

The Body and the Senses in Racine's Theatre

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Declaration Of Authorship

I Carolyn Rosen

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

The Body and the Senses in Racine's Theatre

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Abstract

The Body and the Senses in Racine's Theatre

Until now, critics have not made full use of the perceptual awareness with which Racine endows his characters. This particular consciousness lends itself to a study inspired by phenomenology. Racine's characters are fascinating because their language and action speak to the dramatist's sophisticated portrayal of embodied sense experience. I show that Racine uses the senses in an innovative way, and prefiguring modern articulations of the body, sense experience and the world.

My first chapter looks at what Racine's characters see and how they experience love, especially the *coup de foudre*. This 'love at first sight' experience is profoundly destabilising, and significantly impacts upon the entire body.

In my second chapter I examine vision which, for various reasons, has gone wrong through hallucination, deception, premonition, and divine vision. By treating these more unusual forms of vision, I show how Racine plays with and reworks understanding of the senses.

In the third chapter I focus on the sense of touch in the lives of the characters. While one might presume that the stage conventions of Racine's time proved severely restrictive and therefore made sight the most important of the senses, such is not the case. The undeniable influence of these conventions means that the characters feel their own experiences even more powerfully and use tactile language to describe sensations which do not necessarily stem from a literal, physical interaction.

The fourth chapter examines hearing and listening. I address language in the plays, and how verbal communication between characters—as well as the anticipation or absence of that communication— involves their bodies and senses. The presence of the divine in *Esther* and *Athalie* corresponds to a major emphasis on hearing and listening, and this chapter also examines the music of these last two plays.

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INTRODUCTION

*C'est justement mon corps qui perçoit le corps d'autrui et il y trouve comme un prolongement miraculeux de ses propres intentions, une manière familière de traiter le monde; désormais, comme les parties de mon corps forment ensemble un système, le corps d'autrui et le mien sont un seul tout.*¹

Jean Racine's theatre is phenomenal. Part of a holy trinity of early modern French dramatists that includes Corneille and Molière, Racine is nonetheless set apart by the sheer passion evoked by his characters and their dynamic, poetic language. The power of his deceptively simple vocabulary and the beautiful rhythm of the alexandrine verse combine in plays that are still performed after more than three centuries. However, scholarship on Racine tends to focus on a reading of the text as literature. This produces readings which contribute to a greater understanding of historical context, language, and poetry. What critics have missed, though, is the embodied experience of the characters themselves. When I call Racine's theatre phenomenal, it is not merely to praise his achievement but to assert that, through his characters, Racine shows his audience a type of multisensory, embodied experience which shines a light on the way in which sensation is often more than a single sense at a time. I offer a reading of Racine that focuses on these fleshly encounters and is guided by phenomenological insights.

One of the major roadblocks to this type of reading, which has prevented the appearance of a phenomenological study until now, is the understanding of early modern restrictions for the theatre. Discussion of the *bienséances* is well-documented, and critics such as Jacques Scherer, John Lough, and Michael Hawcroft have written about the prohibitions designed to conserve decorum by restricting physical contact and movement.² This emphasis on a lack of movement or touch has led to the expectation for readers and spectators who engage with

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 411.

² Cf. Jacques Scherer, *La Dramaturgie Classique* (Paris: Nizet, 1950), p. 402-403. See also the chapters on 'Les vraisemblances', p. 367-382, and 'Les bienséances', p. 383-421, John Lough, *Seventeenth-Century French Drama: the Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) and Michael Hawcroft, *Word as Action: Racine, Rhetoric and Theatrical Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

Racine that his characters are disembodied entities on a stage, merely there to recite poetic alexandrine verse. Recently, writing on the *bienséances* as an outright prohibitive concept has been re-directed by Michael Hawcroft toward a focus on the more general idea of respect for *vraisemblance* in early modern drama.³ This shift toward a broader notion of representing reality onstage is indeed helpful, and my project goes further and deeper, into the world perceived by Racine's characters and experienced by those who engage with them via the text and the stage.

I offer a phenomenological reading of both the Racinian character's experience and the experience of the reader or spectator. For Racine's characters, sensation is grounded in the body: they are constantly feeling and always in contact with the world around them. Even when certain aspects of their interaction are reduced or sublimated, these sensory experiences present themselves in new and interesting ways. My project uses phenomenology to study the characters' accounts of their embodied experience, which reveal them to be three-dimensional and fleshly. In this way, when applied to theatre, phenomenology provides a useful corrective to the *bienséances*, helping to steer us away from intellectualising sense experience and toward emphasizing sensory and bodily interconnectivity. Characters onstage can demonstrate mutual involvement in a participatory, sensory world. The spectator, likewise, is no longer disembodied and engages with the world onstage in a fleshly way. To support my view of Racine's theatre, my evidence is not only what characters say, but also what their bodies are doing onstage. Characters' experiences do not become real only after they are verbalized and intellectually processed; rather, they are real in the very moment at which they occur.

Merleau-Ponty

What do I mean when I use the term phenomenology, or propose a 'phenomenological' reading of Racine? When I refer to phenomenology, my use of the term is rooted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thinking, which repeatedly emphasizes the non-intellectualization of embodied experience. Whilst people have been writing about and grappling with the senses since the beginning of the Western

³ Michael Hawcroft, 'The *Bienséances* and their Irrelevance to the Death of Camille in Corneille's *Horace*,' *Papers on Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, 38 (2011), 465-79.

philosophical tradition,⁴ phenomenology as a discipline really begins in the early twentieth century with Edmund Husserl's *Ideen* in 1913. Merleau-Ponty comes out of a philosophical line of inquiry that includes Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Husserl's phenomenology is generally considered epistemological, geared toward knowledge, with an end goal of reducing objects to their essences. Heidegger's phenomenology is more ontological, focusing on states of being. Husserl's main stumbling block seems to be the subject-object divide—or the relationship between the mind and what it perceives—and he misses out on the concept of embodiment upon which Merleau-Ponty seizes as fundamental. What primarily separates Merleau-Ponty from Heidegger is that instead of getting caught in the added layer of mental consciousness of experience, he celebrates embodiment and homes in on the importance of the body's experience, in the moment, of taste, touch, hearing, smell and sight.⁵ In a departure from both Husserl and Heidegger, he does not attempt to pare down a perceptual process he considers irreducible.⁶ Instead, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology places absolute primacy on the body's pure experience of sense.⁷ My approach deals with both the interpretation and understanding of sense experience, and with the lived, embodied sense experience for Racine's characters.

When I propose a phenomenological approach to reading Racine, I refer to a methodology which examines the characters' and spectators' sensory experiences from the Merleau-Pontian perspective of embodied experience, the interconnectivity of the senses, and one body's relationship to other bodies. Merleau-Ponty rarely if ever discusses theatre; he is more interested in art, sensory perception, and the

⁴ Cf. Aristotle's *De Anima*, in the version of William of Moerbeke and the commentary of St Thomas Aquinas, trans. by Foster and Humphries (Oregon, USA: Whipf and Stock, 2007), in which Aristotle states the purpose of his work is to understand how the senses function as 'powers of the soul.'

⁵ Veronica Vasterling aptly remarks that Merleau-Ponty 'draw[s] on Heidegger's analysis of human existence as being-in-the-world', but also 'explicates the bodily dimension that Heidegger overlooks despite his focus on praxis and disposition.' Veronica Vasterling, 'Body and Language: Butler, Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard on the Speaking Embodied Subject', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 11 (2003), 205-223 (pp. 211). John Protevi remarks upon the difference between Merleau-Ponty's approach to phenomenology and that of Heidegger: 'Merleau-Ponty [...] avoids [...] the Heideggerian *sens unique* in which the sensible body is left behind in a "formalized" sense of "awareness."' John Protevi, 'The "Sense" of "Sight": Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty on the Meaning of Bodily and Existential Sight', *Research in Phenomenology*, 28 (1998), 211-223 (pp. 222).

⁶ Cf. 'Le plus grand enseignement de la réduction est l'impossibilité d'une réduction complète.' (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 14).

⁷ Cf. Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (London: Routledge, 2008). This introduction helps explain and frame key issues and points of overlap between philosophy of mind, cognitive science and phenomenology. See especially Chapter II, 'Methodologies' (p. 13-41) in which Gallagher and Zahavi discuss the phenomenological perspective.

general dilemmas of representation in art. However, contemporary critics such as Andy Lavender are currently applying key insights from Merleau-Ponty to a comprehensive theory of theatre.⁸ While I am not interested here in proposing a synoptic theory of theatre, I believe Merleau-Ponty's ideas relate exceptionally well to Racine's theatre: they help re-orient us to an interest in bodily experiences and the physical spaces of the theatrical world which is present in Racine. My study of the characters' embodied experiences is connected to my own sensory engagement with what takes place in the text and on the stage. As Gallagher and Zahavi argue, a phenomenological analysis is by nature the product of 'the encounter between at least two first-person perspectives; that is, it involves intersubjectivity.'⁹ This project emerges out of the combination of two first-person perspectives on the characters' embodied experience—in this case, the 'intersubjectively accessible'¹⁰ experience—which is the characters' along with the experience of the reader/spectator observes happening to them. The purpose of this project is not to recreate what it was like for the seventeenth-century spectator, but to approach Racine's theatre from my own perspective, rooted in the present.

The text of the plays continues to live without Racine, and beyond him. What makes him so engaging today is his gift for showing authentic, sophisticated sense experience onstage, and for provoking an emotional and sensory response in the spectator. Some of the most interesting answers, and indeed further questions, come from asking what kind of world the text itself creates. I do not try and resurrect characters precisely as Racine and his contemporaries would have understood them; instead, I look to articulations of perception, embodiment and relationships. I want to give the first word to Racine, but I do not wholly accept his vision—of the theatre itself or his own drama in particular—as a limitation. The text itself escapes the confines of authorial intent as I begin to examine it, and questions emerge about how we experience Racine's world today. My project is not a study of specific modern performances, but about how the text continues to live, in ways which may or may not have been recognized by critics. I am primarily interested in the kinds of horizons of experience opened up through studying the text. Instead of presenting a study of spectatorship, I want to approach the text by keeping in mind the

⁸ Cf *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Chapple and Kattenbelt (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2006), p. 55-66.

⁹ Gallagher and Zahavi, p. 41.

¹⁰ Gallagher and Zahavi, p. 41.

perspective and experience of a general spectator, called forth and created by the text. It would be a disservice to Racine to simply say that he accomplishes things in his work which elude the sensory vocabulary of his contemporary Descartes, when Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology helps us articulate Racine's achievement much more clearly. My thesis is not meant to contain a complete listing of all sense experiences in Racine's theatre, or a comprehensive handbook. Instead, I am trying to catch the most provocative sensory moments in his theatre. At times, my aim will take me into well-trodden territory, and sometimes less familiar ground. The contribution of my work is that it extends familiar examples in fresh ways, and points to new examples of sensation and interrelatedness within the text.

The texts of Racine's plays have long been cited for their undeniable economy of language and even the physical interactions between characters within the space onstage.¹¹ What might appear to be a kind of minimalism of words and movement is in fact evidence of Racine recognising the profundity and concentration of human sensory experience. I apply two main tenets of phenomenology—the interrelation of the senses and the interconnectivity of bodies—to examine the world as Racine's characters perceive it and to follow their sensory experiences as they happen. Instead of merely making modern phenomenology fit with Racinian drama, I utilize several main, phenomenological insights on sense experience, from Aristotle to Merleau-Ponty. There are themes and overlaps in philosophical writing on the senses that run from the time of Aristotle through Racine's era into modern and contemporary writing. Aristotle's investigation into the nature of the soul, *De anima*, is underpinned by logic yet driven by a strong interest in the physical human body and sensation. René Descartes' extensive corpus of work addresses the senses,¹² especially how one understands and describes the things one perceives and what this reveals about cognitive awareness of how one interacts with the world. There is a common human desire to understand how we describe our sensations, and the relationship between the different senses as well as between the mind and the body.

¹¹ Cf. Georges Forestier, *Jean Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) and his introductory remarks to his edition of the *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), as well as Michael Hawcroft, *Word as Action* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

¹² Cf. *Discours de la méthode* and *Les Passions de l'âme*. Against Aristotelian philosophy, Descartes believed that not all knowledge could reliably come from sensation, but still concentrated heavily on sensation, perceptions of sensation, and the mind-body relationship.

While similar interests and commonalities exist between earlier and more modern discussions of sensation, and I will incorporate these when appropriate, Merleau-Ponty does bring a strong new insight to discussion of the senses and will be the orienting point for this project. I will use phenomenological insights to look at Racine's theatre; however, this study will not be strictly welded to phenomenology as a discipline, or indeed, one particular school of phenomenology. Although Merleau-Ponty comments on art, he focuses mainly on Paul Cézanne's paintings. By taking Merleau-Ponty into the realm and medium of the theatre, I accentuate some of the perceptual aspects of his work even further. Merleau-Ponty hoped to arrive at a human ontology of existence through a phenomenological description of experience. He stresses that perception and the world are intertwined through the human body. His discussions of perception in *Phénoménologie de la perception* are particularly significant, as are the same theories elaborated further in *Le visible et l'invisible*, most notably the section 'L'entrelacs—le chiasme'. Merleau-Ponty is critical of both empiricism—the belief that all perception stems from sensation—and intellectualism, the view that perception is the result of judgment. Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasizes the importance of sensory perception's ability to open the body onto the world, allowing one to draw conclusions about the surrounding environment based upon what the body feels. He focuses on the most essential components of sensation, and first-person accounts of vision, touch, hearing, taste and smell. Merleau-Ponty grounds his phenomenology in a return to the body, focusing on it as the site of sensory perception and emphasising the need to go back to thinking about embodied sensations as they are felt. The notion of the 'body schema', whereby the body gives itself to the world as a site of perception, is central to Merleau-Ponty's view of sensation. We are, he believes, intentionally directed toward the world; that is, we actively move in our surroundings, always open to being acted upon by them.

Even when two bodies are not touching, not making contact physically, they still occupy a space in relation to other spaces. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of how people experience each other is an extension of his 'body schema'. What enables us and what enables Racine's characters to recognise each other in the world and appreciate each other as interrelated and complementary bodies, is the 'body schema'. While we each have our own experience of the world, we are simultaneously aware of sharing the world with other bodily beings and of

being visible to other bodily beings. The issue of coexisting with other bodies is one that Merleau-Ponty looks at extensively as he attempts to give a phenomenological account of the experience of the Other. People are present to each other, he postulates, as other perceptive bodies who share similar movements, behaviours, and feelings or sensitivities. The embodied experience, in Racinian theatre or elsewhere, is generated by an encounter with the outside world, rather than in a vacuum within the body itself. This concept radically changes our idea of theatre and our expectations of the theatrical experience. Instead of seeing discrete, closed bodies moving around a stage, the spectator can now see bodies *in relation* to one another, even—sometimes especially—when they do not touch. Thus, the theatre becomes much more of an authentic paradigm for the world than might ordinarily be expected if one is approaching theatre itself as a medium for, perhaps, mere diversion and brief entertainment.

I am guided by the broader themes in his work to highlight or bring out certain things in Racine, rather than by any desire to superimpose Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology on the material in Racine's theatre, or to prove that Racine was a proto-phenomenologist. Merleau-Ponty's writing on perception helps highlight the interconnectivity between characters onstage. Certainly, there can be connections between characters in any drama, but the type of network that is particularly present in Racine's theatre is one in which characters operate within a sort of invisible web of sensation, almost like the synaptic connections in the brain. The particular networks of relationships on stage, and the way space is defined in a theatrical context, are made palpable by the theatre because characters have to be present to each other in a certain way. Merleau-Ponty writes,

Entre ma conscience et mon corps tel que je le vis, entre ce corps phénoménal et celui d'autrui tel que je le vois du dehors, il existe une relation interne qui fait apparaître autrui comme l'achèvement du système.¹³

The bodies of one person and another are each other's completion; they are interwoven parts of the same whole which in turn is woven into the world itself. In this project I will show that these symbiotic relationships exist between characters themselves, and between the spectator and characters. My project will fill a void in

¹³ *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 410.

Racine scholarship by showing his characters as embodied, sensitive beings who re-create and represent human relationships onstage in a way that resonates with the spectator.

Method

My work participates in a rising trend of interdisciplinary approaches to early modern literature and theatre utilizing a range of theoretical resources, including but not limited to performance theory, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism. James Burke draws on a variety of sources from Thomas Aquinas to Jacques Lacan as he traces sensory perceptions of the characters in the sixteenth-century Spanish dramatic poem *Celestina*.¹⁴ One of the strengths of Burke's work is that he demonstrates sensitivity to the difference between the medieval and early modern understanding of the senses and the main points of a particularly modern focus on vision. Barbara Freedman's study of Shakespearean comedy uses Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminist theory and film theory to examine *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *A Comedy of Errors*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. While this yields a rich and varied study, at times Freedman relies too heavily on the theories she uses to the detriment of providing new criticism of Shakespeare, while also lacking sufficient historical sensitivity when shifting between Shakespeare's time and modern criticism, both flaws I hope to avoid in my own inquiry. Most importantly for my purposes, Bruce Smith uses phenomenology as a model for reading the Bard's plays.¹⁵ He takes advantage of phenomenology to examine the experience of the reader, character and spectator, yet seems unclear at various points regarding when and how he uses phenomenology, and precisely what new understanding phenomenology gives him about these bodies.

My study owes much to recent scholarship on Racine, particularly that by Françoise Siguret,¹⁶ Georges Forestier,¹⁷ John Lyons,¹⁸ Joseph Harris,¹⁹ Mitchell

¹⁴ James Burke, *Vision, the Gaze, and the Function of the Senses in 'Celestina'* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Bruce Smith, *Phenomenal Shakespeare* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

¹⁶ Cf. Françoise Siguret, *L'Oeil Surpris: Perception et représentation dans la première moitié du XVIIème siècle* (Paris: Papers on Seventeenth-Century Literature, 1985).

¹⁷ Cf. Georges Forestier, *Jean Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

¹⁸ Cf. John Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder: the Theory of Tragedy in Classical France* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1999).

Greenberg,²⁰ Katherine Ibbett,²¹ Nicholas Hammond,²² Anne Piéjus,²³ Sylvaine Guyot,²⁴ John Campbell,²⁵ and Richard Goodkin.²⁶ Goodkin remarks that ‘the contradictory and paradoxical nature of human experience is [...] one of tragedy’s most fundamental purposes.’²⁷ I would expand Goodkin’s statement slightly, and argue that one of the most important parts of the often unpredictable, unquantifiable human experience is the interrelatedness of the senses. Further, it is this sense experience that Racine demonstrates, through his characters, whether to an early modern or modern spectator. In the introduction to his edition of the corpus, Georges Forestier states that ‘la tragédie racinienne ne recherche pas le tragique, au sens où nous l’entendons aujourd’hui, mais, à proprement parler, le pathétique.’²⁸ Forestier identifies a very particular form of sensory and emotional connection, between the reader or spectator and the text, which Racine creates in his work.²⁹ Ibbett’s recent work on pity and compassion helpfully opens up new lines of enquiry into ‘intellectual modes of ‘fellow feeling’ with humanity—including, perhaps, the ‘simple emotion’ that Racine deems non-tragic.’³⁰

¹⁹ Cf. Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

²⁰ Cf. Mitchell Greenberg, *Baroque Bodies: Psychoanalysis and the Culture of French Absolutism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

²¹ Cf. Katherine Ibbett, ‘Pity, Compassion, Commiseration: Theories of Theatrical Relatedness,’ *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 30 (2), 196-208.

²² Cf. Nicholas Hammond, *Fragmentary Voices: Memory and Education at Port-Royal* (Tübingen: Biblio 17, 2004).

²³ Cf. Anne Piéjus, *Le théâtre des demoiselles: tragédie et musique à Saint-Cyr à la fin du grand siècle* (Paris: Société française de musicologie, 2000).

²⁴ Cf. Sylvaine Guyot, *Racine et le corps tragique* (Paris: PUF, 2014).

²⁵ Cf. John Campbell, *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Department of Romance Languages, 2005).

²⁶ Cf. Richard Goodkin, *The Tragic Middle: Racine, Aristotle, Euripides* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

²⁷ Richard Goodkin, *The Tragic Middle: Racine, Aristotle, Euripides* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 4.

²⁸ Jean Racine, *Œuvres Complètes: Théâtre, Poésie*, ed. by Georges Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. xxiii.

²⁹ Discussion of sensation can also involve the concepts of feeling and affect. For the purposes of my study I am primarily interested in the senses, which is why I ground my approach in the phenomenological theory of Merleau-Ponty, but I appreciate that there is room to expand this study. To do so, one could begin by looking at work by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example *Touching Feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity* (North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2003).

³⁰ Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), p. 102, citing the work of Katherine Ibbett, ‘Pity, Compassion, Commiseration: Theories of Theatrical Relatedness,’ *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 30/2 (2008), 196-208. The ‘simple emotion’ is Racine’s own wording from the Prefaces.

The question of the spectator of early modern theatre has recently been addressed in a new way by Harris.³¹ Harris examines the long-held ‘rules’ of classical theatre in France, for example the three unities of time, place and action, and finds convincing evidence to support the case that these rules were not stifling constraints to be respected at all costs, but rather, guidelines and suggestions for achieving a certain end. That end seems to be that the spectator sets aside his reason or his inner critic, enters in to the world onstage and allows himself to be carried along emotionally by the play and characters: ‘theorists from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment imagined the theatre as something able to wholly suspend or override its spectators’ critical faculties, and regarded rules as a means to achieve this goal.’³² The spectator as theoretical concept begins to emerge in the early modern period, a time of enquiry into perspective and optics.³³

Both Harris and H  l  ne Merlin make a crucial point about ‘literary works in early modern France [being] aimed at two quite distinct audiences—the supposedly uncritical general public, and a more reflective, critical readership that can detach itself from the immediacy of the experience.’³⁴ As I read Racine’s text, I try to combine both those approaches: the sensitivity to character interactions, feeling and space that a live spectator would have, and also the awareness of word choice and patterns in language which comes from having time to read the text as well as to benefit from scholarship on Racine. In this way, I approach Racine’s work as a commentator and also a type of audience member,³⁵ coming to the text from within my own socio-historical context³⁶ with access to centuries of Racine scholarship and criticism and a focus on sensation for the characters.

Evidence for Racine’s concern with the experience of the spectator and reader can be found, in part, by examining the Prefaces to his plays. Racine rarely discusses the spectator’s senses, but there is ample evidence to support the goal of inspiring an emotional response in his reader or spectator. I do not mean to imply

³¹ Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

³² Harris, p. 3, 4, 6, 18.

³³ Beginning in Chapter 1, I will draw on Ren   Descartes’ writings on optics for my reading of the Racinian characters’ sense of sight.

³⁴ Harris, p. 8 and H  l  ne Merlin, *‘Public’ et litt  rature en France au XVII  me si  cle* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1994), p. 175.

³⁵ For more on viewership and the viewer, see Michele Aaron, *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2007).

³⁶ As Michele Aaron notes of the ‘viewer,’ Aaron, p. 1.

that an expressed concern for inspiring pity and fear, or compassion and fear, should be interpreted as a direct substitute for sensation; rather, that the stated intent in Racine's Prefaces can serve as a useful starting point for an inquiry into sensation and audience sense experience through reading or watching Racine's plays. Katherine Ibbett's recent work on pity and compassion and commiseration in seventeenth-century theories of tragedy raises several significant points, especially with respect to how Racine reports to have crafted his tragedies.³⁷ What Ibbett terms the 'pity-function' in tragedy could be seen as one element in dialogue with, but remaining distinct from, the 'discourse of compassion.' The former 'instrumentalizes the interest in the other in order to refine the schooling of the self,' and the latter asks its audience 'to feel not only for themselves, via those on stage, but more generally for those around them, and to think of the theatre as a place of shared experience.'³⁸

In the Preface to *Andromaque*, Racine demonstrates his familiarity with both his classical sources, and with his audience. Racine discusses Horace's prescriptions for a very one-dimensional Achille, then Aristotle's notion of what makes for truly tragic characters, 'ceux dont le malheur fait la catastrophe de la tragédie, [who] ne soient ni tout à fait bons, ni tout à fait méchants.'³⁹ Characters must neither be perfect nor wholly loathsome, Racine states; they must have *vertu* tempered by a dose of *faiblesse*, so that their faults inspire an audience to feel sorry for them rather than hate them. In the Preface to *Britannicus*, Racine discusses his critics' reactions to how Néron is portrayed, and explains that he chose to show his audience a Néron who at this particular moment in his life, is a 'monstre naissant.'⁴⁰ Instead of showing the public figure, Racine deliberately stages a glimpse into a day in the intimate life of a man on the cusp of growing into his more mature monstrosity: 'Néron est ici dans son particulier et dans son famille,'⁴¹ yet whose cruelty is still apparent. Racine shows that one of his primary, and paramount, concerns—and one which is connected with the overall impression of credibility for an audience, and therefore to an ability for the audience to relate emotionally to the action—is for the

³⁷ Katherine Ibbett, 'Pity, Compassion, Commiseration: Theories of Theatrical Relatedness, *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 30 (2008), 196-208.

³⁸ Ibbett, p.

³⁹ Racine, First Preface to *Andromaque*.

⁴⁰ Racine, First Preface to *Britannicus*. The idea of the *monstre* will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

⁴¹ Racine, First Preface to *Britannicus*.

vraisemblance of the play: ‘[i]l n’y a que le vraisemblance qui touche dans la tragédie.’⁴² Racine’s use of the verb *toucher* could imply an emotional connection between the spectator and the staged action, and it is this mode of being physically as well as emotionally affected that I use Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to explore in Racinian theatre.

One of the most recent studies of Racine’s theatre, Sylvaine Guyot’s *Racine et le corps tragique*,⁴³ also looks at Racine’s characters as embodied entities, but through the lens of the tragic body rather than as beings who have various interrelated sensory experiences. Guyot states that, wherever individual early modern dramatists fell on the spectrum of what produced tragedy’s pleasurable effect on the spectator, one important consequence of this general aim for tragedy was that the bodies of the character and spectator took on an incredible new significance.⁴⁴ Guyot’s study concludes that the tragic body ‘s’offre comme un espace commun d’émotions et de réflexions’⁴⁵ which allows us to explore language, power, knowledge, and ways of approaching and discussion the human condition. In my study, I see the body of the Racinian character as a nexus, but a nexus for sensation.

Special Cases

Various studies have been made of the language used by Racine’s characters, yet not for the same purpose as my work. Whereas previous scholars have concentrated on the poetry of the verse, the rhetorical devices used, or on language as a substitute for action,⁴⁶ the connection between language and sensory perception on Racine’s stage has been largely left to one side. For Racine’s characters, language brings thought and feeling to fruition, enabling people to commune with and affect each other in a particular way. Voicing a thought or feeling forges a bond between the speaker and hearer, and the one who listens—whether another character or a spectator—understands what is said because he or she has the tools to imagine thinking or feeling in a similar fashion. This is not to imply that language is, or

⁴² Racine, Preface to *Bérénice*.

⁴³ Sylvaine Guyot, *Racine et le corps tragique* (Paris: PUF, 2014).

⁴⁴ Guyot, p. 20-21.

⁴⁵ Guyot, p. 254.

⁴⁶ Cf. Michael Hawcroft, *Racine: Language as Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) and Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

must, always be used with the purest intentions; such is often not the case in Racine. The fact that language can provoke physical sensations or make people believe something that is not true, is sometimes used in ways which produce interesting results for the body of the interlocutor. Many of these cases are addressed in the second chapter.

In this project, I deal primarily with the senses of sight, touch and hearing. This is not intended to establish any hierarchy of the senses, but rather reflects the relatively minor role that taste and smell play in Racine's theatre. There are a handful of references made to feeling metaphorically 'eaten up' by apprehension or sorrow. For example, when Britannicus experiences a feeling of dread as he meets with Junie and exclaims 'Mais parmi ce plaisir, quel chagrin me dévore!' Similarly, Athalie describes the anxiety that eats away at her heart, claiming that her dream 'Entretient dans mon coeur un chagrin qui le ronge.'⁴⁷ Antiochus is the only character who ever speaks explicitly about being the agent of metaphorical eating, and only does so in reference to having to swallow his own tears along with his feelings for Bérénice, wondering whether he is doomed to '[t]oujours verser des pleurs qu'il faut que je dévore.'⁴⁸ There are two references to smell in the Racinian corpus, the first made by Élise as she refers to the sound of the chorus rising heavenward, like the pleasing scent of incense.⁴⁹ The second is made by Salomith, who mentions the scent of incense alongside that of sacrifices made to God in the temple.⁵⁰ The biblical book of Esther contains descriptions of two feasts at the Persian court; however, Racine's *Esther* mentions a single feast merely as a background activity.

It is likely that Racine deemed eating too bodily and too vulgar an action to take place onstage. These few references to smell are interesting; however, they are also marginal. It certainly would have been difficult for Racine to miss the fact that the Hebrew texts are often richly sensual, and express themselves in an intensely bodily way. It is no accident that the pair of references to the sense of smell occurs in the sacred dramas and in the context of sacrificial practice, as the biblical backdrop for both *Esther* and *Athalie* adds a divine presence which would be

⁴⁷ *Britannicus* (II. 6. 695) and *Athalie* (II. 5. 488). Jean Racine, *Théâtre Complet*, ed. Jacques Morel and Alain Viala (Paris: Garnier, 2010). When otherwise noted, specific references will be made to Jean Racine, *Œuvres Complètes: Théâtre, Poésie*, ed. by Georges Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

⁴⁸ *Bérénice* (I. 2. 36).

⁴⁹ *Esther* (I. 2. 127).

⁵⁰ *Athalie* (III. 8. 1189-90).

appropriately pleased and satisfied by the smell of incense and sacrifice. God is described several times in the Old Testament as being pleased by the smell of sacrifice.⁵¹ The God of the Hebrew Bible is an embodied entity, for example using his hands, and gesturing toward things⁵² and when he is angry, smoke plumes rise out of his nostrils.⁵³ I believe Racine takes the ‘Ur-text’ of the Bible in the case of the Esther feasts and the smell of incense and, clearly limited by some of his own contemporary constraints, leaves the feast in the background. Significantly, however, he does not remove the feast entirely. Critics have tended to believe that Racine pushes events to the background that are unimportant. The Bible seems to be an inspiring and challenging source for Racine, but it is significant that he chose to include these olfactory elements when he could have excluded them entirely. They are not major elements of *Esther*, but they nonetheless demonstrate Racine’s willingness to engage with problematic sense experience and to tackle the biblical text, challenging himself at a late stage of his career.

Structure

My first chapter opens with an examination of how, and what, Racine’s characters see, especially when they look at each other. After illuminating the colours and changes in lighting that make impressions on the eyes of the characters, I examine how they experience love, especially the *coup de foudre*. Although all cases of love stem from a glance, and to look is to fall in love,⁵⁴ there is a marked difference between reciprocated love and the type of love that presents as violent, one-sided, and which implicates much more of the body than the eye or the heart. The issue of love is a particularly appropriate point of entry for this project. It takes us into two of the most poignant, physically powerful passages from the entire corpus: Phèdre’s love for Hippolyte, which strikes her the moment she first sees him, and Néron’s sudden passion for Junie. The *coup de foudre*, in Racine’s theatre,

⁵¹ For example, in Genesis 29:17 and Leviticus 2:2 in reference respectively to the smell of burnt offerings of an animal or grain, where the translation reads that it is ‘an aroma pleasing to the Lord’. There are, conversely, passages in which the Lord is not pleased by the smell of sacrifice as in Isaiah 1:11.

⁵² Cf. Ezekiel 44:12.

⁵³ Cf. Psalm 18:7.

⁵⁴ ‘Je le vis’ as Bérénice, for example, declares when describing the moment she fell in love with Titus (*Bér.* II. 5. 633).

hardly proves to be the affirming stuff of fairy tales. This type of love is of a much darker nature, and the most deeply troubling aspects of the characters' personalities come to the fore as they struggle against their own bodies, and their reactions to this love play out onstage. For these characters, love is not a sensation which brings them emotionally closer to the object of their affections. Instead, they succeed in pushing away the object of their affection, making them feel disgust and revulsion.

Both Phèdre and Néron are affected and in some way incapacitated by the violence of this love at first sight. The queen is briefly and temporarily blinded, immobilized, and alternately shivers and burns feverishly. The emperor finds himself mute and rooted to the spot the first time he sees Junie. Phèdre and Néron share a feeling of being struck by love in a way that over-stimulates their bodies, heightening their senses to such a degree that each is rendered temporarily senseless, so to speak. Phèdre is fascinated and repulsed in equal measure by her love for Hippolyte, while Néron is obsessed with a desire to control Junie's body and mind, not realising he is the one who is actually a slave to his own passion. To unpack Phèdre and Néron's experiences in a fresh way, I look at the topics of idolatry, control and incest. I draw particularly on Georges Bataille and Lacan. Bataille's reflections on incest help us explore how Phèdre's horror and fascination alternate and ultimately assure her own destruction. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage helps us articulate how Néron's passion translates to a desire to treat Junie as an idol, and how this desire is connected to his need to control and manipulate every part of his court.

For my second chapter, I also focus on the sense of sight. Here vision presents itself as problematic in a variety of ways. Whereas in chapter one, I discuss instances of direct sight, this chapter examines bodily experiences stimulated by vision in an indirect sense. I identify several main ways in which Racine's characters are physically affected by what they perceive, whether through hallucination, deception, premonition, or divine vision. These are liminal experiences, in which characters have real, palpable responses to abstract, esoteric and at times even non-existent objects. By treating the more 'deviant' forms of vision in Racine's theatre, I offer a fuller profile of vision's role in the lives and bodies of his characters. I begin with dreams and visions, which are experienced as reality. What happens in Athalie's dream—one encounter with her deceased mother and another with Joas, whom she has not yet met—is not *per se* realistic, yet because

she is fully and bodily invested in the dream, her other senses, particularly touch, are implicated just as they would be in waking life. Similarly, Joad narrates what occurs as he experiences a religious ecstasy, and the spectator witnesses the power and presence of God in the moment in which Joad's vision, hearing and touch are affected.

Andromaque and Phèdre also struggle with a form of vision and misunderstanding they cannot ultimately control, in which the face of one person becomes almost interchangeable with, and is layered on top of, another. For Andromaque this occurs with the memory of her husband, and the living son they have together. The conflation is a comfort to the widow, allowing her to preserve Hector's memory even as she appears slightly unhinged in interacting with Astyanax as Hector. Phèdre, meanwhile, conflates her husband and his son in another way, pretending to embrace Hippolyte while in fact being with his father. But Phèdre cannot sustain this illusion for long and it eventually overcomes her, clouding her eyes and forcing her to acknowledge her incestuous desire as Hippolyte's image rises to the surface, haunting her and forcing her hand. Finally, I examine the most disturbing examples of vision gone wrong: total deception and madness. Oenone paints Thésée a distorted picture in which Hippolyte attempted to rape his stepmother, irrevocably altering his relationship with his son. When it comes to Oreste's madness, Racine is at pains to demonstrate that the character's complete lack of lucidity nevertheless involves an embodied experience of something very real *to him*. His hallucinations, which he feels onstage in front of the audience, are encompassing sensory experiences that involve sight, sound and touch.

In the third chapter I focus on the sense of touch. While one might presume that the stage conventions of Racine's time proved severely restrictive and therefore elevated sight above all other senses, this is not the case. Indeed, I argue, proscriptions on physical interaction often had the effect of making touch an even stronger presence in characters' experiences and relationships. There are several instances in which Racine breaks with contemporary convention and his characters touch in a physical sense. A close examination of physical support and the embrace shows that even simple, physical contact implicates not only the point of coming together but the entire body. The embraces shared by Mithridate and Xipharès, or Iphigénie and Agamemnon, reveal that even a clear case of touch never occurs in a

vacuum and that *feeling* physical contact involves other senses such as vision and hearing.

Even when characters do not touch, however, they *feel* their own experiences deeply and use tactile language to describe their sensations. When, for example, Néron struggles with his mother for control of Rome and the court, he does so using methods which limit her physical space and the power of her words to carry weight in the imperial palace or to affect him emotionally. When characters make avowals, as Phèdre does with Hippolyte, they do so in an attempt to make emotional contact, to press their case. These types of touch are powerful and multisensory, escaping the limits of mere metaphor. In order to draw out some of the implications of touch for Racine's characters, I refer to Aristotle's work on the primacy of touch and its connection with vision and hearing. I also identify how his characters demonstrate a Cartesian influence in their awareness and articulation of sensation. Racine clearly displays conscious links with classical and early modern theories of the senses. I go beyond this, however, and demonstrate how Racine anticipates not only phenomenology's emphasis on embodied experience and the interconnectivity of the senses, but also the encompassing fleshliness which characterizes human relationships with each other and the world.

My fourth chapter shifts focus from vision and touch to hearing and listening. The spoken word—and indeed its absence in moments of silence—is fundamental to the theatre and the lives of Racine's characters. Previous scholarship on language in Racinian theatre has, to a certain extent, left a crucial lacuna: the power of language lies not only in its use as stand-in for action, but in its ability to create bodily experiences. The first major aim of the chapter is to address how verbal communication between characters—as well as the anticipation or absence of that communication—involves their bodies and their sense of touch. The second aim of the chapter is to make a new contribution to Racinian scholarship by working through the music of *Esther* and *Athalie* to understand the contribution music and song makes to the sensory experience of the audience. Unlike in any of Racine's previous plays, from *La Thébäide* to *Phèdre*, music and song are a vital component of *Esther* and *Athalie*. Together, these elements elevate the spectator's embodied experience to a different plane, and facilitate an encounter with the divine. Racine emphasizes the prophetic element to the sung and spoken language of the chorus in a way that transforms the chorus from a group of human voices into the voice of the

divine, embodied in the collective ‘body’ of the chorus itself. The God of *Esther* and *Athalie* speaks through the chorus to the audience and the other characters, therefore distinguishing Racine’s chorus from the chorus of Greek theatre, from which he takes his initial inspiration. The chorus thus occupies a mediatory position at the intersection between transcendence and immanence. In this way, music in *Esther* and *Athalie* enables communication between the dimensions of the divine and human.

Overall, I hope utilization of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body as *sensorium commune*, or the place at which all sensory perception occurs, will influence Racinian scholarship in a useful way. I argue in favour of an integrative approach to scholarship, in this case within different periods of French thought and literature which, in my opinion, have mistakenly remained segregated. In this project, I maintain there is great need to utilize developments in twentieth- and twenty-first century thinking about the body, such as phenomenology, as a new way of looking at the seventeenth-century text. I intend for this project to inspire fresh ways of understanding and exploring the body, the senses, and being together in the world, for the characters in Racine’s plays and the spectator. I do not argue against what critics such as Hawcroft⁵⁵ offer about the notion of word as a type of action, but I take this concept and related ones further than Hawcroft by conceiving of ‘action’ as active perception, in which the body and world are in constant dialogue and continually affect one other. I will demonstrate that, far from ‘gripping’ us only in the metaphorical sense, Racine’s theatre gives us a fleshly world in which we, the spectator and character, all have a grip on each other.

⁵⁵ Michael Hawcroft, *Racine: Word as Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

CHAPTER I

The Racinian Perspective

*'Chez Racine, derrière ce que l'on voit, il y a ce que l'on entrevoit'*⁵⁶

Of the five senses, vision is one of the first points of entry for the audience into the experience of the theatre. We wait for the curtain to rise onstage, and look for the entrance of characters before we hear what they have to say. In the course of the chapter I provide a classical and early modern context for Racine's conception of how his characters see the world around them, and I move from studying characters' experiences of sight in general to the more particular, and more concentrated, experience of love at first sight. I trace the history of philosophical writing on this sense, identifying classical sources Racine would have been familiar with, and the early modern understanding of vision which also fed into the way in which his characters perceive and talk about their environment. Finally, I use modern writing on perception, and sight in particular, to shed new light on the way in which the Racinian character sees his world.

Racinian characters use their eyes to help navigate the world and their relationships with each other, and their language is influenced in large part by what they see.⁵⁷ These personages, while derived from myth, are not mere archetypes. As I will demonstrate, they display profoundly human qualities in the way they feel their environment. Their embodied sensory experiences can be analysed and understood, and their humanity is evident as they talk about what they have seen, heard and felt in a way which points to a concerted effort on Racine's part to create

⁵⁶ Jean Starobinski, *L'Oeil vivant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

⁵⁷ There are, of course, examples throughout the text of embedded stage directions or descriptions of a character's body language intended for an audience who often could not see well enough to observe the actor's faces: 'Vous frémissez, madame' (*And.* III. 8. 1013) and 'Vous vous troublez, Madame, et changez de visage' (*Brit.* II. 3. 527) come to mind. However, physical sensations do not always need to be verbalised by other characters and made explicit; often, in Racine's theatre, visual cues and experiences are hinted at and implicit in the characters' own spoken language.

characters whose visual, auditory and tactile experiences are recognisable in important ways for the reader and spectator. One might argue that not very much action takes place in Racine's theatre, and that characters merely talk about what has happened earlier or has occurred offstage, but these experiences are all brought into the present on the stage for characters to engage with as they discuss and process them. In Racine's theatre, the key elements of character's experiences are articulated. The reader and spectator have enough evidence to be drawn in and made complicit with the text and the characters' experiences of sensation.

In *La Pratique du Théâtre*, the critic Abbé d'Aubignac discusses the care a dramatist must take in conceiving his plays, and uses the process of painting a picture as a metaphor.⁵⁸ This metaphor, he asserts, can be understood in one of two ways: in the most basic sense of creating a visual experience which the viewer knows to be a false and contrived version of reality, or the second in which the painting, even if the viewer knows it is only a painting, allows the viewer to glimpse and experience the reality within, because the painting is a sensitively rendered version of a plausible reality.⁵⁹ In choosing such a visually charged metaphor, d'Aubignac implicitly acknowledges the primacy of vision for the spectator in the realm of theatre. In this chapter, I examine the *tableau* within which Racine's characters live, and what kinds of figures and colours they see in the world, not purely for the sake of what is represented to the reader or audience, but for what it reveals about patterns in their visual experience. I am guided by what Racine's characters see because of how their sense of sight fits in to the larger scope of their embodied sensory experience.

Aristotle's *De anima* is one of the canonical texts on the senses from the classical period, and his work was a formative part of Racine's education at Port-

⁵⁸ 'Je prends ici la comparaison d'un Tableau, dont j'ai résolu de me servir souvent en ce Traité, et je dis qu'on le peut considérer en deux façons,' François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac, *La Pratique du Théâtre*, ed. Hélène Baby (Paris: Champion, 2001), p. 77. D'Aubignac uses a metaphor which can be traced back to Plato, whose *Republic* groups the theatre with painting, sculpture and other forms of representational art. Plato's argument relates to the distance between the theatre and the reality it purports to represent, that theatre is 'at the third remove from the essential nature of the thing,' Plato, *Republic*, X. 597e. For Plato, the arts attempt to represent the world of appearance, itself already an impure reflection of reality, and do so using mimetic techniques, which makes art the product of a thrice-compounded misrepresentation of truth.

⁵⁹ François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac, *La Pratique du Théâtre*, ed. Hélène Baby (Paris: Champion, 2001), p. 77-78.

Royal, especially the *Poetics*.⁶⁰ In *De anima*, Aristotle examines the soul, and starts out from the assumption that because the soul does not exist apart from the body, it is through studying the body that one gains insight into the nature of the soul.⁶¹ Aristotle terms sight the ‘most prominent’ of all the senses,⁶² meaning that sight is the primary and most immediate sense through which, under normal conditions, a person experiences the world. Aristotle’s praise of vision is not limited to *De anima*; in the *Metaphysics*, he remarks, ‘we prefer sight, generally speaking, to all other senses. The reason for this is that, of all the senses, sight helps us to know things.’⁶³ Throughout his writing on sensation, Aristotle identifies a strong connection between the eye and mind, with the eye being superior to other sense organs in terms of helping the body gain knowledge of the world.

In an effort to understand the workings of the senses, Aristotle identifies an object corresponding to each sense, as well as a medium through which it is sensed, and a particular organ which performs the sensing. As a model for the process of sensation, he uses the analogy of a signet ring being pressed onto warm wax—this is taken up most notably by Descartes in his *Second Meditation*⁶⁴—in order to illustrate the principle of the body being acted upon by outside forces. These forces produce sensations in the body, but do not imprint themselves upon the body in their original state: ‘it must be taken as a general rule that all sensation is the receiving of forms without matter, as wax receives a seal without the iron or gold of the signet-ring. It receives an imprint of the gold or bronze, but not *as* gold or bronze. Similarly the sense of any sense-object is acted upon by a thing having colour or flavour or sound.’⁶⁵ In the case of vision, the object is colour, its medium is transparency or being illuminated, and its organ is the eye.

