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RACINE'S ESTHER

.SAINTSBURY

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HENRY FROWDE



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Clarendon Press Series

RACINE'S
ESTHER

EDITED

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

GEORGE SAINTSBURY

Oxford

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1886

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PREFACE

THIS edition of Racine's first sacred tragedy is uniform in plan with those of Corneille's *Horace* and Voltaire's *Mérope* published in the Clarendon Press Series. Inasmuch however as *Esther* was not written for or in the style of the public theatre, as it was never produced on the stage by ordinary actors till many years after the poet's death, and then only once in the course of a century, it has seemed altogether superfluous and out of place to include an article on "The State of the Stage in the time of Racine." Separate editions of this play are not common, and I have not to acknowledge obligations to any such except to that of Géruzez, a name always venerable to students of French literature. The variorum edition of the dramatic works by Lefèvre, and that of the whole works by Paul Mesnard in the *Grands Ecrivains* series, have also been drawn upon. As in the case of *Horace* I have asked and obtained the kind permission of Messrs. A. & C. Black to adapt my notice of the life and writings of Racine in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Ninth edition, vol. xx) to the purpose of the present work.

PROLEGOMENA.

I. LIFE AND WRITINGS OF RACINE.

JEAN RACINE, the most equal and accomplished, if not the greatest, tragic dramatist of France, was born at La Ferté Milon in the old duchy of Valois in the month of December, 1639. The 20th and the two following days of the month are variously given as his birthday ; all that is certain is that he was christened on the 22nd. The ceremony was at that time often, though not invariably, performed on the day of birth. Racine belonged to a family of the upper bourgeoisie, which had indeed been technically ennobled some generations earlier and bore the punning arms of a rat and a swan (*rat, cygne*). The poet himself subsequently dropped the rat. His family were connected with others of the same or a slightly higher station in La Ferté and its neighbourhood,—the Des Moulins, the Sconins, the Vitarts, all of whom appear in Racine's life. His mother was Jeanne Sconin. His father, of the same name as himself, was only four-and-twenty at the time of the poet's birth. He seems to have been a solicitor (*procureur*) by profession, and held, as his father, the grandfather of the dramatist, had done, the office of *contrôleur au grenier à sel*. Racine was the eldest child of his parents. Little more than a year afterwards his sister Marie was born and his mother died. Jean Racine the elder married again ; but three months later he himself died, and the stepmother is never heard of in connection with the poet and his sister. They were left without any provision ; but their grandparents, Jean Racine the eldest and Marie des Moulins, were still living, and took charge of them. These grandparents had a daughter, Agnes, who figures in Racine's history. She was a nun of Port Royal under the

style of Mère de Sainte Thècle, and the whole family had strong Jansenist leanings. Jean Racine the eldest died in 1649, and, apparently as a consequence of this, the poet was sent to the Collège de Beauvais. This (which was the grammar-school of the town of that name, and not the famous Collège de Beauvais at Paris) was intimately connected with Port Royal, and to this latter place Racine was transferred in November 1655. His special masters there were Nicole and Le Maître. The latter, in an extant letter written to his pupil during one of the gusts of persecution which Port Royal constantly suffered, speaks of himself as 'votre papa'; the manner in which Racine repaid this affection will be seen shortly. It is evident from documents that he was a very diligent student both at Beauvais and Port Royal. He wrote verse both in Latin and French, and his Port Royal odes, which it has been the fashion with the more fanatical admirers of his later poetry to ridicule, are far from despicable. They show the somewhat garrulous nature-worship of the Pléiade tempered by the example of the earlier school of Malherbe. He seems also to have made at least a first draft of his version of the breviary hymns; some, if not most, of a considerable mass of translations from the classics and annotations on them must likewise date from this time. Racine stayed at Port Royal for three years, and left it, aged nearly nineteen, in October 1658. He was then entered at the Collège d'Harcourt, and boarded with his second cousin Nicolas Vitart, steward of the duke of Luynes. Later, if not at first, he lived in the Hôtel de Luynes itself. It is to be observed that his Jansenist surroundings continued with him here, for the duke of Luynes was a severe Port Royalist. It is however clear from Racine's correspondence, which, as we have it, begins in 1660 and is for some years very abundant and interesting, that he was not at all of an austere disposition at this time. His chief correspondent is a certain young abbé Le Vasseur, who seems to have been by no means seriously given. The letters are full of verse-making and of other diversions. A certain Mademoiselle Lucrèce, who seems to have been both amiable and literary, is very frequently mentioned; neither is she the only one of her sex who

