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Views of Kingship: *Britannicus* and Louis XIV's *Mémoires*

by

RUSSELL GANIM

This study situates itself within a current trend in Racinian scholarship to accentuate the political dimensions of Racine's dramaturgy.¹ Recently, Timothy Reiss, Suzanne Gearhart, and Alain Viala, among others, have emphasized the socio-political aspects of Racine's oeuvre in part to counteract the mid twentieth-century notion that Racine's classicism, if not his work in general, is based almost exclusively on the psychological representation of plot and character.² I will argue that to a significant extent, the nature – «classical» or other – of Racine's drama is also founded on a keen sense of the historic as it relates to the contemporary.

Reiss has noted quite convincingly how Racine's oeuvre relates directly to Louis XIV's reign.³ Taking Racine's first three plays as examples, Reiss contends that *La Thébaïde* argues for «the political stability able to be instituted by a strong state,» and shows «the failure to establish such sovereignty and the consequences of such failure» (1). *Alexandre le grand*, the second of Racine's tragedies, is dedicated to the king himself, and «counseled against the

¹ I am deeply indebted to Volker Schröder for his advice on this essay.

² My use of Reiss's work comes from his forthcoming article, «*Andromaque* and the Search for Unique Sovereignty.» *The Shape of Change: Essays in Honor of David Lee Rubin*. Expected Publication 2001. For an analysis of the relationship between classicism and the psychological portrait of Racine's characters, see p. 35 of Gearhart's essay, «Racine's Politics: The Subject/Subversion of Power in *Britannicus*.» *Esprit Créateur* 38 (1998): pp. 34–48. Viala's «Péril, conseil et secret d'Etat dans les tragédies romaines de Racine: Racine et Machiavel,» *Littératures Classiques* 26 (1996): pp. 91–113, also emphasizes the political over the psychological.

³ For Reiss's work on *La Thébaïde* see his article, «*La Thébaïde* ou la souveraineté à la question,» *L'Age du théâtre en France/The Age of Theatre in France*. Ed. David Trott and Nicole Boursier. Edmonton: Academic Printing & Publishing, 1998, pp. 197–205. For *Alexandre le Grand*, consult «Banditry, Madness, and Sovereign Authority,» *Homage to Paul Bénichou*. Ed. Monique Bilezikian and Sylvie Romanowski. Birmingham AL: Summa, 1994, pp. 113–42. Also consult his book, *Tragedy and Truth: Studies in the Development of a Renaissance Neoclassical Discourse*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1980.

aggressive belligerence ... that a sovereign authority might be inclined to follow» (2). The third tragedy, *Andromaque*, raises questions concerning the definition of «the true and legitimate sovereign» (18). In Reiss's view, the Racinian sovereign is «legitimate» if he or she meets three conditions: 1) behaving reasonably, 2) acting for interests that are either dynastic or social in nature, and 3) executing power alone (18). I claim that Racine's fourth tragedy and fifth play, *Britannicus*, continues to emphasize these criteria, but does so via the technique of counter example. Without question, Néron does find himself the sole ruler of Rome at play's end. But unlike the principled example of *Andromaque*, Néron's brutality and egocentrism suggest an irrational and oppressive use of power that can best be described as tyrannical.

It is this concept of tyranny that establishes an essential link between *Britannicus* and Louis XIV's *Mémoires pour l'instruction du Dauphin*. As a historical document, the *Mémoires* are remarkable in that they represent a voluminous treatise on the theory and mechanics of power by an actual sovereign. In current parlance, Louis XIV comes to resemble a political scientist who analyzes his reign as he executes it. Of course, the *Mémoires* were not actually redacted by the king. However, Pierre Goubert has shown that Louis did prepare notes for the text, and oversaw the revisions of the script, first drawn up by Périgny, named the «Lecteur du Roi» in 1663 (8). The king also supervised and approved the subsequent modifications done by Pellisson in 1670. Chronologically, the text, which covers to varying degrees Louis XIV's observations on the years 1661–62, and 1666–68, corresponds to *Britannicus* in that Pellisson's revisions, which constitute the official manuscript at the Bibliothèque Nationale, were penned just months after the first performance of the play in December 1669. By this date in Louis's rule, the still-young king was firmly established as France's only sovereign. The centralizing tendencies of absolutism also raised the possibility of tyranny, an issue which had entered political and literary discourse of the day. Issues of the sovereign's social and ethical legitimacy shape the definition of tyranny in 1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, which describes this notion as that which, «se dit de toute sorte d'oppression et de violence» (2:705).⁴ According to the *Académie*, a «tyran,» is viewed as «celui qui a usurpé, envahi la puissance souveraine dans un estat» (2:606). The presence of the term «tyranny» in the dictionary of the *Académie* shows a heightened awareness of this question at least in some intellectual circles. This consciousness is reflected in Louis XIV's use of the term in the *Mémoires*, as well as Racine's in *Britannicus*.