Aristotle’s understanding of sight relies on a model in which light illuminates an object, making it visible and allowing it to be perceived by the eye. One can only

⁶⁰ For evidence of Racine’s engagement with classical texts through his education at the Petits écoles de Port-Royal, see especially R. C. Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* (Paris: Nizet, 1974), pp. 147, 150, 152, 167 for references to Racine’s annotations in the margins of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Knight also identifies further classical influences on Racine, including Virgil, Horace, Cicero (p. 146), and Plato (p. 148). For scholarly work on education and Port-Royal, see especially Nicholas Hammond, *Fragmentary Voices: Memory and Education at Port-Royal* (Tübingen: Biblio 17, 2004).

⁶¹ François Hédelin, abbé d’Aubignac, *La Pratique du Théâtre*, p. 51.

⁶² *Aristotle’s De Anima*, trans. Foster and Humphries (Oregon, USA: Whipf and Stock, 2007), p. 395.

⁶³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A (980a25).

⁶⁴ For a contemporary resolution to the ‘puzzle’ of Cartesian sensory representation, see references to the work of Raffaella De Rosa in Chapter II, on p. 57-8.

⁶⁵ *De Anima*, trans. Foster and Humphries, p. 336.

see objects because the sun illuminates them, transforming what Aristotle terms ‘potential’ colours into ‘actual’ colours.⁶⁶ Sunlight merely shows these objects in their coloured state; the sun does not create colour on the objects: ‘all that light does is to actualise a transparent medium which can then be modified by colour so that it is seen. The agent intellect, on the other hand, actualises the intelligible notions themselves, abstracting them from matter, i.e. bringing them from potential to actual intelligibility.’⁶⁷ Aristotle makes a distinction between the roles played by the body and mind in the sensory process, allocating the pure experience of sensation to the body, and the understanding that the body is sensing, to the mind.

Aristotle explains the link between the bodily experience of sensation and a mental awareness of that sensory experience, arguing that ‘the sense faculty receives a similitude of the thing sensed in a bodily and material way, whilst the intellect receives a similitude of the thing understood in an incorporeal and immaterial way.’⁶⁸ Pursuing his investigation of sensation further, Aristotle posits that a person possesses both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ senses. Vision, touch, hearing, taste and smell remain ‘external’, while imagination and the passions are examples of ‘internal’ senses. Rather than debating the veracity of Aristotle’s account of sensation, I focus on how the mind-body connection influences Racine’s portrayal of his characters. On stage, his characters act out and describe visual sensations in a way which is designed to mimic the reality of embodied human experience.

In the early modern period, René Descartes’ theories of vision helped shape the understanding of how the eye received and responded to visual stimulation. Whereas the accepted theory had been that object images presented themselves to the eye as the end result of a chain of replication, Descartes believed that ‘vision does not actually see or “represent” the qualities of objects; rather, the mind is indirectly stimulated by certain dispositions in the objects to have various visual sensations.’⁶⁹ In the *Dioptrique*, Descartes takes the classical notion of vision, complicates it in interesting ways and eventually turns vision on its head. Implicitly he seems to acknowledge the importance of vision even if it eventually proves to be an unreliable starting point. Racine’s theatre, on the other hand, owes its heritage

⁶⁶ *De anima*, trans. Foster and Humphries, p. 424.

⁶⁷ *De anima*, trans. Foster and Humphries, p. 428.

⁶⁸ *De anima*, trans. Foster and Humphries, p. 249-50.

⁶⁹ David Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) p. 102.

more to the simple and dramatic theory of vision offered by Aristotle than to Descartes' reconstruction of vision.

In regards to the early modern psyche, Stuart Clark notes that in general writing during this period tended to portray the eyes as 'the guides and rulers not just of the other senses but of the whole body, and a long tradition of understanding perception in general as a 'visual process, whatever the particular source of data.'⁷⁰ This helps reinforce the necessity, and logic, of beginning my study of sensation in Racine with the eye. In this first chapter, I adopt the premise of a primacy of sorts for vision, and believe that characters emphasize their experience of this sense throughout the corpus even as it proves intertwined with other senses, or synonymous with intellectual understanding. For Racine's characters, the dualism of the mind-body problem is one which provokes a constant re-viewing of sensation, and often leads to instances of perception where more than one sense is involved. This interaction and interdependence of the senses is what makes sensation in Racine such a rich topic. At the same time, the complications of sensation are precisely what renders it such a frustrating topic to explore, one which critics have chosen to explore in brief and carefully delimited studies,⁷¹ or from which they have largely stayed away: sensation in Racine seems to become more complicated the closer one looks.

In my study, I use Aristotle and Descartes' work as appropriate in order to understand certain themes in Racine's theatre. Racine is, however, a playwright and his characters escape some of the rigours one might encounter in a philosophical treatise. I do not wish to try and provide a definitive, early modern theory of sight, but I use the elemental premises of early modern vision provided by critics such as Clark. There is no singular early modern definition of vision; instead, what occurs in Racine's time is a challenging of the classical views as seen through, for example, the writings of Descartes, alongside a conservation of parts of these ancient theories. In this chapter, I approach sight in Racine by starting with characters' eyes and tracing the results of impressions made on the eye, whether those lead to other sensations and/or to an inner illumination through cognition. In the study of the visual process, illumination is a key theme and one which is inherently connected with the visual experience for Racine's characters. For these characters, perceiving

⁷⁰ Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, p.10.

⁷¹ I am thinking of the study of *le regard* in Jean Starobinski's *L'Oeil vivant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

something which has been illuminated begs the question of whether that experience leads to data being taken by the mind, or to feeling with the body, or to both. I intend to show that Racine makes his characters' intellectual perceptions and sense faculties combine as they engage visually with their surroundings.

'Seeing things': Colour, Movement, Light and Darkness

According to sources on early modern theories of vision, the final stage of sensation and cognition, whether part of the process of taste, smell, touch, sight or hearing, involves that particular sensation being represented to an 'inner' eye located within the mind.⁷² This notion of the 'mind's eye', and the connection between external and internal sensation, is apparent in the entry for *voir* in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*,⁷³ where the more literal meaning is given as 'appercevoir, recevoir les images des objets dans les yeux, connoistre par les yeux' and a slight variation is 'de la connoissance qu'on acquiert des choses du monde, dans les voyages.' For the figurative sense of the verb, the *Dictionnaire* offers 's'appercevoir, connoistre,' noting that *voir* 'se dit aussi de tous les autres sens, comme du goust, de l'odorat, de l'attouchement' with the illustrative phrase '*voyez si le vin est bon, goutez-y pour voir.*'⁷⁴ The *Dictionnaire* highlights the connection between vision and the other senses, and suggests that all sensory experiences are represented to the mind in a way which is also visual. Even today, in both French and English, seeing something is inherently connected to an evaluation, in some way, of that object.

On Racine's stage, vision proves an integral part of characters' literal and metaphorical sensations: they look to meet each other's eyes, reveal their dark passions in the light of day, try to shine the light of truth in impenetrable places, and express a desire to return to the cover and obscurity of night. As critics such as Jean Starobinski have noted,⁷⁵ much of the psychological tension in Racinian theatre which translates to embodied sensation stems from anxiety related to perceiving light and dark, and especially from the eye's desire not being met in full. In this

⁷² Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, p. 11. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: a Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 17, 27.

⁷³ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, first edition, 1694.

⁷⁴ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, first edition, 1694.

⁷⁵ Starobinski, *L'Oeil vivant*, passim.

section I will examine characters' experiences of light, darkness and colour. I take inspiration from important points raised by critics such as Starobinski, but make a new study of what, in a literal sense, dominates the visual field of the Racinian character, which colours strike the eye, and I uncover fresh evidence for the connection between what characters actually see and how this affects the rest of their body and mind.

The Racinian character's colour palette is heavily pared-down, featuring primarily red, with some mention of white as a synonym for light, one instance of yellow and several references to black. Despite the raptures of the chorus in *Esther* and especially *Athalie*, and the many references to the fertile plains and valleys of Zion, there is no actual mention of green. The sky always stands in for the heavens, and for workings beyond the characters' knowledge or control; its blue colour is not mentioned once. Characters literally 'see red' in every play except *La Thébaïde* and *Les Plaideurs*; that is, they use the verb *rougir* or, as in *Phèdre*, refer to the colour red. Red is, indirectly, a part of all the plays except for *Les Plaideurs*, through blood, bleeding, being covered in blood—*sang*, *sanglant* and *ensanglanté*—or as a marker of frustrated feeling or embarrassment.

In *Iphigénie*, the colour red is used in a metaphorical sense, indicating embarrassment or a struggle against one's conscience. The colour red features heavily in the play, yet in subtler ways than, for example, Racine's earlier work *La Thébaïde*. Characters use various forms of 'rougir' beginning in Act II after the princess' reunion with her father. Agamemnon is clearly distracted, and a hurt Iphigénie asks 'N'osez-vous sans rougir être père un moment?' (II. 2. 560). Here, she calls attention to his embarrassment and equivocation, and the flush of his skin as he wrestles with something he will not share with his daughter; as she notes, 'Tous vos regards sur moi ne tombent qu'avec peine' (II. 2. 553). Iphigénie tries to help her father focus his shifting gaze by describing what is currently in front of him—Ériphile, Iphigénie herself, and their reunion—and asks him to be the father whose attitude is that of the great man she has described to her friend. In a conversation between Clytemnestre and Iphigénie a few scenes later, the former notices that Ériphile blushes or changes colour when hearing about Achilles deciding not to marry Iphigénie: 'Je vous vois rougir de cet outrage. | Il faut d'un noble orgueil armer votre courage' (II. 4. 637-38).

As Agamemnon's deception is compounded and he tries to keep Clytemnestre from discovering that the marriage he has arranged for their daughter is in fact the ceremony of her sacrifice, he refuses to entertain the idea of his wife walking Iphigénie down the aisle. Still believing they are discussing the wedding to Achille, Clytemnestre begs her husband, 'D'un spectacle si doux ne privez point mes yeux. | Daignez ne point ici rougir de ma présence' (III. 1. 812-13). Carrying on with the theme of blushing out of embarrassment, Clytemnestre later professes to not being ashamed to know when it might be useful to throw herself, as a queen, at Achille's feet in supplication (III. 5. 932). The last reference to red in *Iphigénie* is the red colour of Ériphile's blood as she spills it herself in sacrifice at the altar: 'À peine son sang coule et fait rougir la terre, | Les dieux font sur l'autel entendre la tonnerre' (V. 6. 1773-74). In Ulysse's description at the end of the play, Ériphile's flowing blood has a profound and immediately visible effect on the earth: it makes the wind blow again, so much so that the water is white (line 1777), and the heavens open up and shine down (line 1779).

Dramatic red colours stand out to the characters, and nowhere is the power of red more concentrated than in *Phèdre*. One of the most visually detailed, descriptive speeches from the Racinian corpus is Thérémène's account of Hippolyte's spectacular, horrific death. His speech is heavily accented with crimson through the frequent invocation of Hippolyte's spilt blood; it also contains a small scene within a scene, as he recalls what he witnessed Aricie see as she found her lover's body. As Wes Williams observes in his work on monsters and early modern culture,⁷⁶ it is significant that the audience hears in detail about the death of Hippolyte and his battle with the monster, rather than witness it firsthand onstage. Racine chooses 'to have the struggle reported, painted in words, sounds images and rhymes, and in doing so reminds us one last time that his monsters are close kin to the children in his plays.'⁷⁷ By having the battle with the monster reported instead of shown onstage, as Corneille had done with his *Andromède*, Racine increases the horror and monstrosity of Hippolyte's bloody death by placing responsibility on Thérémène's account, and having him paint the *tableau* of the scene for the audience.

⁷⁶ Wes Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic* (Oxford, OUP, 2011).

⁷⁷ Williams, p. 300.

One of the first images to stand out in Théràmène's speech is that of Hippolyte's horses, who seem to resemble him in their sorrow and sense of defeat as they depart Trézène:

Ses superbes coursiers, qu'on voyait autrefois
Pleins d'une ardeur si noble obéir à sa voix,
L'œil morne maintenant et la tête baissée,
Semblaient se conformer à sa triste pensée. (V. 6. 1503-06)

This scene, in which the horses resemble their master and are on course for their departure, contrasts sharply with what Théràmène sees next in the episode after the arrival of the monster sent by Neptune. He describes the monster as being part bull, part dragon, with large horns, and a body covered in yellow scales (lines 1517-20). The sight of this monster is so ghastly and frightening that the earth, sky and sea all recoil in horror. Despite Hippolyte's heroic gesture in which he attacks the monster, his horses are terrified and, perhaps goaded by Neptune's trident, flee in desperation and terror. Instead of obeying their master they flee, dragging him to his death. Two of the most powerful images in Théràmène's narrative are of the wounded monster lashing out at the horses, and of Théràmène himself following the trail of his master's blood to Hippolyte's battered body.

After Hippolyte strikes at and wounds the monster, it falls, writhing and bellowing, at the horses' feet:

De rage et de douleur le monstre bondissant
Vient aux pieds des chevaux tomber en mugissant,
Se roule, et leur présente une gueule enflammé
Qui les couvre de feu, de sang et de fumée. (V. 6. 1531-34)

The verbs *tomber* and *rouler* are densely packed with the adverbs *bondissant* and *mugissant* into three lines, making this an active and violent scene, full of desperate, erratic movement. Not only is the dragon-bull monster visibly and audibly in pain, it retaliates against Hippolyte through his horses, unleashing a storm of fire, blood and smoke on them (line 1534). The 'f' sound from *enflammé* (line 1533) is echoed in *feu* and *fumée* of the following line, and one can imagine the brightness of the blistering fire, the deep red of blood and the choking haze of smoke. Later in the episode, after the horses have run amok, causing Hippolyte's death, Théràmène

literally follows a trail of Hippolyte's blood in order to find his body. As he notes, the prince's entire body is one gaping, bloody wound before it falls to the earth: 'tout son corps n'est bientôt qu'une plaie' (line 1550). He describes the blood-soaked path that leads to Hippolyte, mangled beyond all recognition:

De son généreux sang la trace nous conduit,
Les rochers en sont teints, les ronces dégouttantes
Portent de ses cheveux les dépouilles sanglantes (V. 6. 1556-58)

This gory death scene is punctuated by a series of smaller, equally vivid images. Not only does he follow the trail of his master's blood, it is a 'generous' amount and presumably could not be missed. In fact, the rocks are stained red with the viscous fluid, and it even drips down from the brambles, so saturated is the area. Aricie is not far behind and soon arrives on the horrific scene.

[...] veut quelque temps douter de son malheur.
Et ne connaissant plus ce héros qu'elle adore,
Elle voit Hippolyte, et le demande encore. (V. 6. 1580-82)

Théramène's retelling contrasts the surrounding grass, steaming with Hippolyte's warm, freshly-spilled blood, with the colourless, lifeless body of the prince Aricie finds. To further illustrate his earlier assertion that Hippolyte's own father would not recognise his body (line 1570), Théramène notes that Aricie has difficulty reconciling the mangled corpse she sees with the image she still carries in her mind's eye of Hippolyte as he looked when he was alive. What stands out to Théramène most in the death sequence, and what he recalls to the other characters afterward is the sight of Hippolyte's blood, and the fact that it was spilled everywhere, staining everything in the area. Through Théramène's re-telling, the mind's eye of the audience is led from the thrashing movements of the monster that rose up out of the sea to attack the prince, to the bright flame and crimson that the beast belches onto the horses, then the fall from the sky and dashing against the rocks, and finally the mangled body of the prince. The reader and spectator follow along the trail of blood, deliberately laid by Racine. Racine allows Théramène to be very explicit about the death sequence, which if it had been shown onstage might well have trespassed against the limits of the credible for an audience. One is, perhaps, more

affected for having seen Hippolyte's death in the mind's eye as opposed to the actual eye.

Light, as *lumière* and adjectival or adverbial forms such as *illuminé* or *luminant*, is repeatedly emphasized in *Athalie*. Light is alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, the literal light which makes things visible, and the light of revelation which brings knowledge and understanding. Illumination plays a central role in *Athalie*, where much of the action hangs on the revelation of the child Joas. The first mention of light is during a scene in which the chorus sings in praise of God, helping Josabet as she prepares to go to the temple: 'Il commande au soleil d'animer la nature, | Et la lumière est un don de ses mains' (I. 4. 328-29). Here, the hand of God is a synecdochical reference to the being of God, whose presence the Israelite chorus senses as the life-giving and light-giving force in the natural world. Additionally, God is the force behind the sun itself, illuminating the world and making visible its great beauty.

Then, further developing the imagery of God making himself perceptible in various illuminating ways, the chorus sings about his gift to the Israelites, his divine word inscribed in the law and commandments with which Moses later descends from Mount Sinai to the people. The word of God made visible is a powerful image of one of the only encounters with the divine which human eyes can withstand. The chorus compares the inscription on the tablets to a ray of light, shining from the darkness of the cloud that covered the Mount for six days, shrouding the Lord:

Dans un nuage épais le Seigneur enfermé
Fit luire aux yeux mortels un rayon de sa gloire [...]
Il venait révéler aux enfants des Hébreux
De ses préceptes saints la lumière immortelle
(I. 4. 334-35, 434-35)

Here, the movement from darkness to light corresponds to a shift from the Israelites' wanderings to seeing physical evidence of God showing himself to them as his chosen people. Racine's use of the verb *luire* functions on two levels: it can refer to a more physical visual experience, as in a ray of light emanating from God and seen by the Israelites, or it can refer to an inner spiritual awareness, in which the presence of God is felt by an inner eye. Racine emphasizes the contrast between the eternal

and the temporal by having the chorus sing about the infinite light of God meeting the mortal eyes of the people.

God is present in *Athalie*, where characters catch glimpses of the divine. He must be so translated because his unfiltered image is more than the human eye can withstand. God gives his divine word in visible form and inspires a longing for Zion and a desire to rebuild the temple. By introducing the all-seeing eye of a God whose presence is seen and felt by the characters in different ways, Racine introduces another layer to their visual experience. God's surveillance and visible markers in their lives hint at visions of another world beyond that which they experience, in small part, on earth. Most significantly for the eyes of the Israelites and the characters in *Athalie*, God shows himself through the eventual bringing to light, so to speak, of the divine *logos* which in the play takes the form of the child Joas. References to Joas and light occur throughout the play, whether it be hiding him from Athalie lest his true identity be discovered before the right time—'C'était des tristes Juifs l'espérance dernière, | Que mes soins vigilants cachaient à la lumière'⁷⁸—or about his role as divine child and ruler of the Israelites, come to bring them out of the darkness of Athalie's reign.

When Josabet calls to mind the blood-soaked scene in which she found Joas, this episode stands out as Racine manages to combine the colour red which impacts upon characters' bodies, and an encounter with God as present in the child who is the last of David's line. Josabet remembers,

Joas, laissé pour mort, frappa soudain ma vue [...]
Je le pris tout sanglant. En baignant son visage,
Mes pleurs du sentiment lui rendirent l'usage. (I. 2. 247, 251-52)

Joas' body literally acts upon Josabet; the sight of him strikes her eye and the verb *frapper* (line 247) emphasizes the physical effect of glimpsing his body. He is literally covered in the blood of his slaughtered siblings, and his being found in the midst of such slaughter highlights what is already a miraculous escape from Athalie's vengeance. Josabet's tears are the subject of the next sentence (lines 251-52), and they serve two functions: not only do they wash away the blood of his

⁷⁸ *Athalie*, V. 2. 1651-52.

murdered family members from his body, but they revive the child and bring him back to his senses.

Beyond colour and illumination, the idea of *gloire* plays an important role with respect to vision, bodily impact and understanding in Racine. The characters in *Alexandre*, for example, repeatedly refer to the concept of earthly power and glory associated with the sound of their name. Looking after their *gloire* is important for Porus, Taxile, Axiane and Alexandre alike because it has to do with how they are *seen* by their people and by other rulers. In his final two plays, Racine is able to play with this concept of glory because of the biblical subject and added presence of the divine. In *Esther*, after the fall of Aman, Assuérus declares that his eyes have been opened to the truth: ‘Mes yeux sont désillés, le crime est confondu’ (III. 7. 1178) and asks Mardochée to take his rightful place at his side, ‘Viens briller près de moi dans le rang qui t’est dû’ (III. 7. 1179). The implication is that Assuérus himself shines in glory, and that glory will touch Mardochée as well when he is beside the king, bathed in light. Assuérus orders the temple to be rebuilt, the Jews to be the equals of the Persians (line 1184), and finally,

Que vos heureux enfants [of the Jews] dans leurs solennités
Consacrent à ce jour le triomphe et la gloire,
Et qu’à jamais mon nom vive dans leur mémoire.
(III. 7. 1187-89)

Here, Racine bridges the gap between the use of *gloire* in earlier plays such as *Alexandre*, and its religious and liturgical significance in a biblical context. Assuérus’ understanding of glory in this instance both complements and contradicts that of Esther herself. In *Athalie*, God in his glory is even more heavy-handed, so to speak, as a presence. As Joad warns Abner, ‘Reconnaissez, Abner, à ses traits éclatants, | Un Dieu tel aujourd’hui qu’il fut dans tous les temps: Il sait, quand il lui plait, faire éclater sa gloire (I. 1. 125-27). Joad’s view of God is that he is not only still present even in Athalie’s kingdom of persecution and death, but that God is visible to humans, recognizable by the eye, brilliant and prone to showing himself to great impact when he wishes.

Allumer appears in a slightly ironic context in *Andromaque*. Hector’s widow laments the fact that Pyrrhus’ love for her has ignited a tremendous amount of hate in the hearts of the Greeks (I. 4. 341), and presumably has ignited significant

revulsion in her own heart, the opposite of what the flame of love is meant to inspire. Hermione, wishing to rid herself of Oreste's advances, refers to his love for her as a weak flame, one unlikely to last (I. 4. 341). Britannicus attempts to align himself with Agrippine by insinuating they are both victims of Néron's cruelty and therefore motivated by the same sense of hurt (III. 5. 899), and Junie invokes a vision of the fire that is Néron's wrath, in an attempt to make Britannicus flee what she knows will be a devastating encounter. Finally, when advising Titus strongly against marrying Bérénice, Paulin uses the image of an objectionable flame that should not be seen by the Roman people, as consecrating the love between the Roman emperor and an outsider would be 'odieux' (II. 2. 402). These are all metaphorical uses of light and flame which carry associations with heat, but are notably visual metaphors whose use is meant to stimulate the visual imagination first, with their connection to the sun and to illumination.

Characters' references to the absence of light, and to various shades and shadows between light and darkness, are particularly interesting because they reveal how the characters adjust, or how their perception shifts, when faced with lack. *Nuit* is used in both *La Thébaïde* and *Athalie*, at points in the plays when characters wish to illustrate a feeling of being visually, morally or psychologically lost. Jocaste bemoans the darkness that has descended upon her soul, and Thebes, because her sons are unable to share the Theban throne between them (I. 1. 24). Olympe longs for the eternal night of the tomb, wishing to follow her mistress Antigone in death: 'Heureuse mille fois, si ma douleur mortelle | Dans la nuit du tombeau m'eût plongée avec elle!' (V. 5. 1478). In *Athalie*, night also is used in connection with death and being entombed (IV. 4. 1496), and Abner is one of the only characters to refer to night literally (V. 2. 1639). There are not a large number of references to grey areas in the Racine corpus, but in the opening scene of *Athalie*, Abner illustrates the Israelites' precarious position within Athalie's kingdom when he refers to the 'jours ténébreux' (I. 1. 14) that have descended, which encapsulates the darkness and uncertainty which encroaches upon the light of the day. Even the faithful retain only a shade of their former commitment to religious observance: 'D'adorateurs zélés à peine un petit nombre | Ose des premiers temps nous retracer quelque ombre' (I. 2. 15-16).

Racinian characters' eyes respond primarily to the visual stimuli of bright red, white light, and the black of darkness. The simplicity of their environment's colour

speaks to a heightened sensitivity rather than diminished feeling, to lives in which passion takes centre stage and bodies are often shaken to the core. Characters show alternating concern and desire for the truth and purity of light, or the obscurity and safety of darkness. This does not mean that characters *only* see in these broad terms, but rather that these are the visual cues they look for in their world, and which serve as springboards to embodied experience. What we find in Racine is that, even when we approach a singular sense from a seemingly straightforward perspective, the characters' bodies prove far more sensitive than we might have anticipated. This sensitivity means that a visual stimulus does not simply register in the mind, but usually reverberates throughout the body in some way, and is closely linked with a character's emotional state.

In the second half of this chapter, I shift focus from the general visual landscape of light and darkness to the more specific interpersonal gaze and the gaze of the lover. One of the most universal visual experiences Racine explores is that of seeing another person and falling in love. Desire, in Racine's theatre, is an initially visual engagement with the other which inevitably involves multiple senses and plays upon the entire body. In the next section I will explore how Racine's characters relate to the object of their affection, revealing their fascination or obsession with the body of the other.

The 'Coup de Foudre'

In Starobinski's study of the gaze in Racine, he starts from the premise that the ultimate goal of the gaze is not that the eye rest on an a particular thing or notice any of its particular aspects, but that it meet the eye of another person: 'le regard n'est point tourné vers des objets; il ne s'arrête ni aux formes ni aux couleurs. Il n'explore pas le monde, interroge à peine la nature: il ne cherche que le regard des autres,'⁷⁹ and 'point d'images, donc, ou très peu.'⁸⁰ Starobinski's main point is that seeing another human being and being seen by the other are the visual impulses that govern all action and interaction in the Racinian corpus. What Starobinski aptly highlights is the tension, when dealing with the gaze and other people, between what the gaze wants and the fact that its desire is almost never met, or never met in full.

⁷⁹ Starobinski, *L'Oeil vivant*, p. 77.

⁸⁰ Starobinski, *L'Oeil vivant*, p. 78.

He also identifies an essential part of Racine's characters which makes them come alive and gives them true human dimension:

Chez Racine, derrière ce que l'on voit, il y a ce que l'on entrevoit, et, plus loin, ce dont on ne peut que pressentir la réalité, sans en rien voir. Cette perspective d'ombre est l'un des éléments de l'impression de vérité que nous font les personnages raciniens. Ils sont 'profonds.'⁸¹

The multiple visual layers help achieve a greater sense of reality, as characters are constantly exploring with their eyes, remembering visions or dreams from the past, and struggle with believing what they see and making it into a coherent picture, in the same way the spectator might in his own life. Seeing is complicated, and Starobinski connects the struggle to fulfil the desire of the gaze with the basic meaning of the verb *voir* itself: 'le verbe *voir*, chez Racine, contient ce battement sémantique entre le trouble et la clarté, entre le savoir et l'égarement.'⁸² Starobinski identifies the darkness and obscurity inherent in these multiple visual layers of vision, and representation, and insightfully remarks that in Racinian theatre, things very often go back to a traumatic event before the play began.

Mitchell Greenberg, whose work on Racine and Freudian theories of desire has immeasurably contributed to critical understanding of, among other tropes, love and vision in Racine, refers to such scenes as I will discuss—primarily Phèdre's love for Hippolyte and Néron's love for Junie—as a sort of 'primal' scene, 'a scene which is absent from the tragedy but which never ceases to exert an influence over the entire represented drama.'⁸³ In the tragedy represented onstage, stemming from this 'primal scene,' Roland Barthes traces the life and visual representation of the 'phantasme racinien,' calling critical attention to the fact that 'l'enlèvement de Junie [...] la descente de Phèdre au Labyrinthe [...] sont des *tableaux*.'⁸⁴ In other words, these subsequent scenes, in their unfolding, are constructed similarly to paintings—perhaps similarly to the metaphorical *tableaux* discussed by d'Aubignac—in that 'les personnages et les objets y on une disposition calculée en vue d'un sens global,

⁸¹ Starobinski, *L'Oeil vivant*, p. 73.

⁸² Starobinski, *L'Oeil vivant*, p. 75-6.

⁸³ Mitchell Greenberg, 'Racine, Oedipus, and Absolute Fantasies,' *Diacritics* 28 (1998), 40-61, p. 56.

⁸⁴ Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), p. 30.

ells appellent le voyeur (et le lecteur) a une participation intelligente.’⁸⁵ The phantasms which this section will explore depend upon, or produce, an interplay of shadow and light.⁸⁶

With this tension in mind, I approach the issue of love in Racine’s theatre. The focus on colour and movement from the previous section serves as a primer for following the eye of the character in love. Characters who fall in love mark their love out as stemming from an instant of visual attraction to another. Having just looked at the colours which stand out to Racine’s characters in other situations, I will now examine how love affects their visual field. While readers and viewers might expect love at first sight to be an uplifting, enchanting affair, Racine turns this assumption on its head. First of all, the *coup de foudre* is a profoundly destabilising experience, regardless of how powerful or authoritative Racine’s characters might appear in other contexts. Secondly, the spectator is often witness to something sinister: a destructive impulse, mingled with horror or sadism. These psychological implications are all the more affecting because the *coup de foudre* is not simply visual—as the English idiom ‘love at first sight’ suggests—but rather a multi-sensory *coup*, or blow, which leaves an impression upon the entire body.

In this section, I want to explore the implications of these darker sensations utilising the resources of twentieth-century theories of desire and the senses. I shall examine how Phèdre and Néron each narrate their experiences of the *coup de foudre* phenomenon in particularly evocative, sensorially loaded language, and how their passions play out onstage. I will discuss Phèdre’s experience of falling in love at first sight with her stepson Hippolyte. Here, Georges Bataille’s discussion of the Phaedra complex and the prohibition of incest provide a deeper understanding of Phèdre’s experience and its devastating consequences. Thereafter, I turn to Jacques Lacan’s neo-Freudian concept of the mirror-stage in order to analyse Néron’s sudden passion for Junie. Together, these case histories of Racine’s lovers will encourage us to take a second, closer look at love at first sight.

Being in Love

⁸⁵ Barthes, p. 30.

⁸⁶ Barthes, p. 30, my paraphrase.

All characters in Racine's theatre who speak of love do so in relation to a visual experience. The voice, the smell, and the touch of the other person are not presented as being inherently attractive; rather, the sight alone of that person determines one's love. Because love always starts out from the visual, it implicates the body in every case. The difference, however, between *coup de foudre* and ordinary love lies in the degree to which the rest of the body is implicated, and other senses compromised. Relationships between such partners as Britannicus and Junie, Bérénice and Titus, Bajazet and Atalide, and Monime and Xipharès all speak to an affection that is mutual and softer, yet still begins with a look. Love of this type is not referred to in quite the same manner as the passion whose soul-shaking onset is related by Phèdre or Néron: it affects the senses in ways which are similar, yet not to the same degree. I will set up my discussion of Phèdre and Néron by first addressing these cases of reciprocal love which implicate the body slightly less strongly.

The spectator learns about Britannicus and Junie's love through Narcisse's discussion with his master early in the play: 'Dis-moi: Britannicus l'aime-t-il?' (II. 2. 427) asks the future emperor, and he is told that Britannicus does indeed love Junie, that her eyes have bewitched him (lines 431-432) and he is indeed devoted to her. The audience knows within the first few lines of *Bérénice* that the eponymous queen and Roman emperor are in love ('C'est ici [in the *cabinet* that separates their rooms] quelquefois qu'il se cache à sa cour, | Lorsqu'il vient à la reine expliquer son amour' (I. 1. 5-6)). Bajazet and Atalide attempt to keep their love a secret from Roxane, as Bajazet would need to marry the Sultan's favourite instead of the woman he loves, in order to save his own life. Monime and Xipharès discover in the course of *Mithridate* that they have loved each other, separately, for quite some time.

Titus and Bérénice have enjoyed a relationship for five years before the start of the play (I. 1. 25). They are already in love, and the dilemma that confronts them, ultimately preventing their marriage, is that Titus' obligation to Rome supersedes any understanding he might have had with Bérénice. While trying desperately to understand why, despite the end of the mourning period for his father, her lover will barely see or speak to her, Bérénice tells Phénice

Plus je veux du passé rappeler la mémoire,
Du jour que je le vis jusqu'à ce triste jour,
Plus je vois qu'on me peut reprocher trop d'amour

(II. 5. 632-634)

Similarly to Phèdre, she uses the construction ‘je le vis’ but here it is in a very different context. Bérénice locates the inception of her love in the first time she saw Titus. One episode she recalls with great clarity is the night when Titus’ splendour and glory most impressed her. She remembers particularly how other regal and highly placed people looked at him: ‘Tous ces yeux qu’on voyait venir de toutes parts | Confondre sur lui seul leurs avides regards’ (II. 5. 309-10). Bérénice is struck by seeing so many pairs of important eyes, all fixed on the man she loves, and by how the company seemed themselves to be illuminated only by Titus’ glory: ‘Qui tous de mon amant empruntaient leur éclat’ (II. 5. 306).

Titus, for his part, has also loved Bérénice faithfully for the same five years, and has enjoyed loving her, seeing in her his perfect companion, lover, and he hoped, his future wife. He speaks of the strength of his love and how it has inspired him, telling his interlocutor that his affection for the queen is

Plus ardent mille fois que tu ne peux penser,
Paulin. Je me suis fait un plaisir nécessaire
De la voir chaque jour, de l’aimer, de lui plaire.
(II. 2. 422-424)

The emperor’s greatest pleasure in life has come from loving Bérénice and seeing confirmation of that love every day. It pains him to say goodbye to her, but the unseen character of Rome looms over the lovers, and when the space between their rooms is opened out onto the world for judgment, shows Titus’ relationship with a foreign queen to be unacceptable. John Campbell cites the fact that ‘In *Bérénice*, we are always conscious of a world outside the tragic couple.’⁸⁷ This outside world does not look favourably on a marriage between Titus and Bérénice; for so long as their relationship is carried out in the confines of the imperial palace they appear to be safe, but soon enough their union is judged, and found to be flawed, by Rome. The true tragedy of the piece lies in the fact that Rome does not see Bérénice as Titus sees her: they must separate and never lay eyes on each other again.

⁸⁷ John Campbell, ‘*Bérénice*: The Plotting of a Tragedy,’ *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 15 (1993), 145-55 (pp. 147).

One of the additional complications to the Titus-Bérénice union is the relationship between Bérénice and Antiochus. Antiochus has always been in love with the queen, although circumstances changed after Titus laid eyes on her and in that same instant fell in love with her. In taking a more background role, and even serving as go-between for the two lovers, it seems that for Antiochus, his relationship with Bérénice came to be based on a series of *regards*. He fell in love with Bérénice in an instant:

Madame, il vous souvient que mon coeur en ces lieux
Reçut le premier trait qui partit de vos yeux.
J'aimai. [...] (I. 4. 189-91)

Here, Antiochus sketches a Bérénice whose eyes have the power to launch an arrow straight into his heart, and he traces his love for her back to the moment she first looked at him. Despite her developing relationship with Titus, Antiochus believed she knew how he felt about her without his having to say it, 'je fis parler mes yeux (I. 4. 201). When explaining to Bérénice why he must leave Rome, he confesses he is really leaving her gaze, the one he constantly desires but ultimately never receives, and the eyes which look at him but never really see him: 'Que vous dirai-je enfin? Je fuis des yeux distraits, | Qui me voyant toujours ne me voyaient jamais' (I. 4. 277-78). To truly see Antiochus is to see him in the sense of perceiving his love for her, which she has been unable to do and which he feels is communicated as he looks at her.

Monime presents a unique case in Racine's theatre. She is desired by each of the three lead male characters in *Mithridate*: Mithridate himself, to whom she is engaged; Pharnace, his son whose love, like his father's, she finds repugnant; and Xipharès, his other son, with whom she is in love. Xipharès defends his passion for his father's fiancée:

Qu'il te suffise donc, pour me justifier,
Que je vis, que j'aimai la reine le premier ;
Que mon père ignorait jusqu'au nom de Monime
Quand je conçus pour elle un amour légitime. (I. 1. 45-48)

Looking at Monime is clearly tantamount to loving her. In line 46, Xipharès' choice to use the verbs 'saw' and 'loved' in such quick succession is emblematic of the

swift connection between what his eyes experienced and what the rest of his body felt in loving her. The prince may have been the first to see and love Monime, but he is not the only one to currently desire her; his father soon noticed the beautiful young woman as well: 'Il [Mithridate] la vit' (I. 1. 49). Although Xipharès is narrating his version of his father's experience, the meaning and the impact are very clear, and he only needs three words to *say* that his father saw Monime, to *indicate* that Mithridate loves her.

In the following scene, the prince has the opportunity to speak with his beloved, and confesses his long-abiding love for her. Xipharès declares 'Je vous vis, je formai le dessin d'être à vous' (I. 2. 194). Phèdre relates the hot and cold sensations that consume her body, and Xipharès, in a slightly more muted incarnation of love at first sight, associates seeing Monime for the first time with the formulation of an intention. He does not say that he desired her for his own, but desired to be *hers* in the moment he first looked at her. In this respect, Xipharès is the anti-Néron, as he desires to belong to the one he loves, as opposed to deciding that she must be joined to him. He makes the decision that *he* must be *hers*. Unlike all the other lovers in Racine's plays, Xipharès and Monime do have their happy ending.

The Animate Idol

Néron experiences a sudden and profoundly consuming sense of love for Junie. His primary feeling is one of fascination, and for him, the counterpoint to being dazzled by Junie is an obsessive desire to control her. In the wake of his destabilising experience, Néron first worships Junie and then starts to test out his ability to manipulate her. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage will help uncover the psychological underpinnings of Néron's attempts at mastery over the bodies of those around him.

Néron's love for Junie prefigures the action of the play, first striking when he sets eyes on her in his palace and she is confused and crying. As he relates the episode to his confidant Narcisse, it is clear that with a single look, his entire world is changed. He says of his captive, 'Depuis un moment, mais pour toute ma vie, | J'aime, que dis-je, aimer? j'idolâtre Junie!' (II. 2. 383-384). Néron echoes Phèdre in his evocation of idolatry, yet in his case the veneration of Junie's image is not bound

up in a desire to submit to the one he worships. The moment he looked at her is so significant and so powerful, it will impact upon the rest of his life, and the force of his love makes the future dictator feel as though he has and will always love Junie. Néron's idolatry manifests itself in a desire for power over Junie, to set her forever—perhaps on a pedestal—where he might always look at her.

Néron's experience of the *coup de foudre* is a disempowering one. Despite himself, he confesses to having been 'ravi d'une si belle vue' (II. 2. 395). In an unexpected shift of perspective given that Néron is the kidnapper in this instance, Racine's 'ravisser' confesses himself 'ravi' by his prey. The use of *ravir* speaks to the almost out-of-body sensation, and to the fact that Néron's very soul was suddenly moved in a 'transport d'admiration, de joye.'⁸⁸ He feels impotent in the face of Junie's beauty:

J'ai voulu lui parler, et ma voix s'est perdue:
Immobile, saisi d'un long étonnement,
Je l'ai laissé passer dans son appartement. (II. 2. 396-398)

Ironically, the emperor of Rome, for all his power, is rendered powerless at the sight of the one he loves. Néron can neither speak nor move; the experience of seeing Junie is all-consuming. His 'long étonnement' (line 397) and its duration, when compared with the single instant in which he initially sees Junie, further illustrates the force and effect of the *coup*. He can only follow Junie with his eyes as she retires to her new rooms in the palace. For him, she is something to be taken from Britannicus, to be spied upon,⁸⁹ controlled, and dominated. Néron paints Junie as the consummate object upon which his gaze rests and his desire fixes.

Junie's eyes are the aspect of her physiognomy that Néron finds the most fascinating and, therefore, the part of her body he would most like to control. The night he has her carried off to his palace, he notices 'ses yeux mouillés de larmes' (II. 2. 387). His captive is distressed when Néron catches sight of her, and 'le farouche aspect de ses fiers ravisseurs, | Relevaient de ses yeux les timides douceurs' (II. 2. 393-394). Several Racine scholars have commented on Néron's recognition of the tears he causes to appear in Junie's eyes. Paul Schwartz characterizes the emperor's reaction as 'explained in part by Néron's realization that he c[an] impose

⁸⁸ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, first edition, 1694.

⁸⁹ For example, 'Sur son coeur aurait-il [Britannicus] quelque empire?' (II. 2. 435).

himself on other people with his eyes,'⁹⁰ and Renée Morel notes 'ces larmes témoignent de son pouvoir sur un regard qui ne lui échappera plus.'⁹¹ The sight of Junie's tears does let Néron know that his actions have—indirectly—caused her distress, but Morel goes too far in asserting that Néron now exercises complete power over the young woman and her gaze. As the phrase 'ses fiers ravisseurs' (line 393) shows, the tears in her eyes are the result of actions carried out by Néron's guards, a response to the trauma of being forcibly removed from her home and brought to the imperial palace; these tears have not sprung up because Junie is looking at Néron. In fact, as Starobinski observes, 'il a fait couler ces larmes, mais le regard de Junie s'est détourné vers le ciel.'⁹² In a striking reversal of power, it is Junie, the object of his gaze, who unknowingly wields the power to render her captor speechless and immobile. Néron has captured her body and can now gaze at her whenever he likes, but does not control her eyes.

Junie is, in many ways, Néron's test case for control of others. Although he eventually holds psychological power over his entire court, Junie eludes him, remaining nearly out of reach for him even when he forces her to suffer his presence. Starobinski asserts that in Racine's theatre, 'tout le pouvoir signifiant du corps' is concentrated '[d]ans le seul langage des yeux,'⁹³ and in this principle highlights the fact that Junie is more in control of Néron than he is of her. He may have caused her to cry, but she, without even returning his gaze, robs him of the ability to speak or move. Néron's praise of Junie demonstrates that he is so fixated on her that even in her physical absence she still seems present: 'De son image en vain j'ai voulu me distraire' (II. 2. 400). Whereas Phèdre feels Hippolyte's presence 'sans cesse' (*Ph.* I. 3. 284), Néron pushes this to excess with his obsession, making Junie 'trop présente' (II. 2. 401). He speaks to, entreats, and threatens this conjured vision of his love, spending the entire night with eyes wide open, imagining Junie (II. 2. 406). After this night spent in rapturous contemplation of Junie's phantom, Néron is clearly not content to let his passion remain hidden. Following the hours of darkness spent 'occupé de mon nouvel amour' (II. 2. 405), as he puts it, the light of day brings

⁹⁰ Paul Schwartz, 'Language and Power: Eyes and Words in Britannicus,' trans. by Louis van Delft, *Yale French Studies*, 45 (1970), 102-112 (pp. 105).

⁹¹ Renée Morel, 'Narcisse mortifié et mortifière: le regard chez Racine,' *The French Review*, 64 (1991), 921-933 (pp. 928).

⁹² Jean Starobinski, 'La poétique du regard chez Racine,' in *L'Oeil Vivant*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 71-90 (p. 85).

⁹³ Jean Starobinski, 'La poétique du regard chez Racine', p. 74.

a new resolution. Néron's love consumes him, but not entirely: he lacks the guilt and self-recrimination which destroy Phèdre from within. Néron is preoccupied with Junie in much the same way as a child with a toy, and channels the desire to keep his plaything all to himself by forcing Junie to break off her relationship with Britannicus.

In all the versions of Racine's preface to *Britannicus*, he addresses his approach to painting the picture of Néron's monstrosity. Racine always refers to his Néron as specifically a 'monstre naissant,' captured in private moments with his family in his own home, at the point almost of becoming the true monster into which everyone—and history—knows him to have grown. Williams homes in on Racine's 'language of interiority, or privacy, and intimacy'⁹⁴ with respect to this portrait of the younger Néron not quite at the height of his power but who grows progressively into his own monstrosity as the play progresses. In the course of Act II, scene iii, through his manipulation of Junie, he becomes the kind of fearsome, grotesque figure who is 'no longer reliant on advisors to be his eyes and ears, but endowed with a fantasized hypertrophic sensitivity all his own, a properly physical monster.'⁹⁵

Lacanian Development: The Mirror Stage and Contemplation

Lacan's theory of the mirror stage helps uncover some of the deeper psychological issues at work for Néron that colour his interactions with other characters. This mirror stage, in Lacan's early writings, was simply a single moment in a young child's development when he recognized himself in a mirror, and moved about in front of his own image. In subsequent writings he attributed his theory to make the mirror-stage an event which marks, in more general terms, the moment when one becomes master of one's own body. Critically for our purposes, Lacan states that in this moment a child recognizes similarities between his own body—which he has just learned to control—and those of the people around him. As Lacan writes, 'what occurs here for the first time is the anticipated seizure of mastery.'⁹⁶ Rather than a moment in a child's development, the mirror stage becomes a life-long process that is part of the human experience. The mirror stage is a necessary step

⁹⁴ Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings*, p. 283.

⁹⁵ Williams, p. 283.

⁹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Seminars, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 146.

toward self-control but it is also dangerous because it usually involves a fantasy of still more control over others as well as the self. It can culminate in the individual being completely uncontrollable as his sadistic and/or masochistic impulses rise to the surface.

Néron manifests his intense desire for control, both in his relationship with his mother and a slightly more mature version in which he seeks to have power over everyone else in his world. By Agrippine's own admission, she always tried to exert power over Rome and Néron himself from 'derrière une voile, invisible et présente' (I. 1. 95). Néron's reaction against this is apparent in the opening scene, which finds his mother denied access to her son, and most importantly—for her—a visual connection with him. The start of the play marks the beginning of Néron's attempt to move out from under his mother's surveillance and test out his own body.