appears, Madame (or, as the habit of the time called her, Mademoiselle) Vitart receiving epistles which are especially lively and pleasant. It does not appear that Racine read much philosophy, as he should have done, but he occasionally did some business in superintending building operations at Chevreuse, the duke's country house. He would seem, however, to have been already given up irrevocably to literature. This by no means suited the views of his devout relations at Port Royal, and he complains in one of his letters that an unlucky sonnet on Mazarin had brought down on him 'excommunications sur excommunications.' But he had much more important works in hand than sonnets. The marriage of Louis XIV was the occasion of an ambitious ode, 'La Nymphé de la Seine,' which was submitted before publication to Chapelain, the too famous author of the *Pucelle*. Chapelain's fault was not ill-nature, and he made many suggestions (including the very pertinent one that Tritons were not usually found in rivers), which Racine duly adopted. Nor did the ode bound his ambitions, for he finished one piece, *Amasie*, and undertook another, *Les Amours d'Ovide*, for the theatre. The first, however, was rejected by the actors of the Marais, and it is not certain that the other was ever finished or offered to those of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Racine's letters show that he was intimate with more than one actress at this time; he also made acquaintance with La Fontaine, and the foundations at any rate of the legendary 'society of four' (Boileau, La Fontaine, Molière, and Racine) were thus laid.

His relations were pretty certainly alarmed by this worldliness, though a severe expostulation with him for keeping company with the actors is perhaps later in date. Allusions in a letter to his sister leave little doubt of this. Racine was accordingly disturbed in his easy-going life at Paris. In November 1661 he went to Uzès in Languedoc to live with his uncle the Père Sconin, vicar-general of that diocese, where it was hoped that Sconin would be able to secure a benefice for his nephew. It is certain that he was not slack in endeavouring to do this; but his attempts were in vain, and perhaps the Church did not lose as much as the stage gained. Racine was at Uzès for an uncertain time. All that is known is that

he was back in Paris before the end of 1663. His letters from Uzès to La Fontaine, to Le Vasseur, and others, are in much the same strain as before, but there is here and there a marked tone of cynicism in them. Once back in Paris, he gave himself up entirely to letters with a little courtiership. An ode on the recovery of Louis XIV from a slight illness probably secured him the promise of a pension, of which he speaks to his sister in the summer of 1664, and on 22nd August he actually received it. It is uncertain whether this pension is identical with 'gratifications' which we know that Racine for some years received and which were sometimes eight and sometimes six hundred livres. It would seem not, as one of these gratifications had been allotted to him the year before he so wrote to his sister. All this shows that he had already acquired some repute as a promising novice in letters, though he had as yet done nothing substantive. The ode in which he thanked the king for his presents, 'La Renommée,' is said to have introduced him to Boileau, to whose censorship there is no doubt that he owed much, if not everything; and from this date, November 1663, the familiarity of 'the four' undoubtedly existed in full force. Racine was at the time the least distinguished, but he rapidly equalled, if not the merit, the reputation of his friends. Unfortunately it is precisely at this date that his correspondence ceases, and it is not renewed till after the close of his brief but brilliant career as a dramatist (*Esther* and *Athalie* excepted). This is the more to be regretted in that the most disputable events of Racine's life as well as the greater part of his literary work fall within this silent period. His strange behaviour to Molière, his virulent attack on his masters and friends of Port Royal, and the sudden change by which, after the failure of *Phèdre*, and for no clearly expressed cause, a man of pleasure and an active literary worker became a sober domestic character of almost ostentatiously religious habits, and abstained from almost all but official work, are unillumined by any words of his own. From this time forward the gossip of the period and the *Life* by his son Louis are the chief sources of information. Unfortunately Louis Racine, though a man of some ability and of unimpeached character, was only six years old

