

Travailler en utopie : False Repentance in Racine

by
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Raised in the hotbed of Jansenism, where the real Pascal, unlike the fictional Tartuffe, actually did use a scourge and hairshirt on a daily basis, Racine might have been expected to produce a theater rife with instances of repentance. Certainly his plays are oozing with sin. But, surprisingly, it is often the virtuous characters who speak mainly of repentance, and then, in a negative sense. Courageous and tender Hémon in *La Thébaïde* tells his sweetheart Antigone that he would not repent from the chance to die for his country if it were the price of peace for his fellow Thebans.¹ Burrhus, the doggedly moralistic preceptor to young Néron, refuses to repent of swaying the Roman legions to support his master, even when Agrippine has revealed her fears that he will become a monster.² Junie tells her beloved Britannicus that she wishes she had the leisure to make him repent of his lack of faith in her, were it not that the emperor threatened them with a persecution that left no time for *dépits amoureux*.³ And of course when evil schemers like Créon, Pyrrhus, Néron, and Mithridate pretend to repent, it is always a premeditated trap for their innocent victims. But one cannot appreciate the proper context for fake repentance without trying to establish what the notion of real repentance might have meant for Racine.

The Church had long established its doctrines on repentance, beginning with the Greek patristic writers in the early centuries. Seeing repentance as a transition from impurity to purity, the Greek Fathers identified sin as *miasma* or pollution, which brought about *euthumion*, or the anticipation of an evil fate as the result of evil deeds. Through ritual purification, or *katharsis*, the believer could free himself and pass on to salvation among the community of the saved. This strictly ritual purity was not the same as moral purity, which involved a rebirth into a new way of life, or *metanoia*, which plays such a prominent role in the Pauline

epistles. The Latin Fathers, including Tertullian, distinguished a three step process composed of sorrow, confession, and amendment, but their term of *poenitentia* referred mostly to the first two steps, with the latter continuing to be associated with *metanoia*. Further contrast was made by the Scholastics between contrition and mere attrition, or sorrow stemming from the fear of punishment instead of from empathy. Disagreeing with Aquinas, Luther laid the groundwork for the Protestant position by denying that attrition was a sufficient base for true repentance. Though the official triple structure of sorrow, confession and amendment was reconfirmed by the Council of Trent, Catholic theologians continued to argue over the role of attrition until Pope Alexander VII solved the matter in a casuistic but tolerant way in 1667, declaring that both attrition and perfect contrition were acceptable orthodox viewpoints.

François de Sales's *Introduction à la vie dévote* grants a great deal of importance to repentance, framing the issue according to the Trentine formula. In fact, he introduces a more complex, two-echelon structure of repentance to account for both mortal and venial sins. The former are attacked with a series of ten guided meditations, leading to a general confession covering the convert's entire lifetime. The latter are then dealt with in more piecemeal fashion. Of course, the Salesian approach calls for a massive dose of amendment and a *metanoia* that potentially effects all of life, since the penitent's entire universe is symbolically restructured in the course of the meditations. However, it is interesting that this entire process is interior, involving the conscience disconnected from the outside world, except through imagination and the intercession of the spiritual director. Despite the very social orientation of the Visitandine order that François founded, together with Jeanne de Chantale, there was no social negotiation or rectification in his notion of repentance. Instead, it required an internal colloquy with God, according to the text supplied by spiritual guidance.

Racine's tragic characters, isolated in a pre-Christian universe devoid of any divine benevolence, could not relate to the popular Salesian model. They seem much closer to another sense of

repentance that is equally confined to the individual conscience, that of Descartes. The *Traité des passions* defines repentance in a completely non-spiritual way that prefigures modern psychology:

Le repentir est directement contraire à la satisfaction de soi-même, et c'est une espèce de tristesse qui vient de ce qu'on croit avoir fait quelque mauvaise action; et elle est très amère, parce que sa cause ne vient que de nous...⁴

Thus far, Racine pictures repentance as the product of attrition, but the emphasis is entirely on the anticipation of an evil fate sprung from within. He goes on to add an equivalent to *metanoia*:

ce qui n'empêche pas néanmoins qu'elle soit fort utile lorsqu'il est vrai que l'action dont nous nous repentons est mauvaise et que nous en avons une connaissance certaine, parce qu'elle nous incite à mieux faire une autre fois.