Lacan's discussion of the mirror-stage also helps flesh out Néron's fascination with Junie. As Lacan states, '[t]he subject originally locates and recognizes desire through the intermediary, not only of his own image, but of the body of his fellow being.'⁹⁷ Desire is found in the body of the Other, and discovered through an understanding of how one's body corresponds to the Other's, by locating points the two share in common. Everything the emperor does until he falls in love with Junie is motivated by his desire to free himself from his mother's grasp, to reclaim his own body. Even the idea to carry off Junie is initially conceived as yet another way to show Agrippine that he does not need the wife she has given him,⁹⁸ and can exercise physical control over Britannicus' fiancée if it pleased him. Once he actually sets eyes on Junie he falls in love with her, and the focus of his attention shifts. The emperor discovers that he can exert physical control over Junie, through keeping her as a prisoner in his palace and visiting her whenever he chooses. After the decisively formative experience of the *coup de foudre*, Néron feels that he can move from mastery of his own body to mastery of those around him, because he genuinely desires another person.

Manipulation

⁹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Seminars, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique*, trans. by John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 79.

⁹⁸ Although he has a wife, Octavie was chosen for him by Agrippine, which seems to indicate that Néron does not feel a deep desire to see her and be in her presence. She never appears onstage and is mentioned only a few times in passing, including a conversation about the relative merits of divorcing her (II. 2. 461-89).

When the emperor assures himself that Junie is well under his command physically, he sets out to manipulate her emotionally and psychologically. Lacan's discussion of the appeal of this 'mind control' of others places emphasis on the continued control over one's own body: '[t]he subject anticipates the achievement of psychological mastery, and this anticipation will leave its mark on every subsequent exercise of effective motor mastery.'⁹⁹ In Racine's play, Néron's dark interpretation of 'motor mastery' involves using Junie as an extension of his own body, as he manipulates her from behind a screen during her meeting with her fiancé.

Néron uses Junie's body to accomplish what he cannot do with his own: end her relationship with the man she loves. Prior to her forced interview with Britannicus, Néron warns Junie 'J'entendrai des regards que vous croirez muets' (II. 3. 682). He seeks to establish his sensory supremacy over Junie by implying that, behind the screen and deprived of his ability to see, he will more than sufficiently compensate by an increased sensitivity to her language and tone. Should this threat not be enough to ensure Junie's cooperation, he sends her out to perform her role with the warning, 'Madame, en le voyant, songez que je vous voi' (II. 4. 690). This tactic, similar to the surveillance that Agrippine practised on him, guarantees that when Junie looks at Britannicus all she will imagine is Néron's eye watching her.

Néron's attempt to orchestrate her every move and thought speaks to the sadistic nature of his desire for control. He delights in having Junie brought near him, and is capable of letting her out into the world provided that he can still manipulate her body and mind, then call her back to him at his pleasure. The way in which he manoeuvres Junie about in exercising his power over her is related to the '*Fort/Da*' game to which Lacan refers.¹⁰⁰ Lacan uses Freud's example of a child who displays a masochistic inclination in the way he plays with a toy: he brings it close to him, saying *Da* ('here'), then alternately tosses it away, announcing *Fort* ('far/there'). Néron, in similar fashion to the child in Freud's observations, experiments with forcing presence and absence upon someone else. He attempts to exorcise the memory of Agrippine's manipulations and surveillance by inflicting a similar torment upon Junie. The *Fort/Da* game may be an effective learning tool—

⁹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Seminars, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991) p. 79.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Seminars: Freud's Papers on Technique*, trans. John Forrester, p. 172-73.

albeit one which raises certain concerns—for a child, but its incarnation in an adult who uses another person is sadistic and repulsive to the person who takes the place of the toy. Junie, already terrified of Néron after he forces her to tell Britannicus she is no longer in love with him, is truly broken after he murders her fiancé.

In his experience of the mirror-stage and subsequent quest for domination of others, Néron succeeds only in destroying the object of his love, and never manages to possess her entirely. Although Junie is forever lost to him in a physical sense, and there can be no hope of gaining access to her, he is still haunted by her likeness. At the conclusion of the play, Néron can only utter a single word, her name: ‘Le seul nom de Junie échappe de sa bouche’ (V. 8. 1756). Whereas he had once been so certain in his own gaze and ruthless in his actions, he now finds himself without the object of his desire. Albine notes the change in Néron’s countenance: ‘Il marche sans dessein, ses yeux mal assurés | N’osent lever au ciel leurs regards égarés’ (V. 8. 1757-58). Néron’s sense of purpose is gone; uneasiness has set in, preventing him from being able to focus his gaze, or re-focus after Junie’s absence. The phrase ‘regards égarés’ makes Néron’s eyes seem like windows to a deeply troubled soul. The expression ‘brebis égarée’ was often used of heretics, the ‘lost sheep’ of the flock,¹⁰¹ which further highlights Néron’s unnatural state of separation from his court. His movements and behaviour are erratic and despairing.

One of the most significant, Freudian studies of the psychological implications of characters’ passions and interactions in Racinian theatre is the work of Charles Mauron.¹⁰² Mauron remarks that, for a type of Racinian character such as Néron,

Le moi amoureux rêve qu’il est l’agresseur vis-a-vis de la mère. Il retourne la situation angoissante : il se voit fort et voit la mère faible, prisonnière, réduite à sa merci. Ce mécanisme, illustré par [...] Néron, utilise directement le sadisme.¹⁰³

Néron is able to indulge his impulse to conquer and control those around him, to disastrous effect for those involved. This Freudian impulse to dominate the object of his affection, as Mauron identifies it, does not show itself until Néron truly falls in

¹⁰¹ *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, first edition (1694).

¹⁰² Charles Mauron, *L’Inconscient dans l’oeuvre et la vie de Racine* (Gap: Éditions Ophrys, 1957). It is with great regret that I acknowledge the need for much further exploration of the points raised by Mauron’s work, an imbalance I hope to redress in a future version of the manuscript.

¹⁰³ Mauron, p. 179.

love which happens not with his wife Octavie, chosen for him by Agrippine. It is of no significance that his love is unrequited; it merely matters *that he loves* or believes he does. In the course of the play, Néron moves from avoiding his mother, to leaving her traces of his handiwork, to finally demonstrating his growing control over the lives of those who share emotional and physical space with him.

Phèdre: Light and Darkness

Phèdre has a soul-shaking experience of love at first sight which she too, in various ways, attempts to harness. Unlike Néron, however, who transgresses mostly in a social sense Phèdre has a biological reason to be disgusted by her love, as it is for her husband's son. Her passion presents as a similarly arresting experience, yet one which she attempts to bury deep within herself, while Néron, as has been shown, gives himself to exploring various ways of ensuring continued control over the object of his affection. Phèdre's case presents in interesting ways due to the fact that instead of attempting to control the object of her desire, her impulse is to control her own gaze. This presents complications once she sees Hippolyte again, and her inability to control herself once she sets eyes on him after his absence leads to her disastrous confession of love.

When Phèdre enters the stage, she is famously the very incarnation of a body made heavy by intense emotional anguish. She has been in hiding, from the brilliant light of the sun, her ancestor, and from the knowing gaze of her family and anyone who might be able to see her incestuous love for Hippolyte writ large somehow on her body. One of the first images painted for the audience of her, before she enters the scene, is by Théramène, who describes 'une femme mourante, et qui cherche à mourir' (I. i. 44), and further, 'lasse, enfin, d'elle-même et du jour qui l'éclaire' (I. i. 46). Phèdre wants to disengage from the world as much as possible; she lives as if she were nearly dead. Everyone in Trézène has noticed the queen's reluctance to come out into the light, and even Oenone comments that her mistress is dying of some secret she continues to conceal (I. ii. 146). As the queen enters the stage for the first time, her body betrays her: 'Je ne me soutiens plus; ma force m'abandonne' (I. iii. 154) which is partly because her knees buckle (line 156) but also, and significantly, because her eyes cannot withstand the bright light of day: 'Mes yeux sont éblouis du jour que je revoi' (I. iii. 155). Racine adds to the evidence of the

queen's anguish by having Oenone declare, first to Hippolyte and Théràmène, then to Phèdre herself, that part of her mistress wants and indeed asks, to see the light and be brought out into the world, and once in it seems to react violently against its illuminating effects. Indeed, the sun seems to make Phèdre all too aware of the same of her incestuous desire: she becomes increasingly less coherent and turns red (I. iii. 179-83).

As Mitchell Greenberg remarks, this incestuous desire that Racine uses to build the dramatic tension of the play, is a product of who Phèdre *is*, of her family line and her blood connection to 'the overriding myth of Oedipus, his family, his descendents, and with the consequences of his fate.'¹⁰⁴ The source of her shame and distress, her incestuous passion for her stepson, is not truly of Phèdre's own making but she feels this passion, and fears it, none the less keenly. A major marker of the tragedy of Phèdre is her lack of full understanding of her torment, and Greenberg insightfully describes the source of her psychological pain as her 'constant oscillation between a desire that shames her and a familial curse that condemns her without her ever understanding why'; that Phèdre, as is the case with many characters in Racinian tragedy, is 'condemned by a traumatic history that has shaped [her] destiny but that forever escapes [her] understanding.'¹⁰⁵ When Racine has her remember and describe the moment this love began, it always originates in a visual encounter which has devastating effects on her entire body.

Phèdre's love for Hippolyte is conceived in the space of a single moment, and as we have begun to see, has profound physical, emotional and psychological ramifications. Her primary experience is visual, which then implicates the rest of her body, her other senses, and destabilizes her. Phèdre confesses this love three times in the play, to Oenone, Hippolyte himself, and Thésée. In her first avowal, she describes setting eyes on Hippolyte and the effect of this vision:

[...] À peine au fils d'Égée
Sous ses lois de l'hymen je m'étais engagée,
Mon repos, mon bonheur semblait être affermi,
Athènes me montra mon superbe ennemi.
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,

¹⁰⁴ Greenberg, p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ Greenberg, p. 56 (both citations).

Je sentis tout mon corps et transir et brûler.
 Je reconnus Vénus et ses feux redoutables,
 D'un sang qu'elle poursuit, tourments inévitables.
 Par des vœux assidus je crus les détourner:
 Je lui bâtis un temple, et pris soin de l'orner;
 De victimes moi-même à toute heure entourée,
 Je cherchais dans leurs flancs ma raison égarée. (I. 3. 269-282)

By referring to her stepson as her enemy, Phèdre makes clear that he robbed her of the emotional security, happiness and peace of mind that she enjoyed in the early days of her marriage (line 270). Phèdre does not mention if Hippolyte spoke to her the first time she saw him, what he looked like, or even if he returned her gaze. Hippolyte's only crime is one of presence: the one thing Phèdre identifies as the inception of her passion that she saw him. Simply laying eyes on the prince was enough for Phèdre to feel both the flush of fever and an icy chill run through her entire body. The words 'à sa vue' (line 273) are ambiguous. It is unclear whether Phèdre refers to the sight of Hippolyte or a sensation that he was looking back at her. The deliberate imprecision of her statement makes possible two simultaneous sensory experiences: the flash of intense desire she feels from within, coupled with a chilling horror as she recognizes her lustful gaze for her stepson.¹⁰⁶

Phèdre experienced both love and revulsion in the space of a single moment, evoked through her use of the *passé simple*: 'je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue'. By reliving the first time she saw Hippolyte, Phèdre both feels and sees herself turn red and white. Barthes also notices the double movement of Phèdre narrating her feelings in a moment that has already taken place, and reacting to them afresh as she relates the story, remarking 'la scène initiale au cours de laquelle j'ai été ravi, je ne fais que la reconstituer: c'est un *après-coup*. Je reconstruis une image traumatique, que je vis au présent, mais que je conjugue (que je parle) au passé.'¹⁰⁷ Phèdre's *coup de foudre* experience proves to be a traumatic event, which she constantly re-lives; in doing so, alternately succumbing to her desire and struggling against it. It is not the sight of Hippolyte that Phèdre finds repulsive, but rather the immediate recognition of the social and moral boundaries which her very feelings transgress. Seeing herself retrospectively from outside her own body, looking at her stepson and desiring him intensely, further horrifies her. Morel comments that the *passé simple*

¹⁰⁶ This experience, as internal sensation and a form of touch, is discussed more fully in Chapter III.

¹⁰⁷ Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 229.

illustrates the force of the single moment, asserting that it highlights ‘le côté foudroyant de l’événement.’¹⁰⁸ Morel’s choice of *foudroyant* emphasizes the suddenness and violence of the blow dealt to Phèdre’s mind and body, similar to the strike of lightning. Phèdre’s very soul is shaken: she describes ‘mon âme éperdue’ (line 274), and she senses that her passion will be her undoing.

Starobinski calls attention to a further dimension in this scene: the interplay between light and darkness. He focuses on the first hemistich of line 275 in which the queen asserts that she could no longer see: ‘Le regard de Phèdre s’obscurcit, la nuit se fait en elle.’¹⁰⁹ The light/dark trope which I began to discuss earlier in the section is significant and complex in *Phèdre*, and is woven throughout the play, especially into the scenes in which Phèdre discusses her love for Hippolyte. What Phèdre senses when her gaze turns inward is indeed darkness, and is specifically the darkness of her own transgressive passion. Her focus shifts to the workings of her body, because of the forbidden flame of love she feels and wishes, in a dark way, to explore. This dark love will ultimately lead her to take her own life; it fuels and fascinates her even as it destroys her from within. Starobinski’s observation about visual experience in Racine at large is more relevant to Phèdre’s case: when she looks at her stepson, in the wake of that initial moment, she seeks ‘le regard caressant, la douce prise amoureuse’, and what she finds instead is ‘sa propre culpabilité.’¹¹⁰ She attempts to find relief from these feelings, and peace of mind, by constructing temples to Vénus. Yet neither proves available to her, not even hidden in the bodies of her sacrificial victims. Hippolyte does not notice and certainly, as evident once she makes her confession, does not share Phèdre’s feelings. Yet, from her first sight of him, she secretly wishes that he love her in return. Having him physically close to her, before her very eyes, proves unbearable: she is constantly in the presence of the source of her shameful passion.

Reflection and Reflexivity

Time and absence have little permanent healing effect on Phèdre, and when she sees Hippolyte again, her love for her stepson is like a wound that reopens the

¹⁰⁸ Renée Morel, ‘Narcisse mortifié et mortifière: le regard chez Racine’, *The French Review*, 64 (1991), 921-933 (p. 922).

¹⁰⁹ Jean Starobinski, *L’Oeil vivant*, p. 81.

¹¹⁰ Jean Starobinski, *L’Oeil vivant*, p.87.

moment she lays eyes on him: ‘Ma blessure trop vive aussitôt a saigné’ (I. 3. 304). His very presence still has a strong physical impact on her. Thésée’s presumed death leads her to believe that she might at last confess her love to the prince. In trying to articulate to Hippolyte that she loves him, Phèdre disguises her feelings by pretending to speak of her husband, and reverses the truth, declaring she sees Thésée in Hippolyte. It is unclear how lucid she is during the interview, and she uses highly visual language in an attempt to make her confession without explicitly declaring herself:

[...] Il n’est point mort, puisqu’il respire en vous.
Toujours devant mes yeux, je crois voir mon époux.
Je le vois, je lui parle, et mon cœur... Je m’égare,
Seigneur ; ma folle ardeur malgré moi se déclare.
(II. 5. 627-630)

When the queen declares that she always sees Thésée in front of her, the audience knows that the opposite is true. Her ‘folle ardeur’ is not for her husband, but for his son. Hippolyte misinterprets the meaning of her words, and summarizes the surface meaning of what she has told him: ‘Tout mort qu’il est, Thésée est présent à vos yeux’ (II. 5. 632). He is either confused or has chosen deliberately to not understand the deeper significance of what his stepmother has said. Phèdre realizes she must push further to make her feelings known, and continues, describing how she languishes for her husband as he was when he resembled the young Hippolyte: ‘Tel qu’on dépeint nos dieux, ou tel que je vous voi. | Il avait votre port, vos yeux, votre langage’ (II. 5. 640-641). Again, the queen intentionally blurs the distinction between the two men, hinting ever more at her love for Hippolyte while giving the impression of love and grief for the husband she believes to be deceased. He has now become the point of reference—‘votre port’—and, in a sense, the original image whereas Thésée is merely a copy of Hippolyte. This leads Phèdre to reveal her shocking fantasy of Hippolyte replacing his father, and she her sister Ariadne, bound together in a journey through the Labyrinth.¹¹¹ This confession has disastrous consequences. By disclosing her feelings to Hippolyte, Phèdre lets him glimpse the darkness—the animality—within her, from which he shrinks in fear.

¹¹¹ The second stage of Phèdre’s confession is addressed in detail in Chapter III.

Unbeknownst to Phèdre, Hippolyte has previously made his own confession of love to Aricie, telling her:

Contre vous, contre moi, vainement je m'éprouve:
Présente, je vous fuis ; absente, je vous trouve;
Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit;
La lumière du jour, les ombres de la nuit,
Tout retrace à mes yeux les charmes que j'évite. (II. 2. 541-5)

Hippolyte's avowal parallels Phèdre's confession to Oenone. Both struggle to avoid being in the presence of the one they love (line 289), and against their own bodies: the eyes that refuse to let go of the image of the beloved (line 286), and the feelings this image engenders despite their efforts. Ironically, Hippolyte tries to resist Aricie's charms, believing that her family connection makes her an unsuitable choice. At the same time, his stepmother wrestles with an incestuous passion that trespasses familial connections in a much more fundamental way.

Idolatry

In her first confession, Phèdre describes her obsession with Hippolyte. She shifts emphasis from sensations of light and darkness, hot and cold, to sight and idolatry. The queen describes the feelings she entertains for the haunting spectre of her stepson, telling Oenone:

J'adorais Hippolyte, et le voyant sans cesse,
Même au pied des autels que je faisais fumer,
J'offrais tout à ce dieu que je n'osais nommer.
Je l'évitais partout. O comble de misère!
Mes yeux le retrouvaient dans les traits de son père.
Contre moi-même enfin j'osai me révolter:
J'excitai mon courage à le persécuter.
Pour bannir l'ennemi dont j'étais idolâtre. (I. 3. 284-293)

Phèdre again refers to Hippolyte as her enemy. She sees him everywhere (line 284), and his image remains even when he is physically absent. The horror she already has of her own feelings is compounded by the inescapability of his image, which she sees—despite herself, when her eyes betray her—in Thésée. The queen's conflation of the faces of her husband and stepson is a coping mechanism for the warring

impulses of attraction and repulsion that threaten to destroy her, as well as the prohibition on incest that she is increasingly tempted to transgress. Temporarily, at least, this strategy offers some palliation: ‘Dans le lit de Thésée, elle a l’amer plaisir de tromper en fait celui qu’elle aime, et en imagination celui qu’elle n’aime pas.’¹¹²

Her fantasy, however, cannot quench her illicit desire. The beset queen attempts to rid herself of the physical presence of the one she loves, so that she might regain control of her own body through controlling what her eye sees or does not see. Her feelings and horror of them devour her the longer she endeavours to keep them hidden. Her obsession with her stepson also affects her senses: she carries with her the conjured image of Hippolyte, which she venerates as a sacred icon. Phèdre’s use of *idolâtre* speaks to the power of her love, her devotion to the initial vision of Hippolyte. Racine’s Phèdre has children of her own with Thésée (I. 3. 300), and she is the queen of Trézène; yet nothing occupies her mind more than her desire for her stepson.

In Phèdre’s third and final confession, the queen shifts from submitting to her passion to understanding the degree to which this passion makes her a horrifying creature. She finally tells Thésée the truth of what happened between her and Hippolyte: ‘C’est moi qui sur ce fils chaste et respectueux | Osa jeter un oeil profane, incestueux’ (V. 7. 1622-3). With her last breath, Phèdre acknowledges the power of her own sinful gaze and its power to corrupt. Without even making her avowal to Hippolyte, her incestuous desire is enough to condemn her: it emanates from her eyes, and corrupts the prince despite his lack of complicity.

Kinship and the Prohibition of Incest: Freud and Bataille

As previously mentioned, Phèdre presents a particular case in Racine’s theatre because of the revulsion and self-loathing that make her struggle against her love for Hippolyte, which she knows transgresses the most deeply-held societal and moral terms. According to Lévi-Strauss, the incest prohibition ‘constitue la démarche fondamentale, grâce à laquelle, par laquelle, mais surtout en laquelle, s’accomplit le

¹¹² Marguerite Yourcenar, *Feux* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1957), p. 10.

passage de la Nature à la Culture.¹¹³ The laws governing kinship and relationships within a family do not permit incest; it is socially, biologically and morally disadvantageous. Recourse to sexual relationships among close family members is tantamount to a return to what Lévi-Strauss terms the ‘primal horde.’ The prohibition on incest speaks to a cultural recognition of the importance of exogamy: the movement outside the family, and a desire to conquer new territory. When Phèdre refers to herself as a monster (c.f. II. 5. 701-3), it is not by mere accident that Racine has her reach for this particular word. She uses it deliberately, knowing it refers to the latent animality within her, to the fact that her passion brings her closer to a beast than the wife of Thésée the demigod. Even though the queen never succeeds in seducing her stepson, the very desire to do so and her confession of love to him make her less than human. As Bataille remarks, ‘[t]elle est la règle [...] par laquelle nous sommes devenus des hommes, et dont la prohibition de l’inceste est le type.’¹¹⁴

Just as a repugnant object presents both a ‘force d’attraction and a ‘force de repulsion,’¹¹⁵ against which one struggles, Hippolyte simultaneously horrifies and fascinates his stepmother. It is *precisely because* Phèdre battles against her initial *coup de foudre* that her stepson grows ever more attractive in her eyes: ‘J’adorais Hippolyte, et le voyant sans cesse, | Même au pied des autels que je faisais fumer’ (I. 3. 284-85). The increase in her horror validates and encourages her desire. Bataille, contemplating the unenviable position of Racine’s Phèdre, comments, ‘Je puis même, retrouvant le jeu où Racine se complut, la voir accablée, déchirée, mais d’autant plus ardente en dépit—ou en raison—de l’horreur qu’elle aurait d’Hippolyte et d’elle-même.’¹¹⁶ Hippolyte’s body, as well as her own, might incite revulsion in Phèdre, but rather than stamping out her desire, this adds fuel to its flames. Bataille explains the almost centrifugal force of desire and horror intertwined: ‘[s]i notre désir n’avait eu tant de peine à surmonter notre indéniable répugnance, nous ne l’aurions pas cru aussi fort, nous n’aurions pas vu dans l’objet

¹¹³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris: PUF, 1949), p. 30.

¹¹⁴ Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), viii, p. 31.

¹¹⁵ Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite*, p. 84.

¹¹⁶ Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite*, p. 84.

ce qui, à tel point, avait le pouvoir de susciter le désir.¹¹⁷ The idea of being overcome by her passion at once attracts and repels her.

Mauron also remarks upon this type of double movement, which in turn is connected to Phèdre's desire to punish herself. He cites the defense mechanism of potential self-harm in the face of the kind of illicit desire Phèdre experiences, as being part of one of Freud's most important discoveries. He describes '[l]a haine éveillée par la frustration, si elle ne trouve pas d'issue à l'extérieur,' which 'se réfléchit sur elle-même en masochisme secondaire.'¹¹⁸ This Freudian model makes sense of such competing impulses and energies, and the almost unthinking desire for self-preservation combined with a potent desire to somehow root out the cause of deep self-loathing. Mauron further notes that in Racine's tragedies, Phèdre herself represents 'la passion d'écrire qui, ayant perdu la bataille, se reconnaît coupable, mais aussi s'exhibe coupable et se satisfait en se sacrifiant.'¹¹⁹ She is unable to separate her incestuous, self-destructive desire from her superego, which would normally regulate her behaviour.

The scene in which Phèdre lunges for Hippolyte's sword, pulling it out of his scabbard¹²⁰ and demanding first that he stab her with it, accomplishes both asking him to engage with her in an incestuous act, and also throwing him into the role of his father the monster-slayer. Phèdre's love for Hippolyte is repugnant to her, yet it is this very repugnance that ensures Hippolyte's continued, and increased, desirability in the queen's eyes. Here, Williams' reading of Racine's *Phèdre* sheds considerable light on the competing, transgressive desires of Phèdre and Hippolyte, through the lens of monstrosity. Hippolyte has been raised on stories of his father Thésée the monster-slayer. The audience has learned about the way in which his body responded to hearing these tableau-like tales painted out for his imagination ('tu me dépeignais', line 77), as he recalls to Thérémène that his very soul 's'échauffait au récit de ses nobles exploits (I. i. 76). In a cruel irony, after a lifetime of wondering when he might have his own monster to kill, he finds himself suddenly with one, and from his own family, right before his very eyes. Williams observes, 'Hippolyte's adoptive mother has recognized his deepest need: characterizing herself

¹¹⁷ Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite*, p. 83.

¹¹⁸ Mauron, *L'Inconscient*, p. 181.

¹¹⁹ Mauron, *L'Inconscient*, p. 184.

¹²⁰ *Phèdre* II. 5. 710. Cf. Gravelot's illustration 'Snatching the sword' (1768), reproduced between p. 244-45 in David Maskell, *Racine: A Theatrical Reading*.

as a beast worth the killing, she offers herself to him as his own private ‘monstre.’¹²¹

Conclusion

By approaching the visual world of Racine’s characters as one would a *tableau*, we followed the eye of the Racinian character, noting which colours, changes in light and darkness, and which types of movement stand out. We used d’Aubignac’s understanding of the *tableau* given in *La Pratique du Théâtre*,¹²² to mean not only the actual composition of staging, which would include set decoration and placement of characters onstage, but also the overarching concept of the stage itself and of characters on the stage as a representation of reality, as something seen metaphorically by the spectator. In tracing patterns in the characters’ visual fields, we were able to see into their world punctuated by strong reds, encroaching darkness, and illuminating light. These visual cues are a layer of the entire experience of sight in the lives of the characters, and we saw how talking about the broader aspects of vision rather than consistently exhaustively delineating every visual detail allows the reader and spectator to enter more deeply into the holistic experience of the theatre. By beginning with pure visual form and movement, we entered into a more complicated picture in which vision and understanding are closely connected, and in which vision very soon feeds into other senses.

Racinian love, as we have seen, is initiated by a visual experience. Characters use the formulation ‘Je le vis’ to indicate that they fall in love. This experience implicates the rest of the body and the other senses in varying degrees. In the cases of Phèdre and Néron, love proves to be a veritable *coup* that is forceful enough to temporarily strike them dumb, and denies them use of their other senses and the ability to move or speak. The return to their senses is not as restorative as one might expect, and both the Roman emperor and the queen are pushed to their psychological limits in the aftermath of the *coup de foudre* experience. Phèdre wrestles at once with her incestuous desire and her horror of that desire, which in combination seem to increase to the point where she is compelled to reveal this passion that transgresses every social and moral code. The emperor uses his passion for Junie as

¹²¹ Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture*, p. 293.

¹²² *La Pratique du Théâtre*, ed. Hélène Baby, p. 77.

a weapon against his mother, in ways that allow him to move toward autonomy and to experiment with controlling the bodies of others. Freudian theories of desire, incest, development and control as used by Bataille and Lacan help further articulate the psychological consequences of Racine's *Phèdre* and *Néron*.¹²³

In the *Dioptrique*, Descartes famously begins by calling sight 'le plus universel et le plus noble'¹²⁴ of all the senses. As the treatise continues, this statement proves to be merely the starting point for a study which includes refraction, and other means by which sight becomes complicated and presents the eye with a possibly distorted image. When reality, fantasy, and paradoxes complicate the *tableau*, it becomes challenging to rely completely on the images and pictures vision represents to the eye. Dalia Judovitz remarks, 'Descartes's inquiry into the nature of vision [in the *Dioptrique*] leads to an exploration of optics that displaces both the priority of the eye and the centrality of vision.'¹²⁵ His model 'thus redefines both our access to the visible and the meaning of vision' and centuries later, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology pushes the issue even further, 'restitut[ing] the body as the enigmatic site that conditions the question of vision.'¹²⁶ Visual reality takes on a new meaning, as certainty is no longer rooted in visibility. Yet this also presents a new dimension to vision for Racine's characters, one which will be explored for the first time using a phenomenological analysis in the next chapter.

¹²³ C.f. as already mentioned, Charles Mauron, *L'Inconscient dans l'oeuvre et la vie de Racine* (Gap: Éditions Ophrys, 1957) and also Mitchell Greenberg, *Subjectivity and Subjugation in Seventeenth-Century Drama and Prose* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992).

¹²⁴ Descartes, *Dioptrique* in *Œuvres Philosophiques, 1618-1637*, I (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1998).

¹²⁵ *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 69.

¹²⁶ *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 84.

CHAPTER II

Lying Eyes: Hallucination, Deception, Divine Vision

‘Mes yeux sont éblouis’ (Phèdre, I. 3. 155)

In the previous chapter, we observed how the *coup de foudre* can set off a chain reaction which implicates the entire body. Yet the stimulus for such sensations does not have to be the vision of another person, or indeed any other instance of direct sight. In Racine’s theatre, characters routinely experience visions borne out of misapprehension or madness, which can induce physical sensations no less powerful for their specious origins. Traditionally, critics have preferred to see such examples as a separate phenomenon from sight, thereby missing the bodily ramifications of these instances in which Racine’s characters encounter and experience misrepresentations of vision, including hallucination, deception, premonition, and divine vision. By examining such examples under the umbrella of vision—however misrepresented or ‘misguided’—I hope to acquaint us with a key dimension of the Racinian personages’ phenomenological experience. These experiences are recounted primarily through the sense of vision, but as will be shown, are not purely visual.

At this particular juncture, it is helpful to introduce contemporary scholarship on early modern vision, as related to Cartesian models of sensation, and to Racinian tragedy. Raffaella De Rosa’s recent work on sensory representation in Descartes’s writings is an insightful source for outlining a new, successful model for understanding Descartes’ approach to the body, mind and senses.¹²⁷ De Rosa’s work is an attempt to address the Cartesian disconnect between sensation as it is felt, and the actual or true qualities of what is being sensed. For Descartes, ‘ideas represent their objets as other than they are in normal circumstances.’¹²⁸ Previous scholarship on early modern vision and Descartes has tended to fall back on the

¹²⁷ Raffaella De Rosa, *Descartes and the Puzzle of Sensory Representation* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

¹²⁸ De Rosa, p. 160.

conclusion that sensation is simply a very muddled mode of Cartesian *res extensa*—which can be loosely translated as corporeal substance, therefore related to, and the fault of, the body rather than the mind. De Rosa offers a new model, a ‘descriptivist-causal account,’ which retains important elements of Descartes’ theory of sensory representation, with its inherent reasons to mistrust the representation, while adding the significant point that these muddled, ‘sensory ideas are obscure representations of their *correct* objects.’¹²⁹

Sylvaine Guyot’s chapter, in her own edited volume,¹³⁰ is extremely valuable for the way in which it departs from previous scholarship’s reliance on a commonly held understanding of the ‘classical’ early-modern dramatic goal of the ‘*oeil ébloui*,’ pointing toward a more nuanced perspective at work in Racine’s tragedy. Even in one of the earlier plays—Guyot uses the example of *Alexandre le Grand*—a leader who is ostensibly modelled on a very traditional presentation of a king ruling by divine right, whose image is transfixing and arresting, Guyot teases out signs of how Racine offers more complexity through the body of his Alexandre: ‘[il] apparaît ainsi comme le creuset où convergent différents modèles de visibilité, le blason du processus qui mène de l’un à l’autre.’¹³¹ Guyot’s work identifies a significant shift, which, by the time Racine writes *Esther*, results in a new type of vision that is ‘haptique, tactile et captivante, quasi érotisée, et par laquelle l’oeil de l’amateur d’art vient effleurer la toile qui le touche.’¹³²

Guyot’s identification of a change from the ‘classical’ notion of the spectator struck dumb by a visually arresting image, to one fascinated by an image and invited to respond in a tactile and/or visual manner, is fundamentally important for the insights I draw out from the examples I discuss in my own work. In this chapter on different types of visual experience in Racine’s theatre, the interplay between sight and touch becomes even more charged, even more palpable. Through integrating De Rosa’s reading of Descartes into my study, my perspective on sensation for Racine’s characters shifts in a significant way, not toward being more mistrustful of what the Racinean character sees or reports that he sees, but toward understanding that so much of sensory representation is mysterious, muddled by the body and the mind.

¹²⁹ De Rosa, p. 161. Italics from De Rosa.

¹³⁰ Sylvaine Guyot, ‘Entre éblouissement et ‘véritables grâces’: Racine ou les tensions de l’oeil classique,’ in *Littératures Classiques: l’oeil classique*, 82 (2013), 127-142.

¹³¹ Guyot, p. 133.

¹³² Guyot, p. 139.

Therefore, my focus on the account of sensation, in this case vision which the spectator and characters often have cause to question, narrows even more on what it is that characters say that they see. I begin this chapter keeping in mind that what Racine's characters tell each other and tell the spectator, is a *correct* account, for their minds and bodies, regardless of whether what they saw is likely, or even possible.

Because the reader or audience cannot see with the characters' eyes, Racine must summon these visions or hallucinations by other means. While Shakespeare could conjure the ghost of Hamlet's father as an actor onstage, the conventions of seventeenth-century drama in France discouraged such clear trespasses against realism. Consequently, Racine had to evoke hallucinations and other forms of 'deviant' vision verbally, rather than visually. As we shall see, Racine met this challenge by employing rich language which, far from diminishing the experience of such visions, in fact intensified their effects on the body.

The forms of visual misapprehension which we will examine in this chapter are complex phenomena. In order to clarify our conception of hallucination, and its permutations, it is useful here to draw upon the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He begins from a rather straightforward observation: 'L'halluciné ne peut pas entendre ou voir ou voir au sens fort de ces mots. Il juge, il croit voir ou entendre, mais il ne voit pas, il n'entend pas en effet.'¹³³ Rather than erecting a simple binary here between truth and falsehood, however, Merleau-Ponty recasts the distinction between hallucination and perception as a problem of orientation, or directionality. Whereas perception opens out onto a seemingly limitless experience of the world, determined by myriad forces, the hallucinatory experience is internal and self-contained. According to Merleau-Ponty, previous approaches have failed to reckon with this dynamic, preferring either to explain the problem of hallucination empirically, or reconstruct it clinically. He argues: '[i]l ne faut plus construire l'hallucination, ni en général construire la conscience d'après une certaine essence ou idée d'elle-même qui oblige à la définir par une adéquation absolue.'¹³⁴ Instead, we should concentrate our efforts on 'nous replacer dans la situation effective où les hallucinations et le "réel" s'offrent à nous.'¹³⁵ In other words, we

¹³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard 1945), p. 393.

¹³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 394.

¹³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 395.

must enter into the hallucination itself, through the subject's retelling. While psychologists might dispute the efficacy of Merleau-Ponty's approach in the clinical arena,¹³⁶ this approach is an invaluable tool for looking at the experience of theatrical personages. Guided by Merleau-Ponty's insights, I want to look at five major cases of vision gone awry: Athalie's dream, Joad's visions, Andromaque's and Phèdre's conflation, Oenone's deception, and Oreste's madness.

Each case is increasingly complex in its causes and effects. The divine visions of Athalie and Joad, for instance, are illustrative of a relatively straightforward form of vision come undone; one that comes to and appears before them. For their part, Andromaque and Phèdre each experience hallucinations in which they conflate the images of two men who are close to them, albeit under different circumstances. This superimposition layers one visual form on top of another form. Oenone's deceptive and manipulative efforts, meanwhile, provide a powerful example of the subversion of the primacy normally accorded the visual image, as they demonstrate one character's ability to alter the vision of another. Finally, Créon's mental unravelling and Oreste's delirium and descent into madness offer depictions of vision utterly destroyed. In each example, I will attempt to re-construct these experiences as the characters describe them, treating each as its own self-contained and self-generated perceptual experience. While these selections from *Athalie*, *Andromaque*, *Phèdre* and *La Thébaïde* are not exhaustive, they provide a useful typology for the central ways in which vision can malfunction, ultimately yielding a more complete image of the visual in Racine's work.

Athalie: Divine Vision

I will address both Athalie's dream and Joad's divine visions as examples of experiences that begin primarily as visual ones, yet strongly implicate the other senses especially those of hearing and touch. I will first explore the content of Athalie's dream and her reaction to it. In the first part of her dream, we will see how her encounter with her mother Jezebel destabilizes her. While at first she seems able to interact with Jezebel as a living person, both seeing and hearing her, her mother

¹³⁶ Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 6-7. Since 1980, however, Gallagher and Zahavi note, there has been renewed discussion between philosophers and psychologists about exploring 'phenomenal consciousness': 'in some circles, *phenomenology* as a philosophical approach was thought to be of possible importance when consciousness was raised as a scientific question', Gallagher and Zahavi, p. 4.

disintegrates at Athalie's touch. In the second part of her dream, in which she encounters the divine child Joas, we will find that the full import of this sequence comes not only from its symbolic content but the bodily sensations it awakens. I will work from the Merleau-Pontian position that the best way to analyse Athalie's dream is in re-living it as she tells the story, with close attention to the sensations she experiences during each encounter.

Racine's staging of the Athaliah story is faithful to the scriptural text of 2 Chronicles, and 1 and 2 Kings in terms of its setting, main protagonists, and the religious, ethnic, and gender-based tensions in Athalie's Jerusalem that lead to her deposition. Athalie is the daughter of Ahab and Jezabel, therefore not of the house of David, and worships the deity Baal. When her son is killed, she seeks vengeance upon the rest of David's line, massacring her grandchildren, and seizes power. Joas is the only one of her grandchildren to survive the slaughter and, unbeknownst to Athalie, is raised secretly in the Jewish temple by his aunt and uncle, Josabet and Joad. The subject of the play is, according to Racine himself, Joas' recognition as rightful heir to the throne, and the murder of Athalie.¹³⁷ Racine's additions to the play, however, in which he departs from the biblical text, are some of the most important in terms of the degree to which they implicate the sensory perception of the character involved and, through re-telling or performance, emotionally affect the audience. Athalie's dream (II. 5) is entirely Racine's creation, as are Athalie's conversation with Joas (II. 7) and Joad's divine visions (III. 7). Unlike the Esther story on which his previous biblical play was based, which had been quite a popular and successful theme with other dramatists,¹³⁸ the Athaliah story had only been performed twice.¹³⁹ Racine leads his audience to believe they will encounter the biblical Athalie, the queen of the Book of Kings and Chronicles, who is defined by her filicide and blasphemy. When the queen does take the stage, her fear and uneasiness make her a surprisingly human figure, worthy of some degree of pity. The complexity of Athalie's character makes her unique, and marks Racine's play out among theatrical representations of the queen.

¹³⁷ Racine, *Préface* to *Athalie*.

¹³⁸ Notably, Montchrestien in 1601, and Du Ryer in 1644.

¹³⁹ *Athalie*, played in 1658 at the Collège de Clermont and *Athalie*, played in 1683 at the Collège de Tiron. Cf. V.L. Saulnier, 'Racine et la tragédie scolaire: une Athalie française de 1683', *RHL*, 49 (1949), 62-66.

Racine sets the spectator's expectations against the very different reality of Athalie's demeanour by first conjuring image after image of a vengeful queen's attacks on the descendants of David through Abner's premonitions, Josabet's fears and Joad's hatred of her. In the very first scene, Abner discusses the fear of Athalie that plagues him, even within the temple walls, which lets the audience know that even the most sacred of spaces might still be penetrated in some way by the evil queen, whether by her very presence or by her searing gaze. According to Abner,

Enfin depuis deux jours, la superbe Athalie
Dans un sombre chagrin paraît ensevelie.
Je l'observais hier, et je voyais ses yeux
Lancer sur le lieu saint des regards furieux. (I. 1. 51-54).

To Abner, Athalie's presence in the temple is profanation enough, and her defiant attitude while inside it is further evidence of the evil she represents. Although she wanders around distressed and melancholic, her secret fears do not diminish the power she still possesses and her eyes demonstrate that she retains the ability to hate, to wound or kill those who displease her. Athalie's eyes are transformed into weapons of attack, as shown by use of the verb *lancer*. Because of her devotion to Baal, Athalie's body is offensive to God. Her very bodily presence in the temple is sufficient to desecrate the Holy of Holies; she does not need to speak or act in order to trespass on sacred ground. Zacharie, Josabet and Joad's son, is also present when the pagan queen bursts into the Jewish temple. The memory of Athalie's 'œil farouche' (II. 2. 407), meeting Joad's enraged eyes with those of a rabid animal, haunts Zacharie. He observes both physical and emotional changes in Athalie in the moment she looks at Joas.

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 ;
Surtout, Éliacin paraissait l'étonner. (II. 2. 411-414).

Athalie is particularly affected by the child Éliacin, unable to tear her gaze away from him. Her eyes register her fear and remain fixed on the child, while the rest of her body responds by shutting down: the power of speech fails her, and her previously hostile body language is temporarily broken. Her presence in the temple

desecrates the sacred space itself, yet she is unmoved by this. What paralyzes and terrifies her is the sight of Joas, the divine child who has been hidden from her in the temple and is himself the Holy of Holies.

Athalie is an unnatural woman, who has managed to rise through ruthlessness and murder to a position normally occupied by men, and now ‘Se baigne impunément dans le sang de nos rois’ (I. 1. 74). She is an apostate, a worshipper of Baal, and is in every way foreign and deviant to the Jews of the house of David. As Helen McDermott notes, however, Racine’s true purpose in building up Athalie’s character in such a negative way prior to her appearance onstage is to surprise his audience by introducing a queen who does not entirely resemble the monster she has been made to seem. The real subject of the play, McDermott claims, is ‘the undermining of the Athalie myth.’¹⁴⁰ When Athalie finally takes the stage (II. 3) she enters in a state of emotional turmoil, rather like Phèdre (I. 3); also like Phèdre, her weakened state affects her physically and she needs to sit down. Her first words are ‘Non, je ne puis: tu vois mon trouble et ma faiblesse’ (line 435). Athalie’s retelling of the dream humanizes her, and her attempts to reassure herself, or shake off the terrifying memory generate pathos. While the audience has been prepared to see a vengeful, hateful queen take the stage, they instead find a woman haunted and confused.

She is deeply unsettled by her interactions with the ghost of Jézabel and the figure of Joas. According to John Lapp, Athalie’s dream is unique in French tragedy, due to the fact that it determines most of the play’s action, and also because of ‘its plastic quality, presenting as it does a vision clearly seen, felt and heard.’¹⁴¹ Racine’s use of the dream, Lapp observes, is similar to those of Homeric epics where the physical experience of the dream is seen as ‘objective fact.’¹⁴² John Campbell remarks that although the dream was a fairly common dramatic technique in the seventeenth-century, ‘what is remarkable is how Racine exploits Athalie’s dream, which was entirely his own invention, as an energizing force in the plot.’¹⁴³ Even though the queen herself recognizes it was just a dream,¹⁴⁴ it implicates

¹⁴⁰ Helen Bates McDermott, ‘Matricide and Filicide in Racine’s *Athalie*’, *Symposium*, 38 (1984), 56-69 (p. 57).

¹⁴¹ John Lapp, *Aspects of Racinian Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955), p. 461.

¹⁴² Lapp cites similar examples in the *Odyssey*—Odysseus seeing his mother’s shade—and the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas meets Creusa’s ghost (*Aspects*, p. 463).

¹⁴³ John Campbell, ‘The God of *Athalie*’, *French Studies*, 43 (4), 1989, 385-404, p. 388.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. ‘Un songe (me devrais-je inquiéter d’un songe?)’, (II. 5. 487).

Athalie's senses of sight, hearing and touch in the same manner as if she were truly awake, and she is able to relate it in tangible, affecting terms to the audience. She dreams that she is asleep in her bed when she comes face-to-face with Jézabel's ghost, declaring that her mother 'Devant moi s'est montrée.'¹⁴⁵ Joas' appearance later in the dream is a similar confrontation, and Racine changes the phrase slightly to 'à mes yeux se présente'. Her language seems to imply that an invisible force places her mother and then Joas before her, that she does not seek the encounter but that someone or something wishes her to have both interactions. Initially, sight is the primary sense by which she interacts with her mother and with the divine child. As the encounter with her mother progresses, the senses of hearing and touch are implicated. Seeing Joas is an almost hypnotic experience, and one that is almost entirely felt with her eyes. What makes the dream particularly unsettling in the light of day is that Athalie remembers interacting with her mother and Joas as she would any 'real' person. The audience shares the queen's horror as she grasps at the shreds of Jézabel's flesh and clothing, her sense of peace at seeing the pure child before her, and her shock at feeling the sudden anguish caused by the dagger he soon uses to stab her.

