

ence assured to Turkey, her reforms may be encouraged, and her experiments fairly tried ; so that, if she must be blotted out from the catalogue of nations, her children can reproach none but themselves.

ARTICLE V.

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF JEAN RACINE.¹

By Professor James B. Angell, Brown University.

ON the banks of the Ourcq, about fifty miles from Paris stands a town of two thousand inhabitants, called La Ferté-Milon. It is pleasantly situated on an amphitheatre of hills, which rise gently from the river-side. The stream winds far away through the rich meadows, and disappears between the distant wood-crowned summits. The whole valley presents one of those quiet pictures of rural happiness and peace, which the imagination so naturally paints to itself as the birth-place and home of a poet. There is little in the general appearance of the town to distinguish it from other old French towns, except an ancient castle of the twelfth century, the scene of many a wondrous tale, which the gossiping market-women hand down from generation to generation. But on the chief square stands a marble statue of Jean Racine, with whose lasting fame the name of La Ferté-Milon is indissolubly connected ; for that humble town was his native place.

He was born on the twenty-first of December, 1639. As his mother died when he was three years of age, and his father only two years later, he was left to the care of his

¹ Oeuvres Complètes de J. Racine, avec les Notes de tous les Commentateurs. Quatrième édition publiée par L. Aimé-Martin. 7 Tomes. A Paris, chez Lefavre, Libraire. 1895.

maternal grand-parents. The grandfather died when young Racine was only eleven years old, and the grandmother retired to the convent of Port-Royal-des-Champs, where two of her daughters were already living. The boy was sent to a school in Beauvais, to learn the rudiments of Latin ; but, at the age of sixteen, he repaired to Port Royal, then the home of classical learning, and the stronghold of opposition to the Jesuits. There, in the retirement of a cloister, some of the ripest scholars and profoundest thinkers of France were devoting their lives to earnest study and the service of God. Their influence upon their favorite pupil may be said to have shaped his character, and decided his mental habits. "A dim religious light" colors the whole pathway of his life. His excessive timidity, his extreme sensitiveness, his earnest, if not erroneous, ideas of devotion, were all created or fostered in that quiet retreat. This, as we shall see, was in some respects unfortunate. His was a nature which needed to be strengthened by battling with the rough elements of actual life, rather than to be mellowed and enervated by the unbroken peace of monastic seclusion. But it was at Port Royal that he received that rare and finished culture which makes his works now classic. There he lived in that sweet communion with the tragic poets of ancient Greece, which seemed at times to have transformed his very nature ; there he learned to transport himself back to the days when Hector loved and Ajax fought, and, catching the very spirit of the departed Greek, to body it forth in forms divine, like the *Phèdre* and the *Iphigénie*.

The notes which he made on the Greek authors show that he devoted himself to study with wonderful zeal. His chief pleasure was to roam away into the beautiful groves which surrounded the abbey, and to read over and over again the tragedies of Sophocles and of Euripides. He knew them almost by heart. A taste, rather than a decided talent for poetry, distinguished this period of his life. His Latin versification is said to have been more felicitous than his French. Several of his Latin odes are preserved, but they give no promise of the *Andromaque* and the *Bérénice*.

His teachers and friends, by whom he was so beloved during his residence of three years at the abbey, could scarcely have foreseen that he would soon confer a higher honor on his scholastic home than even their affection and admiration could bestow upon him.

In 1660, the marriage of Louis XIV. furnished a theme to aspiring poets throughout the realm. Racine composed an ode, called *The Nymphs of the Seine*. His uncle, M. Vitart, showed it to Chapelain, one of the chief *littérateurs* of that age, who at once perceived in it the marks of genius. He recommended the young man to the favor of Colbert, the minister of finance. The result was, that the poet received from the king a present of a hundred louis d'or, and a pension of six hundred livres.

The poem has some merit, but it is too long, and several of the complimentary expressions are adulatory, bombastic, and foolish. It represents the river Seine as congratulating herself on the arrival of the queen, paints the joys of the nymphs that dwell in the waters of France, and the despair of the deserted nymphs of the Tagus. All the verses which he wrote at this period are filled with the exaggerated metaphors, and the artificial mythological allusions, which were then in fashion.

After reluctantly spending some time at Chevreuse in superintending the repairs of a castle, which he called his "Babylon," he was induced to go to Uzès, in Provence, to visit an uncle, a canon of St. Geneviève at Paris, who had an ecclesiastical charge. His friends hoped thus to turn his attention from poetry to theology, or to law. In his new home he found himself surrounded by an uncongenial community of coarse peasants, bare-footed villagers, and stupid priests.¹ His uncle was a man of moral worth, and of some

¹ See his Letters from Uzès. He says that one of the best preachers affirmed, in a sermon, that God would change a boy into a girl, before the child was born, rather than not humiliate the father who is too proud of his family.

It is amusing to read the Letters from Uzès in connection with Louis Racine's statement, that his father there carefully shunned all society, preferring the study of the Greek poets to the company of the ladies. It will be found that no great stoicism was required to withstand the social temptations to which he was exposed.

pretensions to scholarship. He easily won the esteem of his nephew, and persuaded him to dress in a sober suit of black, and to study the Christian Fathers. But Virgil and Ariosto seem to have occupied the mind of the young man almost as much as St. Thomas. His course was, however, satisfactory to the uncle, who wished to resign his place in his favor; but insurmountable obstacles prevented the young man from submitting himself to the tonsure. Uzès lost a monk, and the world gained a poet.

