1786, at the play's performance at Saint-Cloud, *Athalie* had become much more of a political drama than a sacred one. The French public cheered the political demise of Athalie, the villainous queen (*Églises* 196).

[40] See Lyons, "The God of Suspense" in *The Phantom of Chance*, and Forestier, "Notice d'*Athalie*," especially pp. 1723-24 for connections between Bossuet's *Histoire universelle* and Racine's biblical plays.

[41] Kapp notes that this is evident in the way that Racine is very careful to not create an evil *merveilleux* in the form of the devil or demons (162). Instead, evil is incarnated in Aman and Mathan, both modeled after characters Racine had created earlier in his pagan plays. By placing evil in a human agent (as opposed to a supernatural being), Racine both emphasizes the omniscient and providential role of God, and avoids having to visibly represent a devil onstage.

This did not mean that Racine lost his poetic agency, as Boileau feared would happen if scriptural integrity was to be preserved in its use as a poetic source.[42] Besides keeping close to the biblical stories of *Esther* and *Athalie*, Racine interwove quotations of and allusions to other portions of the Old Testament. Although this is most evident in the choric portions, which are almost entirely quoted from the Psalms and other biblical poetry,[43] Racine also told the central story using biblical formulae and allusions that pulled from a wider scriptural setting.[44] By connecting textual moments from other places in Scripture to his main narrative, Racine not only exploited the larger dramatic potential of the Bible, he also anchored his play in the wider providential history of the Old (and later New) Testament.[45] His audience responded well to this tactic, as they were well versed in Bossuet's preaching, whose similar providential perspective centered all of human history on the person of Christ.[46] By rearranging Scripture to suit his own dramatic narrative, Racine is still able to circumvent accusations of sacrilege. In his mind, he is simply using elements that are already present in other places in Scripture, and is thus still able to fill his dramatic "Action avec les seules Scènes, que Dieu lui-même, pour ainsi dire, a préparées" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Esther*" 946).

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[42] Since Boileau believed human authorship of the Bible was impossible, and that changing the biblical text was sacrilegious, human poets were left with a very strict set of rules they could follow if they wanted to use Scripture. See Delehanty, "Boileau and the Sublime" in *Literary Knowing*.

[43] Forestier's "Notice d'*Esther*" and subsequent notes contain detailed information about the biblical passages Racine was quoting.

[44] This is not a new technique for Racine. In his previous plays, he often drew on mythological references not contained in the original story and thus widened the breadth of his own story. For instance, Fumaroli notes that "S'il y a une 'lucidité' de Phèdre, c'est dans ce regard proprement médusé qui lui fait voir et connaître en un même instant toujours répété tout ce qui suppose le nom de la déesse [Vénus]" ("Dieux païens" 251-2). This becomes its own kind of sublime, a transcendence of associations and thoughts that bring to mind the fullness of the invoked mythology.

[45] In doing so, Racine set a precedent for the writers of religious tragedy after him. In 1695 Boyer wrote in the preface to his *Judith*, "Il faut se remplir des grandes vérités de la Religion et tirer de l'Écriture Sainte ces riches expressions que nous fournit la divine poésie du Psalmiste et des Prophètes" (Quoted in Phillips 232). See also Gethner "Love Plots as Moral Lessons."

[46] Bossuet's *Histoire universelle* was published in 1681. It was intended for the education and edification of the crown prince, but would also have been read by many in Racine's original audience, particularly the young girls at Saint-Cyr. See Milhiet, *Saint-Cyr*.

One such instance occurs in the beginning of *Esther*, which is the story of a young girl chosen for her beauty by Assuérus, the king of Persia, to replace his deposed queen. Unbeknownst to the king, however, Esther is Jewish and has been chosen by God to deliver the Jewish people from genocide. This horrific event has been planned by the king's right-hand man, as personal-revenge-turned-political against the Jew Mardochée (who is also Esther's uncle) for refusing to show Aman obeisance. Despite this decently dramatic plot, however, Racine ups the ante and makes Esther the means God would use to return the Jews from exile. Although this is a major deviance from the original narrative, Racine uses it to increase the stakes of Esther's role as queen-intermediary. Not only is she saving her people from death, she is bringing them back to their homeland. This also allows Racine to include a tone of nostalgia and longing for the Jewish homeland, particularly in the choral portions. The first scene opens with the reunion between Esther and her childhood friend Elise who had mourned her captivity and supposed death. Elise recounts how she was told by a prophet to seek Esther in Susa since

> Le jour approche, où le Dieu des armées
> Va de son bras puissant faire éclater l'appui
> Et le cri de son peuple est monté jusqu'à lui (I.i.20-23).

The prophet's words are a clever cut-and-pasting from the book of Exodus and the book of Isaiah. Racine thus connects Esther's narrative to the great deliverance of her people from Egypt, another moment when the cries of God's people had reached his ears, as well to Isaiah's prophesied deliverance of the people of Israel. With this simple allusion, Esther suddenly becomes the key player by which God's great salvific designs will be achieved. The prophet's weighty words fill Elise "de joie et d'horreur," two emotions Racine often coupled with a character's reaction to a sublime moment, and which acts as a verbal cue for the spectator to do likewise.[47]

[47] See for instance the reaction Ulysse has to Ériphile's death, "Vous m'en voyez moi-même en cet heureux moment / Saisi d'horreur, de joie, et de ravissement" (V.vi.1731-32).

In *Athalie*, Racine becomes even bolder in his rearrangement of his biblical source, even adding several elements to the original narrative.[48] The biblical story tells how the high priest Joad overthrows the evil queen Athalie. Joad's wife, Josabeth, had saved Athalie's grandson Joas from a slaughter of all the queen's progeny. The high priest then rallies the support of the nation of Judah, places the six-year-old Joas on the throne, and kills Athalie. Although Racine generally adheres to this plot line, he adds two narrative points that are particularly key in increasing the dramatic effect of the story. These are: the encounter between Joas and Athalie, and Joad's prophetic vision.[49] The mid-play encounter between child and grandmother allows Racine to increase the pathos and power of the final *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* while Joad's prophetic vision allows Racine to add an element of the Christian *merveilleux* that is still couched in a *merveilleux dans le discours*. However, Joad's vision, perhaps because of its connection to the *merveilleux*, is potentially controversial enough that Racine feels the need to justify his choice in the preface.[50] He admits that although Scripture is not overt in saying that "Joïada ait eu l'esprit de prophétie," it doesn't take much deductive reasoning to see that Joad is "un homme tout plein de l'esprit de Dieu" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Athalie*" 1013). Racine's deviation is thus not unreasonable within the larger context of the prophetic ability described in Scripture. Racine then undergirds this idea by connecting Joad to the high priest Caiaphas who "being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation" (John 11:51, NRSV 109). Although it is a bit of a theological

[48] While with *Esther* Racine had been careful to insist that he did not change any element of the story. With *Athalie*, however, he defends his changes and additions by claiming they were drawn from different portions of Scripture, or "des expressions tirées des prophètes mêmes" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Athalie*" 1012), thus implying that he has not committed any sacrilege and is just using elements that are part of a larger unified narrative.

[49] The encounter between Joas and Athalie will be examined in detail in the section on sublime characters. Joad's vision will be analyzed in conjunction with the role of the chorus.

[50] The care Racine takes to defend Joad's *merveilleux* vision is the same care he had previously taken to defend his poetic altering of pagan sources. See for example, his defense of Ériphile in the preface of *Iphigénie* whose existence he conjures with some tricky poetic source acrobatics, "J'ai rapporté tous ces avis si différents, et surtout le passage de Pausanias, parce que c'est à cet Auteur que je dois l'heureux personnage d'Ériphile, sans lequel je n'aurais jamais osé entreprendre cette tragédie" (*OC* 698).

jump for Racine to assume that all high priests could prophesy simply because of their "qualité de souverain Pontife" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Athalie*" 1013), the more critical feat for Racine is creating yet another connection between the story of Athalie (and particularly the character of Joas) and the redemptive story of Christ. Indeed, earlier in *Athalie*'s preface, Racine had already made this connection by citing Bossuet's *Histoire universelle*, "Car ce Messie tant de fois promis comme Fils d'Abraham devait aussi être fils de David et de tous les Rois de Juda" (*OC* 1012). The poetic freedom Racine takes with the biblical narrative is justified in the larger Christian narrative of redemption.

More than being drawn from the sublime narrative of the Bible, *Athalie* also provides Racine the opportunity to deal in two other kinds of great (or sublime) tragic action. According to Corneille, the "tragédie d'un genre […] sublime" occurs when a character deliberately tries to kill a close family member or friend, and is thwarted in the end only by "quelque puissance supérieur" (*OC, Trois Discours* 834).[51] In *Iphigénie* Racine had put this kind of action to very effective use.[52] *Athalie* reuses this device, but with an interesting twist. We learn that eight years before the events of the play, Athalie had attempted to murder her grandson Joas (along with her other grandchildren), and was unknowingly thwarted by Josabeth, Joas' aunt, who followed divine prompting and secreted her nephew away from harm. The Cornelian sublime thus exists in *Athalie*, but it occurs extra-scenically and before the beginning of the play. However, allusions to this event

[51] "Quand ils [les personnages] y font de leur côté tout ce qu'ils peuvent, et qu'ils sont empêchés d'en venir à l'effet par quelque puissance supérieure, ou par quelque changement de fortune qui les fait périr eux−mêmes, ou les réduit sous le pouvoir de ceux qu'ils voulaient perdre, il est hors de doute que cela fait une tragédie d'un genre peut−être plus sublime que les trois qu'Aristote avoue" (Corneille, *OC, Trois Discours* 834).

[52] *Iphigénie* has constant reversals of action as Ériphile tries to bring about the demise of her adoptive sister, Iphigénie. She is only fully thwarted in the end when the priest Calchas reveals that Ériphile, and not Iphigénie, is the victim required by the gods for sacrifice. Calchas' divinely inspired and *merveilleux* revelation prompts Ériphile to commit suicide, which results in the winds returning to fill the sails of the Greek troops heading to Troy. Although verbal allusions to the gods abound in this play, including the intervention of Diana who brings the winds, they are never seen on stage. See Delcroix, *Le Sacré dans les tragédies profanes*, Jaoën, "Iphigénie: Poétique et politique du sacrifice," and Gethner, "Pros and Cons of Human Sacrifice."

in the play increase theatrical suspense and emotional mystery. As spectators, we understand the complexities of Joas' relationship to Athalie, and our suspense increases as we await her unpredictable reaction to him, especially if his identity is revealed.

The end of *Athalie* adheres instead to Aristotle's greatest kind of tragic action (and the one which Corneille deemed the least sublime). For Aristotle, the best tragic plot is when a character pursues the demise of someone without knowing their identity, which is then revealed to them before they can fulfill the deed. Athalie, encouraged by her advisor Mathan, seeks to kill Joas, but only because of his connection to her enemy Joad. Joas' identity remains a mystery to Athalie until its revelation at the end. But when she learns who Joas is, Athalie is struck by the memory of her interaction with him, resulting in a powerful effect of Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, or recognition. By simultaneously employing Corneille and Aristotle's preferred kinds of tragic action, Racine is intertwining modern and ancient versions of sublime tragic action.

Sublime Characters

Taking inspiration from Scripture was not the only recourse Racine had to creating his desired ineffable effect. As a playwright as well as a courtier, Racine understood the part a body played in the communication of the sublime.[53] Both Esther and Joas provided him with an excellent canvas on which to paint a character whose physical beauty and internal allure have great effect on those around them. These characters have a certain *je ne sais quoi* which inexplicably attracted the eyes and hearts of the other characters. Both also had disguised identities that permitted Racine to create a striking moment of *anagnorisis* at the end of the play. Additionally, their physical beauty and innocence increased the pathos of their roles as sacrificial victims. As he had for

[53] See Guyot, "Éblouissement," and "Opacity of Theater."

Iphigénie, where an innocent young girl is threatened by her father's willingness to sacrifice her to appease the gods, Racine was cultivating tension in his spectators who feared for the beautiful and innocent Esther and Joas by leaving their fates unknown until the final *peripeteia*, or reversal, where the victims were saved and the perpetrators killed in their stead.

Making the central character of these plays flawless is an interesting choice on Racine's part since he generally followed the Aristotelian model for creating tragic characters that are neither fully good nor fully evil. But both Esther and Joas break this mold with their innocence.[54] But Racine knew, as did his seventeenth-century audience, that both Esther and Joas' stories would end in violence, although he doesn't include this end in *Esther* and only alludes to it in *Athalie*. By emphasizing the initial goodness of Esther and Joas on stage, Racine creates a stark juxtaposition between their innocence and the bloodshed that would follow.[55] For instance, the biblical narrative of Esther recounts how Esther petitions the king for the life of her people. She asks that he issue an edict that on the very day Aman had appointed for their genocide, the Jewish people be allowed to "lay hands on those who had sought their ruin" (Esther 9:2 NRSV 496). The Jewish offensive results in great bloodshed, including the death of the ten sons of Aman. But despite this victory, Esther again approaches the king and petitions him to allow her people a second day to kill and despoil their enemies, which he grants. In *Athalie*, although he still doesn't include the event in the course of the play, Racine is a bit more explicit with his allusion to Joas' corruption. Joad's *merveilleux* vision, which I will analyze below, recounts how the innocent six-year-old child king

[54] They also both have purely evil counterparts in Aman and Mathan who, unlike most of his previous villains, have no redeeming side. See Kapp and Descotes for how Racine makes dramatic use of these two characters.
[55] Racine had also created this juxtaposition to some extent in *Iphigénie*. Although Iphigénie herself is not corrupted, nor does she knowingly make an evil choice, but her willingness to sacrifice herself in the end leads to Ériphile, the true victim's death. Thus, the requirement of the gods is fulfilled, and the slaughter of the Trojan war can commence.

will grow up to order the murder his adopted brother Zacharie in the very temple in which he was raised.

But despite the violence of their futures, Racine deliberately structures the personas of Esther and Joas to embody a number of elements that are meant to create a sublime effect. For instance, Esther embodies the qualities of the *honnête* personage that Racine had cultivated in Alexandre. She is, in some respects, both an *honnête femme* and an *honnête homme* in female form. The concept of *honnête femme* existed in the seventeenth century, but with very different qualities than the *honnête homme*, who was a kind of social actor who charmed and manipulated his audience. An *honnête femme*, on the other hand, was notable for her lack of social engagement; she was esteemed instead for her piety and her modesty. Initially Esther seems to follow this model as well. She is very reluctant to follow Mardochée's political and theological "desseins secrets" to have her become queen in order to deliver her people, but she obeys nonetheless, albeit "tremblante" (I.i.53). She is modest about her striking beauty, describing it as "mes faibles attraits" (I.i.70), and she is unwilling to ascribe any credit to her own charms for the king's attraction to her. Instead she claims that the king chose her by God's direct orchestration since God is the one who motivates the actions of kings and "tient le cœur des Rois entre ses mains puissantes" (I.i.67).[56] Similarly, when Mardochée tells her that she must go before the king to petition for the lives of her people that Aman wants to slaughter, Esther tells him that despite her royal status, she is no exception to the law that forbids anyone to come before the king without first being called.

