

Personification, Dissemination, Violence: Jean Racine's *Britannicus*¹

by

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Nero's rise to power in 54 B.C.E, which Racine takes as the subject of his first Roman political drama, supplies the playwright with a particularly infamous antagonist. Tacitus's account of Nero's reign frightens readers with the birth of an uncontrollable tyrant who, realizing the structurally unfettered nature of his power, sets afire the unspoken promise with his subjects: the promise that the monarch be just, be good, and be a father to his people out of his own volition. Literary criticism on the play has tended to read Racine's 1669 tragedy *Britannicus* as the classical drama-turge's representation of this historical Nero and his violent usurpation of power over the Roman Empire. In such readings, the violence in the play emanates from and returns to the proper name Nero. In turn, the criticism conflates Néron, Racine's character, with the matricidal Nero of Roman history and thereby attributes the actions of the latter to the former.² The criticism goes so far as to attribute to the character Néron deeds of Nero that Racine does not even include in *Britannicus*.³ Following the textual

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² In an effort to distinguish the characters of Ovid's myth and Tacitus's historical narrative from Racine's tragedy, I use the Anglicized Latin names (Nero, Narcissus, Arrippina, Junia, etc.) and French names (Néron, Narcisse, Agrippine, Junie, etc.), respectively. It is important to note however that in the French tradition these names are not distinguishable: Néron is the name used to refer to the historical personage as well as Racine's *Britannicus* and Narcisse is found in French translations of Tacitus and Ovid.

³ For instance, Agrippina is not murdered in *Britannicus*, although her murder is foreshadowed in several places, and Octavie is not exiled in order to free Néron to take another wife. As Burrhus reminds Agrippine in Act III, Scene 3, "l'empereur n'a rien fait qu'on ne puisse excuser" (822). Néron's monstrous coolness in the face of the violence he incites will not arrive until the final act, with Burrhus' report of how Néron watches Britannicus writhing after his sip from the poisoned cup unmoved. Until this notably offstage *coup*, Néron's action is not yet so monstrous as to be contrasted with that of Britannicus. In "Racine à l'école de Molière: *Britannicus*," James Gaines argues that, early in the play, these brother-cousins mirror each other in their (equally) narcissistic desire to see themselves in Junie, Racine's other major addition to the history of Nero.

effects of one of Racine's major and highly contested deviations from the historical narratives of Nero's tyranny, this paper considers Racine's interpolation of the character of Narcisse into the tragedy. Ultimately, I argue that through Narcisse, Racine splits the Néron of his play from, if only by appealing to, the infamous history of Néron. In this way, Narcisse serves in the play as the personification of the difference constitutive of Néron, and perhaps the self in general.

In light of this personification, the violence figured in Racine's iteration of the history of Nero's rise to tyranny **cannot** be attributed simply to a malevolent tyrant but **must be** reexamined with attention to the ways in which violence is disseminated through the piece. By reading Racine's iterations, his repetitions with a difference, of the historical narrative of Nero and of the myth of Narcissus, this paper insists with Racine that power, evil or madness are not consolidated in Néron. By consolidating the violent action of the play into one body—Néron's—and by overlooking Narcisse, criticism has failed to take seriously the staging of the splitting of the self in *Britannicus* and the concomitant dissemination of violence in the tragedy.

Rather than presenting a delineable violence produced by an autonomous subject—by Néron or even by Nero—*Britannicus* contemplates another violence, one that cannot be contained by a character, stage, or even the genre of tragedy. This disseminative violence would then bring Racine's play into conversation with contemporary calls for a rethinking of violence, which aim to accommodate the changing face of violence in light of nuclear fallout, climate change, sexual violence, and abuse, and the violence in everyday language. Calling into question the very nature of what we call violent—of what counts as violence and what does not, of what is given the name violence and what is not—is not only a semantic and theoretical concern we can elucidate in this text, but is central to thinking about the temporalities of violence and about how we might conceive of a history and memory of these violences that linger and spread.⁴

⁴ Although there is not sufficient space here to provide a complete list of texts that rethink violence, I point the reader to those texts that have informed my readings of violence in *Britannicus*: see Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," Arendt's *On Violence*, Georges Vigarello's *Histoire du viol*, René Girard's *La violence et le sacré*, Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (especially Part II, Chapter I), Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, and Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*. Each of these texts, as it wrestles with the unwieldy concept of violence, unsettles the facility by which violence is named, encircled, and contained.

Britannicus opens with the once powerful Agrippine sitting in wait at her son's door, "tandis que Néron s'abandonne au sommeil" (1). Agrippine's conversation with her confidant Albine recounts for the audience the recent events that have come to pass in Rome: Agrippine's relationship with her son has grown cold; Néron has declared himself against Britannicus, the son of Agrippine's deceased uncle and husband, Claudius, and rightful heir to the Roman empire; and she is responsible for cutting off Britannicus's access to the throne in order to give it to Néron, who is in his turn barring her from it. Albine assures Agrippine that Néron remains loyal to his mother to whom he "doit le jour qu'il respire" (15). However Agrippine cannot be derailed from her fears that "L'impatient Néron cesse de se contraindre, / Las de se faire aimer il veut se faire craindre" and that like Britannicus, she "devien[t] importune à [s]on tour" (11–12, 14). In *La tragédie du sang d'Auguste*, Volker Schröder looks to the historical narrative to explain Agrippine's fears. Britannicus is the rightful heir whom Nero has replaced and Agrippina put Nero in power by seducing her uncle, former Emperor Claudius. Britannicus and Agrippina call into question Nero's right to the throne. Yet, for Racine, the threat posed by Britannicus and Agrippine is not only that either one might lay greater claim to power, but rather that Néron's power is not absolute in the first place.⁵ His power has a history and recalling this history (which Agrippine repeatedly does in the play) recalls its contingency.