At last, weary of the town, and of the annoyances which he met on his road to ecclesiastical preferment, he returned to Paris, bringing with him an insignificant production of his pen, called *The Bath of Venus*, an unfinished drama on his favorite theme of Theagines and Charielea, and another on the *Thébaïde*. This last play he completed during the following year, 1663. It was represented by the company of Molière, and was warmly received by the public.¹

It will aid us in measuring the progress which Racine subsequently made in the dramatic art, if we observe with some minuteness the striking features of this piece, before we pass to the examination of some of his greater works. It is founded on the story of the hatred of Eteocles and Polynices, members of that wonderful family whose history furnished themes for the finest tragedies of antiquity.

¹ Grimarest, in his *Life of Molière*, and Mrs. Shelley, in her *Sketch of Racine*, have given another account of the origin of the *Thébaïde*, which has been generally believed, but which the statements of Louis Racine, and a letter of his father, alike show to be erroneous. The biographer of Molière says that the comedian was greatly annoyed, because a rival theatre secured all the new tragedies. Having learned that a new one was to appear there in two months, he resolved to have one ready for the same night. He remembered that, a few months previous, he had received a visit from a young man named Racine, who brought him a poem on Theagines and Charielea. He assembled his players, and told them to scour Paris, and find the poet. Their search was successful. Molière then submitted to him a plan of the *Thébaïde*, and begged him to write an act a week. He accomplished the task, and so he began his dramatic career.

Now Louis Racine says distinctly, in his *Memoir of his father*, when speaking of the visit to Uzès: "Il retourna à Euripide, et y prit le sujet de la *Thébaïde*, qu'il avança beaucoup, en même temps qu'il s'appliquait à la théologie;" and the father writes from Paris to M. l'Abbé Le Vasseur, in December, 1663: "On promet depuis hier la *Thébaïde* à l'hotel" (de Bourgogne). As that theatre was the rival of Molière's, Racine could not possibly think of giving it there at that time, if Molière had furnished the plan.

Even the most casual observer cannot fail to perceive one unfortunate peculiarity of this play, in the disgusting character of its personages. Jocaste, the mother, around whom all the interest gathers, has been guilty of incest with her own son, and is almost as much a prey to the Furies as Oedipus himself. The sons who are the fruits of this unnatural connection rarely show the slightest trace of affection for their mother or their sister. There is no pleasing element in their natures to contrast with their rugged asperity and immoderate passions. Begotten in crime, they are dark, selfish, and morose. Creon is the embodiment of the most despicable hypocrisy. These are the principal characters. The very recital of their names makes us feel that we are approaching a den of outcasts and monsters. By what grouping of such repulsive figures could the artist hope to form a work of beauty or of interest? It is a law of æsthetics, which applies as truly to the drama as to painting, that the merely horrible should never be presented alone.

The subject, moreover, is too simple. The contest of two brothers, neither of whom commends himself to our sympathy by his virtues, presents few events of tragic interest. The anxiety of the mother, the challenge, and the mortal combat, are all that belong to the subject itself; the rest is episode. With these elements, it is impossible to make a great or even a popular drama, unless the poet can, like Euripides in the *Phenissae*, or like Racine himself in *Bérénice*, render the individual characters interesting. But precisely in this respect is the whole conception of the *Frères Ennemis* unfortunate. We see that Polynices would be just as insolent and cruel as Eteocles, were he only in power; and therefore we care not at all which gains the victory. The circumstances of their contest affect us as little as the particulars of a battle between two savage tribes of Africa.

If the mellowing influence of Love, of that pure and holy love, which the author of *Andromaque* could paint with such power, was ever required to soften the asperity of fiendish passion, it was surely needed in this play. Even though we

agree with Racine, that hatred alone could find place in the bosoms of the brothers, we may demand that the lovers Antigone and Hemon should show some token of genuine affection. Such wooing as theirs was never witnessed beneath a Grecian sky. They stand at a most respectful distance from each other, and exchange the most hollow and formal compliments about beautiful eyes, and beautiful souls, and the gods, who hold their destinies. But scarcely a word of real feeling falls from their lips.

But if the revolting characters and the want of touching scenes, in which the power of love is pourtrayed, are subjects of censure, the indiscriminate slaughter at the close is equally objectionable. If a tragedy were great in proportion to the number of deaths, which it represented, this would be one of the most wonderful of all tragedies. When all are slain except the treacherous Creon, he sends himself to the shades with the amiable design of tormenting Antigone by his presence, because she had refused his proffered hand. The play then, necessarily, ends.

It required a poet indeed, to lend an interest to a subject so unpromising, and to a plan so faulty. A graceful drapery should have hidden the mis-shapen form. But the execution is not, on the whole, felicitous. With the exception of two or three scenes, which give us glimpses of the Racine of later years, every page is open to severe criticism. The action is often strained and unnatural. Persons on the verge of rage, are represented as stopping to explain why they are about to be enraged; and others, who are in paroxysms of passion, as deliberately showing why they are logically justified in their passion. Not a few irreconcilable differences in the statement of facts are found. The French critics have remarked many inelegancies of style and several grammatical blunders.

But that the piece has some merit, no one can deny. The narrations of the contest are perhaps the most vigorous and beautiful portions.¹ There are also many short pas-

¹ See Act. V., Scene 3: "J'y cours," 86.

sages of great power. We would especially designate those which show the haughty ambition and overweening pride of a Grecian monarch,¹ and those which depict the deadly hatred that feeds on the remains of departed friendship and fraternal affection.²

We may say of this play, as La Harpe said of the *Alexandre*: "its faults are those of the age; the beauties are Racine's." Whoever has waded through the insipid pieces, with which most of the predecessors of Racine had flooded the French stage, will forgive the young poet for following the beaten track in his first attempt. As we trace his subsequent course, we shall see how he broke the fetters which bound, alike, poets and people, and opened a new and glorious career to dramatic poetry in France.