[56] Although Bossuet doesn't name Esther, he implies that she was God's instrument since God changed the heart of the king regarding the fate of the Jews. "Quoiqu'ils [les juifs] aient été menacés de leur dernière ruine sous Assuérus, quel qu'il soit, Dieu, fléchi par leurs larmes, changea tout à coup le cœur du roi, et tira une vengeance éclatante d'Aman leur ennemi" (*Histoire universelle* 230). Bossuet also alludes obliquely to Esther in another part of the *Histoire*, saying, "mais ce qui n'est pas moins merveilleux quoique d'une autre manière, il toucha le cœur du roi, qui, admirant la piété des Israélites, que nul péril n'avait détournés des observances les plus incommodes de leur religion, leur accorda la vie et la paix" (*Histoire universelle* 236). For more detail on these two allusions to Esther in the *Histoire universelle*, see Dubu, "Esther" especially pp. 616-617.

She is "comme une autre soumise" to the death that this law imposes if the king doesn't welcome her immediately (I.iii.202). But at Mardochée's insistence, Esther ultimately agrees to attempt this life-threatening course of action.

Although her modesty, her piety, her obedience, and her reluctance to step into the public eye label her as an *honnête femme*, Esther also has a remarkable exceptionalism that gives her the qualities of an *honnête homme*.[57] She has striking physical beauty, the status of a divine instrument, and great courage to break the law even at the possible cost of her life. At every encounter with Esther, the king's response to her indicates that she possesses an inexplicable attraction for him. Seventeenth-century literary critic, Dominique Bouhours, describes this quality which inexplicably attracts others as a *je ne sais quoi*. It is an immediate impression that, like the sublime, communicates directly to the heart.[58] When he first sees Esther, the king's response to her is one of amazed silence. "De mes faibles attraits le Roi parut frappé. / Il m'observa longtemps dans un sombre silence" (I.i.70-71). In the *Traité*, Boileau describes the silence of Ajax as sublime because it has a "je ne sais quoi de plus grand que tout ce qu'il aurait pu dire" (*OC* 354). Similarly, the king's silence when he sees Esther speaks more eloquently about her beauty than any effusive words could have.[59]

Although the neo-classical conception of physical beauty harmonized easily with moral goodness, the Christian tradition had a more uneasy relationship with physical beauty. Women's beauty in particular was dangerous, both because it could lead to vanity and *amour-propre*, but

[57] For all who aspired to be *honnêtes hommes*, there were very few who managed it in reality, and those were often thought to do so because of an interior quality, a "grâce naturelle" that mirrors Esther's. See Dens, *L'Honnête homme* and Viala, *La France galante* for insight into this social aesthetic.
[58] "Faut-il s'étonner que le trait dont l'âme est frappée à la première vue d'une personne ne se puisse apercevoir? Car enfin de tous les traits celui qui va le plus vite c'est le trait qui blesse le cœur" (Bouhours, *Entretiens* 285).
[59] The King's subsequent command to Esther, "Soyez Reine" is so simple, almost to the point of taciturnity, that one wonders if Racine was envisioning here the sublime formula Boileau had celebrated in Corneille's work such as "Qu'il mourût" from *Horace*.

also because it could seduce men into immoral action.[60] Racine thus had to walk a careful line with the way he emphasized Esther's renowned beauty, and he chose to safely subvert it to the divine will. Instead of standing on its own, Esther's beauty is the means by which God acts in the play. Curiously, Esther's beauty is in this way a clear connection to the supernatural, in other words, the means to the *merveilleux*.

As we saw before, Esther assures Elise that God was involved in the course of events that brought about her coronation as queen. She insists that Assuérus did not single her out from among many other beautiful young women because her own beauty outshone them, but because God bent the heart of the king to his will and tipped the scale in Esther's favor.[61] Mardochée also makes clear that Esther's beauty has a higher purpose, it will be the means by which God will save his people. He insists "Ce Dieu ne vous a pas choisie / Pour être un vain spectacle aux peoples de l'Asie (I.iii.213-14).

When Esther dares to enter the throne room against the royal decree, her physical beauty is again not a "vain spectacle," but is another moment of divine intervention on the heart of the king. As she enters the king's presence, Esther faints in absolute terror before Assuérus. Her action is an incredibly effective nonverbal response to the king's unspoken question of why she has entered without permission into his throne room, or what seventeenth-century author Nicolas Caussin would call "une éloquence muette" (cited in Kapp 167). However, Racine also knew that the sight of a beautiful young woman fainting created a spectacle that was pleasing to see, and this

[60] Part of theater's danger for critics like Nicole and Bossuet was because the spectators came as much to gaze at the bodies of other spectators in the audience as they did the bodies of actors and actresses on stage. The theater thus became a place for people to partake in personal displays of beauty and fashion. See Koch, "Touch: Contact and the Politics of Fear – Hobbes, Nicole and Pascal" in *The Aesthetic Body* and McClure, *Idolatry*.

[61] She says, God "pour moi fit pencher la balance" (I.i.70,72). Although Esther did have great beauty, her insistence that the king's choice was not based solely on this is perhaps another nod of Racine to Bouhours whose *je ne sais quoi* was not always linked to beauty. "Car enfin, ce n'est précisément ni la beauté ni la bonne mine, ni la bonne grâce…" (*Entretiens* 282).

scene shows his intuition for the suggestive power of the human body in the depiction of a nonverbal sublime moment.[62] Esther's sublime persona communicates its emotion of terror to the king, enabling him to describe the effect Esther has on him.[63] Esther's physical beauty had rendered the king speechless when he first beheld her, but here Assuérus is moved to poetry at the sight of Esther's beautiful fainting body.[64] He exclaims,

> Ô Soleil! Ô flambeaux de lumière immortelle!
> Je me trouble moi-même, et sans frémissement
> Je ne puis voir sa peine et son saisissement (II.vii.654-56).

But Esther's beauty cannot merely be physical for the role she is play in the divine plot, it must have an emotional and a spiritual dimension as well, if she is to soften the heart of the king enough to reverse the political declaration of genocide against her people. Indeed, Assuérus declares of Esther, "Je ne trouve qu'en vous je ne sais quelle grâce, / Qui me charme toujours, et jamais ne me lasse" (II.vii.669-70).[65] A great deal rides on Esther, but we feel assured that both her outer and inner charms are working when Assuérus continues, "Tout respire en Esther

[62] Racine had used the trope of the body of a woman overcome by fear before in *Britannicus*. Néron, upon seeing Junie's terror at being taken hostage in the dark and shadowy night, is deeply troubled by it and unable to speak when he sees her fear. Yet this silence becomes the means to lucid and sublime poetry when he afterwards describes his memory vividly to Narcisse, pinpointing the person and body of Junie as being the source of his inspiration. For a fuller analysis of this moment, see chapter two of this dissertation. See also Tamas, *Silence trahi* and Guyot, *Corps tragique* for Racine's use of the physical body for theatrical effect.

[63] See Gilby, "Emotions" for the importance of the sublime in the transfer of emotion from one subject to another.

[64] This particular scene in the Septuagint is so vivid that it was often what artists chose to depict when painting Esther. For instance, Paolo Veronese painted this scene ca. 1575, Artemisia Gentileschi painted it ca. 1630, and Nicolas Poussin painted it in 1655. Their works can be found at the Louvre, the Met, and the Hermitage respectively. This is also the scene that Le Brun chose for the frontispiece of Racine's 1691 edition of *Esther*. Racine's scene was likely inspired by Poussin's painting which had recently been acquired by Racine's protector, the Marquis de Seignelay. See Forestier, "Notice d'*Esther*" p. 1683. See also Fumaroli, "L'Inspiration du Poète de Poussin" in *L'École du silence*.

[65] Bouhours connected the *je ne sais quoi* to God's grace, "Le je ne sais quoi est de la grâce aussi bien que de la nature et de l'art. Oui la grâce elle-même cette divine grâce qui a fait tant de bruit dans les Écoles et qui fait des effets si admirables dans les âmes; cette grâce si forte et si douce toute ensemble qui triomphe de la dureté du cœur sans blesser la liberté du franc arbitre; qui assujettit la nature en s'y accommodant ; qui se rend maitre d'elle-même ; cette grâce dis-je qu'est-ce autre chose que je ne sais quoi de surnaturel et de divin qu'on ne peut ni expliquer ni comprendre non plus que la gloire qui en est le fruit" (*Entretiens* 294). Bouhours was to receive quite a reactive censuring for this connection. See Beugnot and Declercq, "Notice des *Entretiens*," Scholar, *Je ne sais quoi*, and Kapp for more on how the *je ne sais quoi* connects to religion and God's grace in particular.

l'innocence, et la paix" (II.vii.672).[66] Because of Esther, the king has been able to find light in a dark place, and she makes "des jours sereins de mes jours les plus sombres" (II.vii.674). Esther's inner *grâce*, matching her outward beauty, is the means of grace for Assuérus.[67] Through her, he will not only grasp the truth of the revelation she will make to him about Aman, but also the truth of who her God is.

Esther's "innocence" and "paix" are also key to her role as sacrificial victim in the moment when she comes before the king. Racine had described his previous sacrificial victim, Iphigénie, as "une personne […] vertueuse et aimable" whose death would be completely unjust, a "meurtre horrible" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Iphigénie*" 698). Likewise, Esther's innocent demeanor makes the threat of her death horrible to contemplate, and Racine uses it to increase spectator pathos. In *Iphigénie* Racine had heightened the tragic emotions of pity and terror by creating a vacillation in Agamemnon's actions, one moment he agrees to sacrifice his daughter and then next attempts to save her. Part of what increases the agony of this indecision is that he tries to hide the truth from Iphigénie. He is ashamed of his involvement in her imminent sacrifice. But Iphigénie eventually discovers the truth and voluntarily chooses die to save her father – and the Greeks – from dishonor.

Racine takes another approach with Mardochée, who is Esther's adoptive father. Mardochée knows Esther's sacrificial purpose, in fact he seems to have sent her to be queen possibly for that reason, and he doesn't mince words when tells her that God,

> Pour un plus noble usage il réserve ses Saints.
> S'immoler pour son nom, et pour son héritage,
> D'un enfant d'Israël, voilà le vrai partage (I.iii.216-18).

[66] This line recalls the last line of the Prologue, "Tout respire ici Dieu, la paix, la vérité" (*OC*, "Prologue" 70), as well as the oppositional line in *Phèdre*, "Je respire à la fois l'inceste et l'imposture" (IV.vi.1270).
[67] In Catholic theology, the "means of grace" is a conduit through which God provides his blessing, salvation, and even life itself. See Parish, *Catholic Particularlity*.

But despite this brutal fate, Esther, like Iphigénie, knows that she must risk her life to gain the salvation of her entire people, and she chooses to take her life in her hands in order to save the honor of her fathers, both adoptive and divine.[68]

Dominique Bouhours describes people who can keep a secret as having a "caractère d'une âme noble" and a "génie sublime" (*Entretiens* 237). He says they are like "ces grandes rivières dont on ne voit point le fond" and like "ces grandes forêts dont le silence rempli l'âme de je ne sais quelle horreur religieuse" (*Entretiens* 205).[69] Those who demonstrate this "vertu admirable" merit "la confidence des princes" (*Entretiens* 237). Part of Esther's sublime persona is her ability to keep her Jewish identity a secret until the opportune moment. She hides both her "race" and her "pays" from the king, even under great scrutiny (I.i.54). But ultimately, her discretion is rewarded, allowing her to reveal her identity to great effect. Although the king reacts to the revelation of Esther's identity, his reaction increases significantly when she reveals the political implications of her secret.[70] She tells him that Aman is planning to murder the Jews, including herself as well as Mardochée, whom the king had just honored. But the way Esther describes Aman's plan implies that he is deliberately undermining royal authority, and is thus a threat to Assuérus. At the revelation of this personal and political betrayal, Assuérus' response brings in the language of the Longinian sublime, "Quel jour mêlé d'horreur vint effrayer mon âme? / Tout mon sang de colère et de honte s'enflamme" (III.iv.1136-37).[71] Aman is equally struck by Esther's timely political

[68] Throughout *Esther*, God is referred to as a Father for the fatherless (like Esther), and the great Father of the Jews. See Ahmed for parallels between *Esther* and *Iphigénie*.
[69] Incidentally, both rivers and forests figure prominently in the literary examples Longinus gives as being sublime, and are elements which will be further developed in the Burkian and Kantian sublime.
[70] In Bouhours' chapter on "Secrets" in the *Entretiens* mostly deals with the importance of political secrets. In this, Esther's reticence is especially remarkable because, for Bouhours, women have a particularly difficult time keeping secrets since they are "presque toutes de la nature des échos, qui redisent tout ce qu'on leur dit" (*Entretiens* 203).
[71] Forestier notes, "Non seulement par son remarquable retournement terminal qui a tous les caractères de la péripétie aristotélicienne (l'action se dénoue par une inversion de ce qui était attendu, et ce grâce à une révélation d'identité) et qui produit, comme les dénouements de *Mithridate* et d'*Iphigénie*, un effet de "merveille," mais aussi par l'étonnante suspension du jugement d'Assuérus" ("Notice d'*Esther*" 1686).

revelation and exclaims "D'un juste étonnement je demeure frappé" (III.iv.1142). Aman increases the power of his words by throwing himself at Esther's feet.

In seventeenth-century theater, prominent characters who sat down or fell on the floor were committing "incongruous *actio*" which infringed social codes and shocked spectators (Maskell 144).[72] This is the second time in a short space of time that a character of high rank in *Esther* has fallen at the feet of another. The first instance is when the virtuous and noble Queen Esther throws herself at the feet of the king to reveal her secret identity and beg for mercy. The spectators have barely recovered from this shock when Aman's groveling display almost immediately follows. By doubling this kind of radical physical posturing, Racine is emphasizing a non-discursive sublime, allowing the body to speak and shock as loudly as discourse.

Like Esther, Joas also has an inexplicable allure, a *je ne sais quoi*, about him that attracts Athalie's attention as well as our pathos. Like Esther (and Iphigénie), Joas is an innocent potential victim. And like Esther, Joas encloses in his person a secret of great political import, although he himself is ignorant of it.[73]

We don't see the first encounter between Athalie and Joas since Zacharie recounts it *post facto* to his mother Josabeth. However, Zacharie uses the same language of astonishment and amazed silence that characterized Assuérus' reaction to Esther when he describes Athalie's reaction on seeing the child Joas. Although Athalie initially storms into the holy temple with "le front levé" and "un œil farouche," this "femme superbe" suddenly loses her voice and is stunned to silence by the sight of Joas (II.ii.398, 407). Zacharie recounts,

> Mais sa langue en sa bouche à l'instant s'est glacée,
> Et toute son audace a paru terrassée.
> Ses yeux comme effrayés n'osaient se détourner.

[72] For other examples of "incongruous *actio*," see Maskell pp. 130-135.
[73] Josabeth asks, "Sait-il déjà son nom, et son noble destin?" to which Joad responds "Il ne répond encore qu'au nom d'Éliacin, / Et se croit quelque enfant rejeté par sa mère" (I.ii.181-83).