Surprisingly, he then detaches the feeling even further from a social context by indicating that it is closer to what we might term a psychological reflex:

Mais il arrive souvent que les esprits faibles se repentent des choses qu'ils ont faites sans savoir assurément qu'elles soient mauvaises; il se le persuadent seulement à cause qu'ils le craignent; et s'ils avaient fait le contraire, il s'en repentiraient en même façon...

He concludes that this excessive repentance can and should be subject to therapy applied by reason:

ce qui est en eux une imperfection digne de pitié; et les remèdes contre ce défaut sont les mêmes qui servent à ôter l'irrésolution.

Until *Phèdre*, the notion of repentance in Racine is even closer to this Cartesian model than to that of De Sales, for it seems self-based and self-directed. When Cléon claims to repent of his warlike ways in Act ** of *La Thébaine*, urging Étéocle to accept a truce with Polynice and his invading allies, he alleges a personal motive. One of his sons, Ménécée, who never appears onstage, has preemptively tried to fulfill the oracle that denied peace to Thebes until “the last of its royal blood is spilled” by sacrificing his own life. As the youngest male of the extended ruling family, Ménécée becomes its sacrificial victim:

Ah! Ménécée est mort, le ciel n'en veut point d'autre.
Laissez couler son sang sans y mêler le vôtre;
Et puisqu'il l'a versé pour nous donner la paix,
Accordez-la, Seigneur, à nos justes souhaits. (III, 4)

He goes on to complain of “les malheurs ou le ciel m'a plonge” and to show that it is difficult to find vengeance when his remaining son Hémon and Étéocle’s brother are in the enemy camp:

Dois-je verser son sang, ou répandre le vôtre?
Et dois-je perdre un fils, pour en venger un autre?
Seigneur, mon sang m'est cher, le vôtre est sacré:
Serai-je sacrilège, ou bien dénaturé?
Je me consolerais si ce fils que je plains
Assure par sa mort le repos des Thébains.

He goes on to give his prince several other rational justifications for the truce: Polynice may have become less violent, less confident of success, his Greeks tired of fighting, his Argive father-in-law less willing to underwrite a costly foreign campaign.

This apparent effort to find what Richard Goodkin calls a “tragic middle” through compromise tricks most of the Thebans, causing Jocaste to remark joyfully:

Bientôt ces cœurs de fer se verront adoucis:

La vainqueur [la paix] de Créon peut bien vaincre mes
fils.⁵

But Créon soon disabuses his equally gullible minion Attale:

Tu crois donc que la pais est l'objet de mes soins?...
Non, non, tu me verras d'une constante ardeur
Hair mes ennemis et chrir ma grandeur;
Le trône fit toujours mes ardeurs les plus chères.
Je rougis d'obéir ou règnèrent mes pères;
Je brûle de me voir au rang de mes aïeux. (III, 6)

If he does indeed wish to spare Hémon, it is not to enjoy the fruits of peace together, but so that he can found a dynasty and pass on the throne to his offspring. All that he has said about unwillingness to spill the blood of his nephews is lies. Speaking for the shocked spectators, Attale responds, "Vous n'avez plus, Seigneur, à craindre que vous-même: / On porte ses remords avec le diadème," echoing a previous ironic warning by Jocaste.⁶ But the cynical rationalist retorts, "Quand on est sur le trône on a bien d'autres soins."

Even after Hémon dies in battle along with both princes, Créon dreams of starting a new royal brood with princess Antigone. It is only her death that finally causes him to give up his dynastic hopes and to experience some measure of very belated *euthemion*. One doubts whether he really reaches the stage of attrition, much less true contrition, for even in the death of Antigone, he is only conscious of his own loss of potential.