The conversation goes back and forth between Albine's assurances of Néron's goodwill and Agrippine's revelations of his recent trespasses, including the abduction of Junie. The debate between these two women is interrupted when Néron's governor Burrhus emerges from the Emperor's room and spoils Agrippine's hopes of a private conference with her son. Agrippine asks Burrhus why he has put "une barrière entre mon fils et moi," to which Burrhus retorts "D'en faire un empereur qui ne sût qu'obéir?" (145, 178). He explains to Agrippine that "Ce n'est plus à vous qu'il faut que je réponde. / Ce n'est plus votre fils. C'est le maître du monde" (179–180). These lines mark a crucial splitting of *votre fils* from *le maître du monde*; that is, a splitting of Néron's familial duties from his

⁵ As Schröder suggests, both brothers have ulterior motives for "loving" Junie. For Britannicus and Néron, love of Junie is inextricable from their desire for the blood of Augustus. Britannicus's union with this descendant of Augustus would advance him nearer the throne just as much as Néron's union with her would keep him away.

burgeoning political power.⁶ Burrhus's response also introduces the transformation Néron must undergo in order to become the master of the world, for his roles as son (born of woman) and world master (self-birthing) are made mutually exclusive. As in her conversation with Albine, Agrippine enumerates Néron's crimes to a resistant Burrhus who argues in favor of Néron's irreproachability. However, whether Néron is virtuous because he is not an unnatural son, as Albine insists, or irreproachable insofar as he is the self-authorizing, absolute emperor and therefore the maker of his own law is not entirely clear.

Seeing Britannicus and Narcisse approach, Burrhus cedes his place to the victim of Agrippine's earlier affronts. Appearing for the first time in the play in Act I, Scene 3, the eponymous Britannicus, accompanied by his "gouverneur" Narcisse, is halted in his frenzied entrance by Agrippine. Britannicus complains to Agrippine of Néron's abduction of Junie, whom Agrippine had arranged to marry Britannicus. Néron is holding Junie at his palace for seemingly no other reason than the sadistic torment of his stepbrother, Britannicus. Having discussed Néron's most recent strike against Britannicus, which Agrippine commandeers as yet another example of the Emperor's undermining of her authority, the two set a meeting at Pallas', another of Claudius' emancipated slaves, and Agrippine leaves Britannicus and Narcisse.

Agrippine's departure leaves, for the first time in the tragedy, only Narcisse and Britannicus on stage. Believing himself "seul encore," Britannicus attempts to benefit from the moment of privacy by bearing his heart to Narcisse. Instead, the disinherited prince sets himself and the audience up for a dramatic realization with the following soliloquy:

Mais je suis seul encore...
 Que vois-je autour de moi, que des amis vendus.
 Qui sont de tous mes pas les témoins assidus,
 Qui choisis par Néron pour ce commerce infâme

⁶ This distinction parallels the distinction between the feudal order and the absolute monarchy. The feudal order, Franco Moretti explains in "'A Huge Eclipse': Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty," is based in a dependence and respect. The lord's admiration is not without condition, but precisely on the condition that the lord cares for his fiefs. With the absolutist monarch, the expectation is of an unconditional veneration and fidelity for the king by the subject, one which, as we see in Bodin's writings of sovereignty in *Les six livres de la République*, often leaves the subject in an aporia when facing an unjust king.

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Trafiquent avec lui des secrets de mon âme?
 Quoi qu'il en soit, Narcisse, on me vend tous les jours.
 Il prévoit mes desseins, il entend mes discours.
 Comme toi dans mon cœur il sait ce qui se passe.
 (325–336)

In Act II, Scene 2, Narcisse reveals his duplicitous fidelity to Néron and the irony of Britannicus's complaint. Britannicus is even more "seul" than he knows when in the company of Narcisse, who is in fact the *ami vendu*. Trading Britannicus's secrets for Néron's favor, Narcisse lends Néron his appearance of all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-hearing. Taking leave of Britannicus, Narcisse's first words to Néron in the play in Act II, Scene 2 reveal this trespass: "Grâces aux Dieux Seigneur, Junie entre vos mains/ Vous assure aujourd'hui du reste des Romains" (373–4).