when his father died, and had no direct knowledge. Still his account represents family papers and traditions and seems to have been carefully, as it is certainly in the main impartially, written. From other sources—notably Boileau, Brossette, and Valincourt—a good deal of pretty certainly authentic information is obtainable, and there exists a considerable body of correspondence between Boileau and the poet during the last ten years of Racine's life.

The first, but the least characteristic, of the dramas by which Racine is known, *La Thébaïde*, was finished by the end of 1663, and on Friday, 20th June 1664, it was played by Molière's company at the Palais Royal theatre. Some editors assert that Molière himself acted in it, but the earliest account of the cast we have, and that is sixty years after date, omits his name, though those of Madeleine Béjard and Mademoiselle de Brie occur. There is a tradition, supported by very little evidence, that Molière suggested the subject; on the other hand, Louis Racine distinctly says that his father wrote most of the play at Uzès before he knew Molière. Racine's own letters, which cover the period of composition, though not that of representation, give little help in deciding this not very important question, except that it appears from them that the play was designed for the rival theatre, and that 'La Déhanchée,' Racine's familiar name for Mademoiselle de Beauchâteau, with whom he was intimate, was to play Antigone. The play itself is by far the weakest of Racine's works. He has borrowed much from Euripides and not a little from Rotrou; and in his general style and plan he has as yet struck out no great variation from Corneille. We have very little intelligence about the reception of the piece. It was acted twelve times during the first month, which was for the period a very fair success, and was occasionally revived during the year following.

This is apparently the date of the pleasant picture of the four friends which La Fontaine draws in his *Psyché*, Racine figuring as Acante, 'qui aimait extrêmement les jardins, les fleurs, les ombrages.' Various stories, more or less mythical, also belong to this period; the best authenticated of them

contributes to the documents for Racine's unamiable temper. He had absolutely no reason to complain of Chapelain, who had helped him with criticism, obtained royal gifts for him, and, in a fashion, started him in the literary career, yet he helped in composing the lampoon of *Chapelain décoiffé*. The sin would not be unpardonable if it stood alone, but unluckily a much graver one followed.

We have no definite details as to Racine's doings during the year 1664, but in February 1665 he read at the Hôtel de Nevers, before La Rochefoucauld, Madame de la Fayette, Madame de Sévigné, and other scarcely less redoubtable judges, the greater part of his second acted play, *Alexandre le Grand*, or, as Pomponne (who tells the fact) calls it, *Porus*. This was a frequent kind of preliminary advertisement at the time, and it seems, as we find from the rhymed gazettes, to have been successful. It was anxiously expected by the public, and Molière's company played it on 4th December—Monsieur, his wife Henrietta of England, and many other distinguished persons being present. The gazetteer Subligny vouches for its success, and the still more certain testimony of the accounts of the theatre shows that the receipts were good and, what is more, steady. But a fortnight afterwards *Alexandre* was played, 'de complot avec M. Racine,' says La Grange, by the rival actors (who had four days before performed it in private) at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. A vast amount of ink has been spilt on this question, but no one has produced any valid justification for Racine. That the piece failed at the Palais Royal is demonstrably false, and as this is stated in the earliest attempt to excuse Racine, and the only one made in his lifetime, it is pretty clear that his case was very weak. His son simply says that he was 'mécontent des acteurs,' which indeed is self-evident. It is certain that Molière and he ceased to be friends in consequence of this proceeding; and that Molière was in fault no one who has studied the character of the two men, no one even who considers the probabilities of the case, will easily believe. If, however, *Alexandre* was the occasion of showing the defects of Racine's character as a man, it raised him vastly in public estimation as a poet. He was now for the first time proposed