The same cannot be said of Racine's next false penitent, Pyrrhus. The exposition of *Antigone* shows him already to be aware of the suffering caused by his acts, in fact, all too aware. In Act II, scene 5, after showing his weakness to Andromaque, Pyrrhus is mocked by Phoenix, causing him to pretend to get a grip on himself:

Moi l'aimer? Une ingrante
 Qui me hait d'autant plus que mon amour la flatte?
 Sans parents, sans amis, sans espoir que sur moi,
 Je puis perdre son fils; peut-être je le doi.
 Étrangère?...que dis-je? Esclave dans l'Épire,
 Je lui donne son fils, mon âme, mon empire;
 Et je ne puis gagner dans ce perfide cœur
 D'autre rang que celui de son persécuteur?
 Non, non, je l'ai juré, ma vengeance est certaine:
 Il faut bien une fois justifier sa haine.
 J'abandonne son fils. Que de pleurs vont couler!
 De quel nom sa douleur me va-t-elle appeler!
 Quel spectacle pour elle aujourd'hui se dispose!
 Elle en mourra, Phoenix, et je serai la cause.
 C'est lui mettre moi-même un poignard dans le sein.

This speech vividly demonstrates that Pyrrhus is fully conscious of the sadistic power he holds over his captive, as well as its deleterious effects on his own personality. His turn away from selfish desire and towards the collective Greek model of virtue, which entails the murder of Astyanax, cannot be mistaken for a fully sincere step towards repentance, for he is obviously trying to fool himself before deceiving the other characters in the play.

Thus self-deceived, he explains his apparent change of direction in Act III, scene 6 to Andromaque in terms that smack of devout repentance: "J'étais aveugle alors: mes yeux se sont ouverts." Playing on the multiple meanings of *grâce*, he tries to place blame on Andromaque for withholding the spiritual power that would have saved her son's life: "Sa grâce à vos désirs pouvait être accordée; / Mais vous ne l'avez pas seulement demandée. / C'en est fait." Assuming a passive and fatalistic stance characteristic of the penitent, Pyrrhus hypocritically invites Andromaque to take on a sacrificial identity.⁷ It is ironic that she chooses to do just that, devising her plan for marriage. The efficacy of her "repentance" towards Pyrrhus is evident from the reactions of both the king and her confidante Cephise, but Andromaque soon admits her ploy in private, "Quoi donc? As-tu pensé

qu'Andromaque infidèle / Pût trahir un époux qui croit revivre en elle?" (IV, 1). The Trojan queen's repentance may be false, but at least it will be followed by an ultimate act of self-abnegation, as she tries to satisfy her duties "à Pyrrhus, à mon fils, à mon époux, à moi" through the "innocent stratagème" of suicide. Having reached this stage of willingness, Andromaque's outcome is pointless, for she has attained a heroic answer to her predicament. Not so for Pyrrhus, who wallows in his own abjection, especially in the extraordinary "aveu à l'envers" that he delivers to Hermione: "J'épouse une Troyenne. Oui, Madame, et j'avoue / Que je vous ai promis la foi que je lui voue" (V, 4). Hermione's response is strangely accurate as a moral summation of the protagonist's fate:

Seigneur, dans cet aveu dépouillé d'artifice,
J'aime à voir que du moins vous vous rendiez justice,
Et que voulant bien rompre un nœud si solonnel,
Vous vous abandonniez au crime en criminel.