About the time that the *Frères Ennemis* appeared, Racine wrote an indifferent ode, called *La Renommée aux Muses*. It is of importance chiefly because it secured the poet a gift of six hundred louis from the king, and gave rise to the acquaintance between Racine and the great satirist and critic, Boileau. The acquaintance soon ripened into a friendship, to which Racine owed many of his happiest hours. How confiding, and childlike, and beautiful was the mutual affection of those two great men! Together they toiled, and suffered, and enjoyed, through all the vicissitudes of life; and almost the last words which fell from the lips of the dying Racine, were: "Boileau, I am glad that I am to die before you."

About a year after the completion of the *Frères Ennemis*, Racine produced his *Alexandre*. Before he placed it upon the stage, he submitted it to Corneille. The old dramatist told the young author that his piece gave proofs of a talent for poetry, but not for tragedy; and advised him to abandon the career which he had chosen. The monarch of the stage, in the noon-tide of his fame, did not discern the dawns of that genius, whose name was to go down to posterity with his own. But St. Evremond, the wit and philosopher,

¹ See Act IV., Scene 1: "Je ne sais si mon coeur."

² See Act III., Scene 6: "Cher Attale."

whose opinions were law in many of the salons of Paris, declared, "that the old age of Corneille did not cause him any more uneasiness; and that he had no more reason to fear that tragedy would end with him." Though the *Alexandre* was played, for the first time, on the same night, at the two rival theatres of Paris, and quite favorably received, it was by no means unanimously approved. It really contains a most remarkable combination of merits and faults. It may be considered as representing the transition-state of the author's mind, while he was escaping from subjection to the artificial rules of the age. It occupies an intermediate place between his first play and the *Andromaque*, though it resembles the former more than it does the latter.

While Racine was engaged in the composition of his third dramatic work, the *Andromaque*, he became involved in a controversy, which is worthy of notice. A miserable rhymers, named Desmarets de St. Sorlin, had become the object of universal derision, on account of his doggerel verses, and had therefore resolved to leave Parnassus and become a prophet. He announced the approach of one hundred and forty-four thousand martyrs, who were to establish true religion. One of Racine's friends, M. Nicole, the Port Royalist, had honored the unpoetical fool, St. Sorlin, by writing against him. He remarked that the pretended prophet had commenced his career by writing novels and comedies." "A novel writer and a dramatic poet," he added, "is a public poisoner, not of bodies, but of souls. He should be regarded as guilty of an infinite number of spiritual murders, which he has, either directly or indirectly, committed."

Racine, with his sensitive nature, regarded this as a blow aimed at him. A pious letter from his good old aunt, who was in the convent of Port Royal, confirmed him in this opinion. He therefore thought it necessary to defend himself in a letter, which satirized sharply but pleasantly his old associates, the Port Royalists. This provoked two replies from Jansenists. Racine wrote another spirited letter, and took it to Boileau, who told him that if he published it, it would do more credit to his head than to his heart. "Well,

then," said Racine, "the public shall never see it." He kept his word; and, moreover, called in all the copies of the first letter, which he could obtain. He afterwards evinced the deepest regret at this unfortunate dispute with his respected teachers and cherished friends.

The lamentations of the pious nun, and the arguments of the Port Royalists did not prevent the representation of *Andromaque*. It was most enthusiastically received. It is so far superior to the *Alexandre* that *La Harpe* is justified in saying: "There is really half a century between them."

The plot is so happily formed, that the *Phèdre* and the *Iphigénie* alone, of all Racine's classical dramas, can be compared to the *Andromaque* in respect of thrilling interest. The chief characters are *Andromache*, *Pyrrhus*, *Hermione*, and *Orestes*. Each is made the prey of conflicting passions. The widow of *Hector* is required to give up her boy to the Greeks, or to marry the king of *Epirus*, and prove false to the memory of her beloved husband. Conjugal affection strives with maternal love. *Pyrrhus* is betrothed to *Hermione*, but wishes to gain the hand of *Andromache*. *Hermione*, loving *Pyrrhus*, is wooed by *Orestes*, and is tempted to accept his hand, when *Pyrrhus* deserts her. *Orestes*, sent by the Greeks to carry back *Astyanax*, feels his love for *Hermione* struggling with his sense of duty to his country; and the dark *Furies* are ever hovering over his head. What materials for a tragedy! And with what genius has the poet moulded them into a form of beauty! Notwithstanding all the variety of character and circumstance, which distinguishes this piece, its unity is never forgotten nor perilled. Nowhere is there confusion; and nowhere inconsistency. The movement marches on, gathering new power and majesty at every step, until it reaches the grand catastrophe. The sensitive sympathy of the author with his personages fails not to recall the rich memories that crowd into their excited minds; so that the dramatic scene has, for its background, now the palace of *Agamemnon*, stained with his blood and with that of his murderous wife, and now the smoking walls of *Troy*, and *Hector* trailed ignobly in the

dust. Though the diction is not free from faults, it is generally easy and flowing, and sometimes intensely energetic and expressive. There are, in the whole play, only a few of those careless and affected verses, which deface every scene of the *Frères Ennemis*. The *Andromaque* has always been justly regarded as one of our poet's *chefs-d'oeuvre*. It created a new era in dramatic literature, as distinctly as did the *Cid* a few years before.

In 1668 appeared *Les Plaideurs*, the only comedy which Racine ever wrote. He was involved in a troublesome lawsuit about a benefice; and, wearied by the thousand annoyances of the trial, he consoled himself by composing this piece. It is, in many respects, an avowed imitation of the "Wasps" of Aristophanes. Many of the delicate touches and happy allusions are due to the inspiration gained at the dinners which Racine took with Boileau, Chapelle, and a few other friends. The *Plaideurs* was discussed and polished in this social and literary circle, before it was presented to the public.