Surtout, Éliacin paraissait l'étonner (II.ii.411-14).[74]

The change over the evil queen is so sudden that Zacharie conjectures there must be a supernatural cause behind Athalie's reaction. He thinks that her silence is possibly due to the sight of a destroying angel of God who, in judgement at her sin of sacrilege,[75] "Est venu lui montrer un glaive étincelant" (II.ii.410).[76]

Before the physical on-stage meeting between Athalie and Joas, Racine builds tension and mystery around the boy with Athalie's dream. Athalie, unlike Assuérus who feels at peace because he has found Esther, has not yet found "cette paix que je cherche, et qui me fuit toujours" (II.v.438). Athalie claims she lacks peace because she is haunted by a violent dream. She agonizes, "Je l'évite partout, partout me poursuit" (II.v.489). In another moment of "incongruous *actio*," the incredibly violent and strong queen Athalie is overcome by the memory of this nightmare and sits down weakly to tell her dream to her advisors Mathan and Abner.[77] She underscores her shocking behavior by remarking lucidly on how odd it is that she, a great queen, would be unsettled by a dream, "me devrais-je inquiéter d'un songe?" (II.v.487). She then recounts a vision of her dead mother whose bloody fate Athalie describes in graphic detail.

Mais je n'ai plus trouvé qu'un horrible mélange
D'os et de chair meurtris, et trainés dans la fange,

[74] Much of this language also recalls the final scene in *Iphigénie*, when Ulysse tells Clytemnestre how Calchas with "l'oeil farouche" declares that the fate of Ériphile was to be the victim required by the oracle of the gods to set the winds free to allow the Greeks to sail to Troy. At Calchas' divinely inspired words, everyone who hears is shocked into silence and "Tout le camp immobile / L'écoute avec frayeur" (V.vi.1744; 1761-62).

[75] Athalie was both a woman and a worshiper of the Canaanite god Baal; both reasons to damn her entrance into the temple as a sin of sacrilege.

[76] Racine's scenes of supernatural engagement often have modifiers of doubt. Thus, Zacharie begins this conjecture with "*J'ignore* si de Dieu l'Ange se dévoilant" (II.ii.409, my emphasis). Similarly, Ulysse paints Calchas "Terrible, et plein du Dieu, qui l'agitait *sans doute*" and leaves the sighting of Diana to "le soldat étonné" who thought he saw the goddess, who "*croit* que s'élevant au travers de ses feux" (V.vi.1745, 1785, 1787 my emphasis). Likewise, Théramène qualifies with an "on dit" the god that supposedly brought about Hippolyte's death by torturing his horses ("d'aiguillons pressait leur flanc poudreux" (V.vi.1539-40). Even Joad, before he speaks his prophetic vision, questions its origin "Mais d'où vient que mon cœur frémit d'un saint effroi? / Est-ce l'Esprit divin qui s'empare de moi?" (III.vii.1129-1130).

[77] Like Agrippine, Athalie sits to tell her history, which is bloodier and more horrific, but she also sits because, like Bérénice, she is overcome by emotion.

Des lambeaux pleins de sang, et de membres affreux
Que des chiens dévorants se disputaient entre eux (II.v.503-506).

The violence of this scene is underscored by Racine's use of earthy and bloody words like "fange," which are entirely absent elsewhere in his theater, and which create a "sense of horror and revulsion […] by the use of ordinarily unremarkable words" (Corti 49). Racine's choice of violent and base words to describe Jézabel's death are a prime example of what I call the Longinian "horrific sublime." In Boileau's translation, Longinus stipulates that the expression of "une chose basse en termes grandes et magnifiques, c'est tout de même que si vous appliquiez un grand masque de théâtre sur le visage d'un petit enfant" (*OC, Traité* 382). Part of the fourth source of the sublime, according to Longinus, is the "choix de mots" (*OC* 349). In his explanation of a poet's ability to choose the correct words, Longinus gives two remarkable examples of this kind of sublime, both as bloody and violent as Athalie's vision. Longinus' first example is that of Cléomene who "étant devenu furieux, il prit un couteau dont il se hacha la chair en petits morceaux; et s'étant ainsi déchiqueté lui-même, il mourut" (*OC* 382). The second example is of Pithès who "demeurant toujours dans le vaisseau, ne cessa point de combattre, qu'il n'eût été haché en pièces" (*OC* 382). An author, even when describing a horrific occurrence, can "[dire] bonnement les choses" by his "discours tout simple […] qui n'y entend point de finesse, et renferment néanmoins en elles un sens qui n'a rien de grossier ni de trivial" (*OC* 382).

This is not the first time Racine has used the horrific sublime in his theater. Ériphile's death, although not as graphic as Jézabel's, is still a violent and destructive moment where she "Prend le sacré couteau, le plonge dans son sein. / […] son sang coule et fait rougir la terre" (V.vi.1776-77). The resulting violent reaction causes a "sainte horreur" to fall upon the surrounding crowd (V.vi.1784). Similarly, Théramène describes Hippolyte's death, verbally

depicting the moment when he comes upon the bloody, torn mess of his pupil dragged to pieces by his own horses,

> Tout son corps n'est bientôt qu'une plaie […]
> De son généreux sang la trace nous conduit.
> Les rochers en sont teints. Les ronces dégoutantes
> Portent de ses cheveux les dépouilles sanglantes. […]
> N'a laissé dans mes bras qu'un corps défiguré (V.vi.1550, 1556-1558, 1568).

Aman's death, too, is a violent and graphic affair. A servant comes to tell Assuérus that his political enemy is dead, and by terribly violent means,

> Seigneur, le traître est expiré,
> Par le peuple en fureur à moitié déchiré.
> On traîne, on va donner en spectacle funeste
> De son corps tout sanglant le misérable reste (III.viii.1190-93).

All of these deaths are overshadowed by a supernatural element. Ériphile, although she takes her own life, does so at the words of the gods spoken through the priest Calchas. Hippolyte is dispatched by a beast of Neptune, the sight of which sends the prince's horses careening madly out of his control. Aman is torn apart by God's people driven to a violent frenzy by divine judgement. Jézabel is torn to pieces by dogs in fulfillment of the words of God's prophet Elie "les chiens mangeront Jézabel dans le champ de Jesraël" (cited in Forestier, "Notice d'*Athalie*" 1739). Although the neoclassical aesthetic tended to shy away from visible violence on stage, Racine's horrific verbal descriptions of these deaths is an important part of the development of the later Romantic sublime whose horror and the grotesqueness Burke and Kant will more readily embrace.

The violence of Jézabel's death is striking both because of incredible clarity of its horrific description, but also because the "language of exaltation stands in opposition to language of leveling and earthiness" (Corti 49). Indeed, the magnificent horror of Athalie's dream is underscored by Abner's reaction of "Grand Dieu!" (II.v.507). Athalie's dream creates a curious moment of *peripeteia*. Instead of reversing dramatic action, Racine reverses the tone of Athalie's

dream. The extremely violent language of Athalie's internal vision of Jézabel's torn body is exchanged with the language of innocence and purity as her dream shifts to a vision of Joas. Abner's exclamation of "Grand Dieu" is the turning point of this *peripeteia*, dividing the horrific from the innocent, and augmenting the contrast of Jézabel's bloody remains with the "jeune enfant couvert d'une robe éclatante" who lifts Athalie's battered spirits ("sa vue a ranimé mes esprits abattus" (II.v.508,510)). But the sight of "sa douceur, son air noble et modeste" is suddenly reversed again into the unexpected violence of this innocent child wielding a knife, "un homicide acier, / Que le traître en mon sein a plongé tout entière" (II.v.512-14).

After the violence of her dream, with its shocking double reversal, Athalie then recounts her own version of first seeing Joas in the temple. The memory of the strange combination of nightmare and innocence rushes back to her as she sees Joas for the first time next to her enemy the high priest Joad. The queen is left stunned and overwhelmed by the boy she had seen in her dream. Her words emphasize how shocking this sight is to her. She repeats the word "même" four times in a few lines,

> J'ai vu ce même enfant dont je suis menacée […]
> Je l'ai vu. Son même air, son même habit de lin,
> Sa démarche, ses yeux, et tous ses traits enfin.
> C'est lui-même (II.v.535-39).

We know from Zacharie's previous account of this encounter that Athalie experienced a sudden inability to speak.[78] This is the same shocked silence Racine had used for Ériphile when she sees her captor Achille, and Phèdre when she first lays eyes on the object of her criminal love, Hippolyte. Indeed, Athalie's line "Je l'ai vu" recalls the "Je le vis" of both Ériphile and Phèdre's experiences of seeing the objects of their affection, and their resulting stunned silence.[79]

[78] Zacharie recounts, "Mais sa langue en sa bouche à l'instant s'est glacée" (II.ii.411).
[79] Ériphile lines are "Je le vis. Son aspect n'avait rien de farouche. / Je sentis le reproche expirer dans ma bouche" (II.i.497-98). Phèdre's reaction is similar,

Racine gives us two different accounts on this scene of initial meeting between Athalie and Joas. But both Zacharie and Athalie's accounts are related via a vivid verbal description, or *hypotyposis*, allowing the spectator to "see" it from different perspectives. By doubling this vision, Racine is in a sense amplifying the effect Joas has on Athalie, and is thus increasing spectator curiosity about this mysterious child.[80]

But who is this child? The first time we see Joas on stage is when he and Athalie meet face-to-face.[81] Athalie can sense that this is indeed "un Enfant tout extraordinaire," as Racine describes him in the preface (*OC* 1011). The boy's mysterious identity, compounded by Athalie's horrible nightmare, causes her to exclaim, "Ô ciel! plus j'examine et plus je le regarde, / C'est lui. D'horreur encor [sic] tous mes sens sont saisis" (II.vii.620-21). She proceeds to question him in a strange kind of catechism for the secret to his identity, his very lack of roots fueling her curiosity and

Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue.
Un trouble s'éleva dans mon âme éperdue.
Mes yeux ne voyaient plus, je ne pouvais parler (I.iii.273-275).

[80] Connors credits Houdar de la Motte with being the first "to place a child on stage at the *Comédie Française*, drawing in the emotional attention of both the characters and the audience" with his play *Inés de Castro* in 1723 (187). Connors describes the emotional *dénouement* of La Motte's play which occurs when the King chooses to allow his son to legitimately marry a woman of low birth after he sees their beautiful if illegitimate children, his grandchildren. This ethical course of action is "triggered by a 'non-linguistic' emotional event" of seeing and feeling affection for his grandchildren (187). However, Racine's *Athalie* had placed the child Joas on stage to great emotional effect well before La Motte. Although *Athalie*'s first performances were private affairs, its first public performance was a great success in 1716 at the *Comédie Française*. A few months later, at the Tuileries, its performance provoked, "l'attendrissement de l'assistance, frappée par la proximité de l'âge de Joas et de Louis XV – Louis XV, "précieux reste" de la descendance de Louis XIV après les morts prématurées de son grand-père, le "grand dauphin" et de son père le duc de Bourgognee" (Forestier, "Notice d'*Athalie*" 1717). We could add to this, that although the performances of *Esther* were not officially public, its courtly spectatorship was numerous enough to acknowledge its unprecedented success. Racine himself remarks, "A dire vrai, je ne pensais guère que la chose dût être aussi public qu'elle l'a été" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Esther*" *946*). Forestier suggests that the success of *Esther* was due more to the nubile bodies of young girls singing and performing on stage than to the quality of the play itself, particularly since once Esther was performed publicly, its success was limited ("Notice d'*Esther*" 1680). This may have been the case, but I believe that Esther's later lack of public success might also be due to its having been stripped of its choral sections, which I will address later.

[81] Forestier notes that in this scene, Racine creates a kind of hybrid between the biblical character Joas and Euripides' Ion, who was abandoned by his mother to be devoured by beasts, a fate alluded to in Joas' line that he was abandoned by his parents "Parmi les loups cruels prêts à me dévorer" (II.vii.642). See Forestier "Notes d'*Esther*" 1039. Racine structures Joas' interaction with Athalie in a similar way to Ion's interaction with his mother Créüse. But considering that the biblical character never met Athalie, this interaction clearly leans more heavily on Euripides than on the biblical narrative. See also Stone, "Marking Time."

increasing her attraction to him.[82] She "allows herself to be beguiled by this presumably orphaned prodigy" (Muratore "Racine's Athalie" 188). Joas answers every question with the readiness of one "instruit de bonne heure dans tous les devoirs de la Religion et de la royauté" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Athalie*" 1011). His precocious answers charm Athalie, and she pauses her barrage of questions to wonder at herself,

> Quel prodige nouveau me trouble et m'embarrasse?
> La douceur de sa voix, son enfance, sa grâce,
> Font insensiblement à mon inimitié
> Succéder... Je serais sensible à la pitié? (II.vii.651-54).

Joas troubles and moves Athalie to a sense of pity with his childlike "grâce." Mathan later confirms the unusual effect that Joas has had on Athalie, an effect that has transformed her "grande âme" into a person who instead waffles in her decisions ("elle flotte, elle hésite") (III.iii.876). Mathan attributes Athalie's indecisiveness to "l'enfant" in whom she has seen "je ne sais quel charme" (III.iii.884). Like Esther whose charms moved Assuérus' heart to pity for the plight of her people, Joas seems capable of altering Athalie's violent nature. Mathan acknowledges that she is changed ("J'ai trouvé son courroux chancelant, incertain") and fears that she is considering setting aside her vendetta for vengeance ("remettant sa vengeance à demain") (III.iii.885-86). But Elie, the prophet who denounced the sins of Achab and Jézabel, also prophesied that their daughter would meet the same bloody end as her infamous parents. Thus, despite Joas' innocence, Athalie cannot be redeemed by him, and the hint Mathan gives of this possibility of redemption makes Athalie's end that much more tragic.[83]

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[82] It is remarkable how many times the word "secret" is connected to Joas. Salomith and Zacharie both use it as a euphemistic name when the first asks, "Ce secret au dehors est-il aussi semé?" and the second responds "Ce secret dans le Temple est encore renfermé" (V.i.1529-30). Bouhours' ideal of secrecy is carried out by Esther, but becomes Joas' very identity. There is a certain element of the divine in secrecy as well, and "mystery reveals God's intentions" (Woshinsky, "Biblical Discourse" 20). As Pascal writes "Dieu s'est voulu caché" (*OC*, *Pensées 598* 1277).

[83] Butler describes Athalie as "a human being, all too vulnerably human, whose resistance is being sapped from within" (92).

The moment when Athalie recognizes Joas as both her the grandchild and the legitimate king is stunning in how it collides Aristotelean *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, and biblical revelation.[84] Joas is revealed as the true king of Juda, descended from David's line, and chosen by God to rule. This revelation is made as Joad proclaims, "Soldats du Dieu vivant, défendez votre roi" (V.v.1730). A rare stage direction at this moment indicates, "Ici le fond du Théâtre s'ouvre. On voit le dedans du Temple" (*OC* 1081).[85] Most likely this would have been carried out by a curtain being drawn back with a theatrical machine to reveal Joas on a throne.[86]

Normally, Racine related such *merveilleux* moments with a verbal *récit*. But since the revelation of Joas as king is more of a political one than an overtly supernatural one,[87] Racine feels free to show this moment in a physical, mechanical revealing. The visible immediacy of this revelation gives the spectator the opportunity to see Athalie's reaction. In a stunning moment of Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, Athalie recognizes Joas' true identity, and understands her own impending destruction in a violent peripeteia of the fate she intended for the boy.

