

Jean Baptiste Racine [rah-seen']

Jean Racine, baptised Dec 22, 1639 La Ferté Milon, died Apr 21, 1699 Paris, was orphaned at an early age and raised on charity by relatives who belonged to a puritanical Catholic reform sect known as Jansenists that, among other things, subscribed to an extreme doctrine of original sin and destiny. He was educated at the Jansenist spiritual centre les Petites Écoles du monastère de Port-Royal and the pro-Jansenist collège de Beauvais during which time he was thoroughly grounded in Greek and profoundly influenced by Jansenist tenets.

In 1658, Racine left Port-Royal for Paris to pursue philosophy at the collège d'Harcourt, thus marking the beginning of his sway away from spiritual concerns to more secular desires and ambitions of the Parisian and courtly world. Except for a brief interlude in Uzès in 1661 where he placated anxious relatives by seeking for a clerical office that was not to be, Racine fell deeper in love with the theatre and poetry and cultivated the friendships of fellow

contemporaries Boileau, La

Fontaine and Molière. Where earlier he was content with penning assorted poems, 1664, a year after his return to Paris, saw the première of his first play *La Thébaïde* and, 1665 his second *Alexandre le Grand*, to rave reception.

The next ten years beginning from 1667 and ending in 1677, with works like *Andromaque*, *Les Plaideurs*, *Britannicus*, *Bérénice*, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, *Iphigénie* and finally *Phèdre*, established him as a literary giant standing shoulder to shoulder with previous greats like Corneille. Due to the vitriolic attacks on *Phèdre* by partisan critics and to an internal moral crisis (perhaps brought on by his notorious liaisons with the comédiennes Thérèse Du Parc and Champmeslé), Racine abandoned all secular theatre and married Catherine de Romanet while being appointed the Royal Historiographer alongside Boileau in 1677.

Thus, began his "conversion" or his reconciliation with religion. His two plays of biblical themes, *Esther* (1689) and *Athalie* (1691), were written at the request of Madame de Maintenon for performance by students at her boarding school at Saint-Cyr for religious as well as secular instruction. However, religious bigots who distrusted all stagecraft ensured that, except for some minor works like the *Cantiques spirituels* (1694), these would be his last. Racine's contribution to humanity, his verse tragedies of such deceptively simpler style and more realistic characters and plot structures (compared to Corneille), is an elegant neoclassic style obsessed with verisimilitude. His tightly structured plays capitalises on the struggle with one's will and inexorable fate, faced with the ferocity and destructiveness of consuming

RACINE'S PLAYS

(in chronological order)

1664...	... <i>The Thebaid</i>
1665...	... <i>Alexander</i>
1667...	... <i>Andromache</i>
1668...	... <i>The Litigants</i>
1669...	... <i>Britannicus</i>
1670...	... <i>Berenice</i>
1672...	... <i>Bajazet</i>
1673...	... <i>Mithridates</i>
1674...	... <i>Iphigenia</i>
1677...	... <i>Phaedra</i>
1689...	... <i>Esther</i>
1691...	... <i>Athaliah</i>

passions. The soul of Racinian tragedy, amplified by his powerfully evocative yet restrained poetics, is the *machine infernale* steering the helpless and graceless protagonist fuelled by his/ her obsession and egoistic instincts to certain irredeemable doom.

For more information about Racine and his *oeuvres*:

1 Selected dead tree Bibliography:

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