At its first representation, it was entirely unsuccessful. It is, indeed, not well adapted to produce stage effect. It has too little action. It makes no progress towards any end. Hence it does not excite curiosity. Molière, however, perceived its merit; and, when it was acted at Versailles, the king evinced his admiration of it by such continuous roars of laughter, that the courtiers were utterly astonished. When it was known that the king had laughed, the fortune of the author was secured. As soon as the play was done, the actors started for Paris to congratulate the poet. At the dead of night, the inhabitants of an obscure street, being aroused from their slumbers by the approach of three carriages, threw open their windows and whispered to each other that the officers had come to arrest Racine, on the complaint of an old judge whom he had satirized. The next morning they supposed that the poet was in prison, while he was felicitating himself on his new honors. The king soon bestowed on him a pension of twelve hundred livres.

It would be wrong to judge the *Plaideurs* by the standard

of high comedy. Racine did not attempt such a work as the *Misanthrope* or the *Tartuffe* of Molière. The whole play is a highly exaggerated caricature, and the last act is nothing but broad farce. But the piece is eminently good-humored and devoid of malignity. One feels, after reading it, that he has had a hearty and innocent laugh. But it contains no biting satire. It aims no blow at a prevalent folly. A laughable topic is treated humorously, merely for the purpose of making us laugh. Perhaps one could hardly gain a more correct idea of the difference between high comedy and farce, than by comparing the *Tartuffe* and the last act of the *Plaideurs*. The province of comedy is to place characters in ridiculous situations, and let the developments be true to nature. Little exaggeration can be allowed. Caricature is the province of farce. It not only invents ridiculous circumstances, but exaggerates the folly of the characters themselves.¹

In 1669, the *Britannicus* was written. It represents Nero after his marriage with Octavia, and while he is still young. It paints the mutual jealousy of the emperor and his mother, his fear of Britannicus, his love for Junia, the betrothed of Britannicus, the Roman courage and virtue of Burrhus, who boldly preached the truth to the cruel prince, the duplicity and fiendish meanness of Narcissus, who pretended to be the tutor of Britannicus, while he was a traitor in the service of Nero, and the tender affection of Junia for her affianced lover. This tragedy was worthy to succeed the *Andromaque*. The most serious objection, which critics have urged against it, is, that the interest culminates in the fourth act, and declines in the fifth. Perhaps one of the chief sources of attraction to us, is the picture of the struggle between the growing passions of the youthful emperor, and the

¹ It is said that a countryman was one night at the theatre, when *Andromaque* was given as the principal piece, and the *Plaideurs* as the after-piece. He was delighted, and, as he knew Racine, he expressed his admiration to the poet; "but," he added, "I do not exactly understand how a piece, which began so solemnly, could end so funnily." The good man supposed that he had seen but one play.

power of the stoical philosophy as taught and illustrated by the upright Burrhus.

But for the English reader, Racine's next piece may possess a peculiar interest, which is afforded by no other of his works. For its history recalls the misfortunes of that ill-fated royal family, whose sufferings and wrongs fill so dark a chapter in the annals of England. After the execution of Charles I., his widow passed her days in obscurity in France. Her daughter Henriette, called Henriette d'Angleterre, married Philippe, brother of Louis XIV. It is said that the attachment which existed between her and the king, was not limited to the ordinary affection of a brother-in-law and a sister in law. Their positions absolutely forbade them to be more than friends, and therefore she consoled herself by choosing the love of Bérénice and Titus as the subject of a drama. She prevailed on Racine and Corneille to attempt it at the same time, though neither knew that the other was writing. The plays were represented on the same night; one at the Hotel de Bourgogne, and the other at the Palais-Royal. It was a contest of Dares and Entellus; and the youthful combatant won the victory. His piece was acted thirty times in succession, and with ever-increasing interest.

It has hardly any plot: after the conquest of Jerusalem, Titus brought back to Rome, among his captives, Antiochus, king of Comagene, and Bérénice, a princess of the house of the Agrippas. History tells us that she succeeded in winning the affections of the emperor. Now Racine represents Antiochus as a lover of Bérénice, and at the same time as a friend of Titus. Titus and Bérénice love each other, and wish to be united in marriage; but the Roman senate and people refuse the emperor the privilege of marrying a Jewess. Titus is reluctant to convey this sad news to Bérénice, and so employs Antiochus as a confidant.

One may well ask, in astonishment, How can a play, of five acts, be founded on so slight a theme? It is, indeed, a triumph of genius that, from these simple materials, one of the most touching of all French dramas has been made. By no one but Racine, the poet of courtly life and tender love,

could it have been accomplished. The critics, who are sticklers for conventional rules, have accused him of violating rhetorical laws. The tears which have always been shed when *Bérénice* has been played, are the best answers to their criticisms.¹ The great Condé used to quote this couplet from it, to express his admiration of its beauties.

“ Depuis cinq ans entiers chaque jour je la vois,
Et crois toujours la voir pour le première fois.”

It must be confessed that *Bérénice* can hardly be called a tragedy. We must not seek in it for the stateliness of tragic forms. But the faults of the piece necessarily arise from the nature of the subject, which Racine was not free to choose. On that theme, no other French dramatist could have produced such a play. To paint love so simple, so artless, so confiding, and yet to lay the scene in imperial Rome; to depict Titus, the conqueror of Jerusalem, the idol of the army, balancing between imperial duties and ardent passion: such is a task on which Corneille could not but fail; it is one on which Racine alone could succeed.