The subdued response to Narcisse's celebratory tone intimates that the abduction of Junie has for Néron its end in other and arguably less political (and historically determined) aspirations. "Narcisse, c'en est fait. Néron est amoureux", Néron confesses (382). Narcisse's disbelief—"Vous?" "Vous l'aimez?"—forces Néron to repeat, to echo, his profession of love for Junie (383, 385). This echo, taken with the appositely named interlocutor, brings to mind the myth of Narcissus, particularly Echo's declaration of love to Narcissus at the edge of the forest in Ovid's version of the myth in Book 3 of *Metamorphoses*. What is more, Tiresias's prophecy to Narcissus's mother that if he ever knows himself, he will surely die is echoed in Néron's unexpected prophesy about the dangers of (self-)love. Narcisse asks of Britannicus, "Si jeune encore se connaît-il lui même? / D'un regard enchanteur connaît-il le poison?" (428–429). The proximity of these questions implies that Néron knows the complex relationship between self-knowledge and the poisonous enchantment of the love object. For Néron, love is inextricable from specular self-knowledge, for instance when he confesses to have loved Junie "jusqu'à ses pleurs que je faisais couler" (402). He foresees in love a discovery *and* loss of the self. Néron impossibly knows the dangers of (self-)love that Narcissus (and perhaps, in turn, *Britannicus's* Narcisse) knows only at the moment of death.

The fact that Néron miraculously regains his "voix [qui] s'est perdue" to speak this knowledge to none other than *Britannicus's* own Narcisse is no coincidence. With the myopia of his mythic predecessor, Narcisse attempts to assuage Néron's worries with an image:

Quand elle vous verra de ce degré de gloire,
 Venir en soupirant avouer sa victoire,
 Maître, n'en doutez point, d'un cœur déjà charmé
 Commandez qu'on vous aime, et vous serez aimé.
 (455–9)

Through the *image* of the glorified emperor, Narcisse assures, Néron will gain Junie's adoration. Narcisse's response echoes his mythical counterpart in Ovid. In this scene, Racine allegorizes Narcissus's mythical captivation by an image reflected by the water of the pool in the scene of Narcisse's seduction of Néron with an image of himself.

With this scene, Néron and Narcisse have set the stage for the remainder of the drama: Agrippine's escalating battle to share power and the throne with her son; Junie's failed efforts to reveal both Narcisse's trespasses and Néron's spying eye to the obtuse Britannicus; Néron's wavering over whether or not to kill Britannicus; and Narcisse's coaxing hand that leads or pushes Néron to his final deception of Britannicus, which results in both Britannicus's and Narcisse's deaths. It is already clear after this brief overview of the plot and the allusions to the myth of Narcissus in the opening acts of *Britannicus* that the character of Narcisse is not an inconsequential addition to the history of Nero's rise to power. Narcisse introduces the plot to murder Britannicus (1391), persuades fickle Néron to go through with Britannicus's murder (1464–5), and puts the poison in Britannicus's cup (1628).

Referring to his contemporaries' criticism of *Britannicus* in the preface to the tragedy, Racine explains that "quelques-uns ont pris l'intérêt de Narcisse, et se sont plaints que j'en eusse fait un très méchant homme et le confident de Néron" (*Oeuvre complètes* 373). Justifying himself by the similarity between Nero and Narcissus in Tacitus's *Annals of Imperial Rome*, Racine explains: "Il suffit d'un passage pour leur répondre. Néron, dit Tacite, porta impatiemment la mort de Narcisse, parce que cet affranchi avait une conformité merveilleuse avec les vices du prince encore" (*ibid.*).⁷ This "conformité merveilleuse" between Narcissus's and

⁷ *Annals of Imperial Rome* reveals that Tacitus himself gives a significant role to Narcissus, Claudius's emancipated slave, in his telling of Nero's rise to power in 54 AD. Tacitus's account, in fact, begins with Narcissus's interference in the political and personal affairs of emperor Claudius (the adoptive father of Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, later known as Nero). When Messalina, the second and unfaithful wife of Claudius had secretly remarried to Gaius Silanus while Claudius was away, thus ending

Nero's vices—a conformity that results in their antagonism in Tacitus—would seem to do anything except provide a satisfactory explanation to Racine's critics for the inclusion of Narcisse in his play, especially as the double-dealing confidant to both Britannicus and Néron who is arguably responsible for the former's death.

Racine not only appropriates and manipulates the Nero he inherits from Tacitus, he also constructs the character through an allusion to the Narcissus of Greek and Roman mythology. As we have already seen, Racine's allegory of the myth of Narcissus in Act II, Scene 2 alters the story by figuring a voiceless and enamored Néron/Narcissus as not only surviving his confrontation with the image, but also speaking what he has learned. The stakes of the alteration to the myth of Narcissus in *Britannicus* become clear when read in light of Claire Nouvet's reading of Ovid's iteration of the myth in *Enfances Narcisse*. Her reading of the myth reveals a defensive concealing of an originary difference that is quite pertinent to Racine's iteration of the history of Nero's rise to tyranny and the myth.⁸

their marriage and menacing his power over Rome, Narcissus is the only one brave enough to convey the information to Claudius, for which the Emperor rewards Narcissus by appointing him commander of the Guard, eventually placing the security of his power in the hands of Narcissus (237, 248). Narcissus arranges for Messalina's murder before she has the opportunity to beg pardon from Claudius, whom Narcissus fears might be too lenient on the traitorous spouse. He thus clears the way for the Emperor's subsequent marriage to his niece, Agrippina. Establishing the conditions necessary for Nero's subsequent rise to power, Narcissus not only shares the very sort of vice Nero will become notorious for, but in Tacitus, he is, in part, the very vice from which Nero springs. Narcisse's monologue in Act II, Scene 8 gestures toward this: "La fortune t'appelle une seconde fois, / Narcisse, voudrais-tu résister à sa voix? / Suivons jusque au bout ses ordres favorables; / Et, pour nous rendre heureux perdons les misérables" (757–760).