Athalie's exclamation reveals the power of this moment of recognition and reversal. Her line, "Où suis-je? Ô trahison! Ô reine infortunée!" (V.v.1731) brilliantly combines the existential angst in Hermione's "Où suis-je" (V.i.1401), the power of the biblical quotation, "Trahison!

[84] Haley remarks that *Athalie*'s preface is one of only two times that Racine alludes to Aristotle's *peripeteia* ("Peripeteia and Recognition" 427).

[85] Seventeenth-century stage directions were normally implicit in the text, and it was rare that such an explicit call to action would be included. See Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder*.

[86] This revelation of the inner temple may also be an allusion to the moment of Christ's death when the curtain concealing the Holy of Holies was ripped in two and revealed the sacred space. Sacy's translation renders this as "En même temps, le voile du temple se déchira en deux depuis le haut jusqu'en bas: la terre trembla: les pierres se fendirent: les sépulcres s'ouvrirent; et plusieurs corps des saints, qui étaient dans le sommeil *de la mort,* ressuscitèrent" (t.9, 133-34). However, this revelation of Joas is not the final and truest revelation, and Muratore reminds us that "we know that […] Joas will fail to keep the messianic promise" ("Racine's *Athalie*" 191). See Todd for other ways Joas fits the typology of Christ.

[87] Although in Joad's mind, this moment is primarily theological since it reveals Joas as the incarnate promise of God to safeguard the line of David.

Trahison!" and the pathos of Bérénice's "Princesse infortunée!" (IV.v.1068).[88] But Athalie was fated to share in her parents' damnation, and like Ériphile, Athalie quickly rises to meet that fate. Any pathos we heard in her existential cry is erased by her final curse of Joas, along with any hope that the *enfant merveilleux* might transform her with his "grâce" and save her as Esther had done for Assuérus. Like Corneille's sublime character Cléopâtre in *Rodogune* who calls down a curse on her own offspring,[89] Athalie's prophecy rings loud and clear,

> Fidèle au sang d'Achab, qu'il a reçu de moi
> On verra de David l'héritier détestable
> Abolir tes honneurs, profaner ton autel,
> Et venger Athalie, Achab, et Jézabel (V.vi.1787-90).[90]

Athalie's curse effectively prolongs her existence by reaching into Joas' future, poisoning his blood with her own corrupt "sang" and manipulating him to evil. We know Athalie's curse will be effective because we have the end of the story, both in the narrative of Scripture and through Racine's creation of Joad's prophetic vision.

Athalie is not the only one on whom Joas has or will have an inexplicable effect. Joad assures Josabeth that Joas' intrinsic noble qualities will affect all those who see him, "Joas les touchera par sa noble pudeur, / Où semble de son sang reluire la splendeur" (I.ii.273-4). Similarly, Mathan is surprised by Josabeth's love of Joas, and he comes dangerously close to guessing the boy's identity when he says,

> Quel est cet autre enfant si cher à votre amour?
> Ce grand attachement me surprend à mon tour.
> Est-ce un trésor pour vous si précieux, si rare?
> Est-ce un libérateur que le ciel vous prépare? (III.iv.993-96).

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[88] See Campbell, *Questioning*, and Forestier, "Notice d'*Athalie*" for analyses of Hermione's line and the biblical quotation respectively.

[89] Cléopâtre curses her son and his new wife, Rodogune, wishing that her presence would continue to haunt them in their son, "Puisse naître de vous un fils qui me ressemble" (V.iv.1824).

[90] Contemporaries Bossuet and Sacy had already compared the biblical Athalie to "une autre Médée" and to Corneille's Cléopâtre, because of her willingness to kill her own offspring for political motives (Forestier, "Notice d'*Athalie*" 1711).

Finally, when Joad reveals Joas' identity to him, the great leader and high priest prostrates himself at the feet of the child. The shock and confusion of the spectators at Joad's remarkable and unorthodox behavior is mirrored in Joas' question, "Mon père, en quel état vous vois-je devant moi?" (IV.iii.1291). Once again, Racine uses an unexpected theatrical posture to underscore the importance the effect a sublime character has on another.

The pathos of a father's sacrifice of his child was so effective in *Iphigénie* and *Esther*, it is not surprising that Racine repeats this trope in *Athalie* with an even younger and more innocent child. In *Athalie*'s preface, Racine writes "la montagne sur laquelle le temple fut bâti était la même montagne où Abraham avait autrefois offert en sacrifice son fils Isaac" (*OC* 1010). This allusion to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac on the temple mount is not accidental. The entire plot of *Athalie* centers on Joad's willingness to sacrifice Joas, the child he raised from infancy in the temple, for his own political and religious ends.[91] Joad uses the story of Abraham and Isaac to exhort Josabeth to overcome her fear of Joas' potential death.

> N'êtes-vous pas ici sur la montagne sainte,
> Où le père des Juifs sur son fils innocent,
> Leva sans murmurer un bras obéissant,
> Et mit sur un bûcher ce fruit de sa vieillesse,
> Laissant à Dieu le soin d'accomplir sa promesse,
> Et lui sacrifiant avec ce fils aimé (IV.v.1437-1443).

Joas himself, in a moment of remarkable lucidity for such a young child, recognizes that Josabeth's tears are indicative of greater forces at play. He asks her why she is weeping and touches upon the truth,

> Princesse, vous pleurez! Quelle pitié vous touche?
> Est-ce qu'en holocauste aujourd'hui présenté
> Je dois, comme autrefois la fille de Jephté,

[91] See Greenberg, *From Ancient Myth* for a discussion on Joad's political machinations.

Du Seigneur par ma mort apaiser la colère? (IV.i.1258-61).[92]

The story of Jepthé's daughter is the antithesis of Abraham's holocaust of Isaac. Unlike Abraham, God did not ask Jepthé to sacrifice his child as a test of faith. And unlike Isaac, Jephté's daughter actually died by her father's hand. By connecting himself to Jepthé's daughter, Joas is confirming Josabeth's greatest fear, that he will die as a sacrifice for the glory of God. However, Joas, like Iphigénie and Esther before him, courageously faces his death. When Joad asks him if he is able to pay the debt of his life to God, Joas answers, "Je me sens prêt, s'il veut, de lui donner ma vie" (IV.ii.1274).[93] Joas too is willing to die, sacrificed for the glory of God.[94]

In Iphigénie, Racine had built tension with ambiguous language, using words like "cérémonie" and "flamme" to refer either to marriage or to sacrifice (L. Norman, "Iphigenia" 273).[95] Likewise, much of the language regarding Joas dances around ambiguous words like "offrir" and "consacrer," which could simultaneously mean dedication or sacrifice. For instance, the moment Joad declares his intent for Joas to overthrow Athalie, he says "Je vais l'offrir au Dieu, par qui règnent les rois" (I.ii.178). All of Joad's other uses of this verb refer to the offering of incense and animal sacrifices. Similarly, Mathan describes Joas as "Un enfant qu'à son Dieu Joad a consacré" (III.iii.906). The moment of Aristotelian *peripeteia* at the end of the play thus becomes even more powerful when Joas, who has been surrounded by this sacrificial language throughout the play, is saved, and Athalie becomes the sacrificial victim instead. The irony is that Joas had

[92] Joas' line echoes both Agamemnon when he tells Iphigénie that her death is required because "La colère des dieux demande une victime" and Iphigénie's later resolution "Aegine, il faut des dieux apaiser la colère" (v.1222, 1494).
[93] This scene between Joas and Joad is an interesting counterpoint to Athalie's earlier encounter with Joas. Joad also asks Joas questions that have an oddly catechistic feel. Joas, once again, answers every question correctly, as behooves a boy raised "dès la mamelle" on God's word (*OC*, "Préface d'*Athalie*" 1011). Joad's final test of Joas is to asks if he will imitate the wicked kings of Athalie's line, kings like "L'infidèle Joram, l'impie Ochosias" (IV.ii.1288). Joas answers in condemnation of all who are like these kings, "Puisse périr comme eux quiconque leur ressemble" (IV.ii.1290). Joad then falls reverently at the feet of the young king. But there is a twist of irony in Joas' answer, since, as the spectator knows because of Joad's previous vision, Joas will exactly imitate Joram and Ochosias, and is thus condemning himself with his own words to suffer their fate.
[94] See Morel, "Des Tragédies profanes" and Miles "Eternal Triangle."
[95] See also Desnain, "At the Altar."

been raised in the temple as a potential sacrifice, but Athalie must be taken out of the temple to complete her sacrifice in order that by her blood "la sainteté n'en soit point profanée" (V.vi.1792).

Sublime Chorus

In the 1713 edition of his *Art Poétique*, Boileau annotates his line "le violon tient lieu de chœur et de musique" with an author's note which declares, "*Esther* et *Athalie* ont montré combien on a perdu en supprimant les Chœurs et la music" (*OC* 996). Racine's introduction of a chorus in both *Esther* and *Athalie*, allows him to play with a new theatrical element, his version of the ancient Greek chorus. At first, Racine justifies his choice by saying it was required by his patroness, Madame de Maintenon. But it soon becomes the means by which Racine plans on implementing an oft-recurring idea, "qui était de lier, comme dans les anciennes Tragédies Grecques, le Chœur et le Chant avec l'Action" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Esther*" 946). But Racine does more than simply reuse an ancient trope; the chorus becomes another way he experiments with an aspect of the Longinian sublime.

In the *Traité du Sublime*, there is a curious moment when Longinus discusses the capacity of music to "élever le courage" and "émouvoir les passions" (*OC* 394). He speaks of this power "dans les instruments même inanimés," but acknowledges that instruments are "des images et de simples imitations de la voix" and "des sons bâtards" (*OC* 394). Instead he emphasizes that natural human discourse is greater than music because its compositions and harmonies are effective not only at moving the passions, but also the mind.

> [Le discours] ne frappe pas simplement l'oreille, mais l'esprit, […et] remue tout à la fois tant de différentes sortes de noms, de pensées, de choses, tant de beautés, et d'élégances avec lesquelles notre âme a comme une espèce de liaison et d'affinité; qui par le mélange et la diversité de sons insinue dans les esprits, inspire à ceux qui écoutent les passions mêmes de l'Orateur, et qui bâtit sur ce

> sublime amas de paroles, ce Grand et ce Merveilleux que nous cherchons? (*OC*, *Traité* 394).

Indeed, Longinus seems to denigrate songs that don't prioritize the harmonies of language over those of music.[96] He complains that singers often ignore the natural cadence of words, and are instead "entrainés par le chant," thus reversing what he considers an important hierarchy (*OC* 396). Singers are allowing the purely sensorial music to guide them instead of the rational beauty of discourse, and Longinus claims that singers who prioritize the music stop at awkward, strange, and even unreasonable places in the song. Songs that subjugate discourse to music also lack something vital because their "paroles mesurées n'inspirent point à l'esprit les passions qui doivent naître du discours, et impriment seulement dans l'oreille le mouvement de la cadence" (*OC* 396).

In the preface to *Esther*, Racine credits the composer Moreau for his part in making *Esther* successful.[97] However, Racine also emphasizes that Moreau's music is beautiful because of its ability to pair perfectly with the words of his play, "on n'a point entendu d'airs plus touchants, ni plus convenables aux paroles" (*OC* 947). Racine is thus carefully creating the same hierarchy as Longinus; he is subjugating music, which affects the passions, to the harmony and composition of human discourse, which affects the mind. Racine wanted the focus to remain on the discourse of his choruses rather than the music. The music could and should complement the words, but it must not surpass them.[98] This was a contrary practice to Lully and Quinault's collaborations. Lully first

[96] Méchoulan and Bishop note that Aristotle's *Politics* emphasizes the importance of language, and he distinguishes between the voice alone (*phone*) which is also found in other animals, and *logos*, which is the power of organized speech. *Phone* communicates emotion through sound while *logos* carries reason through ordered language. See pp. 89-90.

[97] Incidentally, Racine doesn't mention Moreau at all in the preface to *Athalie* despite the composer also writing the music for this play. Perhaps this is due to the chorus in *Athalie* having a much smaller role than in *Esther*, while simultaneously having more spoken lines.

[98] Racine's hierarchy seems to have held well. Dubu points out that even by 1716, Moreau's music was considered outdated, and that the *Comédie Française* commissioned new music to be composed to accompany Racine's choruses. It continues to be the tradition at the *Comédie Française* that new music is composed for *Esther* and *Athalie* whenever they are performed (*Églises* 169). Thus, the important thing is that music accompanies Racine's chorus, but it doesn't matter what that music is.

composed the music, and Quinault then wrote his libretti to conform to the cadence and rhythm of Lully's musical airs.[99]

Throughout his career, well before the advent of the chorus in *Esther* and *Athalie*, Racine had paid close attention to the way his poetry sounded. He was known to speak lines aloud as he composed them, in order to ensure that they were properly harmonious and moving. He also trained his actresses, including the young women of Saint Cyr, in the proper declamation of their lines.[100] Thus, when he writes in the preface of *Esther* that his choral music is "convenables aux paroles," Racine is emphasizing that his poetry is already able to move his spectators (*OC* 947). But with the added sensory power of music, he ensures that the passions are moved as much as "l'esprit." Longinus' hierarchy of discourse and music offers Racine a means to create poetry that reaches the heights of transcendent, even sacred, emotion, a kind of "holy passion" (Gilby, "Emotions" 71).[101] As mentioned above, a large percentage of the choral passages are not Racine's own creation, but are quoted from Sacy's translation of the Old Testament.[102] By quoting Scripture for the passages that are accompanied by music, Racine is bolstering the legitimacy of the chorus' music by using words that are, in a sense, authored by God.

Before we consider what Racine is doing with the chorus in *Esther* and *Athalie*, it is important to establish what he is not doing. Citing Dangeau's claim that, "Racine […] fait un opéra dont le sujet est Esther et Assuérus," McGowan claims that Racine's *Esther* (and *Athalie*) drew

[99] Anthony notes that Boileau disdained the weak composition of Quinault's verse in the *Art Poétique*, saying that it was precisely because of its weakness that Quinault needed Lully's music to bolster his work (69).
[100] See Forestier, "Notice d'*Esther,*" and Chaouche, *L'Art du comédien*.
[101] According to Doran "the sublime can mediate between secular and religious attitudes" (*Theory of the Sublime* 7). Similarly, Connors notes that Nicole and Bossuet both took issue with theater because it created powerful emotions that they believed were best reserved for religious purposes. Bossuet considers both music and spectacle dangerous, "pendant qu'on est enchanté par la douceur de la mélodie ou étourdi par le merveilleux du spectacle, ces sentiments s'insinuent sans qu'on y pense et plaisent sans être aperçus" (*Œuvres complètes de Bossuet*, xvii, p. 21, quoted in Connors 183).
[102] However, Racine did smooth or rearrange Sacy's passages according to his own poetic and theatrical instinct.

significant inspiration from the genre of opera ("Sublime Effects" 11). However, with these plays, Racine is not intending to create an opera, and in fact opposes himself to it in significant and important ways. For instance, in the same journal entry that McGowan cites, Dangeau notes that *Esther* will be "chanté et récité par les petites filles de Saint-Cyr" but that "tout ne sera pas en musique" (cited in Forestier, "Notice d'*Esther*" 1673). This is an especially important detail because it highlights that Racine is envisioning something vitally different than Quinault and Lully's *tragédies lyriques*, which were sung in their entirety (B. Norman 12).[103] In contrast, only the choral parts of *Esther* and *Athalie* are set to music (and even in these sections, Racine adds significant spoken portions). Thus, instead of an opera, Racine is creating "une espèce de poème où le chant fût mêlé avec le récit, le tout lié par une action qui rendît la chose plus vive et moins capable d'ennuyer" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Esther*" 946), or what Forestier calls a kind of "anti-opéra" ("Notice d'*Esther*" 1690).