Of *Bajazet*, which was written in 1672, we have little to say. The French have always had a strange interest in dramas which are founded on events in Turkish history. The general plan of them is almost always the same. The chief characters are commonly a cruel and jealous Sultan, a passionate and persecuted Sultana, who is in love with some Christian slave, which young slave is himself in love with some beautiful young woman, also a slave; and, finally, one of those dark Ethiopian messengers of death, whose benevolent vocation it is to sew up supernumerary and refractory wives in canvas bags, and drop them into the Bosphorus. The *dénouement* is either the murder of the Sultana and the lover by the Sultan and Ethiopian, or the discovery that

¹ A curious story is told of its effect on a soldier, who was once standing guard on the stage, when it was represented. He was seen to become more and more excited during the progress of the fourth act, until, at the final speech of *Bérénice* in that act, forgetful of military discipline, he dropped his gun, covered his face with his hands, and burst into tears.

the Christian slave and the beautiful young woman are brother and sister, and their liberation by the Sultan in a fit of unusual magnanimity. Racine has, indeed, deviated a little from these plots. But the character of Bajazet is poorly sustained. The destruction of life at the termination of the play is even more remarkable than it is in the *Frères Ennemis*. The stern integrity of the old vizier, Acomat, and the almost demoniac passion of Roxane are powerfully depicted; and they lend an interest to a most uninteresting theme.¹

The *Mithridate* was warmly applauded on its first appearance, in 1673; but it is really inferior, in every respect, to the *Iphigénie*, which was written in the following year. Voltaire has said, that, if the palm of excellence were to be awarded to any tragedy, it would be given to Racine's *Iphigénie en Aulide*. We must certainly concede that it is the most beautiful and winning of Racine's plays. No other piece so excites all our tenderer emotions, and so fascinates us by its surpassing richness of style. We turn to it again and again, and never finish the last scene without wishing that the poet had accomplished his design of writing an *Iphigenia in Tauris*. The *Phèdre* has enjoyed a higher renown in France than the *Iphigénie*. In no single character has Racine so signally displayed his genius as in the delineation of the heroine of that piece. Nowhere has he given such a picture of the fiercest conflicts of the most violent passions as in the terrible struggles of that wretched woman. It is easy to see how the *Phèdre*, when represented, is the most effective of all Racine's dramas. But for us, who read the plays, and who find more pleasure in contemplating the self-sacrificing devotion of a patriotic maiden than in the guilty passion of a treacherous woman, the *Iphigénie* must have more powerful and permanent attractions than the far-famed *Phèdre*. Yet, if we observe either of these pieces, the last classical dramas which came from

¹ "It is thought that the assassination of Monaldeschi, by the orders of Christina, queen of Sweden, and in her very presence, suggested to Racine the idea of composing *Bajazet*. The compilers of anecdotes say, also, that in the four famous verses where he paints the imbecile Ibrahim, he had in mind Richard Cromwell, whom men were surprised to see living in obscurity."—*Aimé-Martin*.

the pen of our author, and compare it with his first two dramas, we shall be amazed at the vast difference between his earlier and his later productions. Whether we regard the plans, the conception and grouping of characters, the details of arrangement, the tone of coloring, or the accuracy, elegance, and power of expression, we find that the crude productions of early youth have been succeeded by the rarest works of a ripened and gifted manhood.

And now, at the age of thirty-eight, in the fulness of his strength, and the meridian of his fame, he suddenly resolved to write no more tragedies. Annoyances, which attended the first representation of *Phèdre*, undoubtedly hastened a decision which was chiefly due to a growing belief that his dramatic career was displeasing to God. As he reflected steadily upon his past course, it seemed to his sensitive nature that his offences were almost too great for forgiveness. In deep anguish of soul, he determined to abstain from all kinds of poetical composition, and to devote the remainder of his life to works of penitence and piety. Whatever one may think about the sinfulness of writing dramas, all must admire the simplicity and earnestness with which Racine followed the dictates of his conscience. Christianity transformed him; it checked a quickness of temper to which he had been subject, and it subdued his literary ambition, that almost invincible passion which was burning out his very soul. The annals of Literature present us with few scenes more touching than that of Racine's conversion. When his race of glory is only half run; when his temples are adorned with brighter laurels than had ever decked the brow of the father of French tragedy; when each returning year is loading him with fresh and enduring honors, he comes to the sacred altar with humility and single-heartedness, and consecrates his genius, his hopes, and his heart, to the service of his Maker.

On commencing his strictly religious life, Racine thought of becoming a recluse; but his confessor very sensibly advised him to seek for solace and happiness in the pleasures of domestic life, rather than in the solitude of a cloister.

3 He accordingly proceeded, though in the most unromantic manner, to select a wife. He asked his friends to recommend some amiable and virtuous woman. Catharine de Romanet, of Amiens, was proposed and accepted. She proved to be an attached and faithful wife, devoted to the welfare of her family, and to the duties of a pious life; but she did not understand the difference between a masculine and a feminine rhyme. It is said that she never read one of Racine's plays, and only knew their names from hearing them mentioned in conversation.

3 The poet seems to have found deep enjoyment in his home. He watched over the intellectual and religious culture of his children with the most assiduous care. He did not allow them, in their tenderer years, to read dramatic works, but he spared neither pains nor expense to secure for his sons a thorough classical training. His letters to his oldest son are filled with the wisest cautions and sagest advice upon all points, from his conduct in public life to the nicest verbal criticisms, and the minutest details of dress. He had daily devotional services in his family. His readings and paraphrases of the Psalms are said to have been most impressive. It was his chief delight to visit the homes of the sick and the needy, and repeat to them the inspiring songs of the sweet singer of Israel. He excelled in the art of reading. The greatest actors were glad to learn from him. The celebrated Baron, and Champmêslé, the most famous actress of that age, the woman for whom Racine specially adapted his chief *roles*, owed much of their skill to the instruction which they received from him. Valincour relates, that, when a company who were once assembled at Boileau's, were conversing on the Oedipus of Sophocles, Racine caught up the book from the table, and translated the piece with his peculiar power and pathos. He adds: "I have seen the best pieces played by the best actors, but never have I been so moved as by that recital."