⁸ I borrow the term "originary difference" from the English translations of Jacques Derrida. Throughout Derrida's work, the substitution of originary or *originnaire* for original or *original* underscores that while difference precedes any positive identities, it cannot itself be an origin precisely because it calls the myth of the origin into question. As Derrida explains in "Freud et la scène de l'écriture," "C'est donc le retard qui est originaire. Sans quoi la différance serait le délai que s'accorde une conscience, une présence à soi du présent. Différer ne peut donc signifier retarder un possible présent, ajourner un acte, surseoir à une perception déjà et maintenant possible. Ce possible n'est possible que par la différance qu'il faut donc concevoir autrement que comme un calcul ou une mécanique de la décision. Dire qu'elle est originaire, c'est du même coup effacer le mythe d'une origine présente. C'est pourquoi il faut entendre 'originaire' *sous rature*, faute de quoi on dériverait la différance d'une origine pleine. C'est la non-origine qui est originaire" (302–303). For my reading, the difference that comes to insist itself through a

“Narcissus and Echo” in Book 3 of *Metamorphosis* is not Ovid’s own invention, but a reprise of a popular myth in an endeavor to prove poetic mastery. Like Echo’s “repetition” of Narcissus’s speech—which transforms his questions into her responses, his negations into her affirmations—Ovid’s repetition of the myth of Narcissus alters the previous versions. Nouvet explains that the sedimentation of an echo into the character Echo is a mark of Ovid’s own inflection on the myth: “Ovid, point culminant d’une longue tradition poétique qui a progressivement personnifié l’écho, l’incarne finalement en la personne d’Écho à qui il donne une histoire, et même une histoire d’amour” (54). Narcissus’s rejection of Echo is preceded by Ovid’s own ejection of the menacing echo from the voice. Through the accomplished personification of the echo in the character Echo, Nouvet argues, the constitutive alterity of the echo—the echo attaching one to one’s voice as well as separating one from one’s voice—becomes domesticated, pacified, and reified as the character Echo. Just as Ovid seeks to make himself autonomous from his echoes by finally personifying Echo, his story of Narcissus and Echo attempts to make Narcissus’s voice autonomous from the echo by personifying it in Echo.

The echo that Ovid ejects, however, is never simply the empirical voice returned to the subject, but also the repetition that is a condition of possibility of all language. Insofar as this possibility of repetition haunts any singular enunciation, it threatens the singularity of the very enunciation it makes possible.⁹ In defense against the resulting multiplicity of meanings and against the fact that the echo does not simply supplement but doubles, divides, and supplants the voice, Ovid turns the intimate alterity always haunting the voice into something fixedly outside of and different from it. Ovid, Nouvet argues, tries to stabilize and thus do away with the oscillation between echo as unwieldy sound and Echo as another desiring subject. When Ovid incarnates the echo as the character Echo, “la voix étrangère” is subjected to an even greater control: “L’écho n’est plus ‘hideously motiveless,’ ‘horriblement dépourvu de motivation,’ puisqu’il est dorénavant attaché à un désir” (54–5). The wound that Ovid conceals

reading of *Britannicus* alongside Ovid’s myth of Narcissus and Echo, though at first sight a difference between positive identities—between characters—also figures a difference inscribed in, undoing, and constitutive of any given identity.

⁹ See Jacques Derrida’s “Signature événement contexte” in *Marges de la philosophie* for further discussion of the iterative structure of language. What is most pertinent to this discussion is that the expulsion of the echo from Narcissus’s speech aims to figure the speech as selfsame, yet it would do so at the very cost of the conditions of possibility of the speech.

and tries to contain in his *Metamorphoses* is consequently that the echo is a condition of (im)possibility of all speech, an originary and constitutive alterity. E/echo's split from Narcissus in "Narcissus and Echo" transforms a temporal difference—the deferred echo of Narcissus's speech—into the spatial and sexual difference between Echo and Narcissus. Nouvet's explanation of the work accomplished by this split in Ovid's myth elucidates a tendency to defensively conceal and forget an originary difference in the self by converting that difference into a dichotomy between two selves. This tendency is not only at work in Racine's *Britannicus* but is staged by it.