⁴ Online. American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language. U of Chicago. Internet. 26 Apr. 2000.

The notion of tyranny operates on several levels in the *Mémoires*, but Louis XIV's most explicit mention of the concept comes almost at the very beginning of his text, as he describes abuse of power by the nobility:

Le moindre défaut dans l'ordre de la Noblesse était de se trouver mêlée d'un nombre infini d'usurpateurs, sans aucun titre ou avec titre acquis à prix d'argent sans aucun service. La tyrannie qu'elle exerçait en quelques-unes de mes provinces sur ses vassaux et sur ses voisins, ne pouvait être soufferte ni réprimée que par des exemples de sévérité et de rigueur. (47)⁵

In one sense, tyranny for Louis XIV comes in the form of those who would threaten his power. The monarch must then «severely» and «rigorously» remove the menace in order to maintain authority. A presumably impartial observer would, at least according to modern standards, view the king's reaction to perceived tyranny as tyrannical itself. Consequently, the Louis XIV in the *Mémoires*, seems, in spite of himself, to resemble the violently autocratic Néron of *Britannicus*. Such an interpretation, however plausible it may appear, overlooks the general philosophy in which Louis XIV situates his *Mémoires*. In large measure, the monarch's view of kingship is shaped by the idea that reason undergirds the intellectual and moral legitimacy of the sovereign. Although many – among them Huguenots, Fouquet, and the victims of Louis's countless wars – would rightfully dispute the Sun King's claims, Louis XIV saw himself as a socially and administratively progressive monarch whose absolute sovereignty was both grounded in and merited by a firm sense of neo-Classical rationalism. Louis defines the exercise of royal power in the following terms:

La fonction du roi consiste principalement à laisser agir le bon sens, qui agit toujours naturellement et sans peine. Ce qui nous occupe est quelquefois moins difficile que ce qui nous amuserait seulement. L'utilité suit toujours. Un roi, quelque habiles et éclairés que soient ses ministres, ne porte point lui-même la main à l'ouvrage sans qu'il y paraisse ... et nulle satisfaction n'égale celle de remarquer chaque jour quelques progrès à des entreprises glorieuses et hautes, et à la félicité des peuples dont on a soi-même formé le plan et le dessein. (51–52)

⁵ My source for Louis XIV's *Mémoires* is Goubert's edition. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1992.

Louis's philosophy is largely founded upon Cartesian «bon sens» which in turn reinforces a nascent utilitarianism («utilité») that directs the king to take ministerial advice, but only as a means of informing the policy that the ruler will himself devise and implement. What separates such absolute authority from tyranny in Louis's mind, as well as that of other political theorists of the day, is that this concentration of power is the most logical and efficient means of providing for the public welfare, or what Louis terms «la félicité des peuples.» As the custodian of his people's happiness, such a beneficent sovereign acts as a bulwark against the nobility, the Church, or other entities that would impose their tyranny upon the masses.

Nonetheless, in Louis XIV's analysis of power, tyranny expresses itself internally as well as externally. The king's Cartesianism deals as much with the mastery of one's own passions as it does with the ability to make well-reasoned and socially-advanced decisions concerning affairs of state. In his *Mémoires*, he affirms, «Mais à qui se peut vaincre soi-même, il est peu de chose qui puisse résister» (154). The primacy of the monarch's reason over his passion was crucial because, as Reiss has argued, «were the sovereign to allow passion to confuse reason, all things would fall into disarray and confusion» (19). Yet, for Louis XIV, the subordination of affect to intellect was not enough. For a ruler to achieve self-mastery, it was necessary to engage in a kind of cognitive and emotive self-exegesis, especially when evaluating the advice and requests of court and counsel:

Mais quelque obscure, que puissent être leurs intentions, je vous enseignerai, mon fils, un moyen aisé de profiter de ce qu'ils vous diront à votre avantage: c'est de vous examiner secrètement en vous-même, et d'en croire votre propre coeur plus que leurs louanges. (59)