The irony of this scene is so thick that it verges on *bathos*, and only the extreme self-lucidity of Pyrrhus and the poetic artistry of the dramatist prevent it from falling into all-too-obvious comparison with such twisted comic declarations as Alceste's *aveu* to Célimène in *Le Misanthrope*. The rapprochement is all the more acute since Hermione had earlier played the coquette to her other suitor, Oreste.⁸

Néron's use of repentance is ironic almost from the beginning of *Britannicus*. His extortionary avowal to Junie is couched in the same fatalistic terms that Pyrrhus had used with Andromaque: "Les dieux ont prononcé. Loin de leur contredire, / C'est à vous de passer du côté de l'Empire" (II, 3). Néron substitutes the polluted earthly community of the power-mad Empire for the pure, spiritual community of the saved, to which penitents were invited to belong. If she fails to make the right response, he villainously avers, she will soon be forced to repent in a very different kind of way.⁹

It is the same Cartesian sense of repentance that Burrhus evokes in the next act, when he invites Néron to foresake his rashness and reasonably reconsider his actions. However, it is

noteworthy that Burrhus fails to confront the real problem of Néron's depravity by calling only for a rational repentance, and not for the kind of moral reassessment that would target the emperor's perverse desires at the root. By trying to sweep moral failings under the imperial rug, Burrhus simply invites his master to go on misusing the faculties of reason, as he does so ably in feigning repentance before his mother Agrippine:

Oui, Madame, je veux que ma reconnaissance
 Désormais dans les coeurs grave votre puissance;
 Et je bénis déjà cette heureuse froideur,
 Qui de notre amitié va rallumer l'ardeur.
 Quoi que Pallas ait fait, il suffit, je l'oublie;
 Avec Britanicus je me réconcilie;
 Et quant à cet amour qui nous a séparés,
 Je vous fais notre arbitre, et vous nous jugerez. (IV, 2)

Only a few moments later, he will explain brutally to Narcisse how he intends to violate the spirit of contrition: "J'embrasse mon rival, mais c'est pour l'étouffer" (IV, 3). Néron's manipulation of the Cartesian "passion" of repentance is thus very complete, and he escapes any hint of Salesian commitment or transformation. Agrippine mentions the possibility of his remorse in the last lines of the play, but Burrhus, who had described an unflinching emperor murdering Britannicus, merely hopes it will not be the last of his crimes. The rage he reportedly demonstrates at the end of the action is thus not so much retrospective attrition felt over the loss of Junie to the ranks of the vestal virgins, as a foretaste of the greater suffering he will unleash on his subjects in the years to come. Unlike the Salesian penitent, Néron projects his sorrow rather than internalizing it.

If Néron's stunningly efficient false repentance surpasses any comic comparison, the same is not true for Mithridate. The old king of Pontus is like a militant Arnolphe, who has come back from the country to find not one but two Horaces, his own sons Xipharès and Pharnace, hovering around the unwilling child/captive/bride that he has been hiding away from the political world. Like Arnolphe, Mithridate puffs himself up in soliloquy

after soliloquy, gnawing on the prospect of cuckoldry and scheming against the young *blondins* whom he misjudges so completely. In Act III, scene 5, His plan to trap his sons by falsely renouncing his claim on Monime also recalls another greybeard, Harpagon, who uses just such a ruse to trick his son into exposing his love for Mariane.¹⁰ Mithridate's attempt to parade "Tout l'âge et le malheur que je traîne avec moi" and "mes cheveux blancs [cachés] sous trente diadèmes" recalls Harpagon's mistaken conviction that Mariane could be in love only with a bespectacled old geezer. When he debonairly passes off his fiancée to the "worthy" Xipharès ("un autre moi-même!") leads the tender but gullible Monime to name him as her true love, thus releasing all the old man's venom. Mithridate is a strange creature, half pantaloon and half abominable Saturn, ready to devour his own children. It is doubly ironic that his fake repentance from untimely lust and ungallant claustration should take the form of a near-comic *aveu*. One wonders if Racine was not perhaps mocking his audience with such a stylistic monstrosity, wrapped in the lush emotional fabric that had already bought him such worldly success.