Racine's Narcisse, whose mythical and historical analogs die before Nero's rise to power and who is introduced in the "Acteurs" as the "gouverneur de Britannicus," quickly shirks mythical, historical, and textual obligations. His mere presence in *Britannicus* **delays** his historical death, and his deception of Britannicus refuses his assigned role in the play. These trespasses must be read as part of the characterization of Narcisse in the tragedy; for it is these very triumphs over mythical, historical, and textual orders that make Narcisse the perfect pedagogue for the burgeoning tyrant Néron. Néron and Narcisse not only resemble one another, but Néron depends upon Narcisse for his very self-image. Narcisse not only offers a verbal description of the image Néron is to become, but his absolution from textual, historical, and mythical constraints is the very ideal of that image. In this way, we seem faced with a chiastic relationship between Néron and Narcisse: Néron is the surviving, ideal Narcissus for Narcisse, who in turn is the absolved and absolute master for Néron.

And yet, something remains to be considered in Néron and Narcisse's dialogue in Act II, Scene 2. After Narcisse seduces Néron with the image of his most certain triumph over Junie's heart, the Emperor both lauds the autonomous image that Narcisse paints and admits the insurmountable distance that separates him from attaining such autonomy for himself. Gazing into the ideal image of accomplished self-sufficiency, of near self-coincidence, Néron confesses to Narcisse his own search for freedom from time and space, which he names the "joug" of "Tout. Octavie [his wife], Agrippine [his mother], Burrhus [his advisor],/ Sénèque [his other advisor], Rome entière, et trois ans de vertus" (468, 462–3). Néron literally asks Narcisse, the emancipated slave (*affranchi*), how he can emancipate himself (*s'affranchir*). To Néron's question, Narcisse replies with lines borrowed not only from Seneca's tragedy *Octavia*, but from Nero's lines

in *Octavia*. George Forestier's points to this citation in his notes to the folio edition of *Britannicus*: "Dans la tragédie du pseudo-Sénèque, *Octavie* (Ier siècle apr. J-C.), c'est Néron lui-même qui proteste ainsi : 'Moi seul me verrai-je interdit ce qu'il est permis à tous de faire ?' ['Prohibebor unus facere quod cunctis licet']" (*Britannicus* 78, Seneca 454). In *Britannicus*, as Forestier points out, the (self-)legitimizing rhetorical question is taken from Pseudo-Seneca's Nero and given to Racine's Narcisse in response to Néron's complaints of captivity. Narcisse echoes Nero's rhetorical question and responds through this echoing to Néron's complaints about his marriage to Octavie: "Vous seul jusques ici contraire à vos désirs/ N'osez par un divorce assurer vos plaisirs" (481-2). That Racine's curious echoing of the line from Pseudo-Seneca makes explicit reference to a split, "le divorce," seems less than fortuitous. In it, we catch a glimpse of Racine's Narcisse doubling and splitting from the Nero of his ancient sources. Marking Racine's iteration of the historical narrative, Narcisse is part of and other than Nero as the echo and reflection of Nero in *Britannicus*. The difference within the self that haunts Pseudo-Seneca's rhetorical question (that is, the grammatical difference between the object *my self* and the subject *I*) is given a face, history, and motivation in Narcisse.

In short, Narcisse is split not only between his reference to Narcissus in Ovid and Narcissus in Tacitus, but also between the character Narcisse and the character's echo of Nero. The Nero of Pseudo-Seneca not only finds his voice given to Narcisse as a deferred echo but also to Néron, to whom Racine gives his proper name. Néron is doubled not only between himself and the image of himself that Narcisse paints, but also between the character and his difference from and repetition of Nero. In the action of the tragedy, Néron and Narcisse are then each mirrored and divided by the other, such that their identity is deferred elsewhere, always losing itself like an echo that has lost its voice. Nero, Néron, and Narcisse constantly turn into the other, perpetually deferring identity through the very process that allows for the appearance of identity. This spiraling circulation thereby disfigures the seemingly harmonious symmetry of a chiasmic relation between Néron and Narcisse.

The frequency of the critical assumption that Néron's "self amusement," "sadistic tendencies," and "son total amoralisme" determine Néron's action throughout *Britannicus* is drawn more from the inheritance of the proper name Nero, the attribution of consciousness and moral dis-

position to a literary character, and the collapse of Narcisse into Néron than from the text of Racine's tragedy (Gaines 175, 183; Pommier 43).¹⁰ In the first chapter, "L'éveil d'un monstre," of *Etudes Sur Britannicus*, René Pommier argues that Néron is unique in Racine's *oeuvre* in that he is the only character whose action is driven by the pleasure of causing suffering in others.¹¹ For Pommier, this is "un trait qui lui est propre et qui le distingue des autres personnages raciniens" (45). The playwright's other characters, "si cruels qu'ils puissent se montrer," Pommier argues, "ne le sont jamais gratuitement. S'ils tuent, s'ils font souffrir, c'est par désir de vengeance, par jalousie, par désespoir: ce n'est jamais pour le plaisir de tuer et de faire souffrir. Néron est le seul personnage de Racine qui soit vraiment capable de faire souffrir pour le plaisir de faire souffrir" (ibid.). Here, Pommier's reading demonstrates a failure to distinguish the Nero of Roman history from the character Néron of *Britannicus*. As a result, he does not and cannot account for the fact that it is Narcisse who announces the plan to poison Britannicus and who pushes Néron to stay the evil path when he is nearly dissuaded by Burrhus. Pommier rather superimposes the assumed evil of Nero on the story of Néron and in so doing fails to take seriously how Racine's addition of Narcisse diffuses violence throughout the piece.