Long before *Esther* and *Athalie*, however, Racine had taken great pains to distinguish his work from Lully and Quinault's opera. In the preface to *Iphigénie*, he criticizes their opera *Alceste* in a number of ways. First, although he doesn't openly connect it to Lully and Quinault's *Alceste*, Racine denigrates the use of machines, a key characteristic of their opera.[104] He elevates instead his own machine-less play, which he claims conforms better to the expectations and beliefs of his audience. "Quelle apparence de dénouer ma tragédie par le secours d'une Déesse et d'une machine

[103] Anthony notes that in the seventeenth century, the word "opéra" was used interchangeably with "tragédie en musique" or "tragédie lyrique" (397). B. Norman acknowledges that although everything in an opera was sung, Quinault used different cadences and metrics for the various parts of an opera. For instance, the *récitatif sec* "consists of a series of notes on the same pitch leading up to a different pitch at the end of the phrase" and was used primarily for conversations between two characters (26). Much more musically diverse were the "récit lyriques" and the arias which showed off a singer's abilities (26).

[104] Machines were an integral part of the creation of the *merveilleux* in opera, which in turn was considered essential for the aesthetic of heroic love and glory upheld by this genre. Indeed, each act contained a *divertissement*, which depicted a supernatural or spectacular action, often complemented by elaborate machines. See B. Norman p. 20-22 for more detail on opera's *divertissements*.

[…] qui serait trop absurde et trop incroyable parmi nous" (*OC* 698). Again, even though he doesn't mention opera or its creators, Racine indirectly critiques the mixing of tragic and lyric genres, another characteristic of Lully and Quinault's works. Although opera based its plots on tragic mythological subjects, its heroes inevitably triumphed over every obstacle, including unrequited love. Operas "exalted heroism and true love," and often ended in a wedding, a trope common to lyrical and pastoral genres (B. Norman 4). Instead of this triumph of glory and love, however, Racine emphasizes the importance of pure tragic emotion in his plays. He writes, "Mes spectateurs ont été émus des mêmes choses qui ont mis autrefois en larmes le plus savant peuple de la Grèce, et qui ont fait dire, qu'entre les poètes, Euripide était extrêmement tragique, c'est à dire qu'il savait merveilleusement exciter la compassion et la terreur, qui sont les véritables effets de la tragédie" (*OC* 699). The dual Aristotelian goals of pity and fear is a subtle put-down of the not-so-tragic endings of Lully and Quinault's works.

Racine turns from this indirect critique of Lully and Quinault, and mentions directly several ways they have woefully misread and misrepresented Euripides.[105] One error is particularly egregious to him, and Racine uses Euripides' chorus to correct their faulty assumptions.

> Ils disent, par exemple, qu'Euripide a fait deux époux surannés d'Admete et d'Alceste, que l'un est un vieux mari, et l'autre une princesse déjà sur l'âge. Euripide a pris soin de leur répondre en un seul vers, où il fait dire par le Chœur, qu' "Alceste toute jeune et dans la première fleur de son âge expire pour son jeune époux (*OC* 701).

[105] Racine at first seems to give them the benefit of the doubt that their misinterpretation of the ancient author is due to "une malheureuse édition d'Euripide" that mismarked the character parts. But his critique becomes stinging when he writes that "En vérité, quand *toutes les autres éditions* où cet Al. n'a point été oublié, ne donneraient pas un démenti au malheureux Imprimeur qui les a trompés" (*OC*, "Préface d'*Iphigénie*" 700, my emphasis). If they chose to use the only edition that contained this error, without checking it against literally any other edition, Lully and Quinault have no one to blame but themselves.

Racine structures his critique by appropriating Euripides to counter Lully and Quinault. His tongue-in-cheek statement, "Euripide a pris soin de leur répondre" almost implies that Euripides knew the opera writers would misinterpret him, preemptively adding the chorus' line to give Racine the means to correct them. There is also a subtext that implies that Lully and Quinault are not doing the chorus in their opera right if they can't even follow Euripides' chorus correctly.

The preface to *Iphigénie* shows that Racine was thinking about the chorus in conjunction with the opera well before *Esther* and *Athalie*. Indeed, Racine admits in the preface to *Esther* that having a chorus as part of his plays been "un dessein qui m'avait souvent passé dans l'esprit" (*OC* 946). However, the way Racine structures the chorus in these two plays is very distinctive from Lully and Quinault's choruses. Unlike the opera's chorus, whose main exchanges happened during the *divertissements* and the *entractes*, Racine's chorus acts as a character that is introduced by other characters before entering the scene.[106] For instance, the first time the chorus enters on stage in *Esther* is at the beginning of the second scene of Act 1. However, Esther calls them at the end of the previous scene, "Venez, venez, mes filles, / Compagnes autrefois de ma captivité / De l'antique Jacob jeune postérité" (I.i.112-14). The chorus responds to her voice, and enters the scene singing their first lines from offstage ("chantant derrière le Théâtre") (*OC, Esther* 956).

To have the chorus heard before they are seen is a fascinating move on Racine's part because it auditorily enlarges the stage, and increases the range he can access in the unity of place. Racine often verbally invoked off scene space by having characters talk onstage about what they did off-stage. This effectively increased the extent of the stage and allowed Racine a means to

[106] In both *Esther* and *Athalie*, but especially in the former, the chorus is a significant character. This is contrary to Goldmann's opinion that the chorus plays a passive role in *Esther* and an active one in *Athalie*. For instance, of the 1286 lines in Forestier's edition of *Esther*, the chorus has 386, almost a third of the total, a quantity that exceeds even Esther's own 311 lines. In *Athalie*, the chorus' part is reduced, but still significant. Of the total 1815 lines, the chorus has 250, more than any other character except Joad (who has 493 lines). Data taken from http://www.theatre-classique.fr.

bypass the rigorous limits of the unity of place.[107] In *Esther*, however, Racine takes this one step further; via the chorus' first lines, Racine creates a link between invisible but audible off-stage space with the visible stage. The chorus' first lines also circumvent the unity of time since the they create "so many ties […] between the past and the present, between the off-stage of the past and the welcoming stage of the now" (Méchoulan and Bishop 91). So, although Racine formally adheres to the neoclassical unities in both *Esther* and *Athalie*, the chorus allows him to sidestep the limitations the unities impose on him.

The members of *Esther's* chorus also enter from several different angles, ("entrant sur la Scène par plusieurs endroits différents") (*OC*, *Esther* 956), thereby creating a dynamic movement that simultaneously highlights the importance of individuals, even as they enter as a collective group. This action anticipates that the chorus will speak throughout the play both as individuals and as a group. Similarly, even though its lines quote heavily from the Hebrew Scriptures, the chorus still communicates its own thoughts and emotions and interacts with other spoken dialogue as any other character would.[108] This is a very different structure from that of the opera's chorus, which in many cases had "no thoughts of its own, merely repeating words previously uttered by its leader" (Gethner, "Roles of the Chorus" 42).

Through the chorus, Racine creates a variety of powerful effects. The chorus reflects and reinforces the emotional reactions of the other characters, thus also acting as a catalyst to increase spectator emotion. Racine also intends the chorus to be a vehicle for truth, both in its use of Scripture, and by lucidly commenting on the actions and motivations of the characters.[109] Lastly,

[107] See Lyons, "The 'Unities' and the Classical Spectator" in *Kingdom of Disorder*.
[108] See Forestier, "Notice d'*Esther*," p. 1689.
[109] Doolittle highlights the importance of a lexicon of light in Racine's choruses, particularly in *Athalie*. Because the chorus is meant to reveal the motivations of other characters, it acts as another kind of theatrical *fiat lux*, shedding light on the human nature around them. See pp. 153-154 especially. See also Brodsky, "Impressions of Movement."

the chorus allows Racine the space to interact with religious *merveilleux* in his theater. One particularly notable example is the vision of Joad in *Athalie*, which is one of the most overt depictions of the *merveilleux* in Racinian tragedy. Racine amplifies the effects of Joad's vision by surrounding and undergirding it with the chorus.[110] In the following section, I will analyze the different effects created by the chorus.

Racine's chorus is an echo chamber that magnifies and crystalizes the feelings of characters on stage, as well as those of the spectators.[111] For instance, the first appearance of the chorus in *Esther* serves to underscore the emotions of loneliness and longing that Esther and Elise have expressed for their homeland as they languish in captivity in Susa. In Esther's first interaction with Elise she acknowledges their long friendship, "de mes premiers ans la compagne assidue […] / m'aidais à soupirer les malheurs de Sion" (I.i.4, 6). When the chorus comes onstage, Esther asks them to join her and Elise in lamenting the loss of their homeland, "De la triste Sion célèbrent les malheurs" (I.ii.131). The chorus echoes Esther's sorrow as they sing, "Déplorable Sion, qu'as-tu fait de ta gloire," and mourn that Sion will remain in their thoughts "jusqu'au dernier soupir" (I.ii.131, 140). Words like "mémoire" and "exilées" are repeated and recall the state of captivity the members of the chorus share with Esther and Elise.

Many of the chorus' lines in this first lament are drawn from Psalm 137, which would have been very familiar to Racine's seventeenth-century spectators.[112] Although Racine deliberately doesn't include the iconic first line of this Psalm since it references Babylon and not Susa, he still wants to invoke the timeless sentiment of sorrow and exile communicated by the Psalm.[113] He

[110] Both Mardochée and Joad have a "religious fervor which makes it possible to show a human character as the mouthpiece of God" but who, unlike Calchas, appear directly onstage (Dubu, "Artistic Reasons" 227).
[111] Interestingly, in this purpose, Racine's chorus parallels one of the functions of the opera's chorus. See Gethner, "Roles of the Chorus."
[112] See Forestier's "Notice d'*Esther*" p. 1696 for a close reading of this Psalm.
[113] In Sacy's translation the first line of this Psalm reads, "Nous nous sommes assis sur le bord des fleuves de Babylone, et là nous avons pleuré, en nous souvenant de Sion" (t. 2 411).

takes the familiar words penned by an anonymous Psalmist singing by the "fleuves de Babylone," and gives them to a chorus of exiled young Jewish girls in Assuérus' palace in Susa. In a sense, the girls are united with the exiled Psalmist, their song becoming a song of "transcendent beauty" which also takes on the "dual nature of the poet's voice – as subject and as vessel for the divine" (Delehanty 11).

Other than its timeless transcendence, however, Racine creates another curious effect by using this Psalm. Since so many of his seventeenth-century spectators were very familiar with this passage, and might have even memorized it, the Psalm allowed them to participate in the drama unfolding before them in a completely unique way. They effectively became part of the chorus, almost as if they themselves knew the actors' lines. Madame de Sévigné's reaction to *Esther* indicates that Racine's intuition was accurate, "tous ces chantes [sic] convenables aux paroles, qui sont tirées des Psaumes ou de la Sagesse et mis dans le sujet, sont d'une beauté qu'on ne soutient pas sans larmes" (*Correspondance*, t. 3, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 21 février 1689," 508).

The chorus is not just an emotionally active presence. They are also a powerful physical presence which "no amount of commentary can convincingly evoke the effect of" (Maskell 57). Throughout much of *Esther*, the chorus is silently standing on stage. This is a calculated move on Racine's part since seventeenth-century theater practice greatly discouraged silent characters. In fact, d'Aubignac states that leaving "plusieurs Acteurs sur le Théâtre sans parole" is bad theatrical form of "très-mauvaise grâce" and the "plus grand défaut au Théâtre" (*Pratique du Théâtre* 238-239). Racine had already broken with this expectation a number of times, experimenting with a silent observing character to great effect with Néron in *Britannicus* and even more so with Ériphile in *Iphigénie*. But in *Esther,* he allows the chorus, a non-trivial group of twenty four people, to

remain silent onstage. This would have created a very striking effect indeed.[114] In *Esther*, the chorus is present for 13 scenes, but they remain silent for 6 of them. In an additional two scenes, an individual member of the chorus reacts to the scene with a single line of spoken (rather than sung) exclamation, amplifying the general emotion of the scene.

The first example of this individual exclamatory line of the chorus comes soon after the revelation Mardochée gives of Aman's nefarious plan. Although the chorus "se retire vers le fond du théâtre," they are still visible and technically still part of the scene. The line is spoken by "une des plus jeunes israélites" in the midst of what is otherwise a dialogue between Esther and her uncle (*OC* 959). Since the original actors of Esther were the students at Saint-Cyr, this meant that the speaker of this line could have been a child as young as seven.[115] A little girl's voice in response to the news that a genocide is being plotted against the Jews increases the pathos of the moment. Her solitary line, "Ciel! Qui nous défendra, si tu ne nous défends?" gives an individual voice to the helplessness and fear elicited in the collective chorus (and by extrapolation, the Jewish people) by the edict (I.iii.183). The rest of the chorus standing silently at the back of the stage creates a vivid physical reminder of the tragic cost of Aman's decree –these young women will all die if Esther refuses to follow her uncle's plea and petition the king.

The second solitary line spoken by a member of the chorus comes after Esther's revelation of Aman's perfidy. The king stupefied at Esther's declaration, exclaims, "Ciel, daigne m'éclairer / Un moment sans témoins cherchons à respiré" (III.iv.1138-39). In echo to the king's wish, a member of the chorus begs, "Vérité, que j'implore, achève de descendre" (III.iv.1141). The chorus stands in silence as Aman implores the queen for mercy and then grovels at her feet. But when Aman reaches out to grasp Esther's knees, the king, as if in answer to the young chorus member's

[114] See Maskell, "On Stage, Off Stage" in *Theatrical Reading*.
[115] See Forestier, "Notice d'*Esther*" p. 1678, note 2.

plea for truth, reenters the scene. He is just in time to see the "vérité" of this egregious act, and immediately condemns Aman to death.[116] The chorus standing witness to Aman's "perfidies" is a catalyst to the king's realization of the truth of who Aman is. Only after this truthful revelation does the king include the Jewish people as part of "mes peuples vengés" by Aman's death.