The king's recommendation becomes somewhat of an affective version of the first «precept» or «rule» in Descartes's *méthode*, and illustrates the extent to which Louis's concept of power is based on a self-evident conviction of personal and intellectual truth.⁶ What is particularly striking about Louis's suggestion, and indeed about his entire theory of monarchy, is his acute consciousness of the cognitive, moral, and psychological requirements of his profession. For a ruler to be so systematically aware of the confidential and official intricacies of governance was exceptional for Racine's, or any era. And it is Louis's own portrait of a rational, self-aware

⁶ In the Second Part of his *Discours*, Descartes states, «Le premier [précepte] était de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie, que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle» (47). Consult Andre Robinet's 1972 Classiques Larousse edition.

monarch that serves as a major point of contrast when reading *Britannicus* in light of Louis XIV's *Mémoires*.

Such a juxtaposition, however, can only be partial because, as Viala contends, *Britannicus* does not constitute a «méditation politique» whose goal is to «donner des leçons sur les systèmes politiques» (110). Of course, *Britannicus* can in no way be considered a manual on kingship in the manner of Louis XIV's *Mémoires*. Yet, the political questions and themes on which the play is based could not but have prompted Louis XIV and other influential political actors of the day to see *Britannicus* as a commentary –both favorable and unfavorable – on the art of kingship as it is expressed both in a theoretical sense, and in its practical application with respect to Louis XIV's governance of France.

If one begins the joint reading from the standpoint of the inner tyranny imposed by psychological turmoil and the absence of self-mastery, Néron emerges as a figure much less self-possessed than the Louis XIV of the *Mémoires*. Néron's personal disarray plays a significant role in the chaos he inflicts upon the Roman state. Racine himself describes Néron as a «monstre naissant» (26) in the first preface to the play, and it is clear from Néron's violent effort to consolidate power that the influence of reason on his actions is decidedly limited. At the beginning of the play, the question which comes to mind is why Néron, who has led Rome in a relatively stable and progressive manner for the first two years of his reign, turns so brutally oppressive? Many answers present themselves. For example, it is plausible to assume that Néron's unbridled desire for Junie leads the emperor to take extremely unwise political action. In addition, Néron's rapaciousness can be explained in terms of a kind of oedipal revolt against Agrippine, with Néron's assertion of political authority signifying a personal triumph over his mother. On the subject of Agrippine, it is also important to note that her possible alliance with Britannicus poses a threat to Néron's rule, and that such a menace must be eliminated. Clearly, all of these factors play a role in the emperor's decline into terror and madness at the play's conclusion. Nonetheless, at the same time Néron's kidnaping of Junie and his hostility toward Agrippine and Britannicus represent an oppressive view of kingship, Racine also suggests at several moments in the play that Néron's concept of sovereignty is to a significant extent unformed because others have executed power for him. Néron's ill-preparedness and lack of definition with respect to governance account for much of his volatility, and constitute the greatest difference between the emperor and the Louis XIV of the *Mémoires*.

From the work's first scene, opinions differ about Néron's intentions and his ability to govern. Agrippine, whose views certainly reflect her own agenda, does offer what turns out to be an accurate assessment of Néron's

state of mind when she suggests that the emperor will no longer restrain himself and will move against Britannicus in order to secure his hold on the palace:

L'impatient Néron cesse de se contraindre;
Las de se faire aimer, il veut se faire craindre (1.1.11–12)⁷

Agrippine, who subsequently uses the word «tyrannie» to describe her son's rule («Toujours la tyrannie a d'heureuses prémices» v. 39), is contradicted by Albine who is, in a sense, a more credible observer at least at this point in the drama because she is personally removed from the imperial power struggle. Speaking of Rome under Néron's reign, she states:

Il la gouveme en père. Enfin Néron naissant
A toutes les vertus d'Auguste vieillissant. (1.1.29–30)

One could no doubt argue that any comparison between Néron and Augustus is hopelessly naive. However, for Racine to evoke the Augustan ideal as well as the potential for criminality at this early point of the play underscores the ambiguity with which the spectator must view Néron as a ruler.⁸ By portraying Néron between two such extremes, Racine frames what will become the tragedy of the emperor's collapse into tyranny.