Athalie's mother appears before her, dressed and made up resplendently, as on the day she died. The audience has already been reminded of Jézabel's story (I. 1. 114-118), and the figure of her mother at once speaks to Athalie's future death, and also awakens the child and mother within her. As she faces this projection of her mother, Jézabel's ghost warns her that the Jewish God will seek vengeance for the atrocities carried out against the members of the house of David, in language that reflects her maternal affection: 'fille digne de moi' (II. 5. 497). When Athalie perceives Jézabel leaning toward the bed as if to embrace her, she makes a movement to respond but is horrified when the vision of her living mother crumbles, giving way to a decomposing corpse:

Et moi je lui tendais les mains pour l'embrasser,
 Mais je n'ai plus trouvé qu'un horrible mélange
 D'os et de chairs meurtris et traînés dans la fange.
 (II. 5. 502-504)

¹⁴⁵ Lapp notes that this formulation is similar to the '*ante oculos stetit*' of Latin dream narrations (*Aspects*, p. 463).

Even though Jézabel disappears, Athalie's use of *trouver* in the line immediately following line 502—in which she evokes her outstretched hands—implies that she does actually touch her mother's decomposing remains. This feeling is an assault on her senses, and as repulsive to her in the dream as if she were truly awake. Barthes identifies the acute distress caused by such a sensation: 'Dieu la repousse dans le mal ancestral, mais sous les traits de sa mère Jézabel la punit par le plus horrible des anéantissements, la dispersion des chairs, données aux chiens.'¹⁴⁶ In touching her mother's decomposing flesh, Athalie comes in direct contact with her own mortality and with her sins. Her mother's decomposing body, and the relationship that ended with her actual death, calls to mind the relationship Athalie will never have with her deceased son or the grandchildren she murdered. She may be worthy of her mother's love, but she has no child of her own. Her desire for power and the murders she committed for it, do not ultimately sustain her as she faces the reality of her mother's death.

Joas' image also appears in the dream, and Athalie feels her body respond with tenderness to the pure child before her eyes: 'Sa vue a ranimé mes esprits abattus' (II. 5. 510). Everything about the young figure appears to speak to innocence and hope. She feels deeply moved by his presence. As Barthes puts it, 'c'est [Éros] bien le lien qui l'unit à Joas: un *charme*, une fascination d'amour.'¹⁴⁷ The sight of Joas awakens, or reawakens, Athalie's desire to be a mother in combination with a longing for her own childhood.

But the child in the robes is not what he seems, and Athalie again experiences a sudden shift in her experience. Her senses betray her. An innocent child she believed she might freely gaze upon turns out to be other than what he appeared. As she is entranced by his sweet, noble yet unassuming air, she does not even realize that he means her harm until he has already stabbed her.

J'admirais sa douceur, son air noble et modeste,
 J'ai senti tout à coup un homicide acier
 Que le traître en mon sein a plongé tout entier. (II. 5. 512-514)

She tries to assuage her fears by referring to the vision as a product of chance (II. 5. 516) or perhaps simply 'l'effet d'une sombre vapeur' (II. v. 518), yet she has

¹⁴⁶ Barthes, *Sur Racine*, p. 132.

¹⁴⁷ Barthes, *Sur Racine*, p. 131.

experienced the dream of Joas killing her twice more. As with the image of the slain bodies that haunts Josabet, Athalie is similarly pursued by the vision she had of Joas ‘*toujours tout prêt à me percer*’ (II. 5. 522).

In both instances in the dream, Athalie’s visual impression proves faulty, and disintegrates in some way before her eyes. Athalie is twice denied in brutal, shocking fashion the kind of interaction—and above all the comfort—which she craves. As she ponders whether to trust her dream, the queen discusses its contents with her two close advisors. Athalie is unable to forget what she has seen, saying that the vision ‘*Entretient dans mon cœur un chagrin qui le ronge. | Je l’évite partout, partout il me poursuit*’ (II. 5. 488-489). Her repetition of ‘partout’ and the consonance created by ‘poursuit’ highlight the omnipresence of those images of Joas and Jézabel, and the fact that the woman who pursued the Jews in order to persecute and murder them now finds herself hunted and haunted by what she has dreamt. The sadness and guilt that eat away at her help to humanize the pagan queen, and perhaps recall her crimes against her grandchildren.

Athalie’s premonitory dream and her encounter with Joas is an inversion of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac; whereas God comes to Abraham in a dream and tells him to sacrifice his son, in this instance God is responsible for Athalie’s dream in which it is the child who sacrifices the maternal figure. Racine presents a different take on child sacrifice, as in this instance it is the child who eventually re-enacts the dream and performs the sacrifice. One might conclude that Athalie’s dream is of divine provenance because the second half is later realized in precisely the same manner as the original vision. Perhaps the element that separates hallucination from divine vision is that it is later borne out in reality. Upon waking from her terrifying dream, Athalie had no intention of entering the sacred space for the purpose of attacking any of those celebrating or participating in the sacrifice, as Joad, Josabet and Zacharie assume. She suddenly and inexplicably had a desire to try and pacify Yahweh, ‘*Dans le temple des Juifs un instinct m’a poussée, | Et d’apaiser leur Dieu j’ai conçu l’idée*’ (II. 5. 527-528), and she enters the temple without any further reflection. When Athalie sees Joas in the temple, she is neither simply transfixed by him, as Abner observes or as she had been in her dream, nor struck by an inexplicable urge to kill him, as Zacharie fears. She recognizes her assassin. Mortified by this vision of the child precisely as he appeared in her dream, she stands immobile and mute, certain that Joas will eventually be responsible for

her death. Telling Mathan ‘C’est lui-même’ (II. 5. 539), she seems to affirm to herself that he is the same child in her visions from the nights before, with the same dress, physical traits and eyes. The vision is before her, not in a dream this time but in reality: ‘J’ai vu ce même enfant dont je suis menacée, | Tel qu’un songe effrayant l’a peint à ma pensée’ (II. 5. 535-536). This is an inversion of the situation in *Phèdre*, where, as we shall see shortly, Phèdre is haunted by the image of her beloved, whom she has already seen. In this instance, the recurring image precedes and heralds the reality to come.

Racine uses the high priest to provide a foil for Athalie, especially in Act III, scene 7 where Joad’s rapture is a counterpoint to Athalie’s haunted wanderings. After deciding to crown Joas and reveal the child’s true identity to the world, Joad is in ecstasy and cries:

Mais d’où vient que mon coeur 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. 7. 1129-1131)

The high priest has an almost synaesthetic experience; at the same time, he sees and hears history revealed. Joad’s God, as John Campbell remarks, is generally a God of vengeance: ‘in his image of the divinity, God is a hand always just about to strike’¹⁴⁸ but here, in Joad’s trance,¹⁴⁹ God extends to him personally the breath of life and revelation. Such divine raptures are in direct opposition to the queen’s horrified recognition of Éliacin as the boy from her dream. Both characters cry out ‘C’est lui-même!’, but for very different reasons. Athalie utters the words as she relates the moment she saw Éliacin in the temple and recognized him as her murderer (II. 5. 539), and they fly from Joad’s mouth just as he feels himself transformed by the power of God. Each time, the phrase is spoken at a crucial moment of recognition; however, while Athalie confronts a nightmare become reality, which paralyses her with dread,¹⁵⁰ Joad experiences a divinely-inspired transformation from within, a vital spiritual experience which opens his eyes and mind and heightens his senses. Like Athalie, Joad feels his body change, but in his case it is an inner transformation

¹⁴⁸ Campbell, ‘The God of *Athalie*,’ p. 396.

¹⁴⁹ Campbell describes Joad’s ‘trance-like state,’ of which he has no later memory, p. 390.

¹⁵⁰ As evoked by the use of *terrassée* in line 412.

and he is able to see and hear the things God puts before his eyes and ears. Joad enters into a communion with God, and the language he uses to describe his ecstatic experience is one of the most profound, human love.

The setting for Joad's experience, the Holy of Holies, has the effect of making God a real presence in *Athalie*. The audience sees Joad and Josabet's devotion, and Joas' piety, but actually witnessing Joad's revelatory experience is a powerful encounter with the divine shared by Joad and the audience. The temple is at once an empty space, and yet traditionally thought to be the very mercy seat of God, the dwelling place of his name and a place which would cause death were it to be entered by the unworthy. In this scene, the audience is given 'proof' of God's presence and favour on the high priest as well as justification for Joas' ascension as the descendent of David. In *Athalie*, Racine deals with the classic theological theme of a human relationship with the divine. He uses the scene of Joad's transformation as an opportunity to present a very particular interaction with God, in which the audience has the chance to observe Joad's reaction to the divine speaking to him and unveiling mysteries to him.

Both *Athalie* and Joad's visions represent an experience outside of their control, implicate other senses such as hearing and touch, and move them either to fear or indescribable joy. The queen not only sees, but hears her mother's voice and when she moves to respond physically, accidentally caresses her mother's decomposing flesh. In the second half of *Athalie*'s dream, her encounter with the child Joas mesmerizes her, and ends horribly when she is stabbed by the young boy. Her fears are realized in the course of the play, through her onstage interactions with Joas, who rejects her offer of hospitality and later kills her. While the queen's dream is perhaps divine, the high priest's experience most certainly constitutes a very rare interaction in Racinian theatre between the human and the divine. The spirit of God literally enters Joad's body and gives him a transformational experience that pushes his sensory perception, his body and mind, to the very limit.

Andromaque: Hallucination and Conflation

After witnessing the divine visions of *Athalie* and Joas, with *Andromaque* we turn from the domain of the sacred back to the profane. Rather than a revelation

from above, her conflation of Astyanax and Hector—her living son and her deceased husband—swells to the surface from her deep grief. In the words of Richard Goodkin, Andromaque is ‘like a domino poised in indecision at the moment of choosing in which direction to fall’ and ‘bears within her the single choice that will determine all of theirs [Pyrrhus, Hermione and Oreste].’¹⁵¹ By blurring the identities of her son and late husband, she achieves a tenuous balance between two equally undesirable alternatives. She is, as Goodkin puts it, ‘faced less with a choice to be made than with the problem of how not to choose.’¹⁵² Unlike Phèdre, who conflates two living men and ultimately desires Hippolyte above Thésée, Andromaque must keep Astyanax alive because he is the key to preserving Hector. Andromaque’s choice is not between the spectre of her husband and her son, but rather between her son—who embodies, in a phantasmic sense, her husband—and the ultimate betrayal of a marriage to Pyrrhus. Her supposed detachment with regard to her son’s life is in fact a desire to preserve the sanctity of her marriage to Hector by refusing a union with his murderer. To capitulate to Pyrrhus would not signify that her better judgment and concern for Astyanax had won out; instead, it would mean that she did not value Astyanax/Hector.

Ultimately, Andromaque wants to remain at this tipping point as long as possible. Her concern is not for the implications of her decision for the other protagonists but rather the certitude that her choice will permanently sever the phantasmic connection between husband and son that sustains her in the aftermath of the Trojan War. From the start of the play, the connection between father and son in Andromaque’s eyes carries heavy symbolic implications. Oreste has been sent as ambassador from the Greeks, who demand Astyanax be killed lest he one day avenge the death of Hector, his father. Despite her hatred of Pyrrhus, Andromaque cannot bear the thought of losing the last vestige of Hector, of Troy, and her entire family, which she sees alive in Astyanax. So great is her distress once she believes her son will likely be handed over to the Greeks, that Pyrrhus is affected by witnessing her grief:

“C’est Hector, disait-elle, en l’embrassant toujours;
Voilà ses yeux, sa bouche, en déjà son audace;

¹⁵¹ Richard Goodkin, ‘A Choice of Andromache’s’, *Yale French Studies*, 67 (1984), 225-247 (p. 236).

¹⁵² Richard Goodkin, ‘A Choice of Andromache’s’, p. 239.

C'est lui-même; c'est toi, cher époux, que j'embrasse."
(II. 5. 652-654).

The impact of the scene is felt even in its retelling. Not only does Andromaque see her deceased husband in their son, but, through the lens of her pain, her son actually changes before her eyes to become the incarnation of her deceased husband. She is so carried away by this hallucination that she addresses her husband, although she is actually seeing their son. Andromaque takes the conflation much further when she involves the sense of touch, and embraces her son as if he were his father.

Despite her better efforts, Andromaque is never able to rid herself of the image of Pyrrhus, covered in blood, standing over the dead body of her husband. She persists in believing that her ultimate loyalty is to the slain Hector and the ruins of Troy. Although in conversations with her *confidente* Céphise she appears to weaken at one point, perhaps considering a union with Pyrrhus for the sake of her son's life, the image resurfaces to strengthen her resolve to die still loyal to her husband. The imperative 'songe, songe' of her speech to Céphise (III. 8. 997) is 'not a simple memory or recollection of the past but a projection of what the past will look like in the future if it is sacrificed to the needs of the present.'¹⁵³ As Goodkin notes, although the verb *songer* might be thought to gesture only backward, delving into the past, it simultaneously thrusts the past into the future, creating a tragic and infinite pattern of destruction. Despite the great concern she has for her son, and her desire to see Astyanax live, she cannot forget what was done to Hector. Pyrrhus' past crimes bleed into the present and the future, forever colouring Andromaque's perception of him. Andromaque asks Céphise to join in recalling the atrocities of the Trojan War, imagining these crimes continuing with her son if she gives in to Pyrrhus' proposal. Her language is highly visual, detailing all the atrocities committed by Pyrrhus against her family.

Voilà comme Pyrrhus vient s'offrir à ma vue;
Voilà par quels exploits il sut se couronner;
Enfin voilà l'époux que tu veux me donner.
(III. 8. 1006-1008).

¹⁵³ Goodkin, 'A Choice of Andomache's', p. 242.

Reliving the last moments with her husband before he left to fight Achilles proves equally powerful for the grief-stricken queen, and Céphise is again witness to Andromaque's ability to bring the past into the present, and replay memories as though they are fresh. She recalls Hector wiping away her tears, taking their son in his arms, and leaving Astyanax with her as a sign of his love and faithfulness. With great clarity, she re-lives the moment when Hector asked her to make certain that in the event something should happen to him, their son would still know him through her: 'Je te laisse mon fils pour gage de ma foi: | S'il me perd, je prétends qu'il me retrouve en toi' (III. 8. 1023-1024). This request, as Andromaque remembers it, posits her as the guardian of Hector's memory, and she becomes father and mother to Astyanax, at the same time that Astyanax becomes both son and husband to her. As Pyrrhus' captive and the object of his love, Andromaque hopes for a solution that would allow Astyanax to keep his life, and she her dignity as well as Hector's memory. Finding no solution on her own, she determines to consult Hector's ghost, believing that a vision of him might provide a resolution: 'Allons sur son tombeau consulter mon époux' (III. 8. 1048). For Andromaque, Barthes comments, Hector's tomb represents 'réfuge, réconfort, espoir, oracle aussi; par une sorte d'érotisme funèbre, elle veut l'habiter, s'y enfermer avec son fils, vivra dans la mort une sorte de ménage à trois.'¹⁵⁴ More importantly, it is the place where she may find Hector himself, and no longer have to look for him in Astyanax; where she may be a wife and not have to embody the roles of both father and mother.

At the start of Act IV, having just come back from Hector's tomb with her mistress, Céphise believes all is settled and exclaims, 'Ah! je n'en doute point: c'est votre époux, Madame, | C'est Hector qui produit ce miracle en votre âme' (IV. 1. 1049-1050). Andromaque, however, has a very different interpretation and intention: 'Céphise, allons le [Astyanax] voir pour la dernière fois' (IV. 1. 1072). It is clear from this point that Andromaque firmly believes she is responsible for keeping the memory of her husband, and that if she were to marry Pyrrhus it would be as a second death to Hector: 'Quoi donc? As-tu pensé qu'Andromaque infidèle | Pût trahir un époux qui croit revivre en elle?' (IV. 1. 1077-1078). Her duty is ultimately to be faithful to her husband and his memory. With 'Voilà ce qu'un époux m'a commandé lui-même' (IV. 1. 1098), she charges Céphise with being 'De

¹⁵⁴ Barthes, *Sur Racine*, p. 82.

l'espoir des Troyens seule dépositaire', and making certain that Pyrrhus meets his obligations to her son. The dramatic irony later in the play is that Pyrrhus is attacked and killed by the Greeks immediately after making Andromaque his queen. With Pyrrhus and the complicating factor of his love no longer a threat or a distraction, Andromaque is free to mourn Hector's death, honour him as she pleases, and keep his memory in Astyanax.

Phèdre: Hallucination and Unravelling

Phèdre's hallucinations and conflation of her husband and stepson are of a much darker nature. For Andromaque, such visions were the result of her pain over both having lost her husband, and the possibility of losing her son. In Phèdre's eyes, however, the hallucination allows her to carry out an erotic fantasy in which her stepson becomes one with his father, and then eclipses Thésée to become her lover. In the first chapter, I raised the issue of Phèdre's confession to Hippolyte in terms of a slightly couched attempt to reveal herself, using Thésée's name while really meaning Hippolyte's. In this chapter, I would like to add a further dimension to the queen's passion for her stepson, by discussing the fact that as Phèdre alternates between lucidity and hallucination, she also veers from a horror of her passion, to taking a dark pleasure in the fantasy at the same time that she reveals it.

Illusion, as Goldmann points out, is central to the tragedy of Phèdre's incestuous desire and its revelation: 'le monde pour Phèdre, c'est évidemment un Hippolyte et un Thésée idéalisés.'¹⁵⁵ She does not simply prefer Hippolyte to his father; rather, as Goldmann seems to suggest, the perfect Thésée would have had elements of Hippolyte, and part of what she loves in Hippolyte is that she also sees his father in him. Phèdre uses the similarities between father and son, and Hippolyte's desire to resemble his father, to soften the impact of her incestuous confession. In trying to confess to Hippolyte that she loves him, Phèdre disguises her feelings by pretending to speak of her husband, declaring she sees Thésée in Hippolyte:

[...] Il n'est point mort, puisqu'il respire en vous.
Toujours devant mes yeux, je crois voir mon époux.

¹⁵⁵ Goldmann, *Le Dieu Caché*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 429.

Je le vois, je lui parle, et mon cœur... Je m'égare,
Seigneur; ma folle ardeur malgré moi se déclare.
(II. 5. 627-630)

What she really intends to say, as Goldmann puts it, is that she 'le [Thésée] retrouve cependant, idéalisé, pur, renouvelé dans Hippolyte. Un mari qu'elle aurait pu aimer réellement sans commettre aucun péché, ni envers la passion ni envers la gloire.'¹⁵⁶ He has now become the point of reference ('votre port') and, in a sense, the original image whereas Thésée is merely a copy of Hippolyte. Racine plays with the Aristotelian notion of mimesis in Phèdre's confession. The queen's avowal is an opportunity for her to appear to discuss one form of perfection while hinting at a truer, more perfect version of the same thing, which eventually eclipses the copy and comes to the fore. Set within the context of the performed piece, itself an exercise in mimesis designed to stimulate the pity and fear of the audience, this additional mimetic layer adds a heightened level of sophistication to *Phèdre*. As she makes her confession, the audience is fully aware of Hippolyte's face revealed as the perfected version of his father's.

Phèdre's major transgression occurs when she expresses the wish that Hippolyte had been able to occupy the place his father had in her life: 'Pourquoi, trop jeune encor, ne pûtes-vous alors | Entrer dans le vaisseau qui le mit sur nos bords?' (II. 5. 647-648). The images of father and son, once conflated, have come apart and Hippolyte remains as the object of Phèdre's incestuous gaze. She has now effectively revealed that she wishes Hippolyte had played the role of Thésée in her life. Because Phèdre knows this is the end for her, she takes a perverse pleasure in pursuing her fantasy to the limit: 'Et Phèdre au labyrinthe avec vous descendue | Se serait avec vous retrouvée ou perdue' (II. 5. 661-662). By this point she has envisioned her husband, seen Hippolyte superimposed on this vision of him, and Thésée's image has faded for her, leaving that of the stepson she loves despite herself. There is a marked difference between the queen's first confession to Oenone, and her much more convoluted avowal to Hippolyte. Here, she metaphorically leads her stepson through the labyrinth of her confession by taking him through the fantasy in which he replaces Thésée, and she replaces Ariadne to become Hippolyte's lover.

¹⁵⁶ Goldmann, *Le Dieu Caché*, p. 432.

Phèdre can no longer play out this illusory scenario for her own enjoyment, and once she makes a full confession to Hippolyte, she loses what power she still had to control the fantasy. This total loss of control, coupled with Hippolyte's rejection, leads to her complete unraveling. Barthes, thinking of Hippolyte's revulsion, notes, 'Éros est contagieux, il faut se couper de lui, refuser le contact des objets qu'il a effleurés: le seul regard de Phèdre sur Hippolyte corrompt Hippolyte, son épée devient répugnante dès que Phèdre l'a touchée.'¹⁵⁷ The confession, once pronounced, cannot be retracted and serves as the crime itself. That is why Phèdre tries to carefully circumnavigate her *aveu*, and at first chooses phrases that speak to seeing Thésée in Hippolyte, when the inverse is what has really been haunting her. After her avowal, everything about her body, including any object with which she comes into contact, is corruptive. She feels herself to be a threat to natural order in the world at large, not simply in Hippolyte's, hence her challenge 'Délivre l'univers d'un monstre qui t'irrite' (II. 5. 701). Phèdre appears grotesque to Hippolyte and, later, Thésée, yet Thésée sees his son as an unnatural being after Oenone's deception, and Hippolyte's presence fills Phèdre with dread once Thésée returns home.

Tormented by self-hatred and shame, Phèdre acknowledges her disintegrating state: 'Misérable! et je vis? et je soutiens la vue | De ce sacré soleil dont je suis descendue?' (IV. 6. 1273-1274). Earlier in the play, before revealing herself to Hippolyte, she could hide from him and from the judgment of her ancestor the sun. In her rage and despair she addresses Minos, her father: 'Je crois te voir, cherchant un supplice nouveau, | Toi-même, de ton sang devenir le bourreau' (IV. 6. 1287-1288). This vision of her father, whom she apostrophizes, is evidence of her fraught and fragile mental state. At this point in the play, she is under such strain that she hallucinates spectres of her disapproving and punishing family. Phèdre has finally come out into the sun: She has exposed herself fully, and the shame of revealing her dark secret to her ancestors, as well as being complicit in the lie that led to Hippolyte's death, contributes to her mental deterioration. The conflation of Hippolyte and Thésée was a way for her to cope with her incestuous desire, to secretly relish in calling Hippolyte's image to mind while looking at his father, but

¹⁵⁷ Barthes, *Sur Racine*, p. 118-19.

ultimately one which she cannot control once faced again with the real sight of Hippolyte in the flesh.

Phèdre: Oenone's Deception

Oenone's case presents a very clear illustration of the persuasive power of language, especially the potency of a single untruth. The lie she tells Thésée is not an elaborate one; she simply transfers Phèdre's desire for Hippolyte to the prince himself, putting the queen's words in Hippolyte's mouth. In an instant, Hippolyte becomes the guilty party, and the lie takes on a life of its own, permanently colouring Thésée's perception of his own son.

Phèdre, as the audience witnesses, first confesses her love for Hippolyte to Oenone and, thinking that Thésée is dead, is encouraged to share her feelings with her stepson. When the king suddenly returns home, alive after all, the confidante recognizes the danger that Phèdre would face if this adulterous, incestuous desire were discovered by others. Oenone determines to tell Thésée a distorted version of the truth, reversing the roles that both Phèdre and Hippolyte have played and accusing the prince of treachery and incest. Thinking that the visual evidence of Hippolyte's sword in Phèdre's hand and the past experience of Phèdre's desire to have her stepson sent out of her sight will corroborate the story, she suggests:

Vous le [Hippolyte] craignez...Osez l'accuser la première
Du crime dont il peut vous charger aujourd'hui.
Qui vous démentira? Tout parle contre lui. (III. 3. 886-888).

Oenone's plan gives the sword itself the power to persuade against Hippolyte. As she imagines the lie that would make Hippolyte guilty of his stepmother's crime, she realizes the sword that Phèdre snatched in desperation could not only be explained but also used as supporting evidence of Hippolyte's imagined desire. Everything—especially Hippolyte's weapon in Phèdre's hands—seems to be in place to support a case against him.

Once her morally- and socially-transgressive confession has been made, Phèdre's only hope of sparing her own life lies in Oenone's ability to use the words that have been spoken, and instead attribute them to Hippolyte. As Barthes explains, 'la ruse d'Oenone consiste précisément, non pas à *reprendre* l'aveu de Phèdre, [...]

mais à le retourner: Phèdre accusera Hippolyte du meme crime dont elle est coupable: le mot restera intact, simplement transféré d'un personnage à l'autre.'¹⁵⁸ The crime exists as a collection of incestuous words spoken, and Oenone merely transfers ownership of those words from Phèdre to Hippolyte knowing that the person who made the criminal, transgressive gesture will be seen as a morally defective, contaminating presence. After the false vision of Hippolyte has been propagated, the lie takes on a life of its own and governs Thésée's interactions with Hippolyte, ultimately leading him to sign his own son's death warrant.

Thésée's reaction to hearing Oenone's story is not to question any part of her tale, but rather to lash out, immediately prepared to view his own son as a criminal: 'Ah! qu'est-ce que j'entends? Un traître, un téméraire, | Préparait cet outrage à l'honneur de son père?' (IV. 1. 1001-1002). In Oenone's fabrication, Phèdre is cast as the victim of her stepson's incestuous gaze.¹⁵⁹ Thésée replays the homecoming interview with his son in his mind, and now sees in it signs of his treachery: 'Le perfide! Il n'a pu s'empêcher de pâilir; | De crainte, en m'abordant, je l'ai vu tressaillir' (IV. 1. 1023-1024). Oenone succeeds in altering the king's perception of his son's behaviour, and he misreads Hippolyte's struggle to reveal his love for Aricie, and his shame about Phèdre's confession, as guilt over a nonexistent crime. He also misinterprets his wife's silence and flight from his presence as a desire to protect Hippolyte and a sense of shame over what her stepson has supposedly revealed to her (IV. 1. 1012-1013). What Thésée hears fundamentally alters how he sees Hippolyte. In this case, his ears are betrayed by listening to a false story, which makes his eyes begin to deceive him as well.

When he sees his son again, Thésée remarks how innocent Hippolyte really does seem, exclaiming, 'Grands dieux ! à ce noble maintien | Quel oeil ne serait pas trompé comme le mien?' (IV. 2. 1036). There are no visible signs of the prince's adultery, no scarlet letter is emblazoned on his forehead (lines 1037-38), signaling his crime to those around him. Thésée seems to be saying that what he sees in front of him is his blameless son, but is struggling against his mind telling him Hippolyte attempted to rape Phèdre. Surely, he exclaims, there should be an easier way of discerning the truth: 'Et ne devrait-on pas à des signes certains | Reconnaître le coeur

¹⁵⁸ Barthes, *Sur Racine*, p. 119.

¹⁵⁹ Earlier versions of *Phèdre* by Euripides and Seneca, cited by Racine in his Preface, have Hippolyte accused of rape, but in Racine's version he is accused of having the intention to rape Phèdre, which lends Hippolyte's gaze a more violent, invasive interpretation.

des perfides humains?’ (lines 1039-40). Here, he bemoans an appearance that does not correspond to the reality underpinning it. Ironically, Thésée has been duped, but not by the person he holds responsible. He thinks he has been tricked by his son into believing him better and more honourable than he actually is, and is speaking quite facetiously to Hippolyte, but in reality Thésée is guilty of not seeing through Oenone’s false claims.

When Hippolyte understands that Phèdre has accused him of the very crime she wished to commit (IV. 2. 1077), he protests his innocence and attempts to alter his father’s false perception. Thésée uses the fact that his son’s sword was found in Phèdre’s hands as visual evidence of Hippolyte’s guilt. The prince struggles in vain to change the picture that has been painted of him as incestuous. He confesses his true crime to Thésée: the chaste and pure love that he bears to Aricie, but the king’s vision of his son has been so effectively prejudiced that he does not believe him—he thinks Hippolyte is simply pretending: ‘Tu te feins criminel pour te justifier.’ (IV. 2. 1128). Once more, Thésée believes his words are ironic, yet the true irony in this case is that there is none. As he recounts to Phèdre the punishment Neptune will deal out to Hippolyte, Thésée demonstrates to what extent he is certain of Hippolyte’s crime. When telling her of Hippolyte’s device of professing to love Aricie, not his stepmother, he reflects ‘Mais je sais rejeter un frivole artifice’ (IV. 4. 1189). Racine layers irony upon irony, as instead of being able to see clearly enough to reject Oenone’s false version of the truth, Thésée is set upon perceiving his son to be the deceiver.

It is this failure to see Hippolyte’s innocence, to perceive an inner truth not visible to the eye but rather the mind’s eye or the heart, for which Aricie later reproaches Thésée. She does not understand how he could fail to know his son, and could allow what another, peripheral, person said to so easily cloud his perception. Whereas Thésée blames himself earlier for not being able to see signs of an adulterer in his son, Aricie criticizes him for failing to recognize clear signs of Hippolyte’s pure heart. After he has asked the gods to show him the truth, Aricie, who seems to be the mouthpiece of the gods in this instance, upbraids him for not understanding his son:

Avez-vous de son coeur si peu de connaissance?
Discernez-vous si mal le crime et l’innocence?

Faut-il qu'à vos yeux seuls un nuage odieux
Dérobe sa vertu qui brille à tous les yeux? (V. 3. 1429-1432)

She asks Thésée how he could be so blind as to believe such a false image of his own child, referring to Oenone as the 'odieux' creature who is the root cause of Thésée's 'nuage' of blindness. Yet the king still holds that Oenone's story must have had some basis in reality, and determines to speak with her once more, thinking she will be able to offer clarity: 'Je veux de tout le crime être mieux éclairci' (V. 4. 1459). As untruth is multiplied by untruth, Thésée's view of his son becomes ever more firmly rooted in the distorted visions laid out before him. It is not until the penultimate scene of the play, and Thérémène's firsthand account of the death of the prince, that Thésée completely casts aside the erroneous vision of his son as adulterer and recognizes he has been deceived by Oenone.

La Thébaïde: Créon's Madness

Thus far, this chapter has explored varying degrees of corruption in characters' vision. If sight has retained a vestige of credibility in these accounts, whether as disturbing foresight or a lie which twists the truth, the cases of Créon and Oreste present vision in a state of total decay, indistinguishable from madness. Throughout *La Thébaïde*, Créon's gaze has a double focus: his two deepest desires are to sit on the Theban throne and to possess Antigone. He is driven by the pursuit of this image of a possible reality, which becomes an obsession. Fixating on the acquisition of a place in the world and a single person with whom to share it clouds his vision throughout the play.

The dream becomes a reality he must have at all costs, and is his eventual undoing. He equates the throne with life itself, and the role of king is, in his mind, far superior to that of father to his sons and suggests that a man who has not had the chance to rule over a people 'Croit n'avoir point vécu tant qu'il n'a point régné' (line 898). Being king is the ultimate embodied experience. By Créon's admission, it means that everything, including one's senses, is heightened; being set above others brings the greatest perceptual experience of the world. As king, the sins he committed would not weigh on him as they would an ordinary man. Ironically, his

desire for this transcendent experience only leads to a version of a heightened sensory perception that is presented as unrelenting hallucinations.

In conversation with Attale, he reveals, ‘Je ne fais point de pas qui ne tende à l’empire’ (III. 6. 848). In his mind, the throne is the ultimate solution and absolution; being ruler of Thebes would erase any guilt or pain over the crimes committed to put himself there, or the loss of his sons Mécénéé and Hémon. Obsession with the throne and its absolute power has made it necessary for him to depose those who would occupy that space, his nephews. He devotes much of his efforts to bringing Polynice and Étéocle together, not to reconcile them, but hoping to hasten their deadly embrace. He confides in Attale:

Je veux qu’en se voyant leurs fureurs se déploient,
Que rappelant leur haine, au lieu de la chasser,
Ils s’étouffent, Attale, en voulant s’embrasser. (III. 6. 898-890)

Knowing that the mere sight of each other is enough to activate their mortal hatred, Créon works throughout the play to bring about a rapprochement between the brothers. Despite the fact that they are his own flesh, he sees them not as family but as obstacles to one of the things he desires most in the world. He is propelled forward by his desire to seize power: ‘Tous les premiers forfaits coûtent quelques efforts | Mais, Attale, on commet les seconds sans remords’ (III. 6. 901-902). As Créon recounts the battle between the two brothers that he has in fact encouraged, he reveals that his desire for their destruction is so strong that his eye conflates Polynice and Étéocle, and they almost merge into one: ‘D’un geste menaçant, d’un œil brûlant de rage, | Dans le sein l’un de l’autre ils cherchent un passage’ (V. 3. 1321-1322). The use of ‘l’un de l’autre’ and ‘ils’ (line 1322) is the only clear reminder that both Polynice and Étéocle are present. Every other term in the two lines is singular: ‘un geste’, ‘un œil’, ‘le sein’ and ‘un passage’. Their physical movements, and the glint in each brother’s eye, are the same. For a few moments Polynice and Étéocle share the same goal, and their fractious relationship is briefly repaired as they come together in order to destroy each other.

Créon’s hope of ascending the throne with Antigone at his side is shattered when Olympe comes to tell him that the princess has committed suicide, and Créon begins to unravel at the thought of forever losing a woman he never possessed. The final scene of the play finds him unable to countenance that Antigone has ended her

own life in order to escape him and be with his son Hémon. He is furious when he discovers that the woman he has obsessively pursued would take steps to ensure that he could no longer see her. Créon comes completely undone, as the vision he once held is now in tatters. He sees no further purpose to life without Antigone, not because he loved her but because he had fixed his gaze so firmly on her that his world ceases to function properly without her. All his efforts to destroy his nephews and gain access to the throne have come to nothing, and the only solution he can conceive is to follow Antigone to Hades, where he may at least gaze upon her for eternity. In his madness, he makes the decision to end his own life. The object of his desiring gaze can no longer escape him, once he joins her in Hades; she cannot die a second time:

Inhumaine, je vais y descendre après vous.
Vous y verrez toujours l'objet de votre haine,
Et toujours mes soupirs vous rediront ma peine.
(V. 6. 1488-1490)

Whereas other characters in the play have committed suicide to escape an impossibly painful situation or even to leave the world to be with a lover,¹⁶⁰ Créon kills himself in order to further torment Antigone with his presence. He ends his life so that he might have vengeance in the next world, and in his delusion, envisions in detail the suffering he will inflict upon Antigone.

In his madness and desperation to join Antigone, Créon begins to recognize what he has done on earth, and begins to feel remorse for the suffering he has inflicted: '[...] mes propres forfaits | Me font déjà sentir tous les maux que j'ai faits' (V. 6. 1507-1508). He recognizes all those he has hurt by name:

Polynice, Étéocle, Jocaste, Antigone,
Mes fils, que j'ai perdus pour m'élever au trône,
Tant d'autres malheureux dont j'ai causé les maux,
Font déjà dans mon cœur l'office des bourreaux.
(V. 6. 1509-1512).

It is this moment of recognition that signals Créon's final descent into madness. For so long as he could focus his gaze on the distant throne and a union with Antigone,

¹⁶⁰ Jocaste cannot bear to see her sons destroy each other, and Antigone ends her life so she may join her lover Hémon.

he could keep any regret for his crimes out of his sight. In acknowledging his victims, many by name, he accepts the fatal burden of being responsible for their deaths. Créon's vision of himself as ruler and lover has come completely undone. His sister-in-law, nephews and niece are dead, and he has been so blinded by an image of himself on the throne that although he is now in a position to be king, he realizes there is no one with whom to share his rule. Those losses, the people in whose death he had a part, now haunt him, returning as his executioners. 'Je ressens à la fois mille tourments divers' (V. 6. 1515), Créon cries, and imagines the earth opening up to swallow him (line 1514). His world is destroyed, he can no longer trust his eyes and he sinks to the ground, unable to remain standing.

Créon's collapse is precipitated by a sensory overload: his field of vision is entirely taken over by hallucinations, which in turn affect his other senses, invade his body (line 1515), and shatter his perception of space. In his case, madness is tantamount to an excess of perception rather than a lack of sensation. Créon's madness serves as a precursor for the complete psychological and perceptual malfunction that Oreste experiences in *Andromaque*.

Andromaque: Oreste's Insanity

Oreste is the only personage in *Andromaque* whose eyes completely and permanently fail him. The sheer horror of the crime he perpetrates—murdering his friend Pyrrhus to prove his love to Hermione, who rejects him—sends him in to a despair that compromises his senses. As this section will demonstrate, 'losing' one's senses in Racine's theatre in fact translates as an experience of sensory overload. In this section I will explore Oreste and Hermione's relationship as a Lacanian type of love; that is, a love closely bound up in narcissism. The narcissistic element of their relationship, which runs in both directions between both Hermione and Oreste, ultimately leads to Hermione's suicide and Oreste's unravelling. The megalomania-cum-narcissism that leads him to murder Pyrrhus, and the madness that follows, are the antithesis of Merleau-Ponty's hermetically-sealed hallucinatory world from previous examples in this chapter.

Ehsan Ahmed remarks on the degree to which the main characters' lives are enmeshed in *Andromaque*, and how *Andromaque* herself affects every other character, ending with Oreste:

Intense love, when inserted into this very tight human-chain [Andromaque-Pyrrhus-Hermione-Oreste], produces a tragic concatenation of madness with each character being pulled from his or her very center: Andromaque's obsession with Hector incites Pyrrhus' folly for Andromaque, which leads to Hermione's self-abandonment and suicide for Pyrrhus and to Oreste's delirium for Hermione. Love induces madness when their sense of being no longer lies within their self.¹⁶¹

Following Ahmed's train of thought, it is Pyrrhus' frustrated love for Andromaque which sets in motion a chain of events that eventually, with Hermione's rejection, is the complete mental undoing of Oreste. While Ahmed's paradigm is not wholly incorrect, he loses sight of Oreste's complex psychological makeup in his attempt to show a very clear chain of causality between characters in the play. The fact that Oreste's love is inextricable from his narcissism may well have much more to do with Oreste's madness than his unrequited feelings alone.

Prior to his delirium at the end of the play, Oreste discusses love as a passion that is inscribed on the body, writ large on one's face, and refers to the futility of attempting to hide or deny one's feelings. This declaration also shows his heightened awareness of how his own body might be seen by others:

L'amour n'est pas un feu qu'on renferme en une âme;
Tout nous trahit, la voix, le silence, les yeux,
Et les feux mal couverts n'en éclatent que mieux.
(II. 2. 574-577)

Love is an embodied phenomenon, yet does not remain hidden within the body itself; it is visible to the world at large. Even in attempting to disguise his feelings, a character may be betrayed by his own body. Although he may have control over his physical movements, his lack of action or the absence of speech can betray him just as easily as if he were to confess his feelings outright. Here, Oreste's observation can be extended to other personages in the play, as it speaks to the fact that everything has the potential to deceive. All parts of the physical body normally used to convey a character's feelings or thoughts—the mouth or eyes, and even silence, or an averted gaze—can be misleading. What is said is not necessarily what was

¹⁶¹ Ehsan Ahmed, "'L'état, c'est l'autre': passion, politics and alterity in Senault and Racine', *Romantic Review*, 93 (2002), 275-294 (p. 286).

meant, a look is not always meant to convey the impression it gives, and ultimately, no sign is to be trusted.

Oreste attracts his *confident*'s concern when he reaches a high level of anxiety over his relationship with Hermione. Pylade counsels the increasingly desperate Oreste : 'Modérez donc, Seigneur, cette fureur extrême. | Je ne vous connais plus ; vous n'êtes plus vous-même' (III. 1. 709-610). Oreste does love Hermione, but the indecision and hesitations on his part and Pyrrhus', have taken their toll on his fragile psyche. The ambassador and his *confident* make a plan to kidnap the princess, and Oreste is urged to act as though he is not distraught, and instead help Hermione prepare for her marriage to Pyrrhus. Pylade begs his master to give no physical sign of their intention: 'Dissimulez: calmez ce transport inquiet; | Commandez à vos yeux de garder le secret' (III. 1. 719-720). He makes certain to warn Oreste against engaging with Hermione's gaze, as she would be able to see through his feigned resignation to her union with Pyrrhus: 'À ses regards surtout cachez votre courroux' (III. 1. 723).

Ultimately, Oreste's love for Hermione, and his repeatedly thwarted efforts either to win her love in return, or wait patiently for Pyrrhus to leave her again and pretend he no longer loves the princess, translate to violence against Pyrrhus. Oreste takes but one definitive action in the entire course of the play, and it backfires on him. His love for Hermione has been warped and has grown to the point where he chooses to participate in the demise of the man who rejected his beloved. This act, meant finally and completely to win Hermione's love for him, ends up being repulsive to her. When Oreste rushes to Hermione, he seems to be haunted by the vision of the 'funeste image' he has just witnessed (V. 3. 1498). The Greeks, incensed by Pyrrhus' coronation of Andromaque as his queen and wife, rush in fury to attack the king. Oreste, proud of what he has done, takes credit and asserts that they were following his lead: 'Mais c'est moi dont l'ardeur leur a servi d'exemple'. But Hermione, deeply regretting the killing that she encouraged, shrugs off any connection with Pyrrhus' murder and attempts to alter Oreste's reality: 'Pourquoi l'assassiner? Qu'a-t-il fait? À quel titre? | Qui te l'a dit?' (V. 3. 1542-1543). When Oreste protests to having acted at her request, reminding the princess of her desire for revenge on the king, Hermione reproaches him for not being perceptive enough to see what was truly in her heart and mind:

Ne devais-tu pas lire au fond de ma pensée?
Et ne voyais-tu pas, dans mes emportements,
Que mon coeur démentait ma bouche à tous moments?
(V. 3. 1546-1548)

Oreste is accused of lacking the ability to see an underlying truth that, arguably, never existed, and discovers that nothing in his world is what it appears. Hermione finds fault with his eyes, and claims they should have perceived not only her 'true' thoughts, but her true feelings as well. Dazed and unravelling, the ambassador grasps at a reality that has shifted and no longer exists. He can no longer trust his eyes or his ears: 'Que vois-je? Est-ce Hermione? Et que viens-je d'entendre?' (V. 4. 1565). He has changed into a monster he no longer recognizes: 'Je deviens parricide, assassin, sacrilège' (V. 4. 1574). His senses have betrayed him, what he understood and perceived has proved to be false, and the trust he had in Hermione was ill-placed. Not only is the vision of a union with Hermione shattered, but his understanding of himself is destroyed. When Hermione's love and honour justified his murder of Pyrrhus, Oreste could rationalize his actions. However, given that the mercurial heroine has rejected him, the full impact of his fundamental transgression is too heavy a weight for his mind to bear.

By the last scene of the play, Oreste has descended into madness. Unlike Pyrrhus, who is at the 'comble de ses vœux' as he prepares to marry Andromaque, Oreste wails at being 'au comble des douleurs' (V. 5. 1616). Coming completely undone, he has a vision of the bodies of Pyrrhus and Hermione, and wants to die alongside them:

Où sont ces deux amants? Pour couronner ma joie,
Dans leur sang, dans le mien, il faut que je me noie;
L'un et l'autre en mourant je les veux regarder:
Réunissons trois cœurs qui n'ont pu s'accorder.
(V. 5. 1621-1624)

This macabre vision of bathing in the blood of all three characters, himself included, and drowning in it, seems to have a salvific quality for Oreste. He pursues a vision to which he initially gestures as a coronation ceremony, one that simultaneously marks the end of his own life and a final accord between Oreste himself, the woman he loved, and the friend he loved. Instead of imagining a variation on a crown for his head, however, Oreste craves a ceremonial experience which, upon closer

investigation, is a perverse, extreme version of the Catholic Last Rites, which borrows heavily from all three elements of the rite. Canon Law sets out three distinct parts of Last Rites, formerly called Extreme Unction: Penance, Anointing, and Viaticum—literally, ‘preparation for the journey’. In Oreste’s macabre hallucination he takes part in all three. Oreste has repented, in horror and disbelief, of Pyrrhus’ murder (for example, line 1570). By line 1621, his use of ‘couronner’ is a macabre reference to a desire to be anointed with his own, deviant, version of holy oil: his blood mixed with that of both Hermione and Pyrrhus, as made plain by the lines which follow. As he fleshes out the fantasy of drowning, it is clear he longs to die by inhaling and ingesting Pyrrhus and Hermione’s blood as well as his own, in a twisted variation on the Last Rites in which host and wine are both present in the blood of all three characters. This sacrament, normally given in part to symbolize the dying person’s communion with Christ’s passion, is here translated into a triple passion—Pyrrhus’, Hermione’s and his own—which he incorporates into his own body, as his version of the Holy Sacrament, as his life and reason slip away. Oreste becomes both high priest and recipient in his ‘Last Rites’.¹⁶²

Although his desire is to submerge his entire body in blood, Oreste also names the organs that have betrayed him in life: his eyes (line 1623), as Hermione has accused him of failing to see the true meaning behind her words and his reason now is failing him, and his heart (line 1624) which has betrayed him into believing he ought to kill Pyrrhus to honour Hermione. His eyes and heart are the primary parts of his body that caused his fall from grace and require healing in his sanguinary ritual anointing and drowning. There is a historical parallel between the attention Oreste calls to specific organs and early modern Catholic practice of anointing specific regions of the body during Last Rites.¹⁶³ The connection between Oreste’s delirious state and the Catholic Church’s prescriptions regarding the receiving of Last Rites brings up several interesting points. Canon Law permits the anointing of the sick to be given to a ‘member of the faithful who, having reached the use of

¹⁶² John Campbell (‘Racine and the Augustinian Influence: the case of *Andromaque*’, *French Studies*, 53 (1999), 279-291) cautions against applying overly Christianized readings to Racine’s earlier theatre. I am interested in what Racine does with Oreste’s embodied experience, and although it may well not have been Racine’s intention explicitly to connect Oreste with this Christian sacrament, there is a very interesting parallel worth examining between what Oreste’s body experiences and the physical enactment of Last Rites.