Racine also uses the chorus to influence spectator emotion in a way that conforms to the hierarchy of the Longinian aesthetic addressed above, namely that Racine prioritizes spoken word over music. Just before the scene where Esther reveals Aman's plans to the king, the chorus watches as Aman passes by offstage and reports to each other (and to the spectator) what they see. Racine divides this scene in two, the first half is a spoken description of Aman using *hypotyposis*, that is a emotive description of events that we, the spectator, cannot see. It crescendos in its intensity, communicating a mental picture of Aman's evil persona to the "esprit" of the spectator. The second half of this scene is sung, but instead of increasing the fear of the first half, the sung portion calms the emotional tone significantly. By reducing the emotion felt in the second half, one gets the feeling that Racine was proving Longinus' point, that well-constructed discourse not only instructs the mind, it can also instill more passion than music.

In the first half of the scene, Aman is passing by offstage to enter into the banquet hall Esther has prepared for him and the king. As spectators, we only know this because the chorus narrates his actions, giving us the ability to "see" what is not visible. This is another example of Racine's use of words to extend the space of the stage beyond its traditional limits. A young woman tells her companion, "C'est Aman" who answers, "C'est lui-même, et j'en frémis, ma sœur / Mon

[116] As the king reenters the scene, his first line is, "Quoi? Le traître sur vous porte ses mains hardies? / Ah! Dans ses yeux confus je lis ses perfidies" (V.vi.1238-39). Since seventeenth-century stage directions were often implicit in the text, these lines imply that Aman was actually physically touching or holding onto Esther. This is another instance of a shocking "incongruous *actio*" since physical contact between the sexes was generally avoided onstage. See Maskell, "Physical Action" in *Theatrical Reading.*

cœur de crainte et d'horreur se resserre" (III.iii.934-35). The language of physical awareness then shifts to psychological lucidity as they describe what emotions and characteristics they see in Aman's face, Elise asks, "Peut-on en le voyant ne le connaître pas? / L'orgueil et le dédain sont peints sur son visage" (III.iii.938-39). By using the universal "on," her rhetorical question invites us to join in her speculation. As if in echo, another young woman acknowledges "On lit dans ses regards sa fureur et sa rage" (III.iii.939-40). The next speaks, with typical Racinian ambiguity, of a possible supernatural, "Je croyais voir marcher la Mort devant ses pas" (III.iii.941). As each young woman makes her observations about Aman, the spectator is invited into the invisible mental and emotional image she conjures.

Throughout *Esther*, Racine often composes the chorus' sung portions of the text in a variety of different meters, reserving the traditional 12-syllable alexandrine for their spoken sections. However, the first half of this scene is remarkable because the chorus' spoken lines also deviate from the alexandrine. They speak in a descending and ascending pattern of syllables beginning with a single line of 12, closing down to 10, and then 8 syllables, then opening back up to 12 for a few lines before closing the syllable count back down to 10 and then 8. This creates a remarkable tension that increases and decreases as the lines shorten and lengthen. At the height of the tension, Elise exclaims, "Je le vois, mes Sœurs, je le vois / À la table d'Esther l'Insolent près du Roi / A déjà pris sa place" (III.iii.947-49). This structure begins with an 8 syllable line where Elise repeats "Je le vois," emphasizing the role she is playing in giving us this verbal sight of Aman. She then opens to a descriptive alexandrine as Aman seats himself near the king at Esther's table. But she ends her description abruptly and unusually with a very short line of 6-syllables. Racine often gave characters 6-syllable lines, but only as an indication of an emotional dialogue. Normally, the first half of an alexandrine would be spoken by one character, and a second character would answer

with the latter half.[117] But here Racine means for this 6-syllable line to stand alone in its intensity, underscoring the finality of Aman's sitting down to Esther's fated table. Elise's observation is followed by the chorus' description of a feast, but not the literal feast set before Esther and her guests. Instead they describe "le sang de l'orphelin" as the wine Aman drinks, and "les pleurs des misérables" as the meat he consumes (III.iii.952).

But suddenly, the emotion of this scene shifts. A chorus member says, "Chères sœurs, suspendez la douleur qui vous presse, / Chantons, on nous l'ordonne, Et que puissent nos chants / du cœur d'Assuérus adoucir la rudesse" (III.iii.955-56).[118] The chorus then begins to sing, but their song takes on a rhythm of hope. The young women sing of the goodness of kings who care for the orphans and widows in their distress, juxtaposing the role of the king who "de l'orphelin il est le père" with Aman's cruel feast (III.iii.996). The chorus then beseeches Assuérus to be one of these kings, to seek the justice of their cause and to turn away from Aman's evil counsel ("Détourne Roi puissant, détourne tes oreilles / de tout conseil barbare et mensonger" (III.iii.1004-05)). In this scene Racine is deliberately contrasting a spoken portion of the chorus that increases negative emotions, with the sung portion that serves to calm the spectator before the intensity of the scene of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* when Esther reveals her identity and Aman's plans to the king.

Although *Athalie*'s chorus also serves to intensify emotions, it plays a different role than *Esther*'s chorus. The chorus in *Esther* is present throughout each of the three acts, whereas Racine structures *Athalie*'s chorus much more like that of ancient Greek tragedy – they end and begin each act. *Athalie*'s chorus is the means to revelation. Their lexicon is one of light, vision, seeing, and revealing. As in *Esther*, they are a silent, observing presence onstage in key moments of

[117] For instance, Racine does this a few lines later when the first half of an alexandrine, "Le sang de l'orphelin," is spoken by one character, and its second half "les pleurs des misérables" is spoken by another (III.iii.952).
[118] This spoken/sung format is also found in *Athalie*, with the spoken parts often given to Racine's *coryphée*, Salomith.

dramatic action. Finally, they allow Racine to introduce the various ways he includes the *merveilleux*, whether that be Joas' effect on Athalie, or Joad's supernatural vision.

The first appearance of *Athalie*'s chorus, at the end of Act 1, sets the stage for Zacharie's *hypotyposis* describing the initial encounter between Joas and Athalie, the moment when the *merveilleux* of Joas' persona strikes Athalie silent. Its role in this first appearance is to recount the history of the engagement of the Jewish people with their God, culminating in the giving of the law by Moses.[119] The chorus describes the law as "charmante" and having a "douceur extrême" (I.iv.348-49). These are the same adjectives which Athalie will soon use to describe Joas in her dream. Racine uses the chorus to set up a verbal parallel between the divine revelation of the law, and the coming revelation of Joas to Athalie.

The second time the chorus arrives on scene is for the final three scenes of act 2. During the first two of these, they are, as in *Esther*, a group of silent observers to the action. They witness the interaction between Athalie and Joas; they see the queen's inexplicable attraction to the boy; and they recognize, along with Athalie, that there is some mystery that shrouds Joas. But they regain their voice in the last scene of the act, and sing their own reaction to Joas. They enquire "Quel astre à nos yeux vient de luire? / Que sera quelque jour cet Enfant merveilleux?" (II.ix.751-52). Their question harkens back to the three moments when Joas has had an inexplicable effect on Athalie: Zacharie's description of Athalie's reaction to Joas in the temple, Athalie's dream of this marvelous child, and finally her own moment of wonder, communicated in an aside, that acknowledges the potential power of Joas to overcome her own intent on killing him through "La douceur de sa voix, son enfance, sa grâce" (II.vii.651). They follow this question by extolling Joas'

[119] This is in keeping with Racine's expressed purpose for the chorus in *Athalie's* preface, "J'ai songé que ces circonstances [de la mémoire de la publication de la loi sur le mont de Sinaï] me fourniraient quelque variété pour les chants du chœur" (*OC* 1012). See Campbell, "The Unity of Time in Athalie."

virtues and comparing him to Old Testament prophets.[120] This section of the chorus' scene ends with a variation of a repeated refrain, "heureux, heureux mille fois / l'enfant que le Seigneur rend docile à ses lois" (II.ix.786-87).

But in the second half of this scene, the tone shifts, and instead of speaking about Joas, the chorus prays to God, lamenting the idolatry and evil that has allowed Athalie to flourish.[121] They condemn

> Ces Malheureux qui de ta Cité sainte
> Ne verront point l'éternelle splendeur
> C'est à nous de chanter, nous, à qui tu révèles
> Tes clartés immortelles (II.ix.828-21).

They repeat themes of splendor, clarity, and revelation, foreshadowing the role they have in revealing truth, and the part they will play in Joad's vision. Finally, the chorus speaks of the coming judgement on Athalie as a horrible dream-become-reality.

> Que leur restera-t-il? Ce qui reste d'un songe
> Dont on a reconnue l'erreur
> À leur réveil, ô réveil plein d'horreur! […]
> Ils boiront dans la coupe affreuse, inépuisable,
> Que tu présenteras au jour de ta fureur
> À toute la race coupable (II.ix.834-836, 839-41).

The chorus ends the scene with three very short lines which allude to Athalie's own terrible dream of the judgment of her family line. They predict that at the revelation of Joas' identity, Athalie will experience all the violent emotional upheaval of her nightmare becoming reality, "Ô réveil plein d'horreur! / Ô songe peu durable! / Ô dangereuse erreur!" (II.ix.842-44).[122]

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[120] Joas is compared both to Elie who stood up to Athalie's mother Jézabel, and to Samuel who was, like Joas, raised from a young age "à l'ombre du Tabernacle" (II.ix.765)

[121] The notion of idolatry is a constantly discussed issue throughout the seventeenth century. See McClure, *The Logic of Idolatry*.

[122] This is also a foreshadow to the identity Lépine gives the chorus, which he calls "le masque biblique des antiques Érinyes" where the chorus invites the public "à maudire avec lui des personnages qui [incarnent] le mal sous toutes ses formes" (30).

The third appearance of the chorus is as a supporting body to one of the most overtly supernatural moments Racine indulges in for his theater. As justification for this theatrical choice, Racine describes Joad's vision in the preface to *Athalie* as "une espèce d'épisode" (*OC* 1013). By this he means the Greek tragic episode (from the words -*epi* and -*ode*) which described an action contained between two songs of the chorus, and not the seventeenth-century notion of episode which meant a secondary (usually amorous) plot connected to the first.[123] Racine is thus implying that the role his chorus will play in Joad's vision corresponds with ancient tragic choric practice. But in order not to offend those who were uncomfortable with mixing pagan and Christian sources, Racine takes great care to openly connect Joad's vision to the custom of Old Testament prophets who would "entrer dans leurs saints transports au son des instruments" (*OC* 1013). Racine also fills Joad's vision with well-known biblical references. He wanted his audience to interpret the vision as a divine revelation that adhered to orthodox theology, and not simply as the deluded ravings of a mad priest.[124]

Although the first lines of Joad's vision take inspiration from the biblical prophet Balaam's formula,[125] they also reflect the language of other sublime moments of Racine's theater. For instance, it recalls the description Ulysse gives of the priest Calchas who "Terrible, et plein du Dieu, qui l'agitait sans doute" declares to the waiting camp of the Greeks "Le Dieu, qui maintenant vous parle par ma voix, / M'explique son Oracle, et m'instruit de son choix" (V.vi.1745,1747-48). His divinely inspired revelation throws the camp into confusion and shakes everyone with "une

[123] See Forestier, "Notice d'*Athalie*" p. 1733.
[124] The Catholic Church had a long history of internal contemplation and visual projection using biblical passages. The word used for this practice in early church writing was "théorien," the Greek word "to speculate or contemplate," a word which shares the same root as theater (Parish 50). But such contemplations had to be based in Scripture and not contradict orthodox theology. Both with Joad's vision, and in other moments of Scriptural reference in his plays, Racine was tapping into this practice. By writing theater that depended heavily on Scriptural quotation, Racine was able to fulfill his goal of writing a play based on a "sujet de piété et de morale" but which would also make "la chose plus vive et moins capable d'ennuyer" (*OC* "Préface d'*Esther*" 946).
[125] See Forestier "Notice d'*Athalie*" p. 1744.

sainte horreur" (V.vi.1784). The verbal formula with which Joad introduces his vision is thus meant to fill the spectator with anticipation for the sublime or supernatural event that is coming, allowing them to participate in the "purely experiential model of the sublime" (Delehanty 95). Joad begins,

> Mais d'où vient que mon cœur frémit d'un saint effroi?
> Est-ce l'Esprit divin qui s'empare de moi?
> C'est lui-même. Il m'échauffe. Il parle. Mes yeux s'ouvrent,
> Et les siècles obscurs devant moi se découvrent (III.vii.1129-1132).

Joad's emphasis on vision prepares the spectator to "see" what he is about to see. Through his verbal injunctions, he creates a kind of scriptural "merveilleux dans le discours" which brings the supernatural moment to the stage (Lépine 25).

After Joad's initial opening, the chorus interjects a short passage, the main imagery of which is drawn from Moses' prophetic vision in Genesis. The chorus thus begins their role in confirming and supporting Joad's exclamation that this vision is from God. [126] Then Joad's vision moves into tragic prophetic revelation: the innocent and *merveilleux* Joas will become as evil as Athalie. He too will resort to idolatry and will kill any who stand in his way. He will even stone to death Zacharie, Joad's own son and Joas' adoptive brother, desecrating the very temple in which Joas was raised.[127]

Joad continues his vision after a short lament of two lines by the chorus in reaction to his awful revelation, He transitions from the tragedy of Zacharie's death into the triumphant coming of Christ, whose advent will reverse all evils. He ends his vision with the line, "la Terre enfante son Sauveur" (III.vii.1174), thus alluding to "the fullness of divine revelation in its testimony to

[126] See Forestier, "Notice d'*Athalie*" p. 1744.
[127] Racine certainly uses the occurrence of Zacharie's death in the Old Testament narrative to build the prophetic events of Joad's vision. But Racine may also have been struck by Bossuet's sparse sentence in the *Histoire universelle* that describes this event, "Zacharie, fils de Joad, est lapidé" (202). Bossuet's observation is very similar to the striking simplicity of the phrases that Boileau considered sublime. It would have been as good an excuse as any for Racine to build a theatrical moment around the emotion of Bossuet's sentence without directly quoting it.

Christ's life" (Delehanty 50). But then Joad abruptly breaks off, coming out of his vision with seemingly no memory of it. He interrupts Josabeth's fearful wonder at his words with a brusque order, "Préparez, Josabeth, le riche diadème" (III.vii.1177). His vision finished, Joad leaves the stage, forging ahead with his political agenda to crown Joas king instead of Athalie.

The chorus is left gasping in the wake of his sudden departure, and spends the next scene in a state of "trouble" and "consternation" where "les différents mouvements" of Joad's vision have thrown it (III.viii.1023). The chorus is wracked with a deep uncertainty and fear which Salomith, as the *coryphée* or leader of the chorus, voices first, "Que de craintes, mes Sœurs, que de troubles mortels!" (III.viii.1187). Another single voice answers Salomith, "dans ce péril, dans ce désordre extrême" (III.viii.1205). The fear continues to spiral as the chorus "répète et amplifie la prophétie de Joad suivant le procédé antique de la stichomythie" (Lépine 26). This is a rhetorical oscillation between two opposing emotions that increases the effects of each. First one chorus member, echoing Joad's proclamation of the destruction of Jerusalem, despairs, "Sion ne sera plus. Une flamme cruelle / Détruira tous ses ornements" (III.viii.1216-17). To which the next replies in hope, recalling Joad's allusion to the coming of Christ, the eternal Word of God incarnate, "Dieu protège Sion. Elle a pour fondements / sa parole éternelle" (III.viii.1218-19). Back and forth from despair to hope, despair to hope, creating "un vertige général qui rappelle curieusement celui qui cherchent à provoquer les plus anciens rituels religieux" (Lépine 26). Until suddenly a voice speaks "Cessons de nous troubler. Notre Dieu quelque jour / Dévoilera ce grand mystère" (III.viii.1226-27). The violent emotion frothed up by the oscillation of alternating lines of hope and despair is calmed as the chorus speaks the final couplet of the scene, "Est-il d'autre bonheur que la tranquille paix / d'un cœur qui t'aime?" (III.viii.1235-36). Like the divine voice speaking light into existence, the chorus speaks into existence the peace they desire to feel.