3 Many gentlemen of the court were fond of visiting him, to enjoy his pleasing society and instructive conversation. He had a frank and winning countenance, and a pleasing

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address. He was extremely sensitive to criticism. He assured his son, that the pain which attacks on his poems had caused him outweighed by far the pleasure which his fame had afforded him. Yet, in a letter to his son, through every word of which his gentle spirit breathes, he begs him "never to become vexed at the evil which he shall hear spoken of his father." "If you find persons," he writes, "who do not seem to esteem my tragedies, and who even attack them with unjust criticisms, content yourself with assuring them that I have done what I could to please the public, and that I should have been glad had I been able to do more."

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It was his habit to recite his verses while he was composing. Once, some workmen who were in the garden of the Tuileries were surprised at hearing the exclamations of a Grecian hero. On turning, they saw a man gesticulating with the greatest violence, and repeating impassioned poetry. They thought that he must be a madman, until some one approached, who recognized Racine. He was composing Mithridate. He used to write out the plans of his pieces very minutely in prose; and when he had done that, he regarded his tragedy as finished, so slight was the labor of versification.

Racine had scarcely abandoned the drama, when he and Boileau were chosen historiographers to the king. The former regarded his appointment as a special favor of Heaven, and a proof that God desired him to abandon poetry. His office was by no means a sinecure. He was expected to record the events of the reign. In time of war, he was to follow the king to the scene of action. The officers never wearied of playing tricks upon these two poets, who were not deeply versed in the secrets of campaign life. Even Louis XIV. seems to have somewhat enjoyed the embarrassments of his accomplished but not over-valiant historians. In the campaign of 1677, he captured several cities, and returned to Versailles, before his chroniclers had started from home. He asked them why they had not come to see a siege. Racine quickly replied: "Our tailors

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were too slow. We ordered our clothes, but, before they were done, your majesty had taken all the cities." ¹

Some of the admirers of Racine have ascribed to him the qualities of a great historian; but we have no work by which we can fairly judge of his powers of historic composition. His Outline of the History of Port Royal professes to be only a sketch; it neither claims nor deserves rank as a finished history. - Almost the whole of his manuscript history of the reign of Louis XIV. was destroyed by fire, before it had been printed; but probably the reputation of the author has not suffered from that loss. We infer, from passages in his letters, that his work treated chiefly of the achievements of the monarch. The memoirs, sketches, biographies, and letters of his contemporaries, have supplied us with so full descriptions of the sovereign's conquests, that Racine could have added but little to our stock of knowledge; and we fear very much that his history, which was written almost in the very presence of the king, would have been rather an eulogium of his royal master than an impartial picture of the age.

But neither the cares of public service, nor the pleasures of domestic life, had utterly quenched the poetic fire which had once burned so brightly in the soul of Racine. He had laid down his pen from a stern sense of duty. When he saw that he might aid in quickening intellectual and spiritual life, he resumed it again, and wielded it with a power which he had never evinced in his previous works; and so he produced his *Esther* and his *Athalie*. We may well notice briefly the circumstances which led to their composition.

Madame de Maintenon had induced the king to establish, first at Noisy, and afterwards at St. Cyr, a school for the gratuitous education of the daughters of poor and deserving nobles. Madame de Brinon, the governess, a conceited old

¹ Boileau went on the campaign of 1678. One day, after a battle, the king asked him if he kept far from the cannon. "A hundred paces," he replied. "Were you not afraid?" continued the king. "Yes, sire," rejoined Boileau, "very much afraid on your account, and still more on my own."

lady, cherished the idea that she was a poetess, and cherished it none the less fondly because she was alone in her belief. She was accustomed to write verses on pious subjects, and require the scholars to declaim them. These verses were so wretched, that even the enthusiastic girls could not endure them,—a sufficient proof that they must have been miserable indeed. Madame de Maintenon recommended her to assign to her pupils certain passages from Racine and Corneille; but they caught so fully the spirit of Iphigénie and Andromaque, that the patroness feared lest they should acquire an inordinate love for the classical drama. She therefore asked Racine “if he could not choose some pious or moral theme, and compose a kind of poem, in which song should be mingled with recital, and the whole should be bound together by an action which should render it more spirited.” She promised that the piece should not be made public. He hesitated. He was advised by Boileau to refuse the request; but, having thought of the history of Esther as a subject, he formed a plan, sketched a few scenes, and carried them to Boileau, who then urged him to go on. He read them to Madame de Maintenon, who insisted on his completing the piece. In a few months he finished it. He then proceeded to instruct the young ladies of St. Cyr in the art of declamation. One of the grand vestibules of the school was transformed into a theatre. Borin, the royal “*decorateur des spectacles*,” lent his aid in making the preparations. The royal organist and musicians rehearsed the music of Moreau for the occasion. Madame de Maintenon expended more than fourteen thousand livres upon dresses and ornaments for the girls. “The court talk of nothing but the piece which the girls are to play before the king,” says Madame de Sévigné in one of her letters.

It is not for us now to give the details of the representations which followed. The first one was in private; the next was in the presence of the king, the dauphin, and the Prince of Condé. It was completely successful, and, at its close, Racine hastened to the chapel to return his thanks to God. A few days subsequently, the king took a number of

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priests and Jesuits to see the play. So urgent and numerous were the requests to witness it, that it was given five times within a little more than a fortnight. "On one of these occasions," say the Dames de St. Cyr in their Memoirs, "we saw in our house three crowned heads, and almost all the princes and princesses of the blood." James II. and his wife, the banished sovereigns of England, were enjoying the hospitality of their royal cousin, and had come to forget for a time their many misfortunes, while they listened to the beautiful verses of Racine, as they fell from the lips of those "daughters of France."