¹⁶³ Code of Canon Law, Code 1000 §1.

reason, begins to be in danger due to sickness or old age.¹⁶⁴ The question of Oreste's reason, of whether he has permanently lost the reason he had previously attained, is not so much an issue as the fact that he is indeed in danger of dying. He is not suffering from the ills that come with advanced age, or physical wounds that might have come from a battle; rather, his illness is primarily mental, yet is so acute that it affects him physically and jeopardizes his health. Racine knowingly uses the issue of Oreste's mental and physical deterioration to press the necessity of some kind of last, dying ritual, and finds the in the Last Rites a framework within which to develop his variation on the sacrament.

One of the most striking parameters of Oreste's ritual purification is the fact that he believes he must look at Pyrrhus and Hermione as he drowns in their blood. They are both dead at this point, but the fact that they cannot truly return his gaze is not the issue. Oreste's desired 'interaction' with them stems from his not uncommon need to memorialize the dead as though they were still living. It is because of this need that he behaves as though Pyrrhus' and Hermione's bodies and souls are still one (line 1623), even if conceptually he is aware they have separated. Thus, the rite that Oreste constructs is not only for the purpose of purifying himself as he passes from one world to the next; rather, a very important part of that ceremony is looking at Hermione and Pyrrhus as his soul separates from his body, pretending they are still alive for those moments, and in so doing honouring both of them. His desired interaction with Pyrrhus and Hermione is not dissimilar to the practice of honouring the recently departed during a wake, when although the person is deceased the mourners nonetheless feel a sense of being with that person for the last time. What started as his search for 'those two lovers', the pair united in death (line 1621), ends as a final communion with a vision of all three united in the afterlife, as their own unique Trinity.

Oreste experiences more hallucinations, then is deprived of his sense of sight as he feels himself surrounded by an 'épaisse nuit' (line 1625), and his body betrays him yet again as he shivers (V. 5. 1626). In his madness, he famously mistakes Pylade for Pyrrhus, demonstrating as he apostrophizes the emperor that he is truly not himself, and has not yet processed the image he has seen of Pyrrhus covered in blood, attacked by the Greeks: 'Percé de tant de coups, comment t'es-tu sauvé?' (V.

¹⁶⁴ Code of Canon Law, Code 1004 §1.

5. 1631). Oreste flies at 'Pyrrhus' whom he still believes he must kill, shouting 'Tiens, tiens, voilà le coup que je t'ai réservé' (V. 5. 1632). He sees things he does not want to see, such as his dead friend, and then responds to this vision in a way which he normally would not want. He sees Pyrrhus, who he did not want to kill, and despite the fact that in his vision Pyrrhus is not dead, nevertheless tries to kill him again. His eyes and mind deceive him repeatedly as he catches sight not only of a Hermione prepared to ingest his heart, but of snakes (V. 5. 1636 and V. 5. 1638) and demons (V. 5. 1636). In his insanity, the woman he loved has become a monster who, instead of 'breaking' his heart, is capable of devouring it before his eyes. Pylade's description of Oreste, who has completely lost control of his mental faculties, is '[i]l perd le sentiment' (V. 5. 1645). This refers to a man who has lost his ability to reason correctly, and who has ceased to experience appropriate feelings and reactions. Oreste is no longer sensitive to the reality of others in the world, and has lost his ability to participate in his own reality, visual, tactile, auditory or otherwise. In the case of Oreste—not dissimilar to that of Joad in this instance—Racine pushes the boundaries of proper sensory experience. The presentation of madness is not, as one might perhaps expect, a portrayal of a man whose mind is simply deteriorating. Rather, madness, or 'losing one's senses', is manifest as being submerged by the senses, and completely overwhelmed by them. What Oreste sees, hears and feels is not objectively speaking 'real', but these things are all too painfully true and immediate for him. In the character of Oreste, madness stems from an aural 'misunderstanding' and becomes a visual and tactile overload. Racine crafts this scene to not only show the audience Oreste reeling about in turmoil, but also to have Oreste speak about his hallucinations in a detailed, bodily way. The audience at once understands what Oreste experiences, and can imagine what it might feel like to lose control of their own bodies.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have surveyed numerous presentations of vision in which it can deceive, be misrepresented, or fail in other ways. In the course of this investigation, our focus shifted from vision experienced during a dream, to the conflation of two images and its implications, to intentional deception and finally to madness: the complete undoing of vision and sense. Characters' misperceptions are

as much a part of their existence as the experiences they have while awake and lucid; even if they later wake up or come back to their senses, they live through dreams and hallucinations as real in the given moment, and we must take account of them as such. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thinkers such as George Hakewill explored various ways in which vision could become challenging and complicated, as part of a movement well away from classical, particularly Aristotelian notions of vision as a strictly rational process.¹⁶⁵ As Stuart Clark observes,

it takes only a moment's reflection to realize that a cognitive model which assumed that visual appearance would normally correspond with objective reality was ill equipped to deal with serious and repeated breakdowns of that particular relationship—and more specifically with situations where appearances that were supposed to be true proved difficult, perhaps impossible, to distinguish between appearances that were deemed to be false: let us call these 'visual paradoxes.'¹⁶⁶

The primary function of the eyes is to represent to the body what they see or perceive, but this is also their main flaw. The eyes may transmit this information directly to the rest of the body, but this process also leaves room for error and unreliability. In the previous chapter we examined instances where the eyes are opened up to lust and passion, and here we have focused on other deviant visual forms such as hallucination, deception, madness and divine vision. In looking at these more complex visual experiences through a phenomenological lens, we have used Merleau-Ponty's theories of perception to closely examine what it means for Racine's characters to experience vision gone wrong. Merleau-Ponty's work on visual perception contributes the observation that these are still deeply bodily and involve multiple senses at the same time. Racine plays with these kinds of visions which are outside the bounds of what might be comfortable and straightforward, and uses them to enrich the experience of the characters and also, therefore, the audience.

In the instance of Athalie's dream, we encounter a particular type of sensory experience which in many ways resembles the kind of interaction the queen might

¹⁶⁵ Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, p. 31. George Hakewill's work deals primarily with three causes of visual error: nature, human artifice, or demons. Hakewill, writing for a blind friend, departs from the point of view that the eye is naturally fallible, and takes the decidedly counter-Renaissance position of blaming it for everything wrong with the world.

¹⁶⁶ Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, p. 20.

have with someone while awake. The dream itself, however, offers Athalie the unique experience of interacting with her dead mother once more, as she did when Jézabel was alive. She is able to see her mother clearly and hear her voice. Yet Racine places limits on Athalie's physical interaction with her mother, and reminds one that Jézabel is indeed a ghost, when Athalie's outstretched hand meets Jézabel's bones and torn flesh, floating in the air. Her encounter with Joas, however, is made of sterner physical stuff: she feels the searing pain of his dagger as if stabbed while awake. When dealing with the dead, Racine maintains a certain distance. The dream in *Athalie* presents two deeply unsettling encounters, for Athalie and for the audience who hear about and imagine them: it plays with the boundaries between the dead and the living, and includes a nightmarish encounter with a divine child that is nonetheless within the scope of reason because it is based on the scriptural and historic reality of Athalie's demise. Joad's divine raptures are within the bounds of propriety and *vraisemblance* precisely, and only, because they come from God. In this case, the audience has the very rare experience of witnessing the physical effect of the presence of God, who enters Joad's body and produces the sensations and visions he describes. Andromaque's conflation of Hector and Astyanax is a coping mechanism for the trauma of the Trojan War, and the instability and uncertainty that characterize her life in its aftermath. Phèdre's conflation of Hippolyte and Thésée is a way for her to entertain the fantasy of being with her stepson instead of her husband, and is particularly striking because of the perfected version of Thésée that she sees when she looks at Hippolyte. Through Oenone's deception, we see the suggestive power of a lie and the intractability of the spoken word. Once uttered, it is as though the accusation was true, and Hippolyte's guilt becomes fact for Thésée. Créon's madness and collapse are an onstage demonstration of an assault of the senses, something which Racine perfects later in the character of Oreste. The embodied experience of Oreste's unravelling and madness presents what is normally thought of senselessness as a form of extreme sensation. All the instances of 'other' forms of vision in this chapter illustrate the wide range of sensory experiences in the life of the Racinian character.

The examples of vision in this chapter demonstrate the ever-shifting boundaries between true perception and false or illusory perception. In Racine's theatre, we have seen that the difference between appearance and reality is very often fluid for his characters, and rather than limiting visual experience it widens the

scope of what the eye perceives, to include mistakes in comprehension, dreams, divine visions and breaks with reality. The audience sees two things: what happens onstage, and what characters tell us is happening for them internally. Racine capitalizes on the duality of the audience's experience in instances such as Oreste's unravelling or Joad's communion with God. This is particularly interesting when we consider the cases in this chapter, because here more than ever we have seen that choosing a visual experience as a starting point inevitably feeds into a larger experience that is also auditory and tactile. There is richness and depth to these instances of wayward vision, and we have seen that they are not outliers to be glossed over but heightened, concentrated sensations which show us how vulnerable our eyes truly are.

CHAPTER III

‘The Nearness of You’: Touch and Intimacy

‘Quand je te parle, je te touche, et tu me touches quand je t’entends’

Derrida, *Le Toucher*, p. 226-27

We have looked at some of the shapes that vision takes in Racine’s corpus. Whether the perceptual experience of seeing leads to the soul-shaking synaesthetic event of love, or a personage’s eyes fail them, sometimes due to madness, it is clear that sight is one of the primary senses by which a Racinian character navigates his world. Acknowledging the importance of sight, however, need not come at the expense of the other senses. A strong case can also be made for the centrality of touch in Racine’s theatre.

Historically, scholars have tended to overlook the importance of touch and intimacy for Racine. By and large, this reluctance is the result of tendentious assumptions about physical contact on the early modern French stage. Many modern critics take it as axiomatic that the *bienséances* of seventeenth-century French theatre made it all but taboo for actors to touch one another onstage. Jacques Scherer comments that touching, kissing or other physical interaction between lovers, as well as violent physical interactions such as blows or murder, were considered undesirable.¹⁶⁷ John Lough follows Scherer’s lead, stating that ‘[t]he *bienséances* [...] ruled out the depiction on the stage of all forms of violent action such as duels, battles and murders.’¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Jacques Scherer, *La Dramaturgie Classique* (Paris: Nizet, 1950), p. 402-403. See also the chapters on ‘Les vraisemblances’, p. 367-382, and ‘Les bienséances’, p. 383-421.

¹⁶⁸ John Lough, *Seventeenth-Century French Drama: the Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 112.

Such rigid constructions of the *bienséances* steer us away from what is in fact a rich tactile presence in Racine's theatre. Michael Hawcroft helpfully reorients us to this heritage, making a convincing case against understanding the *bienséances* as a 'straightforward prohibitive concept.'¹⁶⁹ He argues that early modern dramatists were less concerned with upholding the norms of touch in the *bienséances* than presenting the audience with *vraisemblance*: interactions which they might reasonably accept as true. According to Hawcroft, Corneille's *Examens* demonstrate 'that there was no straightforward prohibition against depicting violence onstage' and instead, 'the limits imposed on depicting physical violence should be related on the one hand to the practicalities of performance [...] and on the other hand the need to manage the audience's tragic response.'¹⁷⁰ I argue that Racine's treatment of touch demonstrates the same priority given to practical considerations and the emotional impact on an audience.

Although Hawcroft paints a more permissive picture of touch in early modern French drama, the tactile is nevertheless a 'touchy' subject in Racine's time. There remains no romantic embracing or kissing, and—by any account—relatively little physical violence onstage. While Racine avoids breaking these boundaries, he consistently probes and plays with them in several important ways. Limiting touch does not erase it. Indeed, I will argue, it often does the opposite. In those instances in which Racine most severely restricts physical touch, he displaces the tactile into the linguistic realm of his characters, who use increasingly visceral language to articulate their experiences. There does not have to be physical contact for there to be powerful, palpable examples of touch.

Roughly speaking, touch and intimacy are present in three ways in the Racinian corpus: firstly, in the literal touch that occurs when characters make bodily contact, as in an embrace or by physically supporting each other; secondly, in a personage's recounting of how he or she felt physically during a particular moment, or how he or she was emotionally moved by another; and finally when one character employs bodily metaphors—such as the hand for agency—or uses other physically charged language which expresses a sense of contact or proximity.

¹⁶⁹ Michael Hawcroft, 'The *Bienséances* and Their Irrelevance to the Death of Camille in Corneille's *Horace*', *Papers on Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, 38 (2011), 465-79, (pp. 478).

¹⁷⁰ Michael Hawcroft, 'The Death of Camille in Corneille's *Horace*: Performance, Print, Theory' in *Papers on Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, 38 (2011), 443-64, (pp. 464).

The Vocabulary and Philosophy of Touch

Before embarking on the course I have just charted, I want to pause and flesh out some of the vocabulary of touch in Racine, as well as its conceptual underpinnings. I will explore the range of meanings that touch has for Racine, beginning with a short investigation into just how the word itself, and related terms, appears in the corpus of his plays. What words do his characters use when touching each other in a literal sense, how do they describe their own experience of feeling emotionally touched, and how do they talk about metaphorically touching one another?

Racine uses tactile words such as ‘toucher’, ‘caresser’, ‘douleur’ and ‘sentir’, which implicate the body on both an emotional and physical level. ‘Toucher’ carries both literal and figurative meanings in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* (1694), and is defined as ‘mettre la main sur quelque chose, à quelque chose’ in addition to being synonymous with ‘esmouvoir’.¹⁷¹ ‘Esmouvoir’, which describes a feeling of being emotionally moved, is etymologically connected to ‘mouvoir’, which signifies movement in the physical, spatial sense. ‘Sentir’ has figurative connotations in Racine’s time that extend beyond the sensory act of bodily perception and connect to both emotional and mental recognition. It may signify ‘Avoir le coeur touché, l’ame émue de quelque chose’, ‘S’appercevoir, connoistre’ or finally ‘Connoistre, sentir en quel estat on est.’¹⁷² The act of perception and the experience of sensation operate on two levels, the sensory experience itself and the added layer of awareness that one is sensing.

According to the Preface to *Bérénice*, Racine deliberately attempts to ‘touch’ his audience through tragedy: ‘La principale règle est de plaire et de *toucher*.’¹⁷³ Tragedy, for Racine, ought to provoke an emotional response in audience members: tension should build to a breaking point or climax, inspiring a mixture of pity and fear; the flames of the passions must be stoked, and everything one witnesses must relate back to ‘cette tristesse majestueuse qui fait tout le plaisir de la tragédie.’¹⁷⁴ The importance of this sensory connection can be seen by the fact that the verb ‘toucher’ appears in various forms throughout the whole of the Racinian corpus.

¹⁷¹ *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, first edition, 1694.

¹⁷² *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, first edition, 1694.

¹⁷³ Racine, *Théâtre Complet*, p. 325, italics mine.

¹⁷⁴ Racine, *Théâtre Complet*, p. 324.

Aristotelian touch

Racine's understanding of touch owes a significant debt to Aristotle. Racine was familiar with a range of Aristotle's works, and his personally annotated copies of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Poetics* survive.¹⁷⁵ Racine's approach to tactility bears particularly strong affinities with Aristotle's assertions about the senses in *De anima*. As its title suggests, Aristotle's principal concern in *De anima* is to investigate the nature and constitution of the soul, especially its relation to the body. He distinguishes animate from inanimate beings—those with souls from those without—by the capacity for motion and sense-perception.¹⁷⁶ It is the latter which sheds the greatest light on Racine's approach to touch.

Aristotle identifies an object corresponding to each sense, as well as a medium through which it is sensed, and a particular organ that performs the sensing. Touch, however, proves problematic for this schema. According to Aristotle: 'It is a problem whether it is one sense or several: and what the organ is—whether it is the flesh [...] or not,' and whether the flesh should be understood as medium or organ.¹⁷⁷ Touch is therefore *sui generis*, lacking the 'underlying unity' which defines the other senses.¹⁷⁸ Rather than diminishing its importance, however, the multi-faceted character of touch lends it a certain primacy. '[N]o other sense can exist without touch.'¹⁷⁹ The nose which smells, the eyes which see, and the ears which hear are all—in the end—made of flesh, the very organ and medium through which touch also occurs. In fact, in the early modern conception of vision, the eye emitted rays which in turn touched upon things, making vision an actively tactile experience with the eye feeling its way around an object. In his exploration of touch Aristotle points towards a more holistic approach to this sense, in which multiple senses are not only implicated but expected. While Racine does not give a systematic account of touch in either his prefaces or his plays, he clearly works from the Aristotelian insight that

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Roy C. Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* (Paris: Nizet, 1974), pp. 147, 150, 152, 167 for references to Racine's annotations in the margins of Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Knight also identifies further classical influences on Racine, including Virgil, Horace, Cicero (p. 146), and Plato (p. 148).

¹⁷⁶ *De Anima*, 1.2 §§ 31-2 (403b24-404b7).

¹⁷⁷ *De Anima*, 2.11 §§517-18 (422b17-423a22).

¹⁷⁸ *De Anima*, 2.11 §§ 521-4 (422b17-423a22).

¹⁷⁹ *De Anima*, 3.13 §§ 865-8 (435a11-435b25).

touch is both indispensable to the life of the soul, and inextricable from its other sensations.

Physical Touch

Lean on Me: Supporting the Other

In this section, I will discuss the contact that occurs when characters are physically supported by others. Such bodily contact can, in this case, lend a considerable degree of pathos to a rather flawed character such as Créon or Phèdre. Not only do they both reel about under the weight of their many transgressions, but they also are able to rely on physical assistance from others as their strength begins to fail them. The fact that neither is left to collapse on his or her own is significant. The Racinian character who begins to lose his senses or lose control of his body is most compelling when he is touched by another, who attempts to provide emotional as well as physical support. Racine can more effectively play on an audience's emotions when two bodies are involved, one supporting and one collapsing, rather than a single inert body falling to the ground.

At the end of *La Thébaïde*, Créon's physical and mental health deteriorates rapidly and guards provide him with physical support. As he hallucinates and imagines the earth opening up to swallow him (V. 4. 1514), Racine instructs that he collapse into the arms of the guards. Esther goes to visit Assuérus and needs to be physically held by Elise and four other Israelites. She cannot remain on her feet and calls upon the five women to catch her as she falls in a faint (II. 7). Assuérus is visibly moved by Esther's physical collapse and offers her a physicalized testament of his support in his sceptre (c.f. 'Vivez; le sceptre d'or que vous donne cette main | Pour vous de ma clémence est un gage certain', II. 7. 639-40). Assuérus' physical help, in the offer of his sceptre, revives Esther and encourages her to plead her case before the king. A dying Mithridate is carried by his soldiers near the conclusion of the eponymous play. Oenone supports a weak and fainting Phèdre as she enters the stage in a state of near-collapse, weighed down by her guilt, garments and ornaments. The audience learns from Oenone that Phèdre is weak from not having slept or eaten in three days (I. 3. 193). In *Bajazet*, Atalide falls to the ground in a faint that is explicitly integrated into the action of the play and remarked upon by

Zatime (IV. 3. 1205) before she is carried offstage. Her collapse is a tacit admission of her love for Bajazet, and it also heightens the audience's awareness of her physicality. The sight of Bajazet's tortured lover, the once-powerful king, each of these queens, and the brother of Oedipe unable to remain standing or reduced to physical dependence upon other less regal figures is designed to have a powerful impact upon an audience.

In each case, a lack of control over their own bodies has an emotional impact on the other characters and the spectator: witnessing these characters in such a debilitated state moves the audience to pity them, to imagine themselves weighted down in the same manner, by the same concerns. In *Créon*, *Mithridate*, *Phèdre*, *Atalide* and *Esther*, the audience sees a personage who is in some way out of control, physically and/or emotionally. The supporting touch of other characters is a way of bringing them back to focus, and sometimes helping them—even for a moment—back into the same reality shared by other characters onstage.

Embracing

Racine—perhaps consciously—uses Aristotelian thinking in the way his characters respond emotionally and physically to each other. Aristotle's attempt to describe the tactile leads him to conclude that it is an all-encompassing sense, involving other senses and carrying a high degree of intimacy. These observations about touch make their way into the charged, tactile world of Racine's characters. An embrace cannot be reduced to the simple coming-together of two bodies and the meeting of flesh: one always feels multiple sensations instead of just a single tactile sensation, and the emotional dimension inherent in touching complicates matters. As the next section will demonstrate, in some cases, this may very well be intentional. However, whether or not this is the case, Aristotle's theory of sensation provides a useful tool for understanding the rich perceptual experience of the embrace in Racine's theatre.

The dramatist carefully selects charged moments in *Iphigénie*, *Mithridate* and *Athalie* for embraces between his characters. We will explore these moments and discover why the physical, tactile aspect of the embrace carries a special weight that elevates such moments above what could have been achieved dramatically through words or visual effect alone. Racine's characters desire something beyond the

simple satisfaction of physical contact; they seek the effect of the encounter. What makes onstage embraces such powerful experiences for the characters and the audience in Racine's theatre is not simply the sight of two characters in close physical proximity. Rather, the audience follows the expectations that each character carries into these embraces, and feels emotionally implicated in their outcome. The critic David Maskell has written about embracing in Racine, but I do not believe he deals sufficiently with a topic to which he devotes only three pages.¹⁸⁰ Maskell flags up the times when embraces occur in the corpus, but does not go further, to examine the embrace in its physicality, for the sensations and impressions it leaves on the characters, nor do the critics cited by Maskell, for example Barthes.¹⁸¹ This section will address this gap and use a phenomenological reading of the embrace to provide a fuller picture of its bodily and emotional impact.

Each embrace that the audience witnesses occurs at a point in the plays when characters are in a heightened emotional state, and is designed to achieve maximum effect on the bodies of the characters involved and on the audience who witness the embrace. This section will examine the embrace as it happens onstage with particular attention to what an audience would have seen. Xipharès demonstrates his love and loyalty to his father by hugging him (*Mit.* V. 5. 1695-96), Agamemnon reluctantly embraces the daughter he intends to sacrifice (*Iph.* II. 2. 537), and Joas is embraced four times in the course of *Athalie* (II. 8. 743; IV. 2. 1264; IV. 4. 1412; IV. 4. 1416). There comes a point at which the uttering and hearing of words is no longer enough, the eyes have seen enough or have not yet found what they are looking for, and so the prospect of physically touching someone carries a level of certitude that none of the other senses appears to possess.

The last scene of *Mithridate* presents the dying king near the end of his life, no longer able to stand on his own. With his last few breaths, Mithridate asks his loyal son to embrace him:

Mais je sens affaiblir ma force et mes esprits;
Je sens que je me meurs. Approchez-vous, mon fils:
Dans cet embrassement dont la douceur me flatte,
Venez, et recevez l'âme de Mithridate. (V. 5. 1693-1696)

¹⁸⁰ David Maskell, *Racine: A Theatrical Reading* (Oxford: OUP, 1990), pp. 77-79.

¹⁸¹ Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979).

This is a very tender filial embrace, between a man famous for his strength and rage whose forces are failing him, and the loyal son whose union with his own fiancée he blesses. In this embrace, the two men physically touch and each receives comfort from this reconciliation and blessing. In the small amount of time they have together, Mithridate transfers his spirit to his son as they make contact. Thus he ensures his legacy: Xipharès will carry on in his father's memory, having incorporated Mithridate's spirit as part of his own body. The final reconciliation could have been marked only by an exchange of words, but the physical contact between father and son heightens the impact of this moment. Were their bodies to remain apart, Xipharès would never have been able to receive his father's breath into his own body: the power inherent in witnessing the prince inhale his father's soul and *incorporate* it into his own flesh is without parallel. Mithridate's words express very clearly what it is that all Racine's characters desire when they embrace one another: the communion of bodies that is also the communion of souls when their flesh touches. His use of the word *âme*, and the fact that sharing his soul can only be done through physically touching his son, highlights Aristotle's discussion of the complex nature of the soul and its connection to the tactile.

Iphigénie seeks a hug from her father, hoping that an embrace with him will reassure both their troubled souls. She wishes to bring his mind and soul, which she senses are elsewhere, back to her by being physically close, and calm her own anxious body. When Iphigénie is finally reunited with her father, it is quite clear that the guilty Agamemnon does not wish to see his daughter and tries to flee her presence. The princess, not understanding the reason for his hasty departure, enquires where he is going. Iphigénie wants to know what is important enough for her father to steal away from her at the moment of her arrival, and wishes he would stay to witness and participate in her joy at seeing him: 'Seigneur, où courez-vous? et quels empressements | Vous dérobent sitôt à nos embrassements?' (II. 2. 531-32). She remarks upon his 'front chargé d'ennuis' (II. 2. 567) and wants him to hug her, to reassure her and to behave like her father, the kind father about whom she has spoken to Ériphile (II. 2. 561-562, 565-56).

In the hug that Iphigénie finally does receive, Agamemnon cannot embrace her fully. He tells his daughter, 'Eh bien, ma fille, embrassez votre père; | Il vous aime toujours.' (II. 2. 537-38). She is the one to embrace him, and the king—so it seems from his language—perhaps barely and feebly returns the gesture. He speaks of

himself in the third person during this exchange, using ‘votre’ and ‘il’ to signify the detachment he is trying to practice with the daughter he is seriously considering offering in sacrifice to the gods. Iphigénie’s active movement towards her father, her arms open to hug him (line 537), stands in direct contrast to the passive state in which he enters the embrace (line 538), only able to offer her the fact that he, her father, continues to love her. Iphigénie tries to remain positive in the face of this strange and one-sided embrace, exclaiming ‘Je sens croître ma joie et mon étonnement!’ (II. 2. 544). Away from her father, in the next scene, she confides to Ériphile and Doris ‘D’une secrète horreur je me sens frissonner. | Je crains, malgré moi-même, un malheur que j’ignore’ (II. 2. 580-581). Iphigénie seeks an embrace from her father because the sight of him is not nearly as reassuring as she would have wished. Agamemnon will not remain in her presence, nor will he offer her words of welcome or comfort, and so she turns to the security and ostensible authority of the physical. However, the paternal hug does not reassure her in the way she hopes, and the princess is left with less certainty than ever after her father retires. The emotional security she seeks through physical means still eludes her; the feeble words he has offered and declined to clarify (II. 2. 547 and II. 2. 578) and his evasive body language upon seeing her offer neither comfort nor resolution.

Ériphile presents a slightly different case, as she has already been embraced and takes comfort and pleasure in recalling the sensation of being wrapped in another’s arms. Held prisoner after the sacking of Lesbos, believing herself to be an orphan, Ériphile is shown great kindness by Iphigénie whom she nonetheless resents for having the seemingly loving and complete family she desires. After witnessing the embrace her friend received from her father as he welcomed her, she shares her thoughts and her sadness with Doris:

Je vois Iphigénie entre les bras d’un père;
Elle fait tout l’orgueil d’une superbe mère;
Et moi, toujours en butte à de nouveaux dangers,
Remise dès l’enfance en des bras étrangers,
Je reçus et je vois le jour que je respire,
Sans que père ni mère ait daigné me sourire. (II. 1. 421-26)

The young woman, who has never known her own parents, longs for such an apparently affectionate mother and father. She assumes a great amount of affection exists between Agamemnon and Iphigénie from the filial embrace she witnesses, and

remarks that Clytemnestre is able to express her love for her daughter in the pride she feels. Strikingly, it is the sight of Agamemnon's arms wrapped around his daughter that triggers such a strong desire for the same in Ériphile: that single image is connected immediately to a physical feeling of comfort, love and safety. She wants, quite simply, to be held that way. The expression 'entre les bras' (line 421) from the embrace the young woman witnesses is almost faithfully echoed by the 'en des bras' (line 424) of her own experience.

Ériphile is fascinated with the sensation of being embraced by another, and the comfort and understanding this seems to bring to others. The unrequited love she bears for Achille originates from finding herself in his bloodstained arms after being taken prisoner in Lesbos. She connects her attraction to him, in all its erotic power, to the moment she saw—and simultaneously felt—herself being held by him. As she first confesses this love to Doris, she makes explicit reference to

Cet Achille, l'auteur de tes maux et des miens,
Dont la sanglante main m'enleva prisonnière,
Qui m'arracha d'un coup ma naissance et ton père
(II. 1. 472-474)

The memory of Achille's bloodstained hand is seared into her sensory memory, and the image of a bloodied appendage and the corresponding bodily feeling it engenders re-appear as she further explains her feelings:

En me voyant presser d'un bras ensanglanté,
Je frémissais, Doris, et d'un vainqueur sauvage
Craignais de rencontrer l'effroyable visage.
J'entrai dans son vaisseau, détestant sa fureur,
Et toujours détournant ma vue avec horreur.
Je le vis : son aspect n'avait rien de farouche ;
Je sentis le reproche expier dans ma bouche,
Je sentis contre moi mon cœur se déclarer,
J'oubliai ma colère, et ne sus que pleurer. (II. 1. 492-500)

Here, a strongly tactile moment is combined with vision, as this is Ériphile's first memory following a long period in isolation and darkness. Achille's arm is the first thing she feels and sees, and told in this particular way ('En *me voyant*', line 492) is similar to an out-of-body experience. She feels her body react to Achille's touch at the same time she sees herself, from outside her body, with his arm around her. Her

fear of the face of such a destructive and murderous man evaporates the moment she finally sets eyes on him. Seeing Achille, as with Phèdre's experience of first laying eyes on Hippolyte, means that she simultaneously feels her own body reacting to him by shutting down and betraying her. Ériphile feels her unkind words for him dissipate before ever reaching her lips, another site of intimacy, she feels her heart surge with love for him despite herself, and her anger vanishes. The 'Je le vis' (line 488) that marks her initial vision of Achille is followed twice in succession by expressions beginning with 'Je sentis' (lines 488 and 499), culminating in the chiasmatic 'c...m...m...c' of 'contre moi mon coeur' (line 499). These two lines further illustrate the bodily experience of laying eyes on the man she immediately loves, which is so powerful that her heart betrays her mind in order to give itself to Achille.

In Racine's last play, the embrace plays a major role. Joas is involved in all four of the embraces in *Athalie*. The first comes in the scene following the boy's refusal of Athalie's offer to treat him like her own son (II. 7. 699-700). He will not give up the mother and father he has in Josabet and Joad to accept Athalie as his mother, and then runs to the high priest who has heard the entire exchange. Joad puts his arms around the boy, and admires him for his courage. This first instance of physical contact in the play is extremely powerful, as it shows a grown man stooping down or even kneeling to embrace a child who will one day become more powerful than he. The second embrace occurs in much the same manner, between the same two characters. Joas again runs into Joad's arms, this time prepared to sacrifice his own life for God and still unaware of who he really is. In this second instance, Joas seeks out his surrogate father for the reassurance and clarity his embrace will bring. The final two embraces occur in quick succession, after the defeat of Athalie, when Josabet embraces Joas as king and the true son of David (IV. 4. 1413), and just after when Joas calls Zacharie to embrace him, exclaiming, 'Embrassez votre frère' (IV. 4. 1414). Racine's stage directions call for Joad to say 'Enfants, ainsi toujours puissiez-vous être unis!' '*pendant qu'ils* [Joas and Zacharie] *s'embrassent*' (IV. 4. 1416). That Joas refers to himself in the third person, and also that he requests Zacharie embrace him, mark this as an especially significant moment within the play.

In language that echoes Agamemnon's half-hearted assent to his daughter's embrace, Joas seems to hint at a growing emotional detachment that will one day

transform him into Zacharie's murderer. Joas' words significantly colour the embrace, making the audience and the other characters aware of his new position and power, as well as the emotional detachment that will become more apparent as his reign and life continue. The high priest's benediction, simultaneous with the embrace, brings an even greater sense of irony to the act than Joas' words. The blessing reminds the audience that the nature of Joas and Zacharie's relationship will change drastically in the future: Joas will one day prove to be an idolater, like Athalie whom he now replaces, and when Zacharie denounces idolatry he will be stoned to death at Joas' orders.

Touch also occurs offstage, of course, in Racine's theatre, and when it does there are consequences that extend into the action the audience witnesses onstage. *Britannicus* contains a clear example of the ramifications the audience witnesses as the result of a literal embrace. In conversation with Albine in the opening scene of the play, Agrippine relives a particularly hurtful incident in which her son caused her distress and attempted to limit her power:

Sur son trône avec lui j'allais prendre ma place [...]
L'ingrat, d'un faux respect colorant son injure,
Se leva par avance, et courant m'embrasser,
Il m'écarta du trône où je m'allais placer. (I. 1. 103, 108-110)

Agrippine remembers very clearly how her son walked toward her, effectively blocking her access to the throne. The embrace that Agrippine and Néron share, which could be a sign of proximity, understanding, kinship or reconciliation, is in fact a sign of the struggle between them for domination over each other. Néron uses touch in this instance to achieve the end of preventing Agrippine from sitting beside him at that moment. His mother waits for the time when she can best retaliate for this earlier slight, and in Act IV, the audience sees Agrippine sit on her throne and gesture for her son to join her: 'Approchez-vous, Néron, et prenez votre place.' (IV. 2. 1115). She implies not only that his place is beside her—and therefore never above her—but especially that he needs to be summoned and subsequently admitted to his position as Roman Emperor.

Racine chooses not to have his characters embrace the body of a dead character. For example, Thésée never sees Hippolyte's body, as he does in Seneca's

version¹⁸² when the grieving father, having at last learned the truth about how his son acted honourably in the face of Phaedra's attempt to seduce him, scrambles around the stage re-assembling the pieces of his son's corpse and preparing his body for burial. In Racine's version, Théràmène and Aricie are the only characters who see the prince as he expires and immediately after his death (V. 6. 1574-1588). The audience never sees the death scene that the two characters witness; Théràmène reports back to the grieving Thésée and describes Hippolyte's mangled body, 'Que méconnaîtrait l'œil même de son père' (V. 6. 1570). Racine's Thésée is deeply distraught, and expresses a desire to embrace his son's body at the very end of the play: 'Allons de ce cher fils embrasser ce qui reste' (V. 7. 1649). It is no accident that Racine's *Phèdre* ends before the audience might witness Thésée embracing the scattered remains of his son's body; the dramatist purposely avoids showing the audience such a grisly scene and only allows Thésée to go so far as to declare his intention to hold his dead son in his arms. Likewise, one never witnesses the body of Polynice or Étéocle being held by Antigone, or the body of Pyrrhus being carried by soldiers as Hermione rushes to stab herself over his corpse. These deaths are reported by another party in a 'death *récit*', and the audience is always left to imagine the scene for themselves. Even in such instances as Atalide's onstage suicide, or Phèdre's onstage death after having ingested poison, there is no indication that other characters interact with the bodies of the dead. To touch or hold the body of a deceased character would be to commit a fundamental trespass: the bodies of the living are well within bounds, and characters such as Esther or Créon are caught by others as they collapse, but those no longer alive are strictly off-limits. Hermione dies on top of Pyrrhus' body, but she only interacts with Pyrrhus' dead body as she ends her own life. Perhaps the prohibition on the living interacting with the deceased is because the bodies of the dead possess far more power than those of the living. To interact with them on the stage would be completely overpowering, and so they largely remain haunting presences from offstage.

Cartesian Impressions of Touch and Cognition

¹⁸² Cf. *Phaedra*, Act VI, lines 1247-1279, in A.J. Boyle, *Seneca's Phaedra* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns Publications, 1987) pp. 122-125.

Racine not only engaged directly with Aristotle, he was also influenced by later readings of the philosopher, especially in the writings of René Descartes, whose works and portrait he owned.¹⁸³ Descartes expanded upon Aristotle's theory of touch by introducing the concept of *cogitation*, insisting upon the importance of the mind's recognition of the experience of sensation. In *First Philosophy*, he explains:

By the term *conscious experience (cogitationis)* I understand everything that takes place within ourselves so that we are aware of it (*nobis consciis*), in so far as it *is* an object of our awareness (*conscientia*). And so not only acts of understanding, will, and imagination, but even sensations, are here to be taken as experience (*cogitare*).¹⁸⁴

Racine elongates and dramatizes this Cartesian idea of moving between sensation and perceptual awareness. We constantly hear his characters declaim the bodily impact of their thoughts and emotions. While it is important to whom his characters direct these narrations, they also open an invaluable window into the internal process of cogitation, as characters struggle to make sense of the sensations which storm through their bodies.

Descartes emphasizes the way in which the body is not only physically affected by sense experience, but possibly even transmuted. Recasting an analogy from Aristotle, he likens the impress of sensory experience on the body to the effect of a seal upon warm wax.¹⁸⁵ He insists, 'il ne faut pas admettre seulement, quand nous touchons quelque corps doué d'une figure ou de dureté, ou d'aspérité, etc., mais encore quand nous percevons au toucher la chaleur, ou le froid et [choses] semblables.'¹⁸⁶ Sensation does not simply depart upon its recognition in the mind, but may leave its mark upon the body. This bodily impression seems to be precisely what many of Racine's characters seek in the embrace, as witnessed in the examples we surveyed in the previous section. Perhaps more surprisingly, as we shall see

¹⁸³ Roy C. Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* (Paris: Nizet, 1974), p. 170.

¹⁸⁴ *Descartes: Philosophical Writings, a selection*, ed. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach (London: Nelson, 1969), p. 183.

¹⁸⁵ 'Il faut concevoir que la figure externe du corps sentant est réellement mue par l'objet, en même manière absolue que la figure, qui est à la surface de la cire, est mue par le cachet' (Descartes, *Règles utiles et claires pour la direction de l'esprit en la recherche de la vérité*, ed. Jean-Luc Marion (La Hague: Nijhoff, 1977), Rule XII, p. 41.

¹⁸⁶ Descartes, *Règles utiles et claires pour la direction de l'esprit en la recherche de la vérité*, Rule XII, p. 41.

momentarily, Racine's characters also seek to effect a similar transformation in themselves, through their own words.

Internal Sensations: The Body's Response to the Other

While physical contact is more prevalent, and more complex, than critics have previously acknowledged, touch is most often felt internally in Racine. In many cases, a character's reluctance or incapacity to touch one another results in a heightened perception of their own body. Lovers and enemies sense the presence of the Other in themselves, in ways which touch and change the entire body. In this section I will use the fraternal relationship of Étéocle and Polynice to investigate the bodily impact of aversion and attraction. Next, I will explore the destructive power of Phèdre's desire for Hippolyte, which ravages her both mentally and physically.

Racinian characters often exclaim about their physical and emotional pain, using the words 'sentir', 'ressentir' and 'douleur'. Phèdre describes how she felt when looking upon Hippolyte for the first time: 'Je sentis tout mon corps et transir et brûler' (I. 5. 276), Mithridate feels he is very close to death: 'Je sens que je me meurs' (V. 5. 1694) and Créon cries out 'Je ressens à la fois mille tourments divers' (V. 6. 1515). The use of 'douleur' occurs when characters give voice to an emotional pain that runs through their body, as for example Jocaste does at the start of *La Thébàide* as she cries 'Ah! mortelles douleurs!'. Her exclamation 'Ah!' is pre-verbal, and in a single syllable she manages to encapsulate her pain as well as her frustration.

Jocaste and Antigone consistently attempt to bring about a physical reunion between the twins Polynice and Étéocle, and help each understand the other. Yet the language used by the brothers indicates that each is motivated by the desire to destroy the other. Their mutual disgust has existed for as long as they have, and Étéocle explains:

Dans les flancs de ma mère une guerre intestine
De nos divisions lui marqua l'origine
Elles ont, tu le sais, paru dans le berceau
Et nous suivront peut-être encor dans le tombeau.
(IV. 1. 923-926)

Étéocle describes a *huis clos* situation in sketching out how he and his twin brother began their existence. Even before birth, their hatred for each other was undeniable: as they physically developed inside Antigone’s body, their hatred also gestated. This lays the ground for the tense confrontation scene of Act IV, scene 3. The brothers’ mutual disgust intensifies when they are in close physical proximity: ‘Plus il [Polynice] approche, et plus il me semble odieux’ (IV. 1. 933). Rather than describing his brother directly, Étéocle is most concerned with articulating his own response to his brother’s presence, the way in which Polynice’s odiousness affects his own sensibilities.

Jocaste finally succeeds in arranging a meeting with her sons, but when she tries to encourage them to walk toward one another, each recoils in horror: ‘Approchez, Étéocle; avancez, Polynice... | He quoi? loin d'approcher, vous reculez tous deux?’ (IV. 3. 984-985). Clearly, the thought of closing the physical distance between them is unbearable. The brothers are drawn together by their hatred. And yet, as soon as they enter the same space they are instantly repelled like two magnets of the same polarity. Using their personal history and mutual hatred, Racine capitalizes on their conflicting impulses to avoid and destroy one another. He keeps the tension between their warring desires running high until the fatal last meeting,¹⁸⁷ when Polynice and Étéocle do ‘lock horns’ and destroy each other. In Créon’s account of the final battle between the brothers, they merge into one as they unite in their desire to destroy each other. He recalls, ‘[p]ar l’excès de leur haine ils semblaient réunis’ (V. 3. 1315), especially how ‘[d]’un geste menaçant, d’un oeil brûlant de rage | Dans le sein l’un de l’autre ils cherchent un passage’ (V. 3. 1321-22). This fusion of wills and physical gestures recalls their shared existence before birth, and is a poetic way of ending lives ruled by attraction tempered with repulsion.

In Phèdre’s case it is love—an ethically and socially abhorrent lust for her stepson—which rattles her body and soul. As Phèdre enters, she appears weighed down by her garments, her veils and crown, telling Oenone:

Je ne me soutiens plus; ma force m’abandonne.
 Mes yeux sont éblouis du jour que je revoi,
 Et mes genoux tremblants se dérobent sous moi. (I. 3. 154-56)

¹⁸⁷ *Théb.* V, 3

Phèdre's body fails her, and her physical collapse is the result of her extreme emotional distress. The light of the sun, her ancestor, reveals the shameful secret of her passion, reflected in her use of 'dérober' as she feels her knees give way beneath her. The flame of her love for her stepson cannot be stamped out: she does not dare act upon it, yet neither can she stop herself from feeling this dark desire for Hippolyte. Her love and the ensuing guilt have tortured her to such a degree that she is dying, and appears 'atteinte d'un mal qu'elle s'obstine à taire' (I. 1. 45).

The queen relives her experience of seeing her stepson for the first time, and simultaneously falling in love with him, as she confesses her secret to Oenone. Phèdre's love for Hippolyte constitutes one of the most profound and violent instances of one character narrating a personal sensory experience in Racine's theatre. She declares:

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. 3. 273-276)

As Phèdre tells it, merely looking at Hippolyte was enough to make her feel her entire body racked at once by a bone-chilling, invasive coldness and by a burning, all-consuming fire. These conflicting emotions, at opposite ends of the sensory spectrum, consume and torture her. Phèdre can feel her face turn red and then white, and senses the legibility of her passion on her face. She flushed at the sight of him, then felt the sudden chill of blood draining from her face as she realized the potential implications of this love. The full force of this love, combined with an equal and opposite horror at that feeling, rendered Phèdre speechless, and as her field of vision narrowed and was lost, her focus shifted inward to her own body, and the feverish chills that alternately make her burn and shiver. In Phèdre's transgressive love for Hippolyte, as well as Étéocle and Polynice's mutual revulsion, Racine creates a charged, interstitial space, which precedes physical contact. As characters approach one another asymptotically, moving ever closer to actual touch, the skin bristles and prickles, as if shocked by the dancing spark of static electricity.

After examining the power of physical touch, and the bodily impact of near encounters, I want to look at how characters use bodily language to articulate their sense of power, or lack thereof. While Racine's characters utilize a range of bodily metaphors, the most prevalent and potent example is the hand, which often becomes a synecdoche for the whole body, and the will which drives it. The figure of the hand appears throughout the Racinian corpus, especially in *Bérénice*, *Iphigénie*, *Britannicus* and *Phèdre*. The hand is in fact rarely used literally, figuring more often as an index of characters' relative agency and control. In this section I will explore examples in which characters exert power through an outstretched arm or devious handiwork, as well as instances in which they sense the machinations of an invisible hand.