Whether because of the chorus, the use of Scripture, or the way he portrayed the innocent characters of Esther and Joas, Racine's theatrical and poetic intuition served him well. *Esther* was a resounding success. Although the first performances of *Esther* were given at Saint-Cyr itself, performances were quickly moved to the nearby Versailles, presumably because the palace's theater could accommodate a larger audience. However, attendance remained extremely exclusive, available only through personal invitations by the king and Madame de Maintenon. Many courtiers vied for a place among the selected few who would be allowed to watch the young women of Saint-Cyr perform. For almost a month before she was finally able to secure a spot, Madame de Sévigné mentions *Esther* in nearly every letter she writes. She is excited and greatly anticipates seeing a play in which "Racine s'est surpassé" (*Correspondance*, t. 3, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 7 février 1689," 498). After she finally attends a performance, she writes a remarkable letter to her daughter in which she extols different aspects of the play.

> Je ne puis vous dire l'agrément de cette pièce. C'est une chose qui n'est pas aisée à représenter et qui ne sera jamais imitée; c'est un rapport de la musique, des vers, des chants, des personnes si parfait et si complet qu'on n'y souhaite rien. […] Tout y est simple, tout y est innocent, tout y est sublime et touchant (*Correspondance*, t. 3, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 21 février 1689," 508).[128]

Not only is Madame de Sévigné impressed by the discours ("des vers") and musical elements ("la musique," "des chants") of *Esther*, she also sees touching, innocent, and sublime beauty in the "personnes" represented. But there is a curious ambiguity to this word; it could refer either to the

[128] Before this letter, the language of the Longinian sublime is present whenever Madame de Sévigné speaks of *Esther*. Thus, "Monsieur le Chevalier est ravi et transporté d'*Esther*" (*Correspondance,* t.3, 497); "La sainte Écriture est suivie exactement dans cette pièce; tout est beau, tout est grand, tout est traité avec dignité" (*Correspondance,* t.3, 498); "Mme de Chaulnes et Mme de Coulanges […] sont ravies d'Esther" (*Correspondance,* t.3, 505). Even after she sees the play, Madame de Sévigné continues to mention *Esther*. When her daughter finally receives a written copy of the play, Madame de Sévigné reports that a certain M. de la Feuillade opines that *Esther* is "une requête civile contre l'approbation publique." She tells her daughter "Pour moi, je ne réponds que de l'agrément du spectacle, qui ne peut pas être contesté" (*Correspondance,* t.3, 537). Madame de Sévigné thus echoes Boileau's judgement that a sublime work stands against bad opinion, that the "agrément" of the play speaks for itself.

young women acting or to the fictional characters they are representing. For instance, the striking *grâce* and beauty of Esther was so well interpreted by Madame de Caylus, the young woman who played the principal role, that Madame de Sévigné describes this young actress as more talented than Champmeslé, the famous actress who played many of Racine's main female characters.[129] Madame de Sévigné is also struck by the powerful beauty of the "personnes" of the chorus. The young girls interpreted the role of the chorus, both its beautiful singing and silent observation, so well that Madame de Sévigné writes that the "chants [sont] convenables aux paroles," describing them as "d'une beauté qu'on ne soutient pas sans larmes" (*Correspondance,* t. 3, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 21 février 1689," 508). Her emotional reaction is such that she is likely one of the "connaisseurs" Racine is referring to in *Esther*'s preface when he writes that "Tous les connaisseurs demeurent d'accord que depuis longtemps on n'a point entendu d'airs plus touchants ni plus convenables aux paroles" (*OC* 947). Madame de Sévigné had given Racine the excuse he needed to establish the Longinian hierarchy between word and music, and he borrows her phrase to emphasize how vital it is that *Esther*'s music is second to its words.

Perhaps because of the powerful emotional allure created in these elements, the performances of *Esther* engendered "quelques désordres sentimentaux" between "certaines des 'actrices' et des jeunes seigneurs de la Cour" (Forestier, "Notice d'*Esther*" 1680-81). Madame de Maintenon was scandalized with this disorder and put an end to public staging. Indeed, *Esther* was not performed again for a public outside of the confines of Saint-Cyr until 1721, several years after her death. When it was performed, the choral portions were amputated except for a very occasional line. The result left the audience cold and indifferent. Indeed after seeing a performance of *Esther*,

[129] "Mme de Caylus fait Esther, qui fait mieux que la Champmeslé" (*Correspondance*, t. 3, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 28 janvier 1689," 488).

presumably without its full choral glory,[130] Voltaire writes scathingly that the play was, "sans intrigue, sans action, sans intérêt [et elle] déplut beaucoup à quiconque avait du sens et du goût" (cited in *OC*, ed. Picard 809). Considering how important the chorus was in establishing and reinforcing the emotional narrative, the reaction to such an amputation is not unreasonable.[131]

Although Madame de Sévigné anticipates another biblical play by Racine, and writes that "Racine va travailler à une autre tragédie, le roi y a pris goût, on ne verra autre chose" (*Correspondance,* t.3, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 28 février 1689," 520), *Esther* had proved too popular. The now pious king and Madame de Maintenon realized they couldn't comfortably acquiesce to the public performance of a second such play by the girls at Saint-Cyr. The school's pedagogical and sacred purpose might be further undermined by the unholy eyes of young courtiers gazing at the girls playing the characters. Thus, *Athalie*, although completed in 1691, was not permitted to be publicly performed and was only shown to the king and a small select audience "in a private ceremony with no costumes or stage scenery" (Kennedy 116). Even so, Boileau "acclaimed [*Athalie*] as Racine's masterpiece" (Fowlie 399). When it was finally performed at the *Comédie Française* in 1716, after the death of Louis XIV, *Athalie* quickly became the most the regularly played of Racine's works through the 18th century with the most constant success.[132] Voltaire's perception of *Athalie* was very different from his view of *Esther*. In his opinion, *Athalie* was worthy of Racine, who alone among all poets could write such a, "chef d'œuvre de

[130] I couldn't find documentation for which performance Voltaire would have seen, but it was likely the one in 1721 since Forestier writes that after this, the public "se persuada vite qu'Esther était surtout une pièce bonne pour la lecture, et nul ne se risqua plus à la représenter avant le XIXe siècle – si ce n'est dans l'intimité de la maison de Saint-Cyr" ("Notice d'*Esther*" 1681).

[131] As noted above, *Esther* was not played performed with the chorus until the 19th century when it again became a favored play, particularly among the Romantics. For Racine's influence on the Romantics see Sayer, *Racine*, and Parker, *Romantic Tragedies*.

[132] See Dupêcher for the statistics of the performances of Racine's plays at the Comédie Française from 1680-1774.

l'éloquence" and whose language was "toujours pure, toujours naturelle et auguste, souvent sublime" (cited in Dupêcher 194).

Conclusion

In 1694, Pierre Bardou, prieur of Voux, writes admiringly of Racine,

> [...] Tu voulus, dans les vers & Esther et & Athalie
> Donner un nouveau lustre à la scène avilie;
> Et par toi, dans Saint-Cyr, le théâtre ennobli
> Offre du vrai Sublime un modèle accompli. […]
> C'est dans ces vers sacrés, mêlés de symphonie,
> Qu'il sied bien aux auteurs d'exercer leur génie (cited in Picard, *Nouveau Corpus Racinianum* 338)

Although Racine searched for ways to create this "vrai Sublime" in all of his plays, *Esther* and *Athalie* offered him a particularly unique opportunity to do so. Despite the concerns of Boileau and others that the sublime material of the Bible would not make good theater, Racine intertwined "les Écritures" and "la manière sublime dont elles […] sont énoncées," with his own theatrical savvy. The result were plays that many, including Madame de Sévigné considered "merveilles" and that left the audience "au-dessus des paroles" (*Correspondance,* t. 3, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 21 février 1689," 508). After *Iphigénie*'s success, Racine understood the power of pathos created when an innocent child was doomed to sacrifice, and he repeated this trope in the storyline of Esther and Joas. But he also added elements of the social sublime, including Dominique Bouhours' *je ne sais quoi* that charmed and allured inexplicably. Racine created a theatrical tension that juxtaposed on one hand the physical beauty of these two characters and their ability to transform the minds and hearts of their interlocutors, and on the other, the future horror and violent havoc each one will wreak that compromises their perfection. Finally, in *Esther* and *Athalie* Racine

imagines the chorus as the means to portray the voice God gave his people.[133] The chorus' lines constantly draw on Old Testament passages, highlighting moments of divine interaction in the drama of Scripture. Racine The chorus becomes the mirror in which the spectator, moved by the music and ancient choric techniques, experiences the crystalized emotions of theater.

[133] Bossuet in the *Histoire universelle*, says that all throughout their history, God gave his people a voice, "Car Dieu n'a jamais permis que cette voix fût éteinte parmi son peuple" (209).

Conclusion

In January 1675, an anonymous letter to Comte Bussy-Rabutin, one of France's most famous correspondents, describes a curious toy. It is a New Year's present given the king's favorite but illegitimate son, Louis Auguste de Bourbon duc du Maine from his aunt, Madame de Thianges.[1] The toy is a little gilded room, about the size of a table, in which several miniature wax figures create an intriguing tableau. In a tiny armchair sits the four-year-old duc du Maine. He hands some poetry to La Rochefoucauld, author of the *Maximes*, for him to read and judge. Around the armchair hover Louis Auguste's caretaker, Madame Scarron – the future Madame de Maintenon – and two men named M. de Marsillac and M. de Condom (who is none other than the famous preacher, Bossuet). On the other side of the room, the duc's aunt, Madame de Thianges, sits reading poetry with the famous novelist, Madame de Lafayette. On the edge of the room, seven or eight "mauvais poètes" are beaten back by a pitchfork-wielding Boileau aided by Racine. Racine beckons to La Fontaine, possibly from among the enemy poets, to join them. Over the door to the toy room is a sign telling us that this is the "*Chambre Sublime.*" The group of figures, the letter tells us, is called the "cabale sublime" (*Correspondance*, t. 2, Lettre anonyme, 416).

The toy *Chambre* is no longer extant, and no replica or facsimile seems to have been made. It is thus somewhat difficult to determine the artist, but considering that the figures represented are made out of wax, the most likely creator is Antoine Benoist, the royal wax worker. Benoist is most renowned for his wax bust of King Louis XIV created in 1705. However, by 1675, when the toy was given to the little duke, Benoist had already created his exceptional wax representations of the *Cercle*, or key members of the royal court. Courtiers like Bussy-Rabutin, the recipient of the letter,

[1] Louis Auguste was the son of King Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan, the king's mistress from 1667 to 1680, who was sometimes known as the "true queen of France" because of her power and influence in the court. The title of "duc du Maine" had been given to Louis Auguste in 1673 when the king had legitimized him along with his two siblings.

would have recognized each of the figures represented since Benoist specialized in clear and exact likenesses. In fact, as was usual for the creation of miniatures, each person would have posed for his or her own, something that the writer of the letter confirms: "et chacun de ceux qu'elle représente a donné [sa figure]" (Bussy-Rabutin, *Correspondance*, t. 2, Lettre anonyme, 416).

When I read this letter describing the duc du Maine's little toy early in my PhD program, I was thoroughly intrigued. I had begun researching the sublime, and I knew that Boileau's translation of Longinus was generally considered the beginning of the shift toward our modern perception of this aesthetic. But why were these other people included in the toy, particularly the six other authors?[2] The letter was written in early January of 1675, less than a year after Boileau had published his *Traité*, which meant that each of these people already had an important association with the notion of the sublime and with its polemical nature.[3] I decided to begin my research with an investigation into the figures in the *Chambre*.

Racine became the focus my study, both because of his active role in the *Chambre* and because of his well-known collaborative relationship with Boileau. This relationship was the impetus of several directing questions: how did Racine engage with, influence, and deviate from Boileau's theory of the sublime? What evidence from Racine's corpus could be used to show that he envisioned and practiced a theatrical sublime that explored both the discursive and non-discursive aspects of Boileau's aesthetic notion? With these questions in mind, I set about exploring the possibility of Racine as a practitioner of a theatrical sublime.

I decided to start my exploration of Racine's theatrical sublime with *Iphigénie* for three reasons. First, *Iphigénie* had premiered in 1674, the same year as the publication of the *Traité*.

[2] Only Madame de Thianges, the duc's aunt, Madame Scarron, the duc's governess, and M. de Marsillac, La Rochefoucauld's son, were not important literary figures of their day.
[3] The use of the word "sublime," in the title of the toy, *Chambre Sublime*, and the name "cabale sublime" given to the group cements this association.

Secondly, in order to encourage Racine after his disappointment with *Phèdre*, Boileau described *Iphigénie* in *Epître VII* using language very similar to the description of the sublime in the *Traité*. Finally, Racine's engagement with the Longinian sublime in *Iphigénie* is especially clear. Although Racine employed Boileau's discursive notion of the *merveilleux dans le discours* for the final *récit* recounted by Ulysse, Racine's understanding of the sublime in *Iphigénie* is more complex than pure discourse. He explores the sublime through the character of Ériphile, a character whose purpose is to overwhelm, surprise and upend spectator expectations. With her suicide at the end, Ériphile allows Racine to avoid the pagan *merveilleux* of a *deus ex machina*. She also enables him to play with the effect of a silent, observing character, a theatrical device he had employed somewhat in *Britannicus*, but which in *Iphigénie* he used to build emotional tension and create numerous moments of *peripeteia* to reverse Iphigénie's fate. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, as she speaks of her first encounter with Achille, Ériphile paraphrases the ode which Longinus attributes to Sappho. Although Racine recreates this ode more famously in Phèdre's description of her *coup de foudre* for Hippolyte, the fact that Ériphile repurposes the ode first is significant.

However, Racine had already read and engaged with the Longinian sublime well before *Iphigénie*, and even before his literary interaction with Boileau began. Racine's education in the *Petites écoles* of Port Royal schooled him in classical languages and texts, meaning that he would have read Longinus in the original Greek, anteriorly to Boileau's 1674 *Traité*. Indeed, in 1669, Racine paraphrased a passage from Longinus' treatise in the preface to *Britannicus*. Likewise, in the preface to *Bérénice* (1670), Racine engages with Longinus, although not as explicitly as in *Britannicus*. In his treatise, Longinus lists five necessary sources for the creation of sublime: high-mindedness of the author, pathos, figurative language, noble and elegant expression, and excellent

composition of a work. *Bérénice* is Racine's experiment in a play that executes the sublime through a tragic pathos that is communicated by elegant, figurative language with a composition that is remarkably simple, thus fulfilling at least three of Longinus' conditions for the sublime.