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The favorable reception which was accorded to Esther incited the poet to the composition of *Athalie*. But its success was by no means so marked as that of the first piece; the charm of novelty was wanting. *Athalie*, moreover, did not present those ingenious allusions to the king and his favorites which the courtiers thought that they perceived in the *Esther*. In their eyes, Ahasuerus, the clement and powerful monarch, was Louis XIV. And who was the discarded Vashti but the forgotten Montespan? And the beautiful maiden, chosen of God to be the saviour of a race, was she not Madame de Maintenon? And had they not a cruel minister of war, to whom the title of Haman might not inappropriately be applied? But the court of Versailles was nowhere to be found in the *Athalie*. Perhaps the chief reason why it was played only twice at St. Cyr is found in the change which was made in the school at the period when the piece appeared. Madame de Maintenon perceived that the frequent visits of the courtiers to the institution had diverted the attention of the young ladies from the pursuit of their studies, and from pious meditations. She therefore, at first, forbade the public theatrical representations, though both of Racine's sacred dramas were occasionally given in private. But at last, all acting, and even all recitation from dramas, was prohibited.

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Only a few persons, at first, recognized the merits of the *Athalie*. It was not generally appreciated until years after the death of the author. Public attention was then directed

to it by a curious incident.¹ A company of young people were one evening playing at some game, in which forfeits or punishments were introduced for certain delinquencies. A young man was condemned to withdraw from the room, and read an act of *Athalie*. He was absent so long, that some of the company went in search of him. They found that he had finished the play, and begun it again. He praised it so warmly, that they were persuaded to hear him read it. They were all fascinated by its beauties. Each commended it to his friends, and soon everybody was reading *Athalie*. Madame de Maintenon, who had always admired it, induced some ladies and gentlemen of the court to act it in the presence of the king. They gave three brilliant representations; and, soon after, *Athalie* appeared on the public stage at Paris.

From that day to this, it has generally been regarded as the most perfect of all French tragedies. Such is the nature of the characters which are represented, and of the passions which are made prominent, that unless the most entire success had been achieved, the piece must have proved a most signal failure. This is one of the few tragedies in which the affection of lovers is not made the central motive, or at least a source of subordinate interest. The principal characters, on whose deeds and destiny everything hinges, are a priest and a boy. What personages would seem less fitted for dramatic purposes? How has Racine invested them with so thrilling an interest, that the *Athalie* stands forth, among all his works, as the finest creation of his mind?

He has given to Jehoiada that patriarchal faith which lends such awful power and significance to his every word and deed. It never fails nor falters, for a moment. When his friends desert him, when royal authority threatens, when his wife despairs, when the city is shaken by the attack of armies, when the temple itself, the last refuge of the elect, the dwelling of God, is besieged on every side, still he clings fast to the sure promises of The Most High, as to His everlasting

¹ Voltaire and La Harpe have both given this anecdote, though Aimé-Martin says he knows of no authority on which it is founded.

throne. He also moves before us as the agent of Divine justice and Divine vengeance. He is chosen of Heaven to stand between God and sinful men. To his hands are committed the symbols by which The Unseen One reveals himself to His erring children, and we are awed before him who represents, in a certain degree, the majesty of The Infinite Ruler.

The character of the boy was more perilous to the poet than that of the priest. To make him childlike and natural, and yet interesting, in the great movements of a drama, was no easy task. But he has presented him as innocent, artless, and really worthy of the honors which he is to inherit. He has depicted, with great success, the child's unconscious frankness and simplicity of heart. But the boy, even more than the priest, has a beauty and an interest which are not his own. He stands before us, shining in the light, which the long line of illustrious ancestry, priests, prophets, and kings, sheds down upon his head; and radiant with the still brighter glory of that serene and peaceful light, which comes from the last of the royal race, the Messiah himself. We see, in him, the sole representation of that exalted House, the only hope of the Jews and the world. Great and distinct as is the character of Athaliah, she is made subordinate to the youthful Joash. That accursed daughter of Jezebel, whose heart cannot be moved by the sight of her homicidal hands dripping with the blood of her own children, nor by the awful threats of vengeance from on high, is dismayed even by the vision of the innocent boy.

It is now generally conceded that, though the French drama presents us with some more tragic characters than any in the *Athalie*, yet it has no more sublime work, as a whole, than this, our poet's last and greatest piece. It should be remembered, too, that while the *Iphigénie* and the *Phèdre* are, in some measure, imitations from the Greek, the *Athalie* is an original creation. It is the highest proof of Racine's genius. It was formed on no model. No copyist has ever approached its excellence. What other sacred drama holds even a respectable position in literature?

The choruses of the *Athalie* and the *Esther* have given Racine the first rank among the lyric poets of his country. Such a union of natural sentiment, scriptural simplicity, and fervid utterance, has not been attained by any of his successors. It must, however, be confessed, that most of his minor poems add nothing to his reputation.

Louis Racine has given us reason to suppose that disappointment at the failure of *Athalie*, and the temporary loss of the king's favor, hastened the progress of the disease which terminated his father's life. Madame de Maintenon had asked Racine to suggest to her, in writing, the best means for the relief of the multitudes who were impoverished by the wars. Louis XIV., on seeing Racine's paper, exclaimed in anger: "What! because he can make verses, does he think he can give counsel? and because he is a poet, does he think he can be a minister?" Racine was deeply grieved. Madame de Maintenon met him in the garden at Versailles, and endeavored to console him: "I can secure you the king's favor," said she. "Do you know," he rejoined, "that I have a pious old aunt, who is praying, day and night, for my humiliation and disgrace? and her prayers will avail more with Heaven, than yours with the king." At that moment, a carriage was heard. "The king comes!" she exclaimed; "hasten away!" He never saw her, or the king, again.