as a serious rival to Corneille. There is a story, which a credible witness vouches for as Racine's own, that he read the piece to the author of the *Cid* and asked his verdict. Corneille praised the piece highly, but not as a drama, 'Il l'assurait qu'il n'était pas propre à la poésie dramatique.' There is no reason for disbelieving this, for the character of Alexander could not fail to shock Corneille, and he was notorious for not mincing his words. Nor can it be denied that Racine might have been justly hurt, though with a man of more amiable temper the slight would hardly have caused the settled antagonism to Corneille which he displayed. The contrast between the two even at this early period was accurately apprehended and put by Saint Evremond in his masterly *Dissertation sur l'Alexandre*, but this was not produced for a year or two. To this day it is the best criticism of the faults of Racine, though not, it may be, of his merits, which had not yet been fully seen. It may be added that in the preface of the printed play the poet showed the extreme sensitiveness to criticism which perhaps excuses, and which certainly often accompanies, a tendency to criticise others. These defects of character showed themselves still more fully in another matter. The Port Royalists, as has been said, detested the theatre, and in January 1666 Nicole, their chief writer, spoke in one of his *Lettres sur les Visionnaires* of dramatic poets as 'empoisonneurs publics.' There was absolutely no reason why Racine should fit this cap on his own head; but he did so, and published immediately a letter to the author. It is very smartly written, and if Racine had contented himself with protesting against the absurd exaggeration of the decriers of the stage there would have been little harm done. But he filled the piece with personalities, telling an absurd story of Mère Angélique Arnauld's supposed intolerance, drawing a ridiculous picture of Le Maître (a dead man and his own special teacher and friend), and sneering savagely at Nicole himself. The latter made no reply, but two lay adherents of Port Royal took up the quarrel with more zeal than discretion or ability. Racine wrote a second pamphlet as bitter and personal as the first, but less amusing, and was about to publish it, when fortunately Boileau, who

had been absent from Paris, returned and protested against the publication. It remained accordingly unprinted till after the author's death, as well as a preface to both which he had prepared with a view to publishing them together. In this respect Boileau was certainly Racine's good angel, for no one has ventured to justify the tone of these letters. The best excuse for them is that they represent the accumulated resentment arising from a long course of 'excommunications.'

After this disagreeable episode Racine's life for ten years and more becomes simply the history of his connection with the theatre, if we except his election to the Academy on 17th July 1673. He was successively the lover of two famous actresses. Mademoiselle du Parc (Marquise de Gorla) was no very great actress, but was very beautiful, and she had previously captivated Molière. Racine induced her to leave the Palais Royal company and join the Hôtel. She died in 1668, and long afterwards the infamous Voisin accused Racine of having poisoned her. Mademoiselle de Champmeslé was plain and stupid, but an admirable actress and apparently very attractive in some way, for not merely Racine but Charles de Sévigné and many others adored her. Long afterwards, just before his own death, he heard of her mortal illness and speaks of her to his son without a flash of tenderness.

The series of his dramatic triumphs began with *Andromaque*, and this play may perhaps dispute with *Phèdre* and *Athalie* the title of his masterpiece. It is much more uniformly good than *Phèdre*, and the character of Hermione is the most personally interesting on the French tragic stage. It is said that the first representation of *Andromaque* was on 10th November 1667, in public and by the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, but the first contemporary mention of it by the gazettes, prose and verse, is on the 17th, as performed in the queen's apartment. Perrault, by no means a friendly critic as far as Racine is concerned, says that it made as much noise as the *Cid*, and so it ought to have done. Whatever may be thought of the *tragédie pathétique* (a less favourable criticism might call it the 'sentimental tragedy'), it could hardly be better exemplified than in this