In the *Chambre*, Racine beckons to La Fontaine from among the "mauvais poètes" to join him and Boileau (Bussy-Rabutin, *Correspondance*, t. 2, Lettre anonyme, 415). La Fontaine's writing had a certain *je ne sais quoi* about it, according to Boileau's *Dissertation sur Joconde*, a quality which one felt and understood immediately as good writing. La Fontaine was able to produce this kind of excellent writing naturally because he was an *honnête homme*. When Racine entered the literary scene, many authors, including Charles Sorel, Claude Vaugelas, Nicolas Faret, and Dominique Bouhours (whom Racine would later ask for an opinion on *Phèdre*), had written about the importance of *honnêteté* and its synonymous notion, *galanterie*. Likewise, *honnêteté* and *galanterie* were commonly used in theater, particularly in the *tragédies galantes* of Quinault and Thomas Corneille, whose love-motivated heroes and galant language borrowed heavily from popular novels. Pierre Corneille had also used *honnête* and *galant* tropes in some of his plays, including *Polyeucte* and *Œdipe*. But *honnêteté* and *galanterie*, while tolerable for certain genres, were generally frowned upon for serious tragedy. Yet the *honnête homme*, with his authenticity, transparent language, emulation of other *honnêtes gens*, and adaptability was in many ways the personification of the sublime.[4] Racine leaned into the similarities between the sublime and *honnêteté* with *Alexandre le Grand*, placing Alexandre, then often considered the most *honnête* hero from antiquity, at center stage. *Alexandre* was a success, although some critics, like Saint-Évremond gave it mixed reviews since Racine had given what the critic considered frivolous

[4] Knapp explores the personification of the sublime in British literature, but an equivalent study is lacking for French literature.

galanterie to Alexandre who should have been simply a great military hero, unmoved and unmotivated by love of his mistress.

Although *Alexandre* was considered an excellent play which helped propel Racine into the limelight, it was *Andromaque* and *Britannicus* that sealed his reputation. In these two plays, Racine took *honnêteté* and complicated it by bestowing it upon the less-than-virtuous antagonists. Instead of placing *galanterie* in the hands of a virtuous character like Alexandre who would use it for noble and honorable purposes, Racine gave it to Pyrrhus and Néron, whose motivations were far more selfish and even morally corrupt. But the *honnête* tropes and language Racine granted these characters were still meant to conjure certain emotions. Néron, especially, speaks in powerful, figurative imagery that troublingly invites the spectator to participate in his experience of Junie's abduction, and in his subsequent attempts to woo her. Racine's complicated use of *honnêteté* was effective; his critics didn't know how to label Pyrrhus and Néron. Despite Racine's having softened Pyrrhus' "férocité" with *galant* tropes, some still found Pyrrhus too violent toward Andromaque, which an *honnête homme* should not be. Racine justifies Pyrrhus' character as "violent de son naturel," implying that to make Pyrrhus fully *honnête* would be to change him unrealistically (*OC*, "Préface d'*Andromaque*" 197). Similarly, critics were perplexed by Néron and found him both "trop cruel" and "trop bon" (*OC*, "Préface de *Britannicus*" 372). But once again, Racine justifies his character whose use of dishonorable *honnête* and *galant* tropes was so confusing to Racine's critics. Néron as Racine depicts him is at the moment of transition when he is becoming a "monstre naissant;" the moment when the qualities of the "honnête homme" are beginning to deteriorate into something "plus que cruel," (*OC*, "Préface de *Britannicus*" 372). By reinterpreting *honnêteté* through Néron and Pyrrhus, Racine is creating a new and shocking theatrical trope: the *honnête* villain.

One of the people conspicuously absent from the *Chambre* is Pierre Corneille. Corneille was known for his plays whose "divines et sublimes beautés […] nous transportent" and whose "tirades […] font frissonner" (*Correspondance*, t. 2, "Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 16 mars 1672," 459). His pursued an aesthetic of surprise and admiration in the spectator which he considered "quelquefois aussi agréable que la compassion que notre art nous ordonne d'y produire" (*OC,* "Examen de *Nicomède*" 521). But Racine also wanted to produce the "admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise" which occurred in the presence of the sublime (Boileau, *OC*, *Traité* 341). Rather than imitating Corneille's complex plot structures and self-proclaimed *nouveautés*, Racine claimed to follow an aesthetic of simplicity (as he had in *Britannicus* and *Bérénice*) and emphasized *étonnement* instead of *admiration*.[5] Since the mid 1660s, *étonnement* had shifted from the negative connotation given it by Descartes and early dictionaries in which the body was shocked into frozen unresponsiveness due to overwhelming stimulus, to a much more positive and synonymous connection to admiration. Racine used this shift, particularly from *Britannicus* on, and preferred to use *étonnement* instead of *admiration* when characters expressed surprise as a way to distinguish himself from Corneille. One way in which Racine does this is through the *récit*, which, although is extant throughout his corpus, embraced a particular role in *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre*, *Esther*, and *Athalie*. In these plays, the *récit* communicated the theatrical moment which would normally depict the intervention of a divine being in a machine, or a *deus ex machina*, allowing Racine to avoid a visible *merveilleux* and render it internal to the spectator's imagination. This had the double advantage of avoiding machine plays, which Racine proclaimed to dislike in the preface to *Iphigénie*, as well as creating a moment of theatrical *étonnement* in which the spectator was

[5] Racine's claims and his actual practice are not always in harmony. For instance, although *Iphigénie* borrows the most from Longinus' actual text, it is one of Racine's most complicated plots. Whereas *Bérénice* and *Esther* are both much more simple. See Dion, "La Tragédie Simple."

immobilized in their seat as they pictured the recounted events in their heads. However, involving the spectator's imagination in this way allowed them to feel as if they had participated in the moment created by the *récit*, becoming in a sense a creator of the sublime themselves. Or, as Boileau writes in the *Traité*, "tout ce qui est véritablement sublime a cela de propre quand on l'écoute, qu'il élève l'âme, […] *comme si c'était elle qui eût produit les choses qu'elle vient simplement d'entendre*" (*OC* 348, my emphasis).

After his disappointment with the less-than-enthusiastic response with *Phèdre*, Racine took a ten year hiatus from theater. But then the king's morganatic wife, Madame de Maintenon, previously Madame Scarron from the *Chambre*,[6] approached Racine about writing an edifying play for the students of her convent school at Saint-Cyr.[7] Racine proposed the subject of Esther from the Old Testament and decided to include a chorus, both for the purpose of helping the students "apprendre à chanter" but also because the idea of a chorus had "souvent passé dans l'esprit" of Racine (*OC*, "Préface d'*Esther*" 946). But the chorus was a typical characteristic of the *tragédies lyriques*, or opera, which featured gods, goddesses and other *merveilleux* elements enacted by machines, and whose bad theatrics Racine had openly challenged in the preface to *Iphigénie*. The musical elements of *Esther*, and later *Athalie*, provided Racine the opportunity to explore his own version of what he thought the chorus should be. But it also enabled him to experiment with another aspect of the Longinian sublime: excellent composition of spoken parts mixed with the power of music.

But these two plays also consider the religious aspect of the sublime. At the time of *Esther* and *Athalie*'s composition, Boileau was beginning a polemical exchange with the Dutch

[6] Madame Scarron was the long-time caretaker of the seven children born to the king by his mistress Madame de Montespan. Madame Scarron eventually became King Louis XIV's mistress in her own right. After the death of Queen Maria Theresa, the king married Madame Scarron and gave her the title Marquise de Maintenon.
[7] See Grimm, "Esther, Athalie et le double échec."

Theologian Pierre Daniel Huet regarding whether or not the Bible could be considered a sublime text. With his choice of biblical subjects for *Esther* and *Athalie*, Racine seems to be situating himself in this debate. However, while much of the dialogue Racine composed for *Esther* and *Athalie* was quoted from a recent translation of the Old Testament by Lemaître de Sacy, Racine also put his own authorial mark on his plays. He used the stories of Esther and Athalie, but rearranged and smoothed Sacy's translation, and even added onto it from different portions of the Bible, splicing together disconnected lyrical or poetic passages to form his text. In light of this authorial recreation, Racine's bold claim in the preface to *Esther* takes on an interesting significance. He says, "les grandes vérités de l'Écriture, et la manière sublime dont elles y sont énoncées, pour peu qu'on les présente, même imparfaitement, aux yeux des hommes, sont si propres à les frapper" (*OC* 946). One wonders if it is the "vérités" of Scripture, or Racine's poetic rearrangement of them which he considers "sublime."

From early in his career, Racine clearly engaged with the Longinian sublime and was attempting to create effects not only through discourse, but also through the powerful ability of a human body to physically communicate theatrically in a way that produced the same emotions of "admiration, mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise" (Boileau, *OC*, *Traité* 341). For instance, Racine wrote Alexandre's part to include the effect his *honnête* body and ethos would have in overwhelming his enemies with his polite responses to their rudeness. Likewise, Néron's description of Junie's physically absent, but poetically very present body, was meant to overwhelm spectators in their complicit imagination of her. It is as much Bérénice's disheveled demeanor as her elegiac language that communicates the pathos of her distress at Titus' abandonment of her in a moment of "tristesse majestueuse." At the sight of the young, beautiful bodies of the naïvely inexperienced actresses in *Esther*, the court collectively reacted like Madame de Sévigné who

wrote, “Tout y est simple, tout y est innocent, tout y est sublime et touchant” (*Correspondance*, t. 3, “Lettre à Madame de Grignan, 21 février 1689,” 508). Racine’s inclusion of Joas was one of the first moments a child was represented as a character in early-modern tragedy. Joas’ “grâce” which so troubled Athalie was equally meant to evoke deep emotion in the audience at the sight of such a young child on stage threatened by death.

Recognizing Racine as a practitioner of both a discursive and a theatrical sublime permits us to explore the sublime as vital to the development of French neoclassical tragedy. It thus enables us to rethink the genesis in the late seventeenth century of a category so crucial to future Enlightenment and Romantic thought. Indeed, the polemical place Racine holds as a proto-Romantic in the evolution of its aesthetic deserves further exploration.

However, my exploration of Racine’s theatrical practice of the sublime also allows us to reconsider the neoclassical sublime as a generative notion across literary genres in early-modern France. As is evident in the *Chambre*’s little tableau, Racine is but one member of the “cabale sublime.” The larger scope of my project is to explore what role each of the other authors of the *Chambre* play in this important theory. If Racine’s plays allow for a theatrical sublime, how can we consider each of the other authors as a practitioner of the sublime in their own specific genres?

Some, like Bossuet, are already associated with the neoclassical sublime. In his day, Bossuet’s *oraisons funebres* were lauded as exemplary of the sublime style. But the sublime style, as Boileau repeatedly emphasized, is not the same thing as the sublime. Is there room to approach Bossuet from an aesthetic angle, to consider the emotions he conjured in his *oraisons*, sermons, and *panégyriques* as having the same transcendence which Longinus describes in his treatise? What authority does religion hold in aesthetics, particularly a religion like Bossuet’s who feared and limited the more creative and personalized expression of mystics such as Madame Guyon?

At first, La Rochefoucauld, receiving verses from the little duc du Maine, and La Fontaine, being called by Racine, seem a bit harder to connect to the sublime. Neither wrote so-called "serious" genres like tragedy which were often recognized as vehicles for the sublime.[8] However, both authors wrote genres which conform remarkably to Boileau's notion of the discursive sublime, in other words, simple, rhetorically powerful works that communicate truth with an immediacy that "renverse tout comme un foudre" (Boileau, *OC*, *Traité* 342). Indeed, by the creation of the little *Chambre*, La Rochefoucauld was already famous for his *Maximes* and La Fontaine for his *Fables*. The *Maximes* and the *Fables* share many similarities to Bouhours' 1671 discussion of the *devise* in the *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène*. The devise, Bouhours states, is worthy of admiration because it is "une métaphore et une métaphore de proportion, qui représente un objet par un autre avec lequel il a de la ressemblance" (437). The *maxime* and the *fable*, like the *devise*, are examples of *honnête* writing whose condensed structure requires careful crafting which simultaneously appeals to reason and the imagination. The connections I have already drawn between *honnêteté*, and as well as the reputation both La Rochefoucauld and La Fontaine had as *honnêtes hommes*, open the door to exploring the creation of the sublime in these non-traditional genres. After all, Boileau had described La Fontaine's writing as inexplicably beautiful, natural, and naïve, whose beauty could only be felt and not proven in formulaic ways. But the piece that Boileau described thus was La Fontaine's *Joconde*, a comedic and raunchy tale, and seems hardly the candidate for the great and overwhelming sublime. Similarly, La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* cannot be classified as a so-called traditionally "serious" genre, but their powerful lucidity and conciseness portray "the self in the light of the universal, and they

[8] In fact La Fontaine overtly resisted generic limitations in his novel *Les Amours de Psyché et d Cupidon*, in which he had included a discussion on the Longinian sublime. However in this discussion, La Fontaine still defines the sublime as a style rather than as an aesthetic. See *OC, Les Amours de Psychée* pp. 175-185. See also Dandrey, *La Fabrique des Fables*, and Darmon, *Philosophies de la Fable* for more on La Fontaine's poetic approach.

communicate […] the inexorable drift of human existence" (Thweatt 247). Like Racine's tragedies, La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* depict the deterioration of human society caused by *amour-propre*. Despite not employing genres traditionally associated with the sublime, do La Rochefoucauld La Fontaine envision their writing as having the ability move and surprise their readers in much the same way that Boileau describes the sublime as doing?

The last author in the *Chambre* is Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, better known as Madame de Lafayette. At the time of *Chambre*'s creation, she had not yet written her most famous novel, *La Princesse de Clèves* (which wasn't published until 1678), but she was already recognized for two earlier successes, *La Princesse de Monpensier* (1662) and *Zaïde* (1671). In *Zaïde* especially, Lafayette plays with unexpected circumstances meant to surprise readers. Her characters constantly express *étonnement* at what is happening to them. Lafayette also creates what appear to be *merveilleux* circumstances that influence the interactions between characters, but which turn out to be explained by rational means. In the *Discours*, Corneille states, the "réduction de la tragédie au roman est la pierre de touche pour démêler les actions nécessaires d'avec les vraisemblables" (*OC* 837). But in *Zaïde*, Lafayette makes the *merveilleux* the necessary means to create the *vraisemblable*, a curious angle from which to explore the possibility of a novelistic sublime.

In the *Traité*, the sublime is the way by which "les grands Poètes et les Écrivains les plus fameux ont remporté le prix et rempli toute la postérité du bruit de leur gloire" (*OC* 341). Each of these authors in the toy *Chambre Sublime* wrote works that fulfilled this requirement; they are remembered by posterity for their excellent writing. The question now becomes: how do they become part of the larger conversation with more traditional interlocutors like Dennis, Addison, Burke, and Kant? How does the "cabale sublime" become part of the history of the sublime?

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