In *Bérénice*, several of these senses come together in the same moment. Titus appears onstage for the first time after deciding to break off his relationship with Bérénice, yet before informing her. He traces this resolution to a moment of physical touch, the moment at which he closed his father's eyes:

Dès que ma triste main eut fermé sa paupière,
De mon aimable erreur je fus désabusé:
Je sentis le fardeau qui m'était imposé (II. 2. 460-62)

Placing his hand on Vespasian's eyelids to close them is connected to the moment at which he becomes Roman emperor and takes up those responsibilities, and simultaneously connected to the physical feeling of a heavy weight bearing down on him. In that single sweep of his hand, Titus acknowledges his father's passing and accepts the throne of the Roman emperor. This throne comes at a heavy price: he must sacrifice his personal desires, primarily his love for Bérénice, for the good of the State. His grief is delicately and powerfully woven into these lines, beginning with the reference to 'ma triste main' (line 460). The hand is a synecdochical reference to his entire body, so saturated with anguish that his gestures, and the parts of his body that perform them, bear witness to his devastation. 'Dès que' (line 460) indicates that the sensation of closing his father's eyes is absolutely simultaneous with feeling the weight of ruling over the Roman Empire. As Vespasian's eyes are closed in death, Titus' own eyes are opened, as it were ('je fus désabusé', line 461), to the reality of being Rome's emperor. As Titus is emotionally moved by sorrow at his father's passing, he is also moved to a resolution regarding his relationship with

Bérénice. The same sad hand that moved over his father's eyelids must now break off a love that has lasted for five years.

In *Iphigénie*, where agency and manipulation also play a role, the hand becomes a particularly potent symbol. Everyone seems to be playing for control of the princess, and one of the major sources of tension is over whose claim over her is stronger. The question of whether she will be given to the gods as a sacrifice drives much of the play's action and is bitterly disputed by Achille and Clytemnestre. The hand in *Iphigénie* is a reference alternately to the princess' body, and to the competing intentions and agendas of her father and her fiancé. Iphigénie's mother tries to dissuade her husband from sacrificing their daughter by showing him that he would be perpetuating his family history of atrocities committed against its children. Achille attempts to show Iphigénie that the consequences of her self-sacrifice would be horrific for the father she believes she would honour through her death.

At a particularly fraught moment, immediately after Agamemnon has told their daughter that she must give her life as a sacrifice to the gods, Clytemnestre furiously interrupts her husband. Taking up his own language of blood ties and duty to use against him, she admonishes Agamemnon for his decision to order their daughter's death:

Vous ne démentez point une race funeste:
Oui, vous êtes le sang d'Atrée et de Thyeste.
Bourreau de votre fille, il ne vous reste enfin
Que d'en faire à sa mère un horrible festin.
Barbare! c'est donc là cet heureux sacrifice
Que vos soins préparaient avec tant d'artifice?
Quoi! l'horreur de souscrire à cet ordre inhumain
N'a pas, en le traçant, arrêté votre main? (IV. 4. 1245-1252)

Here, the queen plays out the horror of killing Iphigénie as though it has already taken place (lines 1251-1252). She attempts to drive home her point by referring to his uncle Thyestes, who was tricked into eating his own children. The reference to such a heinous crime committed against innocent children finds a clear parallel in the issue with which Agamemnon wrestles, much to Clytemnestre's horror. According to his wife, in letting his daughter die he is simply perpetuating his family's cycle of acts of extreme violence against its children. Leading Iphigénie to the altar to be slaughtered is considered far worse than the action of a weak and

bullied king; it is the ultimate sin, against human nature itself, and Agamemnon's hand must be stopped before he can raise it against their daughter. Clytemnestre's strongest words are found in the last two lines of the passage: she cannot understand how her husband could possibly entertain such an idea, and even as his daughter's potential executioner, the thought of committing such an atrocity should stop him in his tracks and stay his hand. What makes Agamemnon's resolution all the more horrifying, is that he would have Iphigénie brought to the sacrificial altar knowing full well what awaited her, whereas even Thyestes' horrific crime might be downplayed slightly by the fact that when he ingested his own children, he did so unwittingly. In such a visceral passage, the bodies of slaughtered children past and future figure heavily, but equally as important and powerful for Clytemnestre's argument is the evocation of the monstrous hand that could allow such crimes to continue within a family. Clytemnestre uses the story of Thyestes to inspire horror in her husband, as there is a further transgressive element to be found in the ingesting of one's own children as opposed to leading them for slaughter by another. The queen attempts to impress upon her husband the image of a hand stayed from dealing the death blow to a child.¹⁸⁸ In referring to Agamemnon's hand, she transfers agency back to him from Calchas, inspiring him to reassert his authority.

The question of who has the upper hand and who is ultimately in control of Iphigénie's fate continues between characters as the princess makes her choice. In a particularly tense discussion between the princess and her fiancé, an enraged Achille lashes out against his love. He describes the havoc his justified anger will wreck on those he will hold responsible for her slaughter:

À mon aveugle amour tout sera légitime;
 Le prêtre deviendra la première victime,
 Le bûcher, par mes mains détruit et renversé,
 Dans le sang des bourreaux nagera dispersé,
 Et si dans les horreurs de ce désordre extrême,
 Votre père frappé tombe et périt lui-même,
 Alors de vos respects voyant les tristes fruits,
 Reconnaissez les coups que vous aurez conduits.
 (V. 2. 1601-1608)

¹⁸⁸ Artistic representations of Abraham's hand being stayed as he is about to sacrifice Isaac, such as those by Caravaggio (1598 and 1603), Pieter Lastman (1616) and Rembrandt (1635), echo the image that Clytemnestre is trying to impress upon Agamemnon's mind in this scene.

In other words, Achille's love for Iphigénie will blind him to the destruction he intends to cause should she take herself to the altar. His murderous hands, those that so fascinate Ériphile as we have seen, will tear the high priest from limb to limb, as well as the executioner. The image the young hero paints of himself, bloodied after literally tearing his fiancée's slaughterers apart with his bare hands, is intended to horrify Iphigénie and give her pause. The truly surprising portion of his address is at its end. Achille places sole responsibility for his future actions on Iphigénie herself, and transfers to her agency for the killing he would do in her name should she agree to this sacrifice. As with Clytemnestre's threats to Agamemnon, the final lines of Achille's tirade seem to refer to a crime already committed. The overall impression is of Iphigénie's complicity in whatever tragedy would ensue from her decision to walk up to the sacrificial altar. Achille mocks the filial respect and piety that drive his future bride towards Calchas, and makes what the princess cites as a virtue into a great weakness, one which would bring about deadly consequences for all those involved, for which the blame would ultimately be her own. He seeks to invalidate her sacrifice before it happens, by promising that she has the agency to guide his hands to murder, therefore rendering her choice to end her life tantamount to a choice to end her father's as well. In this instance, Achille tries to guide Iphigénie through a scene in which she witnesses a horrifying tableau full of atrocities committed by her lover's hands. He hopes to stop Iphigénie from sacrificing her own life by showing her, at the end of the scene, that her hands were behind his, guiding them to murder.

In *Britannicus*, the metaphor of the hand is not a tactic to change the mind of another character, but rather serves as a reference to presence in general. Néron and Agrippine vie for control of each other and the Roman people. Although Junie tells her lover that 'even the walls might have eyes' in the Roman Emperor's palace, the primary perceptual experience in *Britannicus* is not simply visual, as modern critics have implied it to be.¹⁸⁹ The tactile is equally important. Handiwork abounds in *Britannicus*, a piece in which the Emperor's and his mother's competing desires for control and power, as well as their suspicion of each other, shape each interaction.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Paul Schwartz, 'Language and Power: Eyes and Words in *Britannicus*', trans. Louis van Delft, *Yale French Studies*, 45, Language as Action (1970), 102-112 and Renée Morel, 'Narcisse mortifié et mortifière: le regard chez Racine', *The French Review*, 64 (1991), p. 921-933.

Both Néron and his mother constantly feel, and fear, each other's presence, and they use the figure of the hand to designate this presence.

Néron recognizes his mother's influence in several events that unfold (III. 9. 1086), and Agrippine asserts early on (I. 1. 45) that she played a large role in her son's rise to power, and does not hesitate to reiterate this later on in the play. She does so, for example, in III. 9. 1085-86 and IV. 2. 1167-68, the latter of which is taken from the intense confrontation scene between mother and son, when Agrippine tries to convince her son that she is the one responsible for the fact that he occupies the throne of the Roman emperor. Néron's mother appears extremely powerful at the start of the piece, and attributes her son's ascension to the throne to years of hard work and cunning on her part. She sees herself as the sole agent of his rise to power, as evident in one of her earliest conversations:

Ai-je mis dans sa main le timon de l'état
Pour le conduire au gré du peuple et du sénat?
Ah! que de la patrie il soit, s'il veut, le père,
Mais qu'il songe un peu plus qu'Agrippine est sa mère.
(I. 1. 45-8)

Agrippine believes that she herself handed Néron the whip with which he is to rule over Rome, and would have her son be an uncompromising Emperor, feared and respected. Her only caveat to passing this power to her son is that he remain forever in her debt, which is tantamount to his being dependent upon her sanctioning his political moves and allowing her to have an opinion about every aspect of his life. She is very happy to have him occupy the emperor's throne, but believes he must acknowledge a perpetual commitment to his mother. Throughout the play, Néron struggles to move out from under the weight of his mother's person, and from her attempts to manipulate and control him. The metaphor of the hand, which began in previous examples as synecdoche or metaphor, looms larger in *Britannicus*. As corrosive as Agrippine's presence is, once Néron fully comes into his own at the end of the play, his presence proves to be terrifying and truly evil. Whereas Agrippine arms herself with threats and attempts at control, by the last few lines of the play one senses that Néron now holds the Roman empire firmly in his grip.

Although Néron might have an overwhelming desire to limit his mother's power and feed his own, he is unwilling to kill his rival himself. *Britannicus* is

poisoned, but Néron's appetite for revenge is soured at the thought of using his own hand to commit the crime. He is very willing, however, to sanction the all-too-eager Narcisse's efforts. Agrippine, in the aftermath, is quick to deduce that her son's fingerprints are all over the death of Britannicus:

Arrêtez, Néron: j'ai deux mots à vous dire.
Britannicus est mort, je reconnais les coups,
Je connais l'assassin. (V. 6. 1648-50)

Agrippine has more than two words she needs to say, and instead divulges two very important pieces of information: she knows both who is behind Britannicus' murder ('les coups', line 1649) and who acted on his behalf ('l'assassin', line 1650). In the space of two lines, she manages to point one finger at her son, whose method of dispatching an enemy she recognizes, and another at Narcisse, whom she knows must have carried out the murder at Néron's request. This declaration is meant to tear at Néron's attempt at autonomy, simultaneously revealing his guilt and his cowardice, and to help her gain more power.

Titus focuses on his own hand as a part that is representative of his entire body. The connection made between a single gesture and the responsibilities that open up before him renders his hand, for him, symbolic of that turning point. Clytemnestre attempts to reason with her husband by painting a picture for him in which his hands not only betray him but commit the atrocious crime of slaughtering his own daughter. A desperate Achille tries to hold on to the woman he loves by establishing a link between his hands—a symbol of his agency—and hers, hoping to dissuade her from a path that would lead to death for both of them. Agrippine and Néron, in their fear of each other and lust for power, use the figure of the hand when referring to the presence of the other in an effort to disempower and chip away at each other. In each example, the figure of the hand begins as synecdoche but ends by looming much larger, in a metonymical sense, standing in for power and presence in general and an apprehension of that presence.

The Fantasy of Touch

I will now revisit *Phèdre*, this time to examine the confession its heroine makes to Hippolyte and the fantastic scenario she entertains of proximity to her

stepson. I intend to show how, in a passage devoid of reference to the 'main' or the 'caresse', Racine nonetheless creates a speech for the queen that is laden with tactile references. These lines are some of the most complex in the Racinian corpus, using rich tactile imagery which is painstakingly developed. Nowhere does the verb 'toucher' figure in this passage; nor do any other overtly tactile words like 'embrace', 'kiss', or 'caress' appear. Even a part of the body that might perform an act of touch, the hand, is absent. And yet, the fantasy is primarily about touch. This last example will prove to be the most sophisticated example of Racine's use of touch: because he does not evoke the sense by name, it is all the more powerful and allows the other senses to be implicated in this complex perceptual experience shared by Phèdre, Hippolyte and the audience.

Phèdre tries to rid herself of the guilt that racks her body through confessing her feelings first to Oenone, then Hippolyte himself, and finally to Thésée. Her torture appears to be endless, and presumably would not stop even after her death: her father Minos is the judge in the underworld and her grandfather Helios has already witnessed her shameful passion for Hippolyte. When the infamous interview between Phèdre and her stepson occurs, it takes place following nearly two acts of the anguished queen labouring over the best way to end her life honourably, torn between the illicit love she harbours for Hippolyte and the knowledge that revealing it to him would lead to a dishonourable demise. As Matthew Senior observes, 'Racine's heroes and heroines never manage to carry out Phèdre's desperate wager: 'Je meurs pour ne point faire un aveu si funeste.' Death is inevitable but only after the torment of confession.'¹⁹⁰ Phèdre cannot help herself: she is coming apart psychologically. Although her love for Hippolyte is the result of Vénus' punishment, she is consumed by it as if it were an untainted, organic passion and desperately desires to be loved in return. It is simply impossible for Phèdre to resist the impulse to confess her love for Hippolyte, to face him and express her feelings. She does so first in a roundabout manner, then sets aside any remaining reservations and explicitly declares herself. This fantasy is developed in order to satiate her intense desire for physical contact from Hippolyte, and references to this implied contact saturate her language. She imagines the scenario in which they

¹⁹⁰ Matthew Senior, *In the Grip of Minos: Confessional Discourse in Dante, Corneille and Racine* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1994) p. 165.

might be alone together, and she might enjoy the excuse to touch and be touched by her stepson:

Par vous aurait péri le monstre de la Crète,
Malgré les détours de sa vaste retraite.
Pour en développer l'embarras incertain,
Ma sœur du fil fatal eût armé votre main.
Mais non, dans ce dessein je l'aurais devancée.
L'amour m'en eût d'abord inspiré la pensée.
C'est moi, Prince, c'est moi, dont l'utile secours
Vous eût du Labyrinthe enseigné les détours.
Que de soins m'eût coûtés cette tête charmante!
Un fil n'eût point assez rassuré votre amante:
Compagne du fil qu'il vous fallait chercher,
Moi-même devant vous j'aurais voulu marcher,
Et Phèdre au Labyrinthe avec vous descendue
Se serait avec vous retrouvée ou perdue. (II. 5. 649-662)

According to the legend that Phèdre uses as the template for her love scenario, Ariane held a spool of thread and Thésée unravelled it as he made his way through the Labyrinth in pursuit of the Minotaur, using the thread to guide himself back to safety. The string of the original story becomes a lifeline for Thésée; he depends upon it absolutely, for his safety and indeed his survival. In order for her fantasy to play out, Phèdre first has Hippolyte replace his father Thésée. In her next breath, she corrects her error ('ma soeur', a reference to Ariane at line 652) and accords herself Ariane's role in the episode ('je l'aurais devancée', line 663) to take over the spool of thread. In casting herself as her sister and Hippolyte as his father, she has altered the story to suit her desire for Hippolyte and to create a relationship in which he depends on her. Phèdre thus is responsible for helping her stepson navigate his way through the maze through the thread she now gives to him.

As Phèdre tells her version of the story, with its new players, it becomes apparent that the role of the thread itself appeals to her more than simply being the intermediary that Ariane represented. She then accompanies Hippolyte and the thread (line 659) in the next phase of the fantasy, becoming the very thing that Hippolyte would touch, or clutch, on his route through the Labyrinth. Dependence upon the thread represents a type of intimacy that the queen covets; she yearns to be close to her stepson in that way: to have him lean on her in both a physical and

emotional sense for support. It is the string itself that would enjoy this proximity to and tactile relationship with Hippolyte.

In the final phase of her fantasy, Phèdre leaves aside the loaded image of herself as the thread, calling it insufficient, and articulates clearly the place she hopes to occupy in her stepson's heart: that of lover (line 658). Once the rest of her secret fantasy has been revealed, she lets the prince know that she would have protected him, going before him in the dark maze and taking control of the journey. As she finishes bringing her secret desire to light, Phèdre imagines being bound together with Hippolyte in the darkness of the Labyrinth, their fates and bodies intertwined with him holding fast to her as she helps guide their way to the monster (lines 661-62).

This lengthy discourse, which doubles back on itself and seems to lead one way, then another, is the perfect discursive mirroring of a labyrinthine journey. It reflects Phèdre's confused mental state, as well as the fact that she is simultaneously and clumsily feeling her way around this revelation of love. Instead of simply telling Hippolyte that she is in love with him, or letting him know only that she wishes he had been old enough to marry instead of Thésée, she chooses to unfurl before him an impossible love scenario in which she demonstrates her love through her proximity to him. Phèdre's downfall occurs in the instant she reveals her feelings to Hippolyte:

Moi-même devant vous j'aurais voulu marcher,
Et Phèdre au labyrinthe avec vous descendue
Se serait avec vous retrouvée ou perdue. (II. 5. 660-2)

She attempts to make contact on an emotional level with her stepson through the words she utters, and in revealing the fantasy she entertains of Hippolyte in his father's place. Phèdre seeks to produce both an emotional and physical response in her stepson without using physical means, employing language that is loaded with tactile references. What he hears, and the horrifying picture painted for him by his stepmother, inspires his revulsion. Horrified, he attempts to reason with the queen by reminding her of Thésée's identity as his father and Phèdre's husband (II. 5. 663-4). Phèdre feels the revelation as a self-inflicted wound: she knows in the aftermath of this somewhat couched confession that there is no way to step back from the

boundary she has just trespassed. She gives in to her impulses, facing Hippolyte and hurling at him the purest expression of her love: 'J'aime' (II. 5. 673).

The queen has gone too far, and is too far gone, to retract any single part of her avowal. She ought never to have crossed the threshold, attempting to face Hippolyte as a potential lover. In her confession to Hippolyte, Phèdre commits a fundamental trespass of boundary from which she cannot recover. This extreme, this surpassing of the limits of the tactile, this excess of touch and its unintended consequences, is what destroys Phèdre several acts before the poison she actually ingests at the end of the play. Although so much is at stake, Phèdre risks and ultimately sacrifices her own life in reaching out to Hippolyte and confessing her love. As Senior notes, 'Racine derives many of the tragic effects of his play by contrasting the protagonists' expectations of what avowal is accomplishing from what it actually does. There is a performative ambiguity about confession that escapes each of the characters and eventually destroys them.'¹⁹¹ Phèdre's confession does not accomplish what she hopes: she is not able to move Hippolyte to a positive emotion, and her articulation of her feelings for him merely disgusts him, leaving her feeling ashamed and leading to her death.

Phèdre's admission constitutes a grave transgression, and gestures towards one of the most unnatural forms of contact between members of the same family. Her incestuous passions, as revealed in the play, are a much more shocking crime of touch than any she could have committed by running afoul of the *bienséances*. The very revelation of her fantasy of touching Hippolyte in the Labyrinth is the *actus reus* that condemns her in the eyes of the audience and other characters.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how Racine engages with ancient and early-modern writing on touch. Racine's theatre provides striking examples of the influence exerted by Aristotle's writing on perception, especially touch, well into the early modern period. Cartesian thought, especially on the mind and body connection, also has a clear presence in Racine's work, as felt through the sensory experiences that his characters relate to each other. His treatment of the more

¹⁹¹ Matthew Senior, *In the Grip of Minos*, p. 202.

metaphorical sense of touch is especially interesting in that it prefigures that of modern French thinkers like Derrida, whose writing on touch takes up some of the same themes of sensation that Racine plays with.

As discussed in the introduction to this project, one of the key aspects of the phenomenological experience is its firsthand account of sensation, both internal and external. Touch is unique among the senses for its reflexivity—the fact that one feels, and simultaneously is aware of one’s body reacting to that feeling. Whereas vision is directed outward, and the eye reacts to things perceived in the world at large, the skin and the body itself react to touch. As Derrida puts it, this ‘différence entre les deux “sens” [touch and sight], c’est [...] le rapport à soi du toucher (et donc son évidence phénoménologique réflexive).’¹⁹² This helps explain why examples of literal touch in Racine’s theatre go far beyond mere instances of contact: as characters re-tell their tactile experiences, they discuss not only what happened in a literal sense but how their bodies reacted to that embrace. Racine’s characters use a proto-phenomenological language. In cases that do not involve literal touch, their focus naturally shifts inward and it is clear that these early modern characters feel the presence or gaze of another as another form of touch. This feeling implicates the other senses as well, a point that Derrida draws out explicitly: ‘Le toucher, comme *se toucher*, c’est le toucher, certes, mais aussi le toucher *plus* tout autre sens.’¹⁹³ This communion of the senses is a crucial part of the Racinian character’s experience, in which the sound of one character’s voice can have an emotional and physical impact on the one to whom he speaks, and is a powerful form of touch. They might almost say to each other, ‘[q]uand je te parle, je te touche, et tu me touches quand je t’entends, de si loin que cela m’arrive.’¹⁹⁴

Derrida begins *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* with two important questions: ‘Si deux regards se regardent dans les yeux, peut-on dire alors qu’ils se touchent? Viennent-ils au contact – l’un de l’autre ? [...] Si deux regards viennent au contact, l’un de l’autre, on se demandera toujours s’ils se caressent ou s’ils se donnent un coup – et où serait la différence.’¹⁹⁵ The connection between vision and touch is one that Racine exploits on many occasions, as is clear in such scenes as the

¹⁹² Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000) p. 194-5.

¹⁹³ Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 309.

¹⁹⁴ Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 226-27.

¹⁹⁵ Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 12. Derrida writes on Nancy to pay him tribute, but also offers a keen critique of Nancy’s work in addition to his own perspective. For my purposes it is more useful to cite Derrida on Nancy, than Nancy himself.

confrontation between Étéocle and Polynice, or Phèdre's love confession to Oenone. In Racine's plays, his characters not only make physical contact and feel that sensory experience within their bodies, but also demonstrate their acute awareness of the presence of the other, of the gaze of the other and how this affects them both internally and externally.

Derrida traces a history of touch that includes writing by Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Merleau-Ponty. He too recognizes the importance of the Aristotelian heritage from which he draws. One of the major points that Derrida emphasizes from Aristotle is the significance of touch in all embodied experience: 'C'est le seul sens, le toucher, qui soit indispensable à l'existence du vivant comme tel.'¹⁹⁶ He pushes this further: 'Le toucher, c'est donc bien une question de vie et de mort.'¹⁹⁷ Derrida is not merely making a point about living being tantamount to feeling, and death to not feeling. He is referring to the sensitivity—he calls it 'tactility'—with which one must always approach and barely graze the asymptote of touch. To touch or be touched excessively would mean death: it is the only sense whose extreme proves fatal. If an excessively loud, prolonged noise destroyed one's sense of hearing, one would still be able to live and use the remaining senses. So, too for sight: if one loses one's ability to see, the other senses will compensate for the loss of visual perception. But too great a degree of touch, as in a stab wound, puts an end to the body and the other senses are powerless in the loss of touch. Racine inherently understood this principle of tactility, as is clear in Phèdre's fate once she trespasses that boundary. Metaphorically, Phèdre is 'touched' to excess by her passion for Hippolyte, which, combined with the major transgression of her attempt to emotionally touch him with her confession, brings about her demise.

Derrida's writing helps highlight the precariousness of Phèdre's situation at the start of the play, in addition to her failure to control herself and to sensitively navigate the territory of her desire: 'À l'intouchable ainsi tenu à distance par le regard (ce que veut dire le *respect* dans son idiome latin) ou en tout cas à distance pour veiller attentivement, pour prendre garde [...] à ne pas toucher, affecter, corrompre.'¹⁹⁸ The 'untouchable' in this case is Hippolyte, and although Phèdre never attempts to actually touch him, she completely misunderstands the importance

¹⁹⁶ Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 61.

¹⁹⁷ Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 62.

¹⁹⁸ Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 82.

of 'touching' Hippolyte delicately. Derrida warns that one should understand what he terms *le tact*, not 'au sens commun du toucher, mais du savoir toucher *sans* toucher, *sans trop* toucher, là où toucher, c'est déjà trop.'¹⁹⁹ At the very moment of her revelation, Phèdre ought also to withdraw. Her inability to stop herself means that she finishes by metaphorically attacking him, and literally destroying both of them.

In this chapter, we have seen, once one moves beyond restrictive past interpretations of the *bienséances* and becomes sensitive to touch in Racine's theatre, one finds it everywhere. Touch is found in its more obvious forms, when characters embrace or support one another, and in more metaphorical forms when they discuss their internal sensations. Characters describe feeling the presence or influence of another, using the very potent and wide-reaching metaphor of the hand. Touch is the fundamental sense through which Racine's characters participate in their world and interact with each other. This sense is connected to and facilitates other senses such as vision and hearing, and its privileged position is demonstrated each time one unpacks a character's sensory experience. I do not mean to say Racine's treatment of touch raises questions to which only modern phenomenology has the answers, but rather that the way in which his characters feel touch opens up a very rich avenue of inquiry into the tactile that goes in all directions, between the ancient, the early-modern and the modern.

¹⁹⁹ Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 82.

CHAPTER IV

The Voice of the Other and the Voice of God

‘elle a parlé; le Ciel a fait le reste’ (Esther, III. 9. 1227)

In recent years, the growth of performance theory and reception history have called our attention to the ways in which the spoken word, sung verse, and music play not only upon the ear but the entire body of the listener.²⁰⁰ What is less studied, especially in the field of early modern French literature, is the way in which characters themselves feel the bodily impact of what they hear, not only from other personages, but also from their own mouths. Building upon earlier chapters on touch and sight, this chapter will examine the aural and oral aspects of Racine’s plays. Previous scholarly studies have attempted to assess the connection between speech and action in Racine’s plays by cataloguing stage directions, or have focused closely on aspects of the text other than the senses.²⁰¹ Such readings, significant as they are to the field, do not sufficiently address the bodily impact of the spoken word and often do not encompass the more holistic experience of Racine’s characters. They do not experience their world in an atomistic fashion, and instead live in a way which is three-dimensional, fleshly, and in which the spoken word is connected to physical and emotional sensation. I believe hearing for Racine’s characters is deeply felt throughout the body, ineluctably bound to the senses of sight and touch, and is

²⁰⁰ Cf. the works of Richard Schechner, especially *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), and *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988). See also Brian Reynolds (especially *Performing Transversally: Reimagining Shakespeare and the Critical Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and *Rematerializing Shakespeare: Authority and Representation on the Early Modern English Stage*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

²⁰¹ For example, Hawcroft, *Word as Action* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) and Peter France, *Racine’s Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) focus on rhetoric; Vinaver, *Racine et la Poésie Tragique* (Paris: Nizet, 1951) focuses on poetry.

more aptly described in Aristotle's words as a 'power of the soul'²⁰² connected with understanding. This chapter will assess the role of hearing in the lives of the characters, and the impact of the spoken, sung and divine word on their bodies.

I will begin by examining scenes from *Bérénice*, *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre*, *Britannicus*, and *Andromaque*, which underscore the complex, multisensory experience of delivering and hearing the spoken word in Racine's theatre. In the next half of this chapter, I will turn my attention to *Esther* and *Athalie*, which constituted a significant innovation for Racine with their introduction of an accompanying chorus and instruments. Here I will emphasize how the inclusion of music, both through accompaniment and sung verse, accentuates the bodily effects of hearing and listening for Racine's characters. In particular, I will argue that the experience of singing allows characters to summon God as an active, immanent presence capable of directly affecting their lives.

Two writers to address the physical dimension of hearing in Racine in depth—although neither touches upon the critical topic of music—are Barthes and Henry Phillips.²⁰³ Barthes takes the Abbé d'Aubignac's famous phrase 'parler, c'est agir'²⁰⁴ and alters it in a subtle but critical way. While d'Aubignac refers to the primacy of speech in the theatre and postulates that language literally substitutes for physical action and movement, Barthes reworks this statement so that it points more to a particularly Racinian relationship between language and action. He writes: 'voici peut-être la clef de la tragédie racinienne : parler, c'est faire [...] on pourrait dire que la parole n'y est pas action mais réaction.'²⁰⁵ Barthes proceeds to offer an intriguing description of how language functions in this dynamic interplay: 'il [language] est un organe, peut tenir lieu de la vue, comme si l'oreille voyait, il est un sentiment, car aimer, souffrir, mourir, ce n'est jamais ici que parler.'²⁰⁶ This quotation, as well as Barthes' discussion of the interchangeability of vision and language in the *serail* of *Bajazet*, offers a critical insight into the effects of speaking and listening in Racine. Barthes identifies the connection between hearing and a more metaphorical sight, in other words between hearing and comprehension or emotion. He also picks up on the ever-shifting landscape of sensation or feeling on

²⁰² Aristotle, *De anima*, Book II, chapter viii.

²⁰³ See Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963) and Henry Phillips, *Racine: Language and Theatre* (Durham: University of Durham, 1994).

²⁰⁴ D'Aubignac, *La Pratique du Théâtre*.

²⁰⁵ Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 66.

²⁰⁶ Barthes, *Sur Racine*, p. 66.

Racine's stage, the result of the spoken word which impacts characters and provokes responses in an almost synaptic model. However, Barthes continues to emphasize the connection between language and action over language and sensation. As we shall find, the ear does indeed see in Racine, and not only in the metaphorical way which Barthes imagines.

Phillips takes Barthes' insights even further, asserting plainly that 'Racine locates theatre precisely in matters of language.'²⁰⁷ He argues convincingly that the act of speaking, or preparing to speak—what he calls the 'tension of utterance'—produces anxiety in the characters, which drives the play forward. His analysis is particularly adroit when it comes to the characters of *Bérénice*, whom he demonstrates are consistently preoccupied with whether to speak or hear or not. However, Phillips provides little theoretical grounding for his claims about the 'existential nature of the speech act.'²⁰⁸ In fact, by largely ignoring the multi-sensory effects of sound in Racine, he deprives himself of key evidence which might buttress his thesis.

Emmanuel Lévinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections on language are useful tools in constructing the framework for this study of speaking and hearing in Racine. In typical Lévinasian fashion, language is inextricably linked to an ethical responsibility to the Other. The speaker and the hearer are bound together through their shared sense of language, yet even before being possessed by the spoken word the hearer has an understanding with the person speaking to him. In an important departure from a Heideggerian understanding of language as a means of being among other people, for Levinas, language is a way of being possessed by other people. Speaking itself is the very first, ethical gesture,²⁰⁹ and the hearer has an ethical responsibility to respond. The speaker–hearer relationship outlined by Lévinas helps support my view of Racine's characters as more than mere disembodied voices onstage. Instead, they are compelled to speak, compelled to respond, and the language they share affects them in ways which involve their whole bodies, not simply their ears.

²⁰⁷ Phillips, *Racine: Language and Theatre*, p. 143.

²⁰⁸ Phillips, *Racine: Language and Theatre*, p. 2. For more on speech act theory, especially as developed by J. L. Austin, see especially, J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

²⁰⁹ *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 15

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology was particularly influenced by Heideggerian phenomenology; yet, as discussed, it is less a philosophical system and more an ontology, or even simply a way of thinking. Given that phenomenology, for Merleau-Ponty, is a tool used to understand the experience of being-in-the-world (*Inderweltsein*), it describes our existence in the world. Our use of language is an attempt to get as close as possible to the experience itself, and convey that in terms which might best resonate with another person. In speaking and listening to other beings we presume, against Descartes, that we are not the only sentient or sensible creatures.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of language and being-in-the-world is similar in several ways to that of the later Wittgenstein. Their views on language are perhaps the best point of departure for a discussion of speaking and hearing in Racine's theatre. For Wittgenstein as for Merleau-Ponty, language is essential to the awareness of a shared world because it is the tool used to describe our experiences. Being in the social 'world' teaches us through experience what things mean, as we explain ourselves to others and they explain things to us. Because we have shared meanings for sensations and experiences, we can express ourselves and be understood by other people. This particular point of view on language emphasizes that we all have the tools to understand the experiences of others, not that we all have exactly the same experiences. For example, the words 'summer', 'betrayal' or 'love' are all easily understood, even if the person using these words and the person hearing them have different personal experiences associated with that particular season or those particular feelings. Language draws on a sensibility we all have in common, which the theatre emphasizes by having language as its medium.

Witnessing characters onstage speaking about their feelings makes us question our own experiences and emotions, and helps us approach our world with fresh ears and eyes. Because his characters' experiences are so deeply rooted in their own bodies, Racine's theatre is particularly rife with opportunities to relate characters' sensory experiences to our own. As the next section will illustrate, speaking—or indeed a single utterance—can affect a character's entire body and implicate not only hearing but also vision and touch.

The Voice of the Other and the Body's Response: Hearing and Speaking

The language of Racine's characters is saturated with visual, tactile and auditory references. They speak to each other and react to the communications of others in a manner which is bodily and demonstrates that hearing and speaking do not occur in a sensory vacuum in which only the ear is present. This section builds on the observations that Phillips and Barthes make of Racinian language, using what Lévinas and Merleau-Ponty say about language and taking specific cues from scholars such as Forestier and Hawcroft. Here, I show how the phenomenology of hearing the spoken word is also a phenomenology of the whole body.

In Racine's theatre, language serves as the most obvious, primary medium through which characters—and by extension the audience—learn about the thoughts, feelings and decisions of other personages. Listening and speaking, therefore, form the basis of the Racinian character's bodily interactions with others and the world. The ability to alternately express themselves and understand the language of others is fundamental to all their relationships. In Racine's time 'entendre' was very closely linked with mental and intellectual activity, especially with comprehension. The first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694) lists the first entry for the verb as 'comprendre, concevoir en son esprit, avoir l'intelligence de quelque chose'. The entry for 'voir' is similar in that it also emphasizes knowledge gained through use of the organ in question, and gives 'appercevoir, connoistre par les yeux.' For the early modern body, hearing, like seeing, is bound up in a desire to understand certain truths about the world, other people, and oneself.

Characters articulate their sensations, their fears, confess their love, and put their reactions to events into language. Their ears pick up on noises as well; stage entrances are often announced in reference to a sound rather than simply catching sight of another character, for example when Agamemnon hears Achille coming and tells Arcas, 'Déjà même l'on entre et j'entends quelque bruit' (I. 1. 159), and the audience could also have heard the sounds heralding an entrance. Beyond the literal sense of hearing noise or perceiving spoken language, however, Racine's characters often gesture toward a more figurative notion, one that blends hearing with comprehension. The phrase 'Je vous entends'—used, for example, by Roxane²¹⁰ when she believes she has understood the subtext of Bajazet's language—signifies an act of hearing that is synonymous with and simultaneous to understanding. In

²¹⁰ *Bajazet* (II, i, 497).

still another step further, hearing is sometimes linked to sight in order to highlight a character's comprehension or confusion.

Racine's vocabulary is heavily pared-down, without being overly simple. Characters do not use complicated turns of phrase or obscure words, and the end result is a language which is all the more powerful in its plainness, encapsulates the charged emotions and sensations they feel, and fits within early modern conventions of economy of language. What characters say to each other cuts straight to the heart, and in speaking to each other, they emotionally affect their interlocutors. There are, of course, instances of misunderstanding or of talking at cross-purposes,²¹¹ but spoken language is nonetheless a fundamental part of characters' relationships and onstage existence. There are no mute characters in the corpus, and even personages who are temporarily silent or hesitate engage verbally through much of the play. There are references to listening or hearing,²¹² and several instances in which characters refer to speaking,²¹³ but the acts of speaking and hearing in Racinian theatre are best understood by examining the language used by the characters themselves.

One of the greatest sources for clues about how Racine intended for his characters to be heard, and to hear each other, are the first editions to Racine's plays with the original punctuation and capitalisation. As Forestier has noted in his edition of Racine's plays²¹⁴ in the section called *Lire Racine*, the capitalisation and especially the punctuation of the plays matters greatly, for both the reader and for the actor approaching his or her part. Forestier remarks, 'le respect de la ponctuation originale permet de découvrir que celle-ci est avant tout un guide pour la lecture à haute voix et pour la déclamation.'²¹⁵ In the early modern period, punctuation—whether a colon, semi-colon, full stop or comma—was an indication of how much weight to give certain words and the length of a pause. When the original editions of Racine's plays are considered, and their punctuation and capitalisation, this adds another layer to an understanding of how the characters are feeling. Hawcroft

²¹¹ Many of these have been addressed in Chapter II, for example Thésée's misunderstanding of Hippolyte due to Oenone's deception.

²¹² The verb *écouter* is used in *Alexandre le Grand*, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate* and *Athalie*. The verb *entendre* is used in *Andromaque*, *Les Plaideurs*, *Mithridate*, *Bérénice*, *Esther* and *Athalie*.

²¹³ The verb *parler* is used in *La Thébaïde*, *Alexandre le Grand*, *Esther* and *Athalie*.

²¹⁴ Jean Racine, *Œuvres Complètes: Théâtre, Poésie*, ed. by Georges Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

²¹⁵ Jean Racine, *Œuvres Complètes: Théâtre, Poésie*, ed. by Georges Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. lxiii.

observes that commas can ‘suggest a dramatic pause or hesitation, or highlight phrases that are significant for their emotional impact.’²¹⁶ Hawcroft also notes that the difference between a question mark or exclamation mark is certainly massive, not necessarily for the obvious difference in intent, but because of the difference in a character being seen as more passive or more active and aggressive,²¹⁷ and the risk of ‘resultant loss of emotional affect.’²¹⁸ For example, in Phèdre’s famous avowal of love to Hippolyte, a reader of the original text would be more sensitive to the emphasis placed on family structure and order by Hippolyte and Phèdre—with her attempts to subvert it and his attempts to restore order to their universe by reminding her of that structure.²¹⁹

The Cry

Spoken language is not the only sound that produces an effect on the bodies of Racine’s characters. Pre-verbal cries also figure in the plays, and these almost animalistic verbalisations of physical or emotional hurt can stand in for a blow equal to that of any well-calculated string of insults. The first line of *La Thébaïde* marks a point where Jocaste is left alone with her confidante and can give in to her emotional pain. She seems to exhale and cries, ‘Ah!’ before discussing the source of her distress. When professing his love for Axiane, Porus exclaims ‘Ah!’ before finding the words to express himself. The characters in both *Iphigénie* and *Phèdre* are haunted by imagined and actual cries of pain. Agamemnon and Phèdre each struggle with dreading a loved one’s cry of physical distress and not wanting to witness these screams. In the following section I will address both spoken language and pre-linguistic utterances in terms of how their sound impacts upon Racine’s characters.

The entire play of *Iphigénie*, particularly the sacrifice of the princess, hinges upon the need to break the stillness that has descended after the winds which were meant to carry Agamemnon’s ships home have ceased to blow. Iphigénie’s cry at

²¹⁶ Michael Hawcroft, ‘Reading Racine: Punctuation and Capitalisation in the First Editions of His Plays’, *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 22 (2000), 35-50.

²¹⁷ Hawcroft, ‘Reading Racine’, p. 43.

²¹⁸ Hawcroft, ‘Reading Racine’, p. 44.

²¹⁹ The Forestier edition of the text capitalises ‘Père’, ‘Mère’, ‘Fils’ thus reinforcing the roles that Hippolyte and Phèdre are meant to play, thus showing us how far the queen’s passion has led her away from what is socially and morally acceptable.

the altar is meant to signal the return of the wind, and serve as a herald. Yet the king finds himself unable to trade his daughter's life in return for safe passage home for his troops. Although the gods have demanded she sacrifice her life, Agamemnon struggles with losing his daughter. At first blush what he seems to fear most is the more immediate sound of Clytemnestre's cries, but he knows her protests are nothing compared with the cry his daughter would make as she dies on the altar. For example, after a particularly heated and emotional confrontation with Clytemnestre, Agamemnon is alone onstage and declares,

Voilà, voilà les cris que je craignais d'entendre.
Heureux si dans le trouble où flottent mes esprits
Je n'avais toutefois à craindre que ses cris! (IV. 5. 1314-16)

Iphigénie's pain is connected to Clytemnestre's suffering and he knows she would be inconsolable if their daughter were to trade her life to make the wind blow again. Agamemnon breaks the silence in Aulis at the start of the play, in order to tell his confidant about his plan to avoid his daughter's sacrifice. Iphigénie's father cannot bear to hear his wife cry out at losing their daughter, and cites this as the main reason for acting against the express wishes of the gods. He will try to prevent Iphigénie and her mother from arriving altogether, telling Arcas,

D'une mère en fureur épargne-moi les cris,
Et que ta voix s'accorde avec ce que j'écris.
Pour renvoyer la fille et la mère offensée,
Je leur écris qu'Achille a changé de pensée (I. 1. 147-150).

Should Iphigénie arrive, Agamemnon would be compelled to sacrifice her to appease the gods, the only solution to save his becalmed ships and stranded soldiers. In order to avoid killing his daughter, and hearing Clytemnestre's screams of anguish, he determines it is best to lie about Achilles's change of heart regarding their upcoming wedding. Later, when his wife berates him for his decision to send their daughter to the sacrificial altar and promises to do everything in her power to prevent the ceremony from taking place, the king laments, 'À de moindres fureurs je n'ai pas dû m'attendre' (IV. 5. 1313). Agamemnon does all he can to defer hearing the vocalisation of emotional pain for which he is ultimately responsible. His anxiety governs his physical actions, and he tries to avoid a confrontation with

Clytemnestre, in which he knows she will invoke the horrors of seeing their daughter's heart cut from her chest. Agamemnon's fear of hearing these cries is closely connected to his fear of the horrible visual image of Iphigénie's sacrifice.

Phèdre, in a similar vein, begs Thésée to spare her from hearing anguished screams. She has—falsely—accused Hippolyte of attempted rape, and her husband's impulse is to defend his wife's honour and his own by sacrificing the life of his son, the supposed attacker.

Respectez votre sang, j'ose vous en prier.
Sauvez-moi de l'horreur de l'entendre crier;
Ne me préparez point à la douleur éternelle
De l'avoir fait répandre à la main paternelle (IV. 4. 1171-74).

The queen attempts to produce an emotional, paternal response in Thésée by reminding him of the blood ties he shares with Hippolyte. Phèdre's formulation combines the literal sense of Hippolyte's death cries with the symbolic cry of outrage from the race from which he descends raising up in anguish against the prince's wrongful death. Earlier in the play, Phèdre confesses that it was her inarticulate cries which forced his absence from Trézène: 'Je pressai son exil, et mes cris éternels | L'arrachèrent du sein et des bras paternels' (I. 3. 295-6). Here, the queen's constant objections or, as she describes them, 'cris' prefigure both the crime she raises against Hippolyte and her fear of hearing his death cry. The perpetual nature of her earlier protests against Hippolyte's presence reappear in the fourth Act, as the eternal (line 1173) suffering she would face as the one to blame for the prince's murder. The 'bras paternels' from which a younger Hippolyte is abruptly torn become, through Phèdre's lie, those that metaphorically guide Thésée's hands to filicide and those from which he is again—metaphorically—torn. Phèdre knows she would be responsible for her stepson's death, as Thésée is reacting to Oenone's lie in which Hippolyte allegedly confessed his love for Phèdre and attempted to rape her. Phèdre takes Agamemnon's anxieties about his wife's screams even further by comparing the brief experience of hearing Hippolyte's cries to an eternity of being haunted by the knowledge that she forced Thésée's hand and hearing the echoes of his screams of pain for the rest of her life.

Straight from the Lover's Mouth

When dealing with verbal communication, characters often employ a type of metonymy, and refer to the mouth of their interlocutor. The word *bouche* is used most frequently in *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Bérénice* and of course—Barthes has already flagged this last play in his own study of Racine’s corpus—*Bajazet*. Through tracking the use of *bouche*, several main circumstances for its use emerge. Racine’s characters refer to the mouth when they are waiting for news, for a decision, or waiting to extract a confession from another character. The mouth also serves as the embodiment of language and thought, and is the point at which emotions and decisions leave the body of one character and pass to the ears of another.

The avowal is a powerful example of a type of communication between characters which has great impact upon their emotional state and their bodies. For example, Hippolyte’s confession of love to Aricie makes him agitated and uncomfortable, and feels unnatural to him. Fortunately for him, everything that has been said previously between Aricie and her confidante Ismène indicates she loves him and strongly suspects he might love her too. As Ismène observes, ‘Le nom d’amant peut-être offense son courage, | Mais il en a les yeux, s’il n’en a le langage’ (II. 1. 413-14). She has noticed that the prince’s eyes have made the confession of love that has yet to come from his lips. When he does let Aricie know his true feelings, Hippolyte also makes plain his discomfort: ‘Maintenant je me cherche et ne me trouve plus. | Mon arc, mes javelots, mon char, tout m’importune’ (II. 2. 548-49). These are strange feelings for him, yet he still loves Aricie. He rather hopes she will understand his confession and be touched by what he is saying despite his unvarnished language: ‘Peut-être le récit d’un amour si sauvage | Vous fait en m’écoutant rougir de votre ouvrage’ (II. 2. 553-54). Perhaps the true meaning of his words and the full import of his confession will touch her, and she will understand how he feels. Hippolyte is at pains to excuse himself, adding ‘Songez que je vous parle une langue étrangère’ (II. 2. 558). He is still feeling his way around romantic language and is aware he is not choosing the best or most flattering words, yet hopes that Aricie will see past his unsophisticated way of expressing himself, to the strong feelings behind his confession.