admirable play. In the contemporary depreciations is to be found the avowal of its real merit. The interest was too varied, the pathos too close to human nature to content Boileau, and the partisans of Corneille still found Racine unequal to the heroic height of their master's grandeur. A just criticism will probably hold that these two objections neutralise each other. Both parties agreed in saying that much of the success was due to the actors, another censure which is equivalent to praise. It so happens, too, that, though the four main parts were played by accomplished artists, two at least of them were such as to try those artists severely. Pyrrhus was taken by Floridor, the best tragic actor by common consent of his time, and Orestes by Montfleury, also an accomplished player. But Mademoiselle du Parc, who played Andromache, had generally been thought below, not above, her parts, and Mademoiselle des Oeillets, who played the difficult rôle of Hermione, was old and had few physical advantages. No one who reads *Andromaque* without prejudice is likely to mistake the secret of its success, which is, in few words, the application of the most delicate art to the conception of really tragic passion. Before leaving the play it may be mentioned that it is said to have been in the part of Hermione, three years later, that Mademoiselle de Champmeslé captivated the author. *Andromaque* was succeeded, at the distance of not more than a year, by a play which, taken in conjunction with his others, is perhaps the best proof of the theatrical talent of Racine,—the charming comedietta of *Les Plaideurs*. We do not know exactly when it was played, but it was printed on 5th December 1668, and it had succeeded so badly that doubtless no long time passed between its appearance on the stage and in print. For the printing at that time both in France and England made the play *publica materies*, and therefore in the case of very successful pieces it was put off as long as possible. Many anecdotes are told about the origin and composition of *Les Plaideurs*. The *Wasps* of Aristophanes and the known fact that Racine originally destined it, not for a French company, but for the Italian troupe which was then playing the *Commedia dell'Arte* in Paris dispense us from

enumerating them. The result is a piece admirably dramatic, but sufficiently literary to shock the *profanum vulgus*, which too frequently gives the tone at theatres. It failed completely, the chief favouring voice being, according to a story sufficiently well attested, and worthy of belief even without attestation, that of the man who was best qualified to praise and who might have been most tempted to blame of any man then living. Molière, says Valincourt, the special friend of Racine, said in leaving the house, 'Que ceux qui se moquoient de cette pièce meritoient qu'on se moquerait d'eux.' But the piece was suddenly played at court a month later; the king laughed, and its fortunes were restored. The truth probably was that the legal profession, which was very powerful in the city of Paris, did not fancy the most severe satire on its ways which had been made public since the *or ça* of the fifth book of Rabelais. It need only be added that, if Louis XIV admired *Les Plaideurs*, Napoleon did not, and excluded it from his travelling library. It was followed by a very different work, *Britannicus*, which appeared on 13th December 1669. It was much less successful than *Andromaque*, and, whether or not the cabals, of which Racine constantly complains, and which he certainly did nothing to disarm, had anything to do with this, it seems to have held its own but a very few nights. Afterwards it became very popular, and even from the first the exquisite versification was not denied. But there is no doubt that in *Britannicus* the defects of Racine, which in his first two plays were excusable on the score of apprenticeship, and in the next two hardly appeared at all, display themselves pretty clearly to any competent critic. The complete nullity of *Britannicus* and *Junie* and the insufficient attempt to display the complex and dangerous character of Nero are not redeemed by Agrippina, who is really good, and Burrhus, who is solidly painted as a secondary character. Voltaire calls it 'la pièce des connaisseurs,' and the description is—not quite in the sense in which the critic meant it—a very pregnant one. *Britannicus* is eminently the piece in which persons of a dilettante turn are seduced by the beauties which do exist to discover those which do not. The next play of Racine has,

except *Phèdre*, the most curious history of all. '*Bérénice*,' says Fontenelle succinctly, 'fut un duel,' and he acknowledges that his uncle was not the conqueror. Henrietta of Orleans proposed (it is said without letting them know the double commission) the subject to Corneille and Racine at the same time, and rumour gives no very creditable reasons for her choice of the subject. Her death, famous for its disputed causes and for Bossuet's sermon, preceded the performance of the two plays, both of which, but especially Racine's, were successful. There is no doubt that it is the better of the two, but Chapelle's not unfriendly criticism in quoting the two lines of an old song—