Pommier's reading of the play betrays a desire to definitively unify Narcisse and Néron, to undo or conceal the divisions and doublings of *Britannicus*. The tendency to ignore the dispersal of Néron by designating him as a simple and morally repugnant character is not far from Ovid's radical splitting of Echo from the echo. Whereas Ovid's split creates the illusion of the selfsame voice, Pommier's offers the comforting illusion of a docile violence, one that merely emanates from a subject. His reading aims to definitively pin down the slippery source of violence in the play. By locating the source of evil, by calling it a fact of birth and of blood (and perhaps psychology), Pommier attempts to efface the itinerant vio-

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of the distinction between the fictional character and the historical figure, see Joel Weinsheimer's "Theory of Character: Emma."

¹¹ In her article "Racine's Politics: The Subject/Subversion of Power in *Britannicus*," Suzanne Gearhart suggests a more nuanced reading of *Britannicus*'s villain. In particular, Gearhart is interested in the ways in which Racine generates a complex model of subjectivity, wherein Néron's sadism is not without a measure of masochism. While I agree with Gearhart's efforts to take seriously Racine's rewriting of Néron, she underestimates the import that Narcisse brings to the tragedy, referring to him as "Burrhus's Machiavellian counterpart... [who] constantly assumes...that Néron's sole aim is to conquer and to retain power, whether over Junie or over the Roman people" (40).

lence that spreads and disseminates throughout the text. However, in order to attain and maintain his reading, Pommier must conspicuously ignore Racine's inclusion of Narcisse and the critiques against *Britannicus* to which Racine responds in the 1670 preface.

To be fair, criticism has not overlooked Narcisse's significance for the figuration of violence in the play without a certain amount of help from the text of the tragedy itself.¹² Néron's absence from the stage in the opening act of *Britannicus* seductively invites readers to deify (or demonize) Néron as the omnipotent source of the violence that looms over the five acts of the tragedy. Néron's absence from the stage in Act I, his progressive withdrawal from his relationships with other characters (except, of course, from Narcisse), and his final removal from the stage in Act V certainly contribute to the illusion that Néron is an autonomous and perfectly self-coincident agent of violence in the play. Agrippine, hypersensitive to affronts to her power, feels so dangerously removed from her son in the opening scene that she stays up all night outside his bedroom door in hopes of a private conference with him. In lines that open the play, Albine points to the absurdity of the fact that while Néron is lost in the self-abandonment of sleep or more likely "love," Agrippine huddles unescorted at his door:

Quoi! Tandis que Néron s'abandonne au sommeil,
Faut-il que vous veniez attendre son réveil?
Qu'errant dans le palais sans suite et sans escorte
La mère de César veille seule à sa porte?
Madame, retournez dans votre appartement. (1–5)

Néron's absence from the stage that begins the play lends him an air of transcendence: he is nowhere and everywhere, the solitary topic of everyone's discussion, and the invisible hand that has caused all strife. Néron's physical absence from the entire first act constructs an illusion of Néron as a monster, but a monster precisely to the extent that he is not *monstratus*. He is a monster because he cannot be seen, because he has the

¹² Indeed, at no point in the play is Narcisse recognized by the other characters as the instigator of Néron's violence. To the very end, Britannicus never knows of Narcisse's trespass. Even Junie conspicuously fails to warn Britannicus of Narcisse's double dealing until act V, scene I. Even here, she only hesitantly intimates that Narcisse is to be distrusted through a question: "Mais Narcisse, Seigneur, ne vous trahit-il point?" (1534). When Britannicus replies "Et pourquoi voulez-vous que mon Coeur s'en défie?", Junie's knowledge is transformed into mere suspicion: "Et que sais-je? Il y va, Seigneur, de votre vie. / Tout m'est suspect. Je crains que tout ne soit séduit" (1536-1537).

power to make himself invisible even as he watches—literally, in some cases—every step of the other characters.¹³

However what follows Néron's initial absence from the stage complicates a simple assignment of evil to Néron. An outcome of Racine's staging of the personification of the self-difference constitutive of Nero/Narcisse is that Racine's Néron is *not* a self-authorizing monarch, *not* freed from his worldly ties but made all the more dependent upon them. Although Néron, a Narcissus who we have seen lives to tell his forbidden self-knowledge, seems to be liberated from time and space when in Narcisse's company, he is neither a monarch who rules by the "il me plait," nor a ruler whose utterance and its enactment unite in a perfect instantaneity. The figuration of the Néron–Narcisse couple lures the spectator and reader to view Néron as the absolute emperor, unconditioned and transcendent, *the* source of violence and violent source of the play, and yet this figuration simultaneously undermines his autonomy. As the personification of self-difference, Narcisse potentially reifies and destroys that self-differing such that Néron might be absolved or freed from its play. However, the very addition to the play that ought to guarantee Néron's freedom is precisely what threatens it. Despite the illusion of exemption from worldly conditions of space and time, the very lines that launch and legitimate the subsequent sequence of violence that in pseudo-Seneca attest to Nero's self-assuredness are severed from Racine's Néron, instead coming from the voice of another—from Narcisse.