Another example of the emphasis on the mouth, itself emblematic of articulation, occurs during *Andromaque*’s hesitation when she is faced with the

choice between sacrificing her son or being unfaithful to Hector's memory. The action of *Andromaque* hinges upon the eponymous character's decision of whether or not to marry Pyrrhus. For so long as Andromaque remains silent on the issue and therefore delays making any definitive pronouncement, she preserves both the life of her son and her own honour as Hector's widow. Throughout the play she holds conversations with Pyrrhus and gives voice to her emotional pain—stemming from the trauma of the Trojan War—yet Andromaque deliberately delays telling her captor whether or not she will become his wife. Much like Titus, she keeps those around her in a state of limbo; other characters bide time until hearing of her decision, which in itself holds the power to undo any promises they have made and any alliances they have formed. In the space between Pyrrhus' ultimatum (III. 7. 975-76) and Andromaque's decision, the ever-increasing tension narrows focus on the queen to her mouth. Ultimately, what Andromaque says determines the fate of the other characters. Unlike Titus however, from whose mouth comes an unbending declaration made from one of his two options, Andromaque's 'word' hides her true intent.

Hermione also plays an important, yet at times underestimated,²²⁰ role in the action of the piece through her silences and through what she says when she speaks. Motivated by her desire for revenge, Hermione uses Oreste's love for her own purposes, commanding him to kill Pyrrhus, 'Courez au temple. Il faut immoler...'. When Oreste interjects, demanding to know who, Hermione finishes the line by saying simply, 'Pyrrhus' (IV. 3. 1172). There is no ambiguity about her request; when challenged by an astonished Oreste, 'Pyrrhus, Madame!' (IV. 3. 1173), Hermione plays upon Oreste's love for her, using it as a weapon in her revenge. She dangles the tantalising possibility that she could return Oreste's love before him, as an incentive to his swift action against the king: 'S'il [Pyrrhus] ne meurt aujourd'hui, je puis l'aimer demain' (IV. 3. 1200). The fact that Oreste acts swiftly on what he hears when Hermione tells him to kill Pyrrhus changes everything for each of the four protagonists. More than Andromaque consenting to marry Pyrrhus, Hermione's words alter the end of the play itself. Pyrrhus is murdered, Andromaque

²²⁰ I am thinking of Richard Goodkin, 'A Choice of Andromache's', *Yale French Studies*, no. 67, 1984, pp. 225-247, particularly p. 236 in which he states that Andromaque 'bears within her the single choice that will determine all of theirs'. Goodkin is not wrong to emphasise the power of Andromaque's decision, yet his article is similar to the writing of other critics in that it neglects the role of Hermione's words in the tragedy.

becomes his widow after barely being his wife, and saves Astyanax in the process. Hermione, in despair, commits suicide on top of Pyrrhus' body, and Oreste—as previously discussed²²¹—is profoundly and permanently destabilized, unable to trust what he hears, sees, feels and thinks. Hermione's taunt of 'Et ne voyais-tu pas dans mes emportements, | Que mon coeur démentait ma bouche à tous moments?' (V. 3. 1547-48) seems to return to haunt Oreste as he struggles with the auditory and visual hallucinations resultant from his psychological unravelling. He was indeed unable to perceive this alleged, overarching truth behind her words, a sort of meta-language that allegedly came silently from her heart, communicating whilst she told Oreste to assassinate Pyrrhus that she actually wished the king no harm.

Breaking the Silence

Much of recent scholarship on silence in Racine has taken inspiration from work by Richard Parish²²² and Henry Phillips.²²³ Parish's seminal study makes several major points about the ways in which Racine presents his characters' silence: there is repressive silence, as Phèdre or Bajazet and Atalide experience, or silence imposed from within or without; some are overcome with emotion such as Agamemnon and Titus and are literally silent, and leave the stage. This silence is a powerful tool which Racine uses to dramatic ends in his tragedy: a character's hesitation, refusal to speak or concealment of the truth increases the potential value of the word, the listener's desire to hear it uttered aloud, and carries the tragic action along without words being spoken by the characters onstage. As Barthes remarks, 'le silence est irruption du faire véritable [...] mettre fin à la parole, c'est engager un processus irréversible.'²²⁴ Phillips' word, most significantly, claims a strong connection between vision and speech or hearing in Racinian theatre: 'the dynamics of presence in Racine means that seeing and speaking are the same thing.'²²⁵ Furthermore, according to Phillips, silence actually increases the emphasis and

²²¹ Also in Chapter II.

²²² Richard Parish, 'Un calme si funeste': Some types of silence in Racine,' *French Studies*, 34 (1980), 385-400.

²²³ Henry Phillips, 'The Theatricality of Discourse in Racinian Tragedy,' *Modern Language Review*, 84 (1989), 37-50.

²²⁴ Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), p. 67.

²²⁵ Phillips, p. 38.

awareness, for other characters and for an audience, with respect to the bodily presence of the silent character,

silence exposes the characters in a way that language cannot. In an experience where the expectations of speech are so specific [not only in the context of Racine's own dramatic concerns, but also in the cases of speech required in the scenes themselves, by characters], the complete absence of speech is more dramatic than any attempt at evasion.²²⁶

Parish notes that in *Bérénice*, 'concealment, speechlessness and inarticulacy all affect the shape and progress of the first three acts of the play.'²²⁷ Most of the driving force behind characters' conversations in *Bérénice*, similarly to *Andromaque*, is the anticipation of Titus' decision to either marry Bérénice or let her go. This choice is an opportunity for Racine to emphasize the physical and emotional weight of the spoken word, and the silence that hangs in the space between characters and their conversations. Repeatedly, we hear that the other characters' fate rests on whether or not Titus will speak, and if so, what he will say. Antiochus outlines the single event that would force him to leave Rome immediately: 'Si Titus a parlé, s'il l'épouse, je pars' (I. 3. 130). Bérénice also recognizes the weight carried by Titus' word: 'Titus m'aime, il peut tout, il n'a plus qu'à parler' (I. 5. 298). Titus' single speech act is the final word, and determines the fate of all three characters. At the very outset of the play, a quivering Antiochus tries to muster his strength in order to confess his love to Bérénice:

Pourrai-je, sans trembler, lui dire: 'Je vous aime?'
Mais quoi? Déjà je tremble, et mon coeur agité
Craint autant ce moment que je l'ai souhaité (I. 1. 21-23)

Antiochus' wavering resolve and struggle over whether to speak to Bérénice reverberates within his whole body. His heart is particularly affected and unsettled, unsure if he should go through with his avowal. The moment he had longed for is come, pushed forward because of her likely marriage to Titus, which raises the stakes for his confession. Antiochus stands between action and inaction, speech and silence, uneasy in mind and body.

²²⁶ Phillips, p. 45.

²²⁷ Parish, p. 394.

Titus' final pronouncement on the matter depends, in its turn, on the collective voice of Rome, which also features heavily in the play. He anxiously asks Paulin, 'De la reine et de moi que dit la voix publique? | Parlez : qu'entendez-vous?' (II. 2. 344-45). He relies on Paulin's ears and ability to listen carefully to what Rome wants, and asks for the empire's opinion as a whole, 'Je veux par votre bouche entendre tous les coeurs' (II. 2. 358). Paulin uses his voice to speak for the Roman people, to articulate their desires, in this instance whether they would support his marriage to Bérénice. The connection usually made between the heart and mouth, or speaking one's true feelings, is different in a very interesting way in this scene because Paulin is the mouthpiece for what the Romans feel in their hearts. As he speaks to Titus, his voice stands in for Rome's voice. Here, the audience sees Titus crushed in response to Paulin's report, as it officially confirms his fears. He has suspected since Vespasian's death that his love for the Palestinian queen would not be suitable, and confesses that,

[...] Vingt fois depuis huit jours
J'ai voulu devant elle en ouvrir le discours;
Et dès le premier mot la langue embarrassée
Dans ma bouche vingt fois a demeuré glacée (II. 2. 473-76)

Titus' mind revolts against the idea of breaking off his relationship, but even when he manages to convince himself to do so, his body betrays him. He is stopped partly by his desire to avoid hurting the queen he loves, but also because he wishes to avoid inflicting pain on himself. Titus simply is not emotionally prepared to hear himself speak to Bérénice in order to tell her that they must go their separate ways for Rome's benefit.

When they meet for the first time, Bérénice is by far the more articulate of the lovers. Her words, instead of inspiring Titus to match her or even to change his mind, seem to frighten him and produce the opposite effect. Bérénice begs him for some sign or word, 'Un soupir, un regard, un mot de votre bouche, | Voilà l'ambition d'un coeur comme le mien' (II. 4. 576-77). As she speaks, the queen emphasizes the potentially soothing effect of language on the heart and mind. Titus' reticence exemplifies the inverse or absence of language, and only serves to increase her anxiety. The desperate emperor wishes he could have communicated through his silence in the period of mourning after Vespasian's death, telling Antiochus 'Ma

bouche et mes regards, muets depuis huit jours, | L'auront pu préparer à ce triste discours' (III. 1. 737-38). Perhaps Bérénice should have understood what Titus was communicating behind his grief, but she interpreted his silence as part of the mourning process.

Bérénice's presence in their initial confrontation illustrates the degree to which Titus' greatest resolve finds itself paralysed, his body unresponsive. After their first onstage encounter, Titus still struggles with the guilt over a sacrifice he knows he must make for Rome: 'Pourrai-je dire enfin: "Je ne veux plus vous voir?" | Je viens percer un coeur que j'adore, qui m'aime' (IV. 4. 998-99). He tries out the words he will use to end the relationship and, hearing how they sound, seems to imagine the physical pain they will inflict upon her. He makes the connection between what he will say and how her body will be affected. Like arrows, or a dagger, his words will drive straight into her heart. As she struggles to make sense of a world without her lover, Bérénice finds herself reaching for what she heard Titus say. In her frustration, she protests against '[...] cette même bouche, après mille serments | D'un amour qui devait nous unir à tous moments' (IV. 5. 1105-06), which has now pronounced the end of their relationship and cited Rome's wishes as the reason they must separate.

Paul Hammond's recent article makes interesting and significant connections between physical space in *Bérénice*, and the miscommunications and silences between characters.²²⁸ As many critics have noted, the play takes place in a small space between Bérénice and Titus' rooms, where they are used to meeting in private. While it is indeed a secluded place, and at times has perhaps been one where they sought refuge together from prying eyes and ears of the court, it is also—and more significantly—one which represents Titus' failure to commit to a decision about the future of their relationship. Hammond notes of the lovers, 'neither ever crosses over into the enclosure of the other's world.'²²⁹ According to Bérénice, as quoted above, all that Titus needs to do is 'say the word' as it were (I. 5. 298), and yet he cannot; he remains silent. Hammond remarks, '[i]n the spaces of *Bérénice* we see the proximity and the distance between the characters through their use of shared and

²²⁸ Paul Hammond, 'The Rhetoric of Space and Self in Racine's *Bérénice*,' *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 36 (2014), 141-155.

²²⁹ Hammond, p. 143.

not-quite-shared language. But the spaces of characters are also defined by silence.²³⁰

Hermione regrets words she has earlier spoken and convinces Oreste he failed to understand her, and Titus struggles mightily in his attempts to communicate to Bérénice why they must never see each other again. I will continue the discussion of the spoken word using examples from *Britannicus* and *Bajazet*, focussing primarily on control and surveillance through language.

Listening In

Néron appears to cultivate the impression of being the ultimate panopticon, his all-powerful eye roving constantly around his court. In order to finally dispense with Agrippine and come into his own, however, Néron recognizes the importance of hearing everything that goes on and controlling the language of those around him. His captive Junie provides a test case for his ability to hold sway over the verbal communications of others, and he gives her the task of ending her relationship with Britannicus.

Before placing himself behind the screen, some of his parting words to her are ‘Vous n’aurez point pour moi de langages secrets: | J’entendrai des regards que vous croyez muets’ (II. 3. 681-82), coupled with a warning that Britannicus will pay the price ‘D’un geste ou d’un soupir échappé pour lui plaire’ (II. 3. 684). Not only will he keep a tight hold on Junie’s tongue and therefore her linguistic abilities, but he will also punish any effort to communicate extra-linguistically to her lover. She is to utter the words that Néron has prescribed in a convincing manner, and must make no attempt to indicate that she is telling Britannicus their relationship is finished against her will. Néron readies himself for the pleasure of listening to Junie cast grave doubt in Britannicus’ heart. The pain he means to inflict on Britannicus is much greater for the fact that it comes from Junie’s mouth: ‘[...] il vaut mieux que lui-même | Entende son arrêt de la bouche qu’il aime (II. 3. 667-668). In case it proves too difficult for Junie to put these hurtful revelations into spoken language, Néron adds the clause that she may tell Britannicus he is no longer welcome in her presence through being silent or reticent:

²³⁰ Hammond, p. 153.

Et soit par vos discours, soit par votre silence,
Du moins par vos froideurs, faites-lui concevoir
Qu'il porte ailleurs ses vœux et son espoir (II. 3. 672-74)

Néron creates a unique, almost perfectly controlled environment for listening to and watching the fracture of Britannicus and Junie's relationship. He places restrictions on Junie's spoken language while allowing for the possibility of silence, yet attempting to control what is communicated even by an absence of language. Néron's instructions to Junie demonstrate a comprehensive awareness of the close ties between hearing and understanding, or between the mouth and ears and the heart.

Britannicus is unnerved by Junie's hesitation in their first meeting, unaware that Néron is watching and listening to their conversation or that the woman he loves has been told in no uncertain terms to end their relationship. During the interview, obeying Néron's explicit orders, Junie evades bodily or even any real sensory contact with her lover: she avoids his gaze and says very little, leading him to ask, 'Vous ne me dites rien?' (II. 7. 707) and to twice beg her 'Parlez' (II. 7. 709, 741). When Junie does speak she declines to return his love and instead focuses on recasting the things Britannicus says against Néron to make his language more palatable to the emperor listening behind the curtain, insisting her lover had told her many times 'Que Rome le [Néron] louait d'une commune voix' (II. 7. 726). Because Junie knows Néron is listening and watching them, she controls her language, her facial expressions and even the look in her eye. A frustrated Britannicus exclaims 'Quoi! même vos regards ont appris à se taire?' (II. 7. 736), joining her lack of verbal communication with a refusal to connect with him in a non-verbal manner. Although her lover leaves the scene fearing he has been rejected, Junie's love for Britannicus is blindingly obvious to Néron, whose immediate reaction to the interview is 'Eh bien! de leur amour tu vois la violence, | Narcisse: elle a paru jusque dans son silence!' (II. 8. 747-48). Néron is hypersensitive and megalomaniacal to such a degree that he perceives traces of Junie's love for Britannicus in the tone of the language she uses to end the relationship, and, although she makes no gesture to warn Britannicus, also in her silence.

Néron's attempts to control every aspect of his environment lead him, as I have shown, to stifle Junie's spoken and gestural language. He puts an equal if not

greater amount of effort into regulating Agrippine's behaviour in an attempt to curb and severely limit her power. The very opening of the play shows the audience a frustrated Agrippine, who is unable to see and speak with her son. Néron's interlude with Junie and Britannicus is a trial run for his more complicated power struggle with Agrippine. She feels all of his attempts to physically, visually and linguistically block her, and begins to fear him. Agrippine senses that her primary weapon against Néron is her tongue, and when Burrhus suggests she calm down, retorts, 'Ah! l'on s'efforce en vain de me fermer la bouche!' (III. 3. 832). With that, she strikes back at her son whom she still has not been able to see, by having an interview with his rival Britannicus, in an effort to pit him against Néron. She declares, 'Tôt ou tard il faudra qu'il entende sa mère' (III. 5. 920), and promises, '[...] J'assiégerai Néron de toutes parts' (III. 5. 925). Agrippine's attack on Néron is a siege comprised of spoken language: her own verbal communications are explicitly designed to 'make tongues wag' and inspire threads of discussion in the court that the elusive Néron can follow back to her.

Néron hears his mother's voice behind Britannicus' accusations a few scenes later, when the prince lashes out at him for his treatment of Junie, 'Je la [Junie] laisse expliquer sur tout ce qui me touche, | Et ne me cache point pour lui fermer la bouche' (III. 8. 1068). When Néron replies, 'Je vous entends' (III. 8. 1068) he wryly addresses Agrippine through Britannicus. Determined to retaliate, Néron sends a non-verbal message to Agrippine by replacing her own guard with his, telling her she is under his control by sending those who represent him to keep her physically confined. The fact that he deliberately denies his mother the chance to be heard, and does not deign to speak or explain himself before placing her under guard, is meant to wound her far more than mere language, and show that his hatred and disrespect in fact cannot be expressed in words. While it does involve vision and physical space, the war between Néron and his mother Agrippine is primarily fought through language: the wounds each sustains in the struggle can be traced back to spoken words as well as silence. Néron's graduation—as it were—from emperor to dictator is marked by the fact that he is able to almost completely abandon language at the end of the play.

Set in the *seraglio* of the Turkish court, *Bajazet* shows the audience a unique, closed environment in which language reigns, where one navigates and interacts with the world primarily through speaking and listening. Bajazet's life—as Roxane

repeatedly reminds him—hangs in the balance during the play, and is dependent upon how convincingly he avows a love for her. Adding another layer to the linguistically-driven plot, Bajazet is able to speak effectively to Roxane only because of the verbal coaching Atalide, in the guise of go-between, gives her lover before his conversations, and through Roxane's pre- and post- interview confidences with Atalide.

At the beginning of the play, it becomes clear to what degree Bajazet is in danger of losing his life should he say the wrong thing: Roxane demands to see him, and intends to put him to death if he does not offer to marry her. Part of her test is setting conditions to ensure he is not prepared to hear what Roxane has to say, and therefore speaks, as it were, from the heart. In declaring what she hopes to achieve by the secret meeting, Roxane tells Atalide 'Je veux que devant moi sa bouche et son visage | Me découvrent son coeur sans me laisser d'ombrage' (I. 3. 329-330). It is important that Bajazet's physical impression correspond to the one given by his words: he must appear *and* sound like someone in love.

In *Bérénice*, Titus and the queen meet in a private space between their two rooms. Bajazet and Roxane's 'relationship', by contrast, develops only because Atalide is pressed into service as Roxane's proxy and, as the latter describes it, 'Me prêter votre voix pour m'expliquer à lui' (I. 3. 328). Roxane's whole impression of Bajazet himself and the relationship they share is coloured by Atalide's descriptions, the favourite 'Le voyait par mes yeux, lui parlait par ma bouche' (I. 4. 350). When Atalide's function as translator or mouthpiece is taken away, she is increasingly at risk of unwittingly revealing her relationship with Bajazet. Without realising it at first, Roxane gives herself the opportunity to discover their love when she changes the rules and speaks to Bajazet on her own terms.

Extracting full statements from Bajazet proves more difficult than Roxane initially anticipated, and she orders, 'Achève, parle' (II, I, 560) in a vain attempt to provoke him into speaking clearly. Bajazet has to later be encouraged by Atalide to lie to Roxane if necessary and agree to marry her in order to stay alive. When he is ultimately unable to speak for himself and plainly declare his love, Atalide yet again attempts to smooth things over by putting words in Bajazet's mouth. But Roxane by this point is no longer content to let her speak for the prince, and begins to find it odd that Atalide always comes to Bajazet's rescue with the most perfectly formulated phrases, 'Je vois qu'à l'excuser votre adresse est extrême: | Vous parlez

mieux pour lui qu'il ne parle lui-même' (III. 5. 1057). Atalide, anxious to spare the prince's life, fully understands the gravity of the situation and the importance of a flawless, eleventh-hour performance from Bajazet to Roxane: 'Qu'il l'apaise. Ces mots [those she has just read in Bajazet's private letter to her] ne me suffisent pas: | Que sa bouche, ses yeux, tout l'assure qu'il l'aime' (IV. 1. 1156-57). However, the discovery of Bajazet's written communications with Atalide is the undoing of the couple, if not all three protagonists. Utterly betrayed, Roxane throws Bajazet's words of feigned love back in his face, accusing him—rightly—'Et me jurer enfin, d'une bouche perfide, | Tout ce que tu ne sens que pour ton Atalide' (V. 4. 1486-87). Roxane's triumph over Atalide and Bajazet's verbal deception is short-lived, and she suffers the consequences of having intended to be unfaithful to the Sultan whose spy Orcan has heard and communicated everything to him.

Racine's characters place great emphasis on spoken language, not in order to render language a direct substitute for action itself, but to allow the spoken word to wield power sufficient to act upon more of the body than the ear alone. Words can emotionally wound to such a degree that a character feels the hurt in a physical manner; the spoken word can confuse or disappoint a listener, or immediately connect to a certain visual image or tactile sensation, and waiting to hear a character speak can cause fear and unrest. Spoken language works in collaboration with the auditory and can also be understood in visual and tactile terms. The absence of language, or silence, is felt equally strongly and the body of a character who longs for verbal communication struggles to fill the empty space in a variety of ways.²³¹ While speech and listening to the spoken word affect the physical body, song and music in *Esther* and *Athalie* push this experience to a greater extreme. The next section will examine writing on music theory, and through it, the effect of music on the body and, most importantly, the eternal soul.

The Wisdom of the Ancients: Music, Order and Divine Presence

Unlike in any of Racine's previous plays, from *La Thébaïde* to *Phèdre*, music and song are a vital component of *Esther* and *Athalie*. Together, these sonic elements seek to elevate characters' as well as the audience's sensory experience to

²³¹ For further studies of silence in Racinian theatre, see especially the work of Éric Méchoulan, *Le corps imprimé: essai sur le silence en littérature* (Montréal, Québec: Éditions Balzac, 1999).

a different plane, and facilitate an encounter with the divine. In this section, I attempt to bring fresh eyes and ears to the biblical plays and approach the lines of the chorus as language set to music, rather than a sometimes superfluous portion of a literary text. I evaluate the chorus itself: Racine deliberately modifies its function from the strictly classical role, introducing a prophetic element to the sung and spoken language of the chorus. The addition of prophecy transforms the voice of the chorus from that of a group of human voices, into the voice of God embodied in the collective ‘body’ of the chorus itself. The God of *Esther* and *Athalie* speaks through the chorus to the audience and the other characters, therefore distinguishing Racine’s chorus significantly from the chorus of Greek theatre from which he takes his initial inspiration. My study of *Esther* and *Athalie* will take inspiration from both Platonic/Boethian notions of music as the embodiment of mathematical perfection and harmony, as well as the Aristotelian/Augustinian viewpoint that music can attune both body and soul to moral goodness. My readings of these two plays will be slightly more conjectural at the level of the body and the senses, and I offer the reading that the audience is invited to imagine characters onstage responding physically and emotionally to the music and song from the chorus.

My study owes a great debt, at this point in particular, to recent scholarship by Anne Piéjus, Nicholas Hammond and Éric Méchoulan. Piéjus’ remarkable tome on music and education at Saint-Cyr²³² has made possible the foundation of this chapter and will undoubtedly continue to inspire further scholarship in the fields of musicology, literature and history. Hammond’s work, especially on the intersection of education theory at Port-Royal, memory, and Racinian theatre,²³³ guides the discussion to follow on memory in *Esther* and *Athalie*. Méchoulan’s research, in particular his article ‘From Music to Literature,’²³⁴ is a particularly illuminating complement to research in music history and theory for this chapter.

In his edition of the Racinian corpus, Georges Forestier is quick to point out that *Esther* (and also *Athalie*) marks a very unique and particular project for Racine; it is a response to a special commission, entirely its own genre, and ought to be considered in its proper context:

²³² Anne Piéjus, *Le théâtre des demoiselles: tragédie et musique à Saint-Cyr à la fin du grand siècle* (Paris: Société française de musicologie, 2000).

²³³ Nicholas Hammond, *Fragmentary Voices: Memory and Education at Port-Royal* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr, 2004).

²³⁴ Éric Méchoulan, ‘From Music to Literature,’ *SubStance* 28.1 (88), 1999, pp. 42-56.

[C]e qui ne devait être qu'une pièce de collège devint, entre ses [Racine's] mains, un chef d'oeuvre digne d'être mis sur le même pied que ses tragédies profanes, d'être comparé avec la tragédie antique, de rivaliser, grâce à l'appoint du musicien Moreau et du décorateur Bérain, avec les splendeurs chorales et ornamentales de l'opéra contemporain.²³⁵

The sacred dramas of *Esther* and *Athalie* mark a significant departure from Racine's previous work in terms of their form, subject matter, and audience. I will first address the commission of these two plays in their institutional and educational context, before considering the theories of music which underpin the inclusion of sung voice and musical instrument.

The commission of *Esther* for the young girls at Saint-Cyr is well-documented, by Racine himself in his *Préface*, by Madame de Maintenon herself in personal correspondence, and by the memoirs of her niece and former Saint-Cyr pupil Madame de Caylus, all cited by scholars including Piéjus, Forestier and Hammond.²³⁶ What Hammond's work in particular brings to the field is the discussion of education at Port-Royal institutions, of which Racine was a product, and the formational effects for the Saint-Cyr pupils of putting on productions of *Esther* and *Athalie*. While Hammond is understandably careful to note that not too strong a connection can—or should—be made between the two institutions themselves,²³⁷ what is most interesting is the educational theory and approach to students' formation that results in the commission of a play like *Esther*. The Port-Royalistes' methodologies, and the resultant emphasis on memory as fundamental among the four component parts of rhetoric, are fleshed out in such treatises as those produced by Pierre Nicole (*Traité de l'Education d'un Prince*, 1670) and Pierre Coustel (*Traité de l'Education des Enfants*, 1687). These treatises are noteworthy for their insistence upon learning in what Hammond identifies as a specifically 'intelligent way.'²³⁸ Memory, for the Port-Royalistes, is central to learning and to developing the mind in a certain way, along with conversation, translation and small groups of instruction. Citing Coustel, Hammond notes of this approach,

²³⁵ Forestier, p. 1675.

²³⁶ See especially Piéjus, p. 94-7, Forestier, p. 1673 and Hammond, p. 155.

²³⁷ Considering, not least of all, the dispersal of the *petites écoles* in 1650. See Hammond, *Fragmentary voices*, p. 153.

²³⁸ Hammond, p. 77.

the child should try to understand, to have ‘l’intelligence parfaite’ (viii) of what he is learning. Rather than it being useful on its own terms, memory, therefore, should be the launch-pad for other faculties, such as ‘jugement.’²³⁹

Such an approach is justified by grounding it in the philosophical and pedagogical tradition of the Ancients, and in the theology of Saints Augustine and Bernard of Clairveaux. In terms of the educational intention behind the creation of *Esther*, not only is the process a useful exercise in memory for the young women of Saint-Cyr, but Racine’s use of biblical source material means that it doubles as a devotional exercise. I will turn to explore this second aspect, particularly the concept of memory as it relates to *anamnesis*, as understood by the Greek philosophical tradition and as it functions in Jewish and Christian worship.

If we take Hammond’s observations about memory and push them even further into the context of Racine’s *Esther* and *Athalie*, the novelty and theological impact of their performance become even more profound. I make no claims about Racine’s intention; rather, I intend to flag up areas of great interest and further research, which make a strong argument for a connection between personal devotion and the process of participating in a production of *Esther* or *Athalie*, as a member of the audience or cast. *Anamnesis* as understood in its original, Attic Greek sense, can function as memory in terms of a person’s recollection, or as memorial sacrifice. Its Hebrew language cognate, which can be transcribed as *zikkaron*, appears in the Old Testament in relation to temple sacrificial practice, and is always connected to covenant. Particularly in Pauline theology²⁴⁰—and of course into the post-Apostolic period which owes a large debt to the philosophical writings of Plotinus—*anamnesis* retains its connection with covenant, with the obvious shift of becoming symbolic of a covenant forged in the death of the Christ. Hammond traces the emphasis on memory in both *Esther* and *Athalie*, especially in terms of characters such as Mardochee or Esther being the repository for the hope and continued survival of the Jews. I wish to make the further point that Racine, most likely knowingly, depicts this past action carried in to the present through acts of remembrance as an embodied experience with a liturgical function for the young actresses and the

²³⁹ Hammond, p. 64.

²⁴⁰ See, for example, 1 Cor. 11:24-6.

audience, making sophisticated use of memory as *anamnesis* in Jewish and Christian tradition.

Scholars have noted the additional roles of the chorus and music, in *Esther* and *Athalie*. Racine could quite possibly have been familiar with the origins and development of the Greek chorus, a hallmark of *Esther* and *Athalie*, through his education at Port-Royal.²⁴¹ At its inception, Greek tragedy was a choral song, dedicated to Dionysus, which then developed into spoken dialogue alternating with song,²⁴² not unlike the structure of *Esther* and *Athalie*. As a general rule, the chorus in Greek tragedy enters at the beginning of a play and does not exit the stage until the very end. The choral song usually follows a pattern of a1, a2, b1, b2, c,²⁴³ a template which allows for three main musical themes with one variation on each of the first two. In later periods, including Racine's, the musical forms of *ritornello* and *da capo* call for certain repetitions of themes to similar effect. Racine uses these musical themes to underscore repetitions in the language of sung verses in both *Esther* and *Athalie*, and variations on the themes appear in the music between acts.

In his *Préface* to *Esther*, Racine claims to have used the invitation to produce a play for Saint-Cyr as an opportunity to unite 'comme dans les anciennes tragédies grecques, le chœur et le chant avec l'action, et d'employer à chanter les louanges du vrai Dieu cette partie du chœur que les païens employaient à chanter les louanges de leurs fausses divinités.'²⁴⁴ This comment speaks to Racine's desire not only to emulate the Greek integration of choral presence and song with plot, but to deploy the chorus to a specifically Christian purpose. As we shall see, the chorus becomes particularly important for Racine as a device for emphasizing the immanence of the Divine. The chorus—constituted by the Israelites in *Esther*, and the priestly caste of the Levites in *Athalie*—plays two critical roles. On the one hand, the chorus represent the chosen people, a unified, communal body, bearing testimony to God's covenantal promise. But while they function as the incarnation of God on earth, they are not consubstantial with God, like Christ. Thus the chorus also give voice to the Israelites' feeling of separation from God, and express a yearning for his presence.

²⁴¹ Cf. R.C. Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* (Paris: Boivin, 1950/Nizet, 1974).

²⁴² Graham Ley, *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 31.

²⁴³ Graham Ley, *A Short Introduction*, p. 65.

²⁴⁴ *Esther, Préface*, p. 640.

Racine's conception of the role of the chorus, and indeed his wider intuitions about music, could have emerged from a rich amalgam of classical and biblical interests. This is particularly evident in the 'sublime' properties he attributes to the music and singing that highlight the scriptural text of the Book of Esther,²⁴⁵ which recall classical notions of the music of the spheres. According to Plato, the "world soul" is inherently present in the cosmos by virtue of ratios,²⁴⁶ which lend it a perfectly ordered organisation.²⁴⁷ This structure finds expression in the music of the spheres, by which the planets and stars emit sounds which combine in precise harmony.²⁴⁸ While Racine seems aware of this notion, and his musical collaborator Jean-Baptiste Moreau's scores seem to gesture toward cosmic vibrations, Racine adds a new twist to the concept. His interpretation of a 'music of the spheres' is not so much a symphony generated by the movement of celestial bodies as it is a point of intersection between the divine and human realms. Through music, the spheres of both God and man find themselves in perfect harmony. Méchoulan notes that Plotinus plays a critical role in how Christianity and Christian authors re-frame music's role in the relationship between God and the created world:

[t]he recurring comparison with the One, the Reason-Principle, with musical harmony, is revealing for Plotinus, as it will be for Christian authors, because it permits them to think at once the multiplicity and the symphonics of disparate elements—local heterogeneity and universal harmony. The Indo-European root *ar* of the Greek *armonia* refers to the notion of a just order of the universe, but *armonia* comes also from the idea [...] of the joint²⁴⁹

Racine may well have been aware, to a certain extent, of drawing on such a rich tradition of order and structure in his conception the substance of *Esther* and *Athalie*, and the integration of music and sung verse to both plays. It is also worth noting the possible significance of Racine's personal copies of the Psalter,²⁵⁰ not for their

²⁴⁵ *Esther*, *Préface*, p. 640.

²⁴⁶ The invention of these ratios is attributed to the Pythagoreans, and they are based on the length of the string on an instrument. The ratio for the octave is 2:1; for the fifth, 3:2; and the fourth, 4:3 (Chadwick, *Boethius: the Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981)), p. 78-79.

²⁴⁷ Plato, *Timaeus*, 35b, 35a, cited in Chadwick, *Boethius*, p. 79. The 'world soul', as Plato defines it, is a unique combination of difference, sameness, and being.

²⁴⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*, 37b. Chadwick, *Boethius*, p. 79.

²⁴⁹ Méchoulan, 'From Music to Literature', p. 44.

²⁵⁰ Forestier, p. 1675, cites 'la richesse toute à faite exceptionnelle de son [Racine's] fonds biblique' no less than six different editions of the Bible in various languages, plus 'de nombreuses éditions

number but for the influence they could have brought to bear on his writing of the sacred dramas, particularly the prayers and laments featured especially in *Esther*, and for inspiring some of the musical setting by drawing on a rich tradition of explicitly Jewish, Second Temple worship.²⁵¹ For example, in *Esther* one notices the influence of both Psalm 141 and 137 in Act I, scene ii, in the exchange between Esther, Élise and the chorus, or of Psalm 129 in Act I, scene v, line 340 sung by a single Israelite voice from the chorus.

In the *Préface* to *Esther* Racine clearly draws on Aristotle as well, particularly his understanding of the connection between music, the body, and a good moral education. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle remarks that ‘music is the most important source of pleasure’²⁵² to be found in tragedy and is one of the six essential components of the tragic form, along with a story, a moral element, style, ideas and staging. Elsewhere, in his *Politics*, Aristotle discusses the fact that different musical modes can have various emotional effects, and accords music the power to shape a person’s character, for better or for worse.²⁵³ This clearly chimes with Racine’s goals in *Esther* and *Athalie*, commissioned as a complement to the general program of moral and spiritual education for the *demoiselles* of Saint-Cyr.

In late Antiquity, Augustine and Boethius further developed these strands of Platonic and Aristotelian thought regarding the perfect ratios of music and its impact on the human body and soul. In *De institutione musica*—a seminal work in the history of music theory, which both Moreau and Racine would have known—Boethius identifies three types of music: cosmic, human, and instrumental.²⁵⁴ As Henry Chadwick explains, for Boethius human music is ‘the blending of incorporeal soul and the physical body [...] The primary concords of octave fifth and fourth correspond to the soul’s threefold power to think, to perceive, and to acquire a skill or habit; or to kinds of virtue in moderating sensual desires.’²⁵⁵ Here, Plato’s theory

séparées de différents livres de l’Ancien Testament (Pentateuque, Prophètes, et surtout Psaumes, dont il possédait au moins trois éditions.’

²⁵¹ For further studies of the Psalms, see Alison Gray, *Psalm 18 in Words and Pictures: A Reading Through Metaphor* (Biblical Interpretation Series 127; Leiden: Brill, 2014), and Brueggemann, W., *The Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg Old Testament Studies; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

²⁵² Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Kenny, p. 25.

²⁵³ Aristotle, *Politics*, book VIII, part V.

²⁵⁴ The existing text of *De institutione musica* finishes abruptly after Book 19, Chapter 5, and Boethius only discusses instrumental music. According to Chadwick, what Boethius may well have discussed in terms of cosmic and human music is likely to be found in the works of Ptolemy, Plutarch and Aristotle (Chadwick, *Boethius*, p. 83).

²⁵⁵ Chadwick, *Boethius*, p. 82-3.

of the world soul is cast in smaller, human terms one can readily imagine. Music's potential to inspire the soul and temper otherwise distracting physical passions fits well within the objectives of Saint-Cyr itself, and Racine's contribution to the young ladies' leisure activities with *Esther* and *Athalie*.

Saint Augustine took up and developed Boethius' moral and spiritual insights in a way which likely influenced Racine's own thinking, especially given the wealth of historical evidence to support the connection between Augustinian writing and education at Port-Royal.²⁵⁶ John Campbell has considered Augustinian theology in Racine's work, and in fact argues most persuasively against an Augustinian reading when applied to one of Racine's earlier, non-religious plays such as *Andromaque*.²⁵⁷ Several scholars have examined the strong affinities between Augustine's reflections on devotional music and Racine's final biblical plays, especially Piéjus in her monumental study of Saint-Cyr's education and musical tradition, in which she pays particular close attention the debates around the creation, purpose and reception of *Esther* and *Athalie*.²⁵⁸ Augustine's *Confessions* contain a powerful testimony of the effect of religious music on the body and soul. Speaking to God, he writes:

I have some sense of restful contentment in sounds whose soul is your words [...] I feel that when the sacred words are chanted well, our souls are moved and are [...] religiously and with a warmer devotion kindled to piety.²⁵⁹

Music, especially the sung liturgy or Holy Scripture set to music, has the potential to open a direct channel with the Divine. Just as Augustine felt "kindled to piety" by music, Racine hoped *Esther* and *Athalie*—themselves based on Scripture—would constitute an exercise in piety and good character for the young ladies of Saint-Cyr.²⁶⁰ And much as Augustine felt a passionate, physical sensation of a connection with God when listening to religious music—something which warmed him like a fire—the music in Racine's biblical plays seeks to make a bodily impression, especially upon his characters. When the spoken word is integrated with song and

²⁵⁶ Hammond, *Fragmentary voices*, p. 44-7.

²⁵⁷ John Campbell, 'Racine and the Augustinian Influence: the case of *Andromaque*', *French Studies*, 53 (1999), 279-291.

²⁵⁸ Piéjus, *Le théâtre des demoiselles: tragédie et musique à Saint-Cyr à la fin du grand siècle* (Paris: Société française de musicologie, 2000), especially p. 621-5, and Nicholas Hammond, *Fragmentary Voices: Memory and Education at Port-Royal* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr, 2004).

²⁵⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Chadwick, xxxiii (49), p. 207-208.

²⁶⁰ *Esther*, *Préface*, p. 639.

music, the normally limited range of speech intersects with the infinite, and music's perfect harmonic proportions can move both body and soul.

Baroque Composition

Although the decision to add a musical element to his plays was not unique to Racine, his realisation of the spoken word alternating with sung verse is indeed distinctive. Music and choral accompaniment to tragedy were of course commonplace in the Greek theatre of antiquity, as we have seen. In the early modern period, however, the intersection of music, theatre, and the genre of opera were not viewed with a kind eye by critics. One critic in particular, Nicolas Boileau, publicly opposed the operas written by Pierre Quinault and Jean-Baptiste Lully. The incredibly prolific Lully, a contemporary of Racine, created a specific type of opera with Quinault, the latter as the librettist and Lully as the composer, which was based on the alexandrine or, occasionally, heroic—10-syllable—verse. Lully also worked closely with Quinault and Boileau in producing *tragédies en musique*. He collaborated with Molière as well in creating a new genre they termed the *comédie-ballet*. Racine and Lully were rivals for a time, but nonetheless worked together to produce *l'Idylle sur la Paix*, first performed at Sceaux on July 16, 1685 during an elaborate party hosted by the marquis de Seignelay—Colbert's son and Racine's patron at court—in honour of Louis XIV.²⁶¹ The piece marked Racine's first attempt to integrate music and theatre. Although *l'Idylle sur la Paix* was written in lyric verse and entirely sung, it clearly paves the way for the unique style of *Esther* and *Athalie*. Anne Piéjus notes of *l'Idylle*,

La répétition des paroles, l'étirement du temps dramatique, la souplesse à accepter que le musicien modifie les formes prévues par l'auteur, ou qu'il répète des vers pour construire des formes *da capo* et des rondeaux, étaient déjà très présents dans cette œuvre.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Jérôme de la Gorce, *L'Opéra à Paris au temps de Louis XIV : histoire d'un théâtre* (Paris: Desjonquères, 1992), p. 72.

²⁶² *Esther: tragédie de Jean Racine, intermèdes de Jean-Baptiste Moreau*, ed. Anne Piéjus (Paris: Société Française de la Musicologie, 2003), p. x.

The two musical forms Piéjus identifies, the *da capo* and rondo, are also used in *Esther* and *Athalie* in addition to the *ritournelle*, or main musical theme. They may have especially appealed to Racine given his vision for both the plays, as the repetitions allowed by these forms permit the composer and dramatist firstly to remind the audience of primary musical themes, and then develop them in subsequent alternating musical sections or episodes. Moreover, in light of the liturgical function of the music for *Esther* and *Athalie*, these forms underscore important portions of the biblical text, as well as the significant communications of God through the people Israel, represented by the chorus.

Relatively little is known about Jean-Baptiste Moreau as compared with, for example, Lully, Boileau, or Quinault. He is present today exclusively through his work with Racine on *Esther*, *Athalie* and, later, three of Racine's four *Cantiques Spirituels*. There is evidence that Moreau served as *maître de musique* at the cathedral in Langres until 1683, then went to Paris, and within several years managed to attract a supporter in the Dauphine, Victoire de Bavière, which eventually earned him the invitation to write the music of *Esther*.²⁶³ His music to Racine's plays has not remained a constant presence alongside the texts, and only contemporary efforts by musicologists have rendered Moreau's scores more widely available and comprehensible to modern scholars. Indeed, lovers of music are likely to be much more familiar with George Handel's oratorio 'Esther' (c. 1718) and 'Athaliah' (1733), or with Felix Mendelssohn's incidental music to *Athalie* from 1845, in particular the 'War March of the Priests', than with Moreau's music to Racine's plays.

Moreau's music for both plays is indicative of the middle Baroque period, which can be identified by the *basso continuo*—sometimes called a 'figured bass'—a bass part which is written out in its entirety and upon which the chord progressions of the music score are created. The *basso continuo* is played by a small section of the orchestra, made up of a bass instrument which produces single notes at a time, and a chordal instrument which produces more than one note simultaneously.²⁶⁴ In Moreau's score from the seventeenth century,²⁶⁵ as well as the slightly edited

²⁶³ *Esther: tragédie de Jean Racine, intermèdes de Jean-Baptiste Moreau*, ed. Anne Piéjus (Paris: Société Française de Musicologie, 2003), p. xiv.

²⁶⁴ The 2011 production of *Athalie* highlighted the quintessentially Baroque aspect of Moreau's music by including the bassoon, a string instrument; and the harpsichord, a keyboard instrument.

²⁶⁵ For example, Moreau, *Intermèdes en musique de la tragédie d'Esther* (Paris: Ballard, 1696).

version produced by the Société Française de Musicologie, the notation for the *basso continuo* is a continuous line of single notes. This type of notation is typical for the Baroque period, and the harpsichord player improvised from chords which could be built in harmonic proportion to the musical notes of the bass part.

In recent years, the Société Française de Musicologie has funded research to consult the original editions of the music for *Esther* (2003) and *Athalie* (2005). Anne Piéjus has carefully examined and sensitively edited the original music, preserving its integrity and presenting modern musicians, dramatists and scholars with an accurate, comprehensible version of Moreau's original score. The music itself is presented along with Racine's text, which facilitates an understanding of the interplay between Moreau's music, the chorus, and the spoken words of both plays.

Probably due in large part to the relative inaccessibility of original scores intelligible to non-experts, scholarship on the music of *Esther* and *Athalie* has been limited up to now, a fact I hope to play some small part in redressing. Barthes, who devotes short sections to each play in *Sur Racine*, makes but a single mention of the chorus and accompaniment to *Esther*, stating that it promotes an ideal of childhood and innocence 'savourée par tout un chœur de vierges-victimes, dont les chants, à la fois louanges et plaintes, forment comme le *milieu*—sensuel—du bonheur racinien.'²⁶⁶ This short statement, nonetheless, carries tremendous significance with Barthes' use of the word *sensuel*: he is picking up on precisely the more 'dangerous' aspect of music which Madame de Maintenon and indeed those associated with education at the *petites écoles* wished to avoid²⁶⁷ but which in some sense can not be contained. Goldmann's seminal work on Jansenism and tragic vision in Pascal and Racine, *Le Dieu Caché*, steers clear of the music and sung portions of the plays, focusing instead on the written text. Racine's last two plays take up a small portion of Goldmann's extensive tome, as they represent 'une vision opposée au jansénisme tragique puisqu'à la place du Dieu caché et muet de la tragédie, ils présentent un univers dans lequel Dieu est victorieux et présent *dans le monde*.'²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 126.

²⁶⁷ Anne Piéjus, *Le théâtre des demoiselles*, discusses this point further on p. 623-6, about education at Saint-Cyr, music, and virtue. Piéjus cites Bossuet's reading of Augustine's writing on devotional music, particularly its correct use in catechesis, for example through the canticles (p. 625). Piéjus also highlights the reliance on, and struggle with, Racine's contemporaries and those involved in education, regarding Augustine's sometimes inconsistent writings on devotional music (p. 626).