The exchequer was so low that the incomes of all officers were taxed. Racine begged that his tax might be remitted as a special favor. "We will see," said the king; "I shall be glad to have it done if I can." This answer added a fresh wound to the spirit of Racine. With a sensitiveness which was, perhaps, rendered morbid by a confirmed disease of the liver, he thought that he was utterly deserted by his greatest benefactor. He feared lest his family should be reduced to distressing want. Such thoughts and fears aggravated his illness, until at last it became painfully evident that his days were drawing to a close. He suffered much, during the last two weeks of his life, from dryness of the throat. "I offer this suffering to God," said he; "may it atone for the hours of pleasure I have passed at the tables of the great." He had

always feared lest sickness might dissipate his religious feelings. But he found them strengthened in the hour of trial. He carefully arranged his affairs, took leave of his family, and, with firm Christian hopes, passed quietly away from this life, on the 21st day of April, 1699.

In accordance with his wishes, he was first interred in the cemetery of Port Royal, near his faithful instructor, M. Hamon. At the destruction of the home of the Port Royalists, in 1711, his remains were removed to the church of St. Etienne du Mont, that beautiful old structure, so renowned for its chaste architecture and its historic associations. It is situated in the southeastern part of Paris, under the very shadow of the Pantheon, in that quarter of the city which is dedicated to the study of letters and science. Near the high altar of that ancient temple, by the side of the tomb of the great Pascal, may be seen a slab with an inscription by Boileau, which tells the stranger that there "rests the body of Jean Racine."

In our hasty review of the dramatic works of Racine, we have avoided the strong terms of condemnation, which so many English critics have applied to the whole French Drama. When we reflect that those very plays, which they have unsparingly ridiculed, have formed the delight of a nation by no means inferior to the English in taste, and that the most refined scholars of France have been repulsed by the great works of the Elizabethan age, we may well inquire whether indiscriminate censure, either of the romantic or the classical drama, is befitting an unprejudiced mind? We find it to be a historic fact that, in all kinds of works, which appeal to the taste, the nations of Southern Europe are inclined to regard the strict observance of artistic laws, the perfection of form and the beauty of execution; while those of the North seek for freedom from conventional laws; boldness of conception, and originality of expression. This difference is not less apparent in their music and architecture, than in their poetry. Is the ideal of the one class absolutely more correct than that of the other? Shall the builder of the Strasburg Cathedral deny all genius to the architect

of St. Peter's? Or is not, rather, each work good in its kind? Is not each suited to its place?

If we judge by the standard of the French, Corneille alone can be compared with Racine. The author of the *Cid* and of *Cinna* may have conceived of some more heroic characters than his younger rival; but, in female characters, in perfection of plan, in smoothness of versification, in mastery of language, in exquisite sensibility, in melting pathos, and in sustained excellence, his plays are inferior to those of Racine. While we assign to our author such rank as a dramatic poet, we cannot forget the versatility of his genius. His prose is chaste and pure. His sacred lyrics are unequalled in beauty. His Epigrams and Letters, as well as the "*Plaideurs*," evince a genial humor and subtle wit. When Voltaire was asked to edit the works of Racine with notes, he replied: "What should I have to do, except to write at the foot of every page — *beau! sublime! pathétique! admirable!*" Lessing has said that, if Racine were not the prince of poets, he certainly was the poet of princes. And yet he has never yielded to the temptation to sully his works by a single impure expression. He who is most widely acquainted with the literature of France, will best appreciate this distinguishing merit of Racine. His genius was womanly and sensitive, rather than manly and daring. Hence he excelled in the portraiture of warm and glowing passions; and especially of love, in all its varied manifestations. It is maternal in *Andromaque*; it is furious in *Phèdre*; it is earnest and tender in *Bérénice*; it is innocent and pious in *Esther*; it appears as patriotic and filial devotion, in *Iphigénie*; it rises into sublimest faith, in the priestly *Jehoiada*.

There are poets whom we love rather than admire. There are others, whom we admire more than we love. There are a chosen few, like Racine, whom we cannot but love and admire. We love him with an ardent love, when we see him a spirited boy at Beauvais, a studious youth in the groves of Port Royal, an earnest man, hastening on, with a generous enthusiasm, to the highest triumphs of genius. We love him with a tender and pitying love, when we see him possessed of the idea

that his whole past life had been a life of sin, bowing in contrition at the throne of an offended God, withering with his pious maledictions the brightest laurels he had won, blotting out, with his fast-flowing tears, the beautiful lines which seemed to him the dark witnesses of his guilt. We love him with a holy love, as we see him shedding the kindest influences over the household, whose sunlight had dispelled his clouds of despair, as we hear the music of that rich voice in the lowly cot of the sick and the afflicted, repeating the consolatory psalms of David, or leading the spirit heavenward in humble, heartfelt prayer. We love him with a sorrowing love, as we see his noble but sensitive heart pierced by a shaft from the hand of the monarch, to whose reign he had given one of its highest titles to glory. We may admire the poet and dramatist; but we love the scholar, the penitent, the Christian, the martyr to his own love.

ARTICLE VI.

AFRICA AND COLONIZATION.¹

By Professor William G. T. Shedd, Andover.

ON the 22d of March, 1775, Edmund Burke, pleading for the liberties of the American Colonies, in the British House of Commons, had occasion to allude to their marvellous growth, as outrunning everything of the kind in the then past history of England, or the world. In less than seventy years, he said, the trade with America had increased twelve-fold. It had grown from a half-million of pounds per annum to six millions — a sum nearly equal to the whole export trade of England at the commencement of the eighteenth

¹ An Address delivered before the Massachusetts Colonization Society, Boston, May 27th, 1857.