Néron reveals his dependence on Narcisse for the illusion of autonomy when he confesses to him that he avoids Agrippine's *yeux*, thus breaking from what seemed his absolute indifference to her:

Éloigné de ses yeux, j'ordonne, je menace,
J'écoute vos conseils, j'ose les approuver,
Je m'excite contre elle et tâche à la braver.
Mais (je t'expose ici mon âme toute nue)
Sitôt que mon Malheur me ramène à sa vue,

¹³ Such is the case for the famous scene in which Néron forces Junie to reject Britannicus:

Caché près de ces lieux je vous verrai, Madame:
Renfermez votre amour dans le fond de votre âme.
Vous n'aurez point pour moi de langages secrets,
J'entendrai des regards que vous croisez muets.
Et sa perte sera infaillible salaire
D'un geste, ou d'un soupir échappé pour lui plaire. (679–
684)

Soit que je n'ose encore démentir le pouvoir
 De ces yeux, où j'ai lu si longtemps mon devoir,
 Soit qu'à tant de bienfaits ma mémoire fidèle,
 Lui soumette en secret tout ce que je tiens d'elle:
 Mais enfin mes efforts ne me servent de rien,
 Mon génie étonné tremble devant le sien. (496–506)

His weakness in the face of Agrippine's gaze, or what Barthes calls her *agrippement*, prompts the avoidance, against which she rails in the first scene. The significance of seeing and being seen in *Britannicus* has been a point of much critical attention. For instance, in "Le Pouvoir des yeux dans *Britannicus*," Louis Van Delf argues that Néron's mastery over the play between *être* and *paraître* is interrupted by Agrippine's maternal ability to read her son's true feelings. Yet, what this passage undermines is precisely Néron's mastery. Néron's goal is not to rule himself, but to "listen to [Narcisse's] advice, [and] dare to agree with it." Rather than the victim of an inescapable maternal penetration that unsettles his mastery over the play between appearing and being, between dissimulation and essence, Néron is the apprentice following the *affranchi*.

Only in the presence of Narcisse will Néron finally overcome the control of Agrippine and Burrhus. Although in his conversations with Narcisse, Néron dares to oppose them, as soon as he encounters either of them without his Narcisse supplement, his resistance falters. In Act IV, Scene 2, after an argument with his mother about his ingratitude towards her, Néron grants power to Agrippine, asking her, "Eh bien donc, prononcez, que voulez-vous qu'on fasse?" (1287) Agrippine provides the following list of demands:

De mes accusateurs qu'on punisse l'audace,
 Que de Britannicus on calme le courroux,
 Que Junie à son choix puisse prendre un époux,
 Qu'ils soient libres tous deux, et que Pallas demeure,
 Que vous me permettiez de vous voir à toute heure,
 Que ce même Burrhus, qui nous vient écouter,
 À votre porte enfin n'ose plus m'arrêter. (1288–1294)

Néron acquiesces and assures her: "Oui, Madame, je veux que ma reconnaissance/ Désormais dans les cœurs grave votre puissance (1295–1296). Although Néron reveals in the next scene that "[il] embrasse [son] rival, mais c'est pour l'étouffer," he is subsequently and more successfully persuaded by Burrhus, disappointing Narcisse with the news that he "ne souhaite pas que vous alliez plus loin" (1314, 1398). Tellingly, both Agrip-

pine and Burrhus sway Néron in the absence of Narcisse. In fact, Néron and Narcisse are not onstage at the same time in the presence of Agrippine or Burrhus until Act V, Scene 6, where Néron, echoed by Narcisse (or the other way around), finally frees himself from their control. The scene ends with Néron's final line in the tragedy, "Narcisse, suivez-moi" (1694).

In his discussion of another conversation between Néron and Narcisse, Mitchell Greenberg points to what he calls Néron's vulnerability to the image: "Narcisse reflects back to Néron the image that haunts him and that he rails against, the image of an ineffectual puppet controlled by his mother and tutors and mocked behind his back by the Roman populace" (Greenberg 115). What Greenberg's reading of the specular relationship between Néron and Narcisse allows us to recognize is that, rather than reject the reflection he receives from Narcisse, Néron takes the image of the *affranchi* as his ideal. As we have seen, throughout the majority of the tragedy, Néron is the hesitant follower of an *affranchi*, who will in his turn, as Greenberg points out, forever bear the indelible (and feminine) mark of *having been* a slave. This mark forever borne by Narcisse is critical to an understanding of the specificity of the violence figured in the play: the image by which Néron models himself, the most absolute figure in the play, is precisely not a transcendent being, but a human—or worse, a woman. If Néron is mortally reliant on Narcisse for his tyrannical guile, Narcisse is in his own right no less marked by human weakness in his past condition as a slave.