²⁶⁸ Goldmann, *Le Dieu Caché* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 440.

This lack of critical attention to the musical dimensions of *Esther* and *Athalie* has been reflected and probably reinforced by the relatively small number of modern productions of these two biblical plays. The staging of *Esther* at the Théâtre d'Orsay in 1978 was more of a re-interpretation of Racine's play, set in Prague on the eve of World War II.²⁶⁹ A 1980 production of *Athalie* had no interval between acts, modern music, and a recitation of choral parts rather than singing. More recently, in 2011 *Athalie* was performed in Nantes by an all-female cast dressed as nuns. In this instance, particular attention was paid to the original rhythm of the alexandrine verse, and the production followed the original music score by Moreau. This latest production, with its dedicated attention to celebrating the *Athalie* of Racine's time—including period instruments²⁷⁰—is encouraging, although it remains to be seen whether this is an anomaly or indeed a barometer of changing perceptions about the value of re-creating particular sensory experiences for both characters and audiences.

Music occupies a liminal space in *Esther* and *Athalie*: enabling communication between the dimensions of the divine and human. Moreau's accompanying music and song in Racine's rendering of the stories of Queen Esther and Queen Athaliah intentionally opens the door for the God of the Bible as a presence on Racine's stage, capable of acting in, and on, the lives of the play's characters without compromising his own transcendence. The chorus itself exists and functions at the meeting place of transcendence and immanence. Racine is able to introduce a transcendent force in these plays which has a powerful impact on his characters' bodies and their sensory experience.

Esther and *Athalie*

The music of *Esther* and *Athalie* marks a very different kind of theatre for Racine: a personal art form, which occupies a distinctive place between theatre and opera. The sung verse and instrumental accompaniment affect the characters in a physical way which they feel more powerfully than the spoken word. Racine's choice of subject matter in the stories of Esther and Athalie from the sacred biblical

²⁶⁹ *Racine: Théâtre Complet*, ed. Morel and Viala (Paris: Garnier, 2010), p. 789.

²⁷⁰ The chorus was accompanied by violins, bassoons, a beak flute (an older form of flute made of wood, which would have been used in Racine's time), a theorbo (similar to a lute, with a long neck), a viol (six-stringed instrument with a fretted fingerboard) and harpsichord.

text begins to lay the groundwork for a divine presence. However, the music and sung verse are the medium through which God is called to the stage and represented by the chorus.

Esther

Esther was given a large amount of support from its inception through to its performances at Saint-Cyr.²⁷¹ Nicholas Hammond observes that *Esther* and *Athalie* were written during a point in Racine's career when he was working as the Royal Historiographer, had reconciled with Port-Royal, and was in a position to compose pieces different from his earlier work in subject matter and purpose.²⁷² According to Racine's *Préface*, his goal was to connect singing with the spoken verses and action of the play. He notes that 'elles [Mmes de Maintenon and de Brinon, the latter of whom was the head of school] me firent l'honneur [...] de me demander si je ne pourrais pas faire sur quelque sujet de piété et de morale une espèce de poème où le chant fût mêlé avec le récit, le tout lié par une action.'²⁷³ Here, Racine emphasizes the six Greek additions to the Hebrew text of Esther,²⁷⁴ which testify to early scholars' desire to redress what they saw as an imbalance and to write God into a text that otherwise was the only book in which the word for 'God' did not appear. For example, they add mention of God softening Assuérus' heart when Esther approaches him. Even so, the Catholic version remains rather more visceral than an

²⁷¹ The unique institution of Saint-Cyr was the project of Madame de Maintenon, Louis XIV's mistress and secret wife. Louis financially supported the school, which was founded to provide a good moral education for young women from families who had been financially ruined by his military campaigns. Saint-Cyr had two hundred and fifty students at a time and a staff of about sixty nuns. Young women remained at the school until the age of twenty, after which point they either entered into a suitable marriage with a dowry provided by the king, or were provided with a royal recommendation if they wished to join a religious order. Students were taught needlework, poetry, proper pronunciation, literature and conversation. The young women began to put on plays and soon after a few unsuccessful attempts which were deemed inappropriate, Racine received the commission to write a suitable piece for the young women (cf. René Jasinski, *Autour de l'Esther racinienne* (Paris: Nizet, 1985)).

²⁷² Nicholas Hammond, *Fragmentary Voices: Memory and Education at Port-Royal* (Tübingen: Biblio 17, 2004), p. 155.

²⁷³ *Esther, Préface*, p. 639.

²⁷⁴ Scholars date these additions at late second-early first century BCE, and they are labelled A-F. The edition of the Bible Racine would have used integrates these additions into the Book of Esther in the OT. In his edition of the Racinian corpus, Georges Forestier notes evidence of Racine having worked from these additions as early in the play as the opening lines uttered by Esther, particularly lines 5 and 6 which Forestier attributes to Racine's use of Esther's prayer from the additions which, Forestier argues, upholds Racine's stated purpose in the preface of showing an Esther who is the saviour of the Jews (Forestier, p. 1694).

emblem of Christian piety, as it includes several feasts as well as massacres of large numbers of Persians when the king's edict is altered for the Jews to be able to defend themselves against their attackers.²⁷⁵ In the biblical text Racine would most likely have consulted,²⁷⁶ Esther is willing to use food and her sexuality in order to save her people from destruction.

Esther herself is a strong figure, who represents the ethnic and political difficulties faced by the Jewish diaspora in the Persian Empire.²⁷⁷ Scholars often place Esther among a group of highly regarded female leaders, prophets and judges²⁷⁸ from the Old Testament such as Ruth and Deborah. Racine makes reference to Esther's place in this pantheon partially as justification for using the story of Esther, but primarily as an argument in support of the presence and participation of the chorus and music. Had there been no music to the play, he explains, these young Israelites

auraient directement pêché contre le louable coutume de leur nation, où l'on ne recevait de Dieu aucun bienfait signalé qu'on ne l'en remerciât sur-le-champ par de fort longs cantiques: témoin ceux de Marie, sœur de Moïse, de Déborah et de Judith.²⁷⁹

This rationale seems to make an unnecessarily generalising statement about all Jews being people of song, but does place an important emphasis on the biblical tradition

²⁷⁵ Aman made the edict in Assuérus' name, with his seal. Edicts made with the king's seal could not be revoked.

²⁷⁶ The *Bible de Port-Royal*, also called the *Bible de Sacy*, by Isaac le Maistre de Sacy and Antoine Arnauld (OT published in instalments from 1672-1696; NT published in 1667). This French translation of the Bible was accused of having strong Protestant inflections by the Jesuits. There is some evidence to support a claim that Racine could have used the Louvain Bible by Nicolas de Leuze (Antwerp: 1550), which was a literal French translation of the Vulgate and the Greek New Testament, based on earlier literal French translations by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (OT published 1523; NT published 1528). The most convincing evidence, however, is for the *Bible de Sacy*, and can be found in George Forestier's edition of Racine's theatre (p. 1682-3). Nicholas Hammond also makes a very convincing case, in part using Forestier, for Racine's use of the *Bible de Sacy* (Hammond, *Fragmentary Voices*, p. 157).

²⁷⁷ Esther's ethnicity and position within the diaspora find an echo in the situation of French Jews in the seventeenth century. At the time Racine was writing Esther, Jews were expelled from some of France's territories including Martinique. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Jews had begun to return to France after another period of exile. However, there had been anti-Semitic riots and protests in the south of France, and therefore many migrated north to provinces like Alsace and Lorraine which had recently been annexed. Louis XIV had hesitated over whether to expel the Jews once more, but decided instead to demand large taxes and confiscate a good deal of their property.

²⁷⁸ In the biblical sense, not those with juridical authority but rather those in direct communication with God who serve as spiritual leaders.

²⁷⁹ *Esther, Préface*, p. 641.

with which Racine works in adapting Esther's story for the stage. The Greek additions to the biblical text provided Racine with the descriptive elements which form the backdrop of the play and inspired his lyrics for the chorus. There are several important differences between Racine's *Esther* for the young ladies of Saint-Cyr and the text from which it is inspired. As one might expect given the restrictions of the theatre in Racine's time, there is no actual eating on the stage, and Racine makes reference to a single feast that is merely meant to serve as background information for a scene. Also in keeping with theatrical tradition and propriety, there is no bloodshed onstage and emphasis is placed instead on Esther as the saviour of the Jews rather than the vengeance enjoyed on what becomes the feast of Purim. Very little is made of Esther's sexuality; instead, Racine's text and the chorus emphasize her beauty and devotion to God.

The choice of Esther's story served Racine well for several reasons. The action of the play, leading up to the Jews' escape from annihilation at the hands of the Persians, is commemorated throughout the empire with feasting and thus forms the basis for the celebration of Purim as a Jewish holiday. This element of the plot structure has resonances with traditional *purimspiel* put on during the festivities, including those in the French empire at the time. Purim itself is celebrated by putting on disguises, by taking on roles and playing parts contrary to one's own character—for example, that of Aman—all of which are theatrical in nature. The principal religious concern weighing on Louis'—and therefore, to an extent, Racine's—mind was that of the conflict between the Jansenists and the Jesuits. The Jansenists identified themselves as followers of Augustine and were viciously attacked by the Jesuits, who cast them as close to Calvinists²⁸⁰ in terms of doctrine and called on the pope to sanction them. The struggle and resultant political impact could not have escaped notice by Racine, educated at Port-Royal schools.²⁸¹ The king himself was becoming an increasingly devout Catholic as he advanced in age, and through the encouragement and influence of Madame de Maintenon.²⁸² Using the story of Esther had the added advantage of allowing enough room for the

²⁸⁰ A rather dangerous accusation given the religious and political climate of seventeenth-century France, in which the Louis XIV, a Roman Catholic, maintained close ties with the Pope. The Calvinists were, and are, a Protestant faith.

²⁸¹ See especially Nicholas Hammond, *Fragmentary voices*, chapters 2 and 4, for discussion of the fragility of the political and religious situation.

²⁸² Cf. Veronica Buckley, *Madame de Maintenon: the Secret Wife of Louis XIV* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), for a useful volume on Madame de Maintenon and the nature of the relationship.

possibility of the Esther-Assuérus relationship to be taken as a flattering allusion to the union of Mme de Maintenon and Louis XIV.²⁸³ Not least of all Esther, as a story from the Old Testament, was unlikely to attract unwanted attention for Saint-Cyr, or be challenged in its suitability for the institution's pupils. In fact, the story of Esther had already been used several times in early modern French theatre, notably by Montchrestien in 1601 and Du Ryer in 1644, and always met with success.²⁸⁴ The chorus in *Esther* displays elements of the Greek chorus that inspired Racine, and its sung praises of God undoubtedly resonated with what was, originally, a largely Christian audience.

Labelling the music as *intermèdes* belies the significance and sophistication of Moreau's composition. The music's appellation gives a false impression that it is meant merely as a sort of light, diversionary entertainment. Rather, the power of Moreau's musical score is that it is woven through the scenes of both plays, along with the sung verse of the chorus. In *Esther* as well as *Athalie*, music inspires characters and moves them to praise of the divine, and makes possible an encounter between the human and the divine felt in a certain way in the human body. Musical interludes work with language to produce a unique experience, one which reverberates between the temporal and eternal, and facilitates the characters' unique bodily experience of God. Within the sounds and tones of Racine's last two plays lies the word of God and his promise to Israel.

In *Esther* the chorus is not onstage at the start of the play, which allows Racine to create a significant entrance for them, punctuated by singing and music. The young girls assemble onstage from different directions, singing in alternate voices as they arrive.²⁸⁵ Esther herself has already introduced the chorus in the previous scene, which calls attention to their bodily presence but also their distinctive relationship to her. Élise, Esther's confidant, is also a member of the chorus. She refers to its members as the 'cher espoir d'une nation sainte' (line 125), and

²⁸³ This particular device, by which a Christian author uses an Old Testament text for his personal and political ends yet in a manner that still defies simplistic allegory, is by no means a stratagem unique to Racine. His English contemporary John Dryden used the Absalom and Achitophel story as the basis for his allegorical poem, which itself was actually a defence of Charles II's right to the English throne.

²⁸⁴ For further reading, see Jean Orcibal, *La Genèse d'Esther et d'Athalie* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1950), Frédéric Delforge, *Les Petites Écoles de Port-Royal* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985), and Nicholas Hammond, *Fragmentary Voices: Memory and Education at Port-Royal* (Tübingen: Biblio 17, 2004).

²⁸⁵ Racine indicates at the start of I. 2 that a single Israelite begins, [elle] 'chante derrière le théâtre', then has instructions for the entire chorus to sing together 'entrant sur la scène par plusieurs endroits différents'.

compares their sung prayer to God with the vapours and smoke from incense that rise heavenward. As a significant part of the Christian and Jewish liturgy,²⁸⁶ incense represents a method of communion with God and a symbol of his covenant; it is burned in the temple and the Holy of Holies where God is present. When Esther requests that the chorus sing, a single voice makes a plaintive prayer for the restoration of Zion, alternating with the chorus as a whole, who echo with the refrain. The alternation of single and ensemble voice serves as an illustration of hearts lifted to God in prayer and allows for the possibility of the Eternal coming to rest in the hearts of the faithful. Indeed, the chorus' offering seems to invite God to respond by sending Mardochee, whose appearance Esther welcomes as though he had been ushered into the Persian court under the protective wing of an angel (I. 3. 157-58). Mardochee is the first physical manifestation of God's ability to intervene in the fate of the Jewish diaspora, summoned by music and song.

In Esther's prayer of preparation for her audience with Assuérus (I. 4), she admits feeling apart from the Persian court and its excesses, which she rejects. After she asks that God be with her in the interview, the scene shifts to one that is—for the first time in Racine's theatre—entirely sung by the chorus. Here, the chorus acts as intercessor on behalf of Esther and her people, inciting God to action against the Persians and their false gods. The music begins with a new theme for the *ritournelle*. In this scene, ascending and descending runs for both instrument and vocal parts highlight the chorus' appeal to a God 'qui voles sur l'aile des vents' (I. v. 355) and who is implored 'descends, tel qu'autrefois la mer te vit descendre' (line 364). At the very end of the scene, the two Israelite voices who have been singing in rounds for the last several lines (lines 369-371) come together in unison to sing the last line (line 372) in harmony. The emphasis in this last line falls heavily on 'gloire' which is stretched out over two notes sung in thirds. The music here appeals not only to a nation gathering its strength for a battle, but a God preparing to make himself manifest on earth.

When Esther comes to see Assuérus in II. 7 she enters leaning on Élise for support, and four of the young Israelites carry her train. All six women are united

²⁸⁶ Prescriptions for the use of incense are found, among other places, in Exodus 30:7-8 and Leviticus 16:12-13 (the latter specifically for incense burning on Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement).

though the figure of Esther.²⁸⁷ After a terrified Esther faints she is brought back to her senses by the sound of Assuérus' voice. In the chorus' reaction to this, however (II. 8), one begins to suspect that Esther was in fact revived by God speaking through Assuérus' voice. This scene highlights the instantaneous change that completely transformed the king's entire demeanour. Here, the chorus cites God's intervention through the body of Assuérus, 'Dieu, notre Dieu a versé dans son coeur | Cet esprit de douceur' (II. 8. 725-26). God himself is not visible, but his work is evident. The chorus also outlines an opposition of the Persian gods and the Jewish God: whereas the gods of the court are 'impuissants' and 'sourds' (line 767), nothing more than the unresponsive statues that represent them, God himself is immanent in the world and may be felt and heard. Music, as the chorus demonstrates, is fundamental to a bodily encounter with the divine presence of God. The chosen people of Israel go to sleep and awaken to the sound of music (line 784), and the children of God laugh at his table as they drink from an over-brimming cup of joy (line 788-89).

Music and song are a way of entering into communion with God, as the chorus shows when they sing to calm their fears after an encounter with Aman (III. 3). Their laudatory melody, comparable to David's song of praise,²⁸⁸ is transformed into the voice of God himself when they cry out to Assuérus 'Détourne, roi puissant, détourne tes oreilles | De tout conseil barbare et mensonger' (line 999). In this case, God does not interfere directly with the king's sense of hearing but rather primes Assuérus' ears to perceive the truth behind Aman's words. The final scene of *Esther* is celebratory, and focuses on Esther's own communion with God: 'elle [Esther] a parlé; le Ciel a fait le reste' (line 1227). The divine is present through the chorus, but also through Esther who interacts with the chorus. Several aspects of the music are particularly evocative: musical interludes throughout both plays often finish with the first violin and *contrepartie* coming together on precisely the same note, with the *basse-continue* two octaves below, for example at the end of both the prelude and overture to *Esther*. The use of the ritornello in each play serves as an incarnation of the Eternal: the inherent repetition in this musical form gestures toward the infinite, and is especially powerful at the very end of *Esther*. Both plays feature interludes

²⁸⁷ The significance in Judaism of the number six likely came into play in Racine's setting of this scene: the number calls to mind the star of David, and of the six days of creation.

²⁸⁸ For example, from 2 Samuel 22:3-51 and Psalm 145.

punctuated by two voices from the chorus, which are often sung in thirds, echoing another of the divine proportions of the ancients.

Athalie

Esther was a triumph, by all accounts.²⁸⁹ The sheer novelty of the results from Racine and Moreau's collaboration and the unique role of the chorus contributed to its positive reception and piqued the curiosity of those members of the public who were fortunate enough to garner a coveted invitation to one of its performances.²⁹⁰ With *Athalie*, Racine and Moreau retained some of the same highly successful elements such as the presence and role of the chorus, the inclusion of a single character who interacts with both the other characters and the chorus itself, and the choice of an Old Testament story. Racine's decision to set the play on the feast of Shavuot reinforces its liturgical function, and he draws a parallel between Jewish and Christian tradition by referring to Pentecost in his setting for the play. Hammond remarks on the connection which Racine sets up between the education of Joas, which is steeped in learning the law, and the revelation of the Law itself to Moses: '[t]he combination of memory and the Law is integral to the education of Joas in *Athalie*. Racine is insistent on choosing Pentecost as the time to portray Joas' unveiling as the new King of the Jews.'²⁹¹ *Athalie* represents a further evolution in the new genre of Racine's, with its decidedly dramatic interplay between the profane and the sacred, and the figure of the protagonist always threatening to impinge upon other characters' bodily experience of praising God and listening for his divine communication.

While the atmosphere of Saint-Cyr proved providential for nourishing a new kind of production with *Esther*, the institution was a different place by the time Racine's second play was performed there. Louis, who in the past had defended or even championed Saint-Cyr's unique status, began to cave in to pressure to align the school with a religious order, and officially transform it into an Augustinian

²⁸⁹ See especially Forestier's edition, p. 1676-81.

²⁹⁰ Racine even mentions with humility in the *Préface* to *Esther* that 'un divertissement d'enfants est devenu le sujet de l'empressement de toute la cour ; le roi lui-même, qui en avait été touché, n'ayant pu refuser à tout ce qu'il y a de plus grands seigneurs de les y mener', Racine, *Théâtre Complet*, ed. Viala, p. 640).

²⁹¹ Hammond, *Fragmentary voices*, p. 163.

convent.²⁹² *Athalie* was commissioned largely based on *Esther*'s success, yet was performed in a comparatively simple manner. The performances took place in a small room, and were closer to rehearsals than full-scale performances. *Athalie* lacked the scenery and costumes that had enhanced the production of *Esther*, and the pared-down nature of the staging was possibly due to a backlash from the tremendous popularity of the girls' first production and the not entirely welcome attention it had brought to the institution.²⁹³

The role of the chorus is further developed with the Levite chorus of *Athalie*. Salomith's position as intermediary is similar in some ways to Élise's role in *Esther*, yet Zacharie's sister plays a role that Racine explicitly lays out in the *Préface*: 'elle chante avec lui [the chorus], porte la parole pour lui, et fait enfin ces fonctions de ce personnage des anciens choeurs qu'on appelait la coryphée.'²⁹⁴ This term, although it originated in the Greek tragedies that inspired Racine, also has significance in Christian theology: Peter the apostle is often referred to as the Coryphaeus. Here, other characters interact with Salomith and address her in spoken language, yet she is also very much the mouthpiece of the chorus and its chosen member. Salomith plays the role of selected apologist, encouraging the members of her family in their communion with God, and chosen singer, representing God's word incarnate in song.

Because of a lack of sources, it is not possible to know precisely which of the instruments Moreau intended for the music were actually present in the small space where *Athalie* was performed. Looking at the musical score itself, one immediately notices that it is expanded to match the length of *Athalie* and provide musical links between all five acts, as opposed to the three acts in *Esther*, and the music between Acts I and II of *Esther* which is not a new composition but a reprisal of the overture music. The musical interludes of *Athalie* link each act, and the chorus, although constantly onstage, intervenes to sing one time during each of the five acts. Whereas *Esther* contains the final march mentioned above, there is no remaining evidence of any of the music Moreau might have composed for the end of *Athalie*.

Athalie's story is narrated in 2 Kings 8:16-11:16, and 2 Chronicles 20:10-23:15. She is the daughter of Achab and Jézabel, and promotes the worship of Baal

²⁹² *Athalie: tragédie de Jean Racine, intermèdes de Jean-Baptiste Moreau*, ed. Anne Piéjus (Paris: Société Française de Musicologie, 2005), p. x.

²⁹³ *Athalie: tragédie de Jean Racine, intermèdes de Jean-Baptiste Moreau*, ed. Anne Piéjus, p. x-xi.

²⁹⁴ *Athalie, Préface*, p. 696.

in Judah in keeping with her mother's tradition. Athalie was married to Joram, and when her son Ochosias is killed on a state visit to Israel along with the king of Israel and the rest of Achab's progeny, the queen decides to take revenge. Because Jéhu is responsible for the crimes against her family, she murders everyone in his line, who are all related to David. In this massacre committed by the house of Achab against the house of David, Athalie believes she has slaughtered every last member of the line—related to her as her grandchildren— but one child, Joas, survives. He is raised in secret, in the temple, by Josabet and Joad the high priest.

Athalie herself is alternately compelling and repugnant, which contributes to the dramatic impact of the play. The queen is remarkable for the immanent bodily threat she represents to the last of David's line, as well as the fact that her body and voice are offensive to God and provoke an extreme reaction against her in the Levites themselves, as demonstrated in the song of the chorus. Although the subject of the play is ostensibly Joas' recognition and ascension to the throne, Racine admits that close attention to Athalie's story seemed more likely to resonate with an audience:

la plupart du monde n'en ayant entendu parler que sous le nom d'Athalie, je n'ai pas jugé à propos de leur présenter sous un autre titre puisque d'ailleurs Athalie y joue un personnage si considérable et que c'est sa mort qui termine la pièce.²⁹⁵

Because of her polarizing effect, Athalie seems the ideal 'body' to represent the play. Her presence generates as much passion from the chorus as a reaction against her, as does the pure desire to sing the praises of the Eternal.

In *Athalie*, the chorus of Levites enters silently, in contrast to the dramatic entrance of the chorus for *Esther*. Salomith and Zacharie bring in the chorus (I. 3), and Josabet invites them to sing in praise of God (I. 4). Also in counterpoint to *Esther*, the first sung portion of the play is performed by the entire chorus, singing verses in nearly perfect unison and two-part harmony. After these four lines, the remainder of the scene is formed primarily of solo voices, which are accentuated by short (four lines or less) interventions from the entire chorus. The scene plays almost as a choral form of *ritournelle*, with the ensemble of voices echoing and reinforcing the theme of God's glory which is further developed by individual

²⁹⁵ *Athalie*, *Préface*, p. 694.

voices. The chorus recalls God's appearance to Moses on Mount Sinai, emphasizing the auditory accompaniment to the divine law's transmission, 'ce bruit dans les airs, | Ces trompettes et ce tonnerre' (I. 4. 338-39). When the chorus is joined as one body in unified song, it collectively channels God's immanence onstage, for the other characters to experience. As separate choral voices react to this presence, characters hear and witness God's power to move the individual.

Athalie's power and ability to inspire fear seem to come from her lack of womanly grace and the memory of her filicide. Yet as the play unfolds, the queen's latent fragility and emotional vulnerability rise to the surface on two primary occasions: in her retelling of the premonitory dream she experiences, and her sudden desire to take the child Éliacin into her palace and raise him when they come face to face inside the temple. The chorus of Levites is a silent witness to Athalie's conversation with Joas (II. 7). The queen is humanised during this second encounter with Joas, in which she addresses him not as the last member of the house of David and King of Judah—she does not yet know his true identity—but as the child he appears to be in a physical, worldly sense. Unaware that Joas has been raised and instructed by Josabet and Joad to one day claim his throne, Athalie approaches the boy as an orphan to whom she would give a place in her palace and at her table,²⁹⁶ in language that feels like a perversion of God's promise to the child. Joas' protest and rejection of the queen are a reminder of Athalie's unsuitability for the role because of her past crimes, and her status as outsider and apostate.

The chorus' reaction to the confrontation (II. 9) compares the way in which Joas challenges Athalie to Elijah's defiance of Jézabel and Ahab.²⁹⁷ The child is divine because God speaks to, and through, him. As with the theophany on Mount Sinai, when God chooses to speak to Moses, so Joas is selected to enter into a unique relationship with the divine. In this scene solo voices alternate with the chorus as an ensemble, reinforcing the theme of communion and communication with God. The chorus contrasts Joas' innocence and removal from the world with Athalie's corrupting, intruding presence. In a passage which inverts the praise of Zion and overflowing cup of life heard in *Esther* (II. 8. 778-79), the chorus anticipates the

²⁹⁶ 'À ma table, partout, à mes côtés assis, | Je prétends vous traiter comme mon propre fils.' (II. 7. 697-98).

²⁹⁷ 1 Kings, 21.

destruction of Athalie and all the followers of Baal, 'Ils boiront dans la coupe affreuse, inépuisable, | Que tu [God] présenteras, au jour de ta fureur' (II. 9. 839-40).

In the course of preparations for war (III. 7), individual members of the chorus pledge their help by offering to invoke the divine with their tears and laments (lines 1117-18). Their efforts seem to summon God to their aid almost immediately, and they witness God's presence onstage through Joad's religious ecstasy in which he sees and hears divine revelations.²⁹⁸ The entire chorus and orchestra together contribute to encourage and support the high priest's transformational experience and Joas' coronation, in a musical benediction from God. This combination of instrumental sounds and voice reveals the hidden harmony of God's word, and the perfectly ordered universe is present in musical and vocal concord.

The most dramatic scenes in *Athalie* occur as the Levites ready themselves for battle, and Act III, scene viii has a liturgical function. Worship of the divine is drawn out through a series of call and response by solo voices, casting aside doubt and ending with praise. The scene begins in spoken verse, then transitions to song introduced by flute and the *basso continuo*. The accompanying music is accented by individual voices and the addition of the two featured flutes whose high tones seem to reach heavenward, for four bars to introduce line 1212, and three bars to introduce the next line. The music seems to stir God to come to Joas' side and the Levites' defence.

The last time both music and song are performed is between the fourth and fifth acts, and the score largely echoes the final lines from the end of Act IV. The triumphant notes that might have accompanied Athalie's defeat in the temple are never realised. At the end of Act IV the song is cut off when Salomith and the chorus hear the enemy's trumpets (lines 1503-6) and move to hide in the safety of the temple. There is no accompanying music to the last act, and the chorus remains merely as a silent presence throughout each scene. At the close of the play, Joad asks the chorus to go proclaim God's glory and covenant with his people (V. 7). Instead of using music and song to signal God's intervention, Racine relies on the presence of all the Levites and priests who surround Athalie in the temple immediately before her demise, 'Et Dieu de toutes parts a su t'envelopper', as Joad says to her (line 1734). The assistants, the chorus, are joined by the priests who

²⁹⁸ Joad's synaesthetic, transcendent experience is addressed more fully in Chapter III.

serve a function on Racine's stage in part as representatives of God and also as ordained religious figures who are responsible for facilitating a religious, bodily experience in the people they serve, in this case, the Jews. Joad's statement is doubly true because they are with Athalie inside the temple, the dwelling place of God where the divine is indeed immanent and invisibly present at every turn. The Levite priests, and God himself, lead the Jews to end Athalie's rule in Judah.

Conclusion

Racine's characters feel language in a sophisticated way that implicates their bodies and creates a multi-sensory experience. When they speak to each other and listen to each other's voices, they touch each other emotionally. Scholars have remarked upon the Racinian character's obsession with speaking and listening, but as we have seen, this chapter forges a new path from previous observations, and has investigated the point at which language and sensation connect. Characters listen in on each other, overhear conversations, make avowals of love to each other and hang on each other's words. They may listen first with their ears, and speak with their mouths, but these are not acts which occur in a perceptual vacuum. Rather, speaking and listening are felt by the rest of the body, and provoke strong emotional responses in the characters who participate.

This chapter's secondary focus is on *Esther* and *Athalie*, especially on the music of these last two plays. The chorus serves a special function in Racine's final pieces which goes beyond that of the classical theatre from which he took his inspiration. As I have shown, the Racine demonstrates an extremely sophisticated interweaving of Greek philosophy, Christian and Jewish theology, of musical history and of liturgy, in terms of how he constructs his plays and integrates the role and song of the chorus. In a certain sense, the voice of God takes a human form and is heard and seen in chorus' collective body assembled onstage. The chorus and music communicate God's word in the same way as angels who appear to men and represent God in the world. As Boethius wrote long before Racine, in a passage which nonetheless articulates the early modern dramatist's use of music, 'when we hear what is properly and harmoniously united in sound in conjunction with that which is harmoniously coupled and joined together within us and are attracted to it,

then we recognize that we ourselves are put together in its likeness.²⁹⁹ The sounds of divine presence and immanence are found in the music and singing of *Esther* and *Athalie*. In the echoes of God's voice, as well as in the act of verbalising prayer to the Divine, Racine's characters speak, sing and hear the perfect order of the universe, which in turn reveals the same sounds within their own bodies and souls. The music of *Esther* and *Athalie* is indeed a 'music of the spheres,' but in a different sense, in which the human and the divine intersect in infinite echoes of the proportions of divine harmony.

²⁹⁹ Boethius, *The Fundamentals of Music*, p. 2.

CONCLUSION

Racine's approach to sensation is extraordinarily complex and sophisticated. The primary aim of this project was to study Racine's theatre from a new perspective, that of the embodied characters themselves. We have looked at what they see, felt for them, and listened to what they hear. One of the major reasons why we as readers, critics and audiences still connect with Racine's characters is because Racine understood—in part consciously, in part intuitively—that human sensory experience is often synesthetic, which guides how he constructs his characters' experience of the world. In each chapter, I used one primary sense as a starting point, which fed organically into discussions that included other senses. When we picked through the characters' embodied experiences, we discovered that we engage with them on such a deep level because they feel with their entire bodies, using multiple senses at once, in a way which is profoundly human. Altogether, the human body for Racine serves as a nexus for sensation, where vision, touch and hearing are intimately interconnected. Moreover, the bodies of his characters do not operate in isolation but work as a system of interconnected sites of sensory perception, mirroring our own world.

I began this project with vision and asked what Racine's characters see in the most literal sense. Their eye notices movement, light and darkness, and is attuned to the colour red in particular. The difference between light and dark can be literal but also metaphorical, as in the mind arriving at understanding or at illumination. Even things that characters have set eyes on at an earlier point offstage feed into the overall picture of reality created for the spectator. This led to a discussion of the more charged and violent instances of sight, which paradoxically were those which one might assume to be the simplest. Love at first sight ought to be positively inspiring and uplifting, but for Néron and Phèdre it is traumatizing and brings out the darkest parts of their nature. Loving Junie connects Néron with his desire for domination and control. Loving Hippolyte feeds into Phèdre's self-destructive impulse, and her incestuous desire eats away at her mentally and physically. One of

the most important aspects of vision in Racinian theatre, we discovered, is that the eye is connected to the ear, the skin, internal sensation, and the mind all at once. As Phèdre and Néron re-examine their experiences, they look again at a moment they have frozen in time and notice what they felt, what they saw, and how their bodies betrayed them. The *coup de foudre* cases of Phèdre and Néron allow Racine to play with the incestuous or masochistic impulses which push these characters to the margins of humanity. These outlying instances are in fact of great significance, as the reader and spectator see that Racine does not shy away from developing the sensory lives of these darker characters, even if their experiences are provocative or alienating.

The second chapter examined more special cases of sight, those in which a character sees something outside of the normal visual experience such as a hallucination, a different version of reality painted by another character, or a vision. These might seem on the surface like contrived, superfluous instances, devices by which Racine trespasses beyond what one might expect from characters on a stage. We found, however, that such instances of sight in fact illustrate how susceptible our eyes are to our own desires, and to the permeable boundary between perception and reality. Having Oreste go mad onstage is an opportunity for Racine to play with sensory overload, and show that instead of losing his senses, as per the expression, he is overtaken by them and overstimulated, pushed past his breaking point. Racine uses Athalie's dream to engage with another state of perception and demonstrate its effect on reality. This chapter showed us that what could be pushed to one side as strange or incongruous scenes are actually some of the parts of Racine's theatre which more closely model human experience, because they involve recognition of the eye's vulnerability and also tap into a fear of losing control of body and mind. We saw that the text can sustain ambiguity, and we also learned that Racine sometimes shows us experiences which are simply too overpowering to be logically articulated or intellectualized.

The third chapter focused on touch, which had emerged already as a crucial dimension in our discussions of vision. Previous studies have shied away from exploring touch, perhaps out of an archaic sense of the tactile as a literal, physical touch which went against theatrical propriety in Racine's time. But when we expanded our understanding of this sense to include internal sensation as well as a physical meeting of two bodies, we discovered an intricately interconnected world of

characters who are always, in some way, in contact with each other. We also observed that even a physical touch is much less about a surface contact than it is about a connection felt underneath the skin. In examining touch, we saw where Racine's theatre best illustrates Merleau-Ponty's theories of interrelation, not only of the senses themselves but especially of people as intimately connected bodies in the world. Racine's characters are always feeling, always responding to little touches from each other which reverberate around the stage. Their constant bodily engagement with each other and the world invites us in, asking us as to respond. We learned that Racine's characters, just as we would, prepare physically for an approaching touch and anticipate contact based on that they see and hear. The sublimation of touch can in fact increase its potency, making it a precarious experience, because Racine recognises the potency of the tactile. Racine enjoys and savours these experiences, and instead of accepting certain limitations chooses to accommodate and emphasize them in his own way.

The final chapter focused on the sense of hearing, beginning with how characters internalize what is said to them. Here we found that what buzzes in the ear itself reverberates through the rest of the body. Whereas other studies have examined characters' lines as poetry, we shifted the focus back to the words as spoken language, which re-grounded language in the body. We also found that one of Racine's most often undervalued and overlooked contributions to the theatre—at least by some critics—is his use of music and song in his last two plays. Racine re-works the chorus of classical tragedy in a sophisticated new way. The chorus comments on and reacts to events on the stage, but more importantly it occupies a liminal space between the human and the divine. At times, the chorus calls upon God, at others it serves a liturgical function and at yet other points it acts as the mouthpiece of divine will. Music, in Racine, speaks straight to our very souls, allowing us access to divine truths we cannot fully articulate in words. By including music, Racine made a divinely ordered infinity present on earth to characters and readers and spectators, through its perfect harmonic proportions. There is something admonishing in his darker presentations of vision and touch which we dealt with in the preceding chapters. In the music of *Esther* and *Athalie*, however, Racine gives us an experience which can be encompassing without being destructive.

I hope to have shown, above all, how Racine's theatre cannot be broken down simply in terms of character A encountering character B and experiencing one

sensation at a time. What began as an investigation into vision, touch and hearing became an opportunity to explore the intertwined and interdependent sensations which characterise lived experience on the Racinian stage. These sensations are complex; for example, vision does not only involve seeing with the eye, it also means seeing with the mind's eye, understanding—as well as misunderstanding—things outside of the normal visual field. Likewise, touch goes far beyond merely laying a finger on another character. One feels the body of another from across the stage or even from beyond the grave; feels emotion, absence and loss with every fibre. The power of the word is even more concentrated in combination with music, and the sound of an instrument can communicate the essence of the divine through the human ear. Overall, this gives us a fresh perspective on Racine's senses. He tests the limits of sensation, appears at times to be ambivalent, and frequently plays with the senses or delights in their extremes.

My emphasis on theory, from the ancient to the modern, helps to highlight Racine's sophisticated portrayal of the senses in his theatre. I have used this theoretical writing to flag up important aspects of vision, touch and hearing in Racine, which are hinted at in some ways by ancient and early modern discourse on the senses but most clearly articulated by modern theory. We discovered that Racine was not wholly dependent upon earlier philosophers such as Aristotle or Boethius, nor was he simply a proto-phenomenologist. Racine recognised certain aspects of sensation and certain principles of the body and used them in the way he constructed his characters. In some ways, he deliberately opens doors, deepening our understanding of the common 'flesh' connecting characters and the world, and in other ways he does this unconsciously or in a manner which suggests he had yet to fully work out the issue of embodied sensation even as he produced examples of it. In his own particular approach, he anticipated fuller philosophical articulations of embodied sensation such as those we find in Merleau-Ponty, or the deep psychological implications of the link between sensation and desire uncovered by Bataille. While exploring the text as literature or poetry has yielded invaluable insights in scholarship, restricting analysis to this method has denied us the opportunity to appreciate Racine's lasting contribution to the theatre, the richly human sensory life evoked by his characters' language when we listen and actively engage as spectators and readers. The bodies of Racine's characters should not be confined to the past. Our previous failing with respect to literature, and especially to

creative texts of the past, is that we make these texts less real for ourselves than we should. We need not deny characters the opportunity to truly affect us, and to present us with dilemmas. When is the body out of control or outside traditional limits? How much faith should we place on our bodies? Is it possible to caress but not to touch?³⁰⁰ Is it even ethical to place so much emphasis on the body? Together, creative texts of the past and theories of the present can help us explore these issues in new ways.

Further Implications

One of Racine's greatest accomplishments is that his characters experience different sensations at the same time while conserving their distinctive, simple language. The complexity of their feelings is not fully apparent at first blush, in scenes where characters ostensibly discuss something they see, but which is in fact an experience that involves the ear and flesh as well as the eye. Merleau-Ponty writes about the sense of sight in a way that could be used to express Racine's attitude to vision and perhaps expanded to include sensation in general: 'je trouve la vision, non comme "pensée de voir," selon le mot de Descartes, mais comme regard en prise sur un monde visible, et c'est pourquoi il peut y avoir pour moi un regard d'autrui.'³⁰¹ Merleau-Ponty sees the body as reciprocally engaged with the world and others through the sense of sight, instead of the eye being the point of origin for a visual light beam directed onto the world. He opens our eyes, so to speak, to the fact that our body is part of the 'flesh of the world' and the flesh of other people. As mentioned in the introduction, this is not the first study to combine phenomenological insights with early modern theatre. It is unique, however, in using the phenomenological concepts of sensory interrelation and the body in the world to articulate what Racine accomplishes in terms of how his characters affect each other onstage, and how he presents their often synesthetic experiences in a way which is powerful yet not heavy-handed. Wider questions still remain about the implications of my research. For example, does my study of Racine's theatrical text have implications for related fields such as performance theory? Can a

³⁰⁰ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000) and Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini* (La Hague: Nijhoff, 1971).

³⁰¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 409.

phenomenological approach be applied by critics to works of other periods and genres?

I see potential for significant crossover between future phenomenological studies like mine, and performance history and theory. I deal with spectatorship in particular in my fourth chapter because the act of playing melodies from original scores for *Esther* and *Athalie* led me to imagine an embodied response for someone also hearing that music for the first time. I discovered through research into modern productions of Racine's sacred dramas that on some occasions there has been a concerted effort to remain faithful to original instruments and musical arrangement, while other productions have done away with the musical elements or replaced the interludes with other scores, sometimes with modern music.³⁰² This brings up important questions of performance, for those directing and acting in theatrical productions and especially for scholars. It is necessary to create new avenues rather than reinforcing old conventions. Through this current project I want to challenge previous assumptions about what the senses mean to Racine, and liberate the characters as we read them and understand them in the text. This could be a precursor to a slightly different approach for actors in Racinian plays, and lead particularly to consideration of questions such as how one demonstrates touching without touching, or how one portrays the shiver of excitement that comes before a meeting with the Other. Contemporary critics have thought through issues of objectivity and early modern spectatorship.³⁰³ These studies point to a crucial reorientation of perspective toward both performance and the body, which have begun to open lines of enquiry still to be mined.

Phenomenology is a crucial tool in productively linking theory and practice with respect to acting in the theatre. Critics such as Daniel Zahavi, Philip Zarrilli, Alice Rayner and Stanton Garner³⁰⁴ have written about the avenues opened up by

³⁰² Cf. Chapter IV, p. 17 of this project.

³⁰³ Cf. Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

³⁰⁴ Cf. Daniel Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (London: MIT Press, 2005), Phillip Zarrilli, 'Toward a Phenomenological Model of the Actor's Embodied Modes of Experience', *Theatre Journal*, 56 (2004), 653-666, Alice Rayner, *To Act to Do to Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), and Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Most phenomenological studies of the theatre which address the actor's experience build on work by Konstantin Stanislavski, whose reflections on the art of the actor are not explicitly phenomenological but open up conversations about acting which are influenced by phenomenological insights.

introducing phenomenological insights into discussions about the actor and his experience. Zarrilli observes that the body of the actor

is dually present for the objective gaze and/or experience of an audience, and as a site of experience for the actor *per se*. [It] is a site through which representation as well as experience are generated for both self and other. The actor undergoes an experience that is one's own, and is therefore constitutive of one's being-in-the-world, and simultaneously constitutes a world for the other.³⁰⁵

Zarrilli articulates the complexity of the actor's onstage experience, and the fact that the actor consciously externalises an internal experience for the benefit of an audience. The actor's calling is to translate productively his own sensations so that the spectator engages mentally and bodily in the theatrical experience. Zarrilli, Zahavi and others have used phenomenology to look at the body of the actor, and their insights may uncover fresh or deeper ways for the modern actor to approach roles within Racine's theatre such as Phèdre, Andromaque, Néron or Bérénice, which have been shown to be among the more complex characters who also have the most to say about what their bodies perceive.

While I believe Racine opens particularly potent perspectives on sensation and the body, it may prove interesting to engage with the work of other dramatists of Racine's time such as Pierre Corneille or Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin) using a similar approach. From this perspective, it follows that a phenomenological approach might be able to tell us more about how Corneille, for instance, plays with the senses of his characters, sometimes in a context which involves a transformational experience. Corneille's *Polyeucte*,³⁰⁶ for instance, provides one example of the early-modern relationship between religion and theatre which precedes Racine's engagement with scripture. The interplay and frequent struggle between religion and theatre in Corneille's time, and *Polyeucte*'s liturgical function, have each been discussed by critics.³⁰⁷ Phenomenology might very well facilitate a

³⁰⁵ Zarrilli, p. 664.

³⁰⁶ First performed in 1643.

³⁰⁷ Cf. Marc Fumaroli, '*Sacerdos sive rhetor, orator sive histrio*: rhétorique, théologie, et "moralité du théâtre" en France de Corneille à Molière', in *Héros et orateurs* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), 449-91. Cf. André Georges, 'Les Conversions de Pauline et de Félix et l'évolution religieuse de Sévère', *Les Lettres romaines*, 51 (1997), 35-51 and Nina Ekstein, 'The Conversion of *Polyeucte*'s Félix: the Problem of Religion and Theatre', *French Forum*, 34 (2009), 1-17.

deeper reading of an event such as Pauline's instantaneous conversion to Christianity upon being spattered with Polyeucte's blood, and might highlight important aspects of Pauline's experience which is at once intensely bodily and divine.

Throughout this examination of Racine's theatre, I have demonstrated the ways in which there is a profound engagement with the body, different from that which we are led to expect from conventions of the time and from our contemporary scholarship on Racine. But, a reader of the thesis would be justified in asking, what is the significance of having such a deep reading? One might argue that Racine uses embodied experience to demonstrate the senses' ultimate unreliability. Any seeming attempt by Racine to warn us off these senses, however, could equally be conceived as an opportunity for him to explore sensation while working around some of the conventions of his day. In his theatre, Racine creates situations which allow us to role play 'sensing' what it means to be swept up in the passions displayed by the characters. Theatre gives Racine the freedom to play on the darker aspects of embodied sensation in a way which is not strictly negative. The senses are the gateway to some of the most powerful experiences we can have, and Racine shows us the passions can be deeply troubling but also revelatory. The unreliability of the senses is a key issue in his theatre, one which leads us to wonder how our own senses affect our relationship with the world. Is this relationship cognitive, visceral, or both? Does it even matter if sensory experience proves misleading? Racine does not give us definitive answers, but provides an opportunity for us to engage with theatre, both on the page and onstage, as a model for questioning our own lives and relationships.

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