Opinions about Néron speak less about his indecisiveness and apprehension than his direct behavior. Néron is at his most impetuous and mercurial in (4.3–4), where the emperor appears caught between two opposing views of kingship. The differing perspectives come from Burrhus and Narcisse, each of whom articulates a vision of power that shapes Racine's portrait of sovereignty, and the threat tyranny poses to it. In his second preface (1676), Racine describes Burrhus as «fameux...pour son expérience dans les armes et pour la sévérité de ses moeurs» (31). This «honnête homme,» Racine adds, «fut extrêmement regretté...après sa mort, à cause de sa vertu» (31). To a large extent, Racine's description of Burrhus in the preface corresponds to his representation in the play. In Burrhus's first scene, he claims to be truthful in his dealings with all members of the royal family, and tries to assuage Agrippine's fear that he is hiding Néron's plans from her by saying, «Burrhus pour le mensonge eut toujours trop d'horreur» (1.2.141). Along with Néron's other governor, Seneca, Burrhus views his role as that of instilling the young

emperor with a sense of duty and probity that will result in Néron's personal glory, and more importantly, that of the Roman Empire.

No doubt Louis XIV could have drawn a parallel between his concept of enlightened absolutism and that of Burrhus. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that at particular moments in the drama, Burrhus does not always appear the stoic saint. For example, he justifies Junie's kidnaping to Agrippine by arguing that though Junie is detained against her will, she is charged with no crime. Along these lines, Burrhus suggests that Junie's ancestry, as well as her affection for Britannicus, constitute a possible menace to Néron's throne.⁹ For a good part of the action, Burrhus defends Néron against Agrippine, and consistently warns the emperor of the danger his mother represents. Without question, Burrhus's admonishments stem from a desire to serve what he feels are the best interests of the Empire. Yet, a governor as experienced and as seemingly influential as Burrhus cannot attain his position without a combination of personal wisdom and political maneuvering. The moral ambiguity evinced by a supposedly virtuous advisor such as Burrhus becomes important, for reasons I shall discuss shortly, in terms of how Louis XIV would interpret the play on a more profound level, especially with respect to the potential tyranny of counsel.

For the moment, however, it will be useful to concentrate on tyranny as it relates to the exercise of royal power. And in this vein, a seemingly honorable Burrhus seeks to circumvent the abuse of power by making an appeal to Néron's sense of mercy in a way that would transform the emperor into a near-divinity. In begging Néron to spare the life of Britannicus, Burrhus states:

Quel plaisir de penser et de dire en vous-même:
Partout, en ce moment, on me bénit, on m'aime;
On ne voit point le peuple à mon nom s'alarmer;
Le Ciel dans tous leurs pleurs ne m'entend point nommer;
Leur sombre inimitié ne fuit point mon visage;
Je vois voler partout les coeurs à mon passage! (4.3.1359–64)

As in the beginning of the play, Burrhus combines appeal to personal and collective interests to promote what he feels is deportment becoming an emperor. But given the imminent possibility of Britannicus's assassination, Burrhus invokes the image of an emperor from whom emanates a spiritual presence, and who is looked upon by his subjects with divine reverence. The

⁷ All quotes from *Britannicus* come from the 1984 Bordas edition, Maurice Martin, ed.

⁸ For a study of Augustan imagery in *Britannicus*, see Schröder's book. *La tragédie du sang d'Auguste: politique et intertextualité dans Britannicus*. Tübingen: G. Narr, 1999.

⁹ Consult (1.2.235–44). Also see Georges Couton's article, «*Britannicus*: tragédie des cabales.» *Mélanges d'histoire littéraire (XVI^e et XVII^e siècle) offerts à Raymond Lebègue*. Paris: Nizet, 1969. I thank Ronald Tobin for bringing this essay to my attention.

imagery is not that of a vengeful, but of a forgiving God whose defining trait is that of clemency toward his enemies. Burrhus's supplication, which initially is reminiscent of Louis XIV's recommendation that his son look inward before making decisions (v.1359), is presented as a kind of meta-discourse whose scope and tone come to echo the presumed declarations of the Roman people (vv. 1360–64).