Nonetheless, Racine would make one more attempt to portray a genuine repentance in *Phèdre*. Through the first half of the play, the frailty of Cartesian repentance is associated with Œnone, who vacillates from one conciliatory position to another, without any certitude of right or wrong. Hippolyte represents the possibility of true amendment, particularly in his political plans for a division of Thésée's empire among all the potential heirs, including the much-wronged clan of which Aricie is the sole survivor. But this superficially virtuous project is flawed by Hippolyte's ulterior motive of flight from responsibility. A true political penitent would be able to accept some measure of self-blame and to avoid the aphasia that plagues the prince whenever he is called upon to confront moral evil. Phèdre herself does not have this weakness, since from the outset she is acutely aware of her moral contamination. Her seizure of her step-son's sword is as close as any of the characters come to a tragic middle, but she is unable to negotiate a solution completely on her own. Significantly, she never delivers the false repentance that Œnone urges her to make, in order to save her own life and the future of her children. The

old nurse's lying is all that is needed to push Thésée's suspicious and destructive imagination toward a rash, bloody conclusion.

Thus, it is with real sincerity that Phèdre approaches her husband in Act IV, scene 4, with the intention of repenting of her passive role in Hippolyte's punishment, if not, indeed, of her very passion for the youth. The "juste effroi" that has shaken her from her lethargy and sent her on the mission of mercy bears the marks of contrition. She phrases her supplications in terms of Thésée's lineage and Thésée's blood, indicating empathy, and she begs him "Sauvez-moi de l'horreur de l'entendre crier," suggesting that the phase of *enteumion* has begun in her. Like a Salesian penitent, she asks to be spared from "la douleur éternelle," a prefiguration of hell that was one of the meditations required in the *Introduction à la vie dévote*.

Unfortunately, the news that Hippolyte has confessed his love for Aricie leaves the queen speechless and thwarts her inclination to repent. As Descartes mentions, repentance is subject to the even the vaguest disturbance when it is not solidly anchored. Phèdre herself, lucid as always to her own shortcomings, explains how close to repentance she had come:

Je cédaï au remords dont j'étais tourmentée.
 Qui sait même où m'allait porter ce repentir?
 Peut-être à m'accuser j'aurais pu consentir;
 Peut-être si la voix ne m'eût été coupée,
 L'affreuse vérité me serait échappée. (IV, v)

But once unchained, jealousy quickly leads Phèdre into delusions of persecution, as she imagines, in her following tirades, Hippolyte and Aricie enjoying a perfect and unfettered happiness, so alien to their real expectations as they flee, friendless refugees in a hostile landscape, toward the illusion of a sanctuary where they will plight their chaste vows to one another. Instead of repenting of her guilt, Phèdre discharges it on the unworthy figure of C enone, who leaves the stage intent on suicide with a parting line on the futility of service that nearly parodies the remark of Moli ere's Martine, the fired maid of *Les Femmes savantes*, who declares, "Service

d'autrui n'est pas un héritage!" Instead of a tragic middle of successful repentance, all that Phèdre is able to salvage from the disaster is an untimely assumption of guilt after all punishment, including her own poison, has already been administered. The sentence has been placed before the verdict. Instead of a penitent's ultimate submission to the final judgment of God, Phèdre foreshortens both penitence and judgment by her magnificent but futile gesture.

The futility of Racine's most beautiful potential penitent is indicative to some degree of a failure in the fundamental Jansenist spiritual enterprise. Despite the austere penitential regime assumed by many of the Messieurs de Port-Royal, they did not provide for a reliable transmission of their model to future emulators. David Wetsel points out that Pascal, the great apologist of the movement, was so concerned over the fragile state of the converted *chercheur* that he hesitated to recommend any significant emphasis on repentance from the new recruit to devotion.¹¹ In fact, Pascal points out that any disproportionate penitence would spoil "both the man and the acts, the man by his sin corrupting the acts and the acts wearing down the man in his weakness" (*Pensées* 772). Pascal's own conversion experience, recorded in the fragment that he always wore over his heart, bears significant traces of the Salesian model of repentance, as does the repentance scene that Racine fashions for his most evolved heroine. Yet Pascal admits that in contemporary France repentance reflects the instability inherent in the rationalist Cartesian model, where practical concerns are bound to prevail over purely spiritual movements. Racine, too, admits this instability, and his increasing tendency to examine the ironic fault lines where comedy and tragedy grind together, such as jealousy, pride, and impotence, indicates that he was consciously aware of the problem. The solution lies as hidden as their Jansenist God.