The final scene of *Britannicus*, which literally overflows the stage, must then be read in light of Narcisse's—of the personification of self-difference's—own wound. Relayed only through a report, oddly rendered by Albine in the present tense, this scene reveals to the audience what will become of Néron after he witnesses the death of both Junie, his love object, and Narcisse, his ideal image. Returning to the stage in Act V, Scene 8, Albine reports that Junie has joined the cult of the virgins and that Narcisse is dead, and then recounts Néron's response to witnessing both of these events. Like Echo from the forest, Albine watches Néron's "death," not the literal death of the character, but the essential death marked by his complete withdrawal from the stage, by the replacement of action by the report. After seeing Junie "sans mourir... morte pour lui" and Narcisse "De mille coups mortels son audace... puni," Néron is on the cusp of losing himself, of getting lost in himself, of suicide: "Il se perdrait, Madame," Albine explains in her final line in the play (1722, 1751, 1764). Although it is Narcisse who is killed "De mille coups mortels son audace... puni,"

Néron finds himself likewise struck “de tant d’objets en même temps frappé”:

...de tant d’objets en même temps frappé
 Laisse [Narcisse] entre les mains qui l’ont enveloppé.
 Il rentre. Chacun fuit son silence farouche.
 Le seul nom Junie échappe de sa bouche.
 Il marche sans dessein, ses yeux mal assurés
 N’osent lever au ciel leurs regards égarés
 Et l’on craint, si la nuit jointe à la solitude
 Vient de son désespoir agir l’inquiétude,
 Si vous l’abandonnez plus longtemps sans secours,
 Que sa douleur bientôt n’attente sur ses jours.
 Le temps presse. Courez. Il ne faut qu’un caprice.
 Il se perdrait, Madame. (1753–1764)

In the final scene—or rather the absent scene—Néron is left the traumatized witness, feeling on his body the *lack* of blows that killed Narcisse. The violence he confronts, is confronted by, is precisely the violence that Racine adds to the history of Nero through the character Narcisse: the violence that never quite “takes place” in a present, but which, like the identities of Nero, Narcisse, and Néron, divides, doubles, and defers the very notion of present. Or, by refusing to stage the event, Racine shows that what is violent is precisely the thought that violence can occur as a visible and identifiable event in the present.

Violence in *Britannicus* cannot be securely or comfortably confined to Néron. Rather, Néron’s story in *Britannicus* tells the tale of a more originary disseminative violence, one central to the myth of Narcissus, which inserts itself between Narcisse and Néron. Combating or concealing this disseminative violence is precisely what is at stake in the ideology of the absolutist monarchy. Nothing threatens the absolutist’s hopes more than the knowledge of his own constitutive difference. However, by dividing Néron rather than protecting him from his difference, as we saw to be the case for Ovid in Nouvet’s reading of Narcissus and Echo, Racine’s personification of difference calls attention to Néron’s continued impotence. Racine’s staging of the personification of difference foregrounds the fail-

ure to finally contain difference, to do away finally with the oscillation between self and other. There is precisely no definitive or final split between Néron and Narcisse, but always an eerie connectedness, a mutual constitution between them that has in turn seduced criticism of the play to read these two as one rather than reading each as both more and less than one.

As an uncomfortable result, it is impossible to finally *locate* violence *on stage* in the tragedy. Of course, the literal exclusion of violence from the stage is inextricable from the rules of *bienséance*—the rule against offending seventeenth-century *pudeur* and demanding triumph of virtue over vice—in seventeenth-century France. It is precisely the effects of such rules on figures of violence—of what the exclusion of eruptive violence from the stage does to its figuration in classical tragedy—that this article contemplates. We might think of the demands of *bienséance* that violence not take place on stage as enacting its own death drive; by excluding violence, *bienséance* allows for or even demands that a more radical and threatening violence be staged. The exclusion of eruptive and spectacular violence from the seventeenth-century stage opens it to the staging of a disseminated violence.

As Racine's contemporary critics quite accurately object, the playwright never finally demonizes either Néron or Narcisse. He will not make violence a character attribute, but an irreducible originary condition of possibility of the tragic text. Violence does not only emanate from the tragedy, but the tragedy from violence.¹⁴ *Britannicus* further challenges the desirability and, more significantly, the possibility of understanding violence as essentially eruptive. It sets up in order to upset the pleasant fiction of a pure, contained, and thereby safe violence. Racine's iteration of Nero's rise to power thus has important implications for thinking about the desire to contain both the violence of dissemination and the dissemination of violence. It calls into question the ways that we locate violence in both space and time. One such way that criticism fixes the contours of violence is by thinking that the "real" violence of the "real" Nero would be any more simply delineated, once and for all, than the violence figured

¹⁴ One concrete way we might conceive of the tragedy emanating from violence is through an examination of the etymology of the term from ancient Greek: *tragōidia*, apparently from *tragos* meaning "goat" and *ōidē* meaning "song, ode." Although the origin of the etymology remains mostly in mystery, some scholars argue that it refers to the goat that the chorus danced around during a ritual sacrifice. For more on the function of sacrifice as an interruption to the chain of mimetic violence, see René Girard's *La Violence et le sacré*.

in the play, and that the History of Nero is fixed and outside of the play, and therefore impervious to the force of its iteration. That the historical narratives of Nero themselves generate this appearance of a single source of violence, namely the appearance that violence emanates from a real subject, would thus need to be rethought in light of Racine's play.

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