Ostensibly, the philosophical opposition to Burrhus is represented by Narcisse, who encourages Néron to betray other members of the royal family and to pursue a short-sighted view of power of which the only immediate goal is swift reinforcement of authority via assassination of one's enemies. Barthes asserts that Narcisse's approach to governing can be summarized as «le crime érigé en système» (59).¹⁰ In his second preface, Racine himself claims that «Narcisse ... entretenait [Néron] dans ses mauvaises inclinations» (31). Narcisse comes across as a much less ambiguous character than Burrhus, and his treachery is evident his first appearance in (1.4), where he urges Britannicus to form an alliance with Agrippine, only to incite Néron's suspicion of Britannicus in (2.2). In essence, the official «governor of Britannicus» deceives his master in order to gain the favor of Néron. As a Greek and a freedman, Narcisse may not carry the authority of a Burrhus or a Seneca, but the eagerness with which he abuses his position to spy on and plot against Britannicus and Junie is representative of the amorality that characterizes Néron's imperial palace. Structurally and thematically, the fact that Racine places Narcisse's final tête-à-tête with Néron directly after the dialogue with Burrhus shows that Narcisse, and the mentality he represents, have the last word. Toward the end of his conversation with the emperor, Narcisse mockingly appropriates what he presumes is the attitude of the «maîtres orgueilleux» (v. 1466) of the Roman establishment in order to convince Néron that the emperor would be held up to ridicule if he did not impose his will by dispensing with Britannicus:

Néron, s'ils en sont crus, n'est point né pour l'Empire;
 Il ne dit, il ne fait que ce qu'on lui prescrit:
 Burrhus conduit son coeur, Sénèque son esprit.
 Pour toute ambition, pour vertu singulière,
 Il excelle à conduire un char dans la carrière,
 A disputer des prix indignes de ses mains,
 A se donner lui-même en spectacle aux Romains.... (4.4.1468–74)

Rhetorically, Narcisse's commentary represents a meta-dialogue that poses a counterweight to Burrhus's prayer-like entreaty in the previous scene. That Burrhus himself is mentioned illustrates a personal rivalry between the

advisors that underscores their competing political philosophies. Narcisse's exhortation, «Ah, ne voulez-vous pas les forcer a se taire?» (v. 1479), suggests unequivocally that Néron has no choice but to hush those who would challenge his sovereignty. Given that Britannicus embodies the most direct threat, Narcisse makes it clear that Néron's stepbrother must be silenced in all forms. The emperor's response, «Viens, Narcisse, allons voir ce que nous devons faire» (v. 1480), confirms that Néron opts for a vision of power in which the emperor rules by force in order to render his ambition and influence uncontested. In a Draconian sense, tyranny, despite its ramifications, is justified in order to preserve absolute authority.

In conclusion, we can ask 1) How Louis XIV would have related this depiction of power to his own reign, and 2) What are Racine's messages to the king? As noted, when reading the *Mémoires*, it would be plausible to contend that given the text's lofty tone and its appeal to orthodoxy, the king would have favorably viewed Burrhus's character, and would have sympathized with the principles Néron's governor attempts to impart. However, for the pragmatic Louis, Burrhus's righteous, almost beatified image of the sovereign would have appeared unattainable. One could also argue that the king would have found this view of kingship tyrannical in a personal sense in that it imposes an oppressive set of principles on the ruler who should, if possessing the proper wisdom, be able to develop a rational mode of governing on his own. Néron's indecisiveness in Act 4 – where he tells Burrhus in scene 3 that he will spare Britannicus, then allows Narcisse to talk him into murder in the following scene – reveals for a Louis XIV so insistent on independent rule, that abuse and manipulation often arise when kings allow themselves to become too dependent upon counsel.

If Burrhus's vision of governance would contain limited appeal to Louis XIV, then one can assume that Narcisse's would carry none. Narcisse's view of imperial politics would appear nothing if not disastrous for a king bent on redefining the sovereign's role in state-building from an intellectual perspective. Yet, one could claim that the Louis (less prevalent in the *Mémoires*) who over time relentlessly promoted his own image in France and his military strength in Europe, could have seen traces of himself in the impulsive and aptly-named Narcisse and in the megalomaniacal Néron. Consequently, one purpose of the play is to serve as an implicit cautionary tale against such abuses. However, within the play's overall structure and message, Racine himself clearly seeks no direct analogy between Néron and Louis XIV. In effect, both Racine and Louis XIV himself would most likely see the king as an anti-Néron, not so much because he embodies high-minded virtue, but because he, at a relatively similar age as the Roman emperor, made the rational and bloodless decision to

¹⁰ *Sur Racine*. Paris: Seuil, 1963.

assume power by and for himself. More importantly, the king made this decision in such a way that avoided the tyranny – political, social, and ministerial – depicted on Racine’s stage. Néron’s negative example thus confirms the direction in which Louis XIV had taken the French state, and lends authority to the king’s views on the monarchy and the *métier de roi*.