NOTES

¹ Peut-on se repentir d'un si grand avantage?

Un si noble trépas flatte trop mon courage;

Et du sang de ses rois il est beau d'être issu,

Dût-on rendre ce sang sitôt qu'on l'a reçu (II, 2)

This and other quotes refer to Racine, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Raymond Picard (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), vol. I.

² Agrippine is ready to confess her entire scheme, but Burrhus tells her it won't work, because she will not be believed. Because the empire must create its own prerogatives, he does not repent backing Néron: "Je ne me repens point de ce zèle sincère" (III, 3).

³ Dans un temps plus heureux ma juste impatience

Vous ferait repentir de votre défiance.

Mais Néron vous menace: en ce pressant danger,

Seigneur, j'ai d'autres soins que de vous affliger.

Allez, rassurez-vous, et cessez de vous plaindre:

Néron nous écoutait, et m'ordonnait de feindre. (III, 7)

⁴ Descartes, "Les Passions de l'âme," *Œuvres et lettres*, ed. André Bridoux (Paris: Gallimard, 1952) p. 785.

⁵ Richard Goodkin, *The Tragic Middle: Racine, Aristotle, Euripides* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991). Goodkin points out that Jocaste had already rejected the ethical mediation between her warring sons, and the false repentance/truce, initiated by Ménécée's self-sacrifice, temporarily seems to reverse her stance (pp. 65-67).

⁶ When Créon had voiced hope that 6,000 reinforcements would help the Theban loyalists repel the invaders and bring final triumph, the queen had said, "La victoire, Créon, n'est pas toujours si belle: / La honte et les remords vont souvent après elle" (I, 4).

⁷ With passivity comes a morbid sense of persecution, leading Pyrrhus to exclaim, "Vous me haïssez plus que tous les Grecs ensemble" (III, 6). But in the next scene, he dismisses Phœnix, vestigial symbol of collective value, and capitulates to Andromaque, "Au nom de votre fils cessons de nous haïr."

⁸ Hermione answers Oreste's nasty salutation with evasion and misdirection worthy of Molière's character:

Hé quoi? Toujours injuste en vos tristes discours,
 De mon inimitié vous plaindrez-vous toujours?
 Quelle est cette étrange rigueur tant de fois alléguée?
 J'ai passé dans l'Épire, où j'étais réléguée:
 Mon père l'ordonnait. Mais qui sait si depuis
 Je n'ai point en secret partagé vos ennuis?
 Pensez-vous avoir seul éprouvé des alarmes?
 Que l'Épire jamais n'ai vu couler mes larmes?
 Enfin qui vous a dit que malgré mon devoir
 Je n'ai pas quelquefois souhaité de vous voir? (II, 1)

This has the desired effect of suckering Oreste instantly, but Hermione's own coquettish pride quickly undoes her scheme when Oreste blunders into the topic of Pyrrhus's spurning of the princess, for her pride will not admit the possibility that Pyrrhus was not attracted to her.

⁹ "Ayez moins de frayeur ou moins de modestie.

N'accusez point ici mon choix d'aveuglement;
 Je vous réponds de vous; consentez seulement.
 Du sang dont vous sortez appelez la mémoire;
 Et ne préférez point à la solide gloire
 Des honneurs dont César prétend vous revêtir,
 La gloire d'un refus, sujet au repentir."

¹⁰ See Ronald Tobin, *Jean Racine Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1999), pp. 109-110.

¹¹ David Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief: Catechesis and Conversion in the Pensées* (Washington: Catholic Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 352-353.