'Marion pleure, Marion crie,
Marion veut qu'on la marie'—

is said to have annoyed Racine very much, and it has a most malicious appropriateness. *Bajazet*, which was first played on 4th January 1672 (for Racine punctually produced his piece a year), is perhaps better. As a play, technically speaking, it has great merit, but the reproach commonly brought against its author was urged specially and with great force against this by Corneille. It is impossible to imagine anything less Oriental than the atmosphere of *Bajazet*; the whole thing is not only French but ephemerally French—French of the day and hour; and its ingenious scenario and admirable style scarcely save it. This charge is equally applicable with the same reservations to *Mithridate*, which appears to have been produced on 13th January 1673, the day after the author's reception at the Academy. It was extremely popular and, as far as style and perfection in a disputable kind go, Racine could hardly have lodged a more triumphant diploma piece. His next attempt, *Iphigénie*, was a long step backwards and upwards in the direction of *Andromaque*. It is not that the characters are eminently Greek, but that Greek tragedy gave Racine examples which prevented him from flying in the face of the propriety of character as he had done in *Bérénice*, *Bajazet*, and *Mithridate*, and that he here called in, as in *Andromaque*, other passions to the aid of the mere sighing and crying which form the sole appeal of these three tragedies. Achilles

is a rather pitiful personage, and the grand story of the sacrifice is softened very tamely to suit French tastes; but the parental agonies of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon are truly drawn, and the whole play is full of pathos. It succeeded brilliantly and deservedly; but oddly enough, the date of its appearance is very uncertain. It was assuredly acted at court in the late summer of 1674, but it does not seem to have been given to the public till the early spring of 1675, the usual time at which Racine produced his work.

The last and finest of the series of tragedies proper was the most unlucky. *Phèdre* was represented for the first time on New Year's day 1677 at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Within a week the opposition company or 'troupe du roi' launched an opposition *Phèdre* by Pradon. This singular competition, which had momentous results for Racine, and in which he to some extent paid the penalty of the *lex talionis* for his own rivalry with Corneille, had long been foreseen. It has been hinted that Racine had from the first been bitterly opposed by a clique, whom his great success irritated, while his personal character did nothing to conciliate them. His enemies at this time had the powerful support of the duchess of Bouillon, one of Mazarin's nieces, a woman of considerable talents and imperious temper, together with her brother the duke of Nevers and divers other personages of high position. These persons of quality, guided, it is said, by Madame Deshoulières, a poetess of merit whom Boileau unjustly depreciated, selected Pradon, a dramatist of little talent but of much facility, to compose a *Phèdre* in competition with that which it was known that Racine had been elaborating with unusual care. Pradon, perhaps assisted, was equal to the occasion, and it is said that the partisans on both sides did not neglect means for correcting fortune. On her side the duchess of Bouillon is accused of having bought up the front places in both theatres for the first six nights; on his part Racine is said to have repeated an old trick of his and prevailed on the best actresses of the company that played Pradon's piece to refuse the title part. There is even some ground for believing that Racine endeavoured to prevent the opposition play from being played at all, and that an express order from the king had to be

obtained for it. It was of no value, but the measures of the cabal had been so well taken that the finest tragedy of the French classical school was all but driven from the stage, while Pradon's was a positive success. A war of sonnets and epigrams followed, during which it is said that the duke of Nevers menaced Racine and Boileau with the same treatment which Dryden and Voltaire actually received, and was only deterred by the protection which Condé extended to them.

The unjust cabal against his piece, and the various annoyances to which it gave rise, no doubt made a deep impression on Racine. But in the absence of accurate contemporary information it is impossible to decide exactly how much influence they had on the subsequent change in his life. For thirteen years he had been constantly employed on a series of brilliant dramas. He now broke off his dramatic work entirely, and in the remaining twenty years of his life wrote but two more plays, and those under special circumstances and of quite a different kind. He had been during his early manhood a libertine in morals and religion; he now married, became irreproachably domestic, and almost ostentatiously devout. No authentic account of this change exists; for that of Louis Racine, which attributes the whole to a sudden religious impulse, is manifestly little more than the theory of a son pious in both senses of the word. Probably all the motives which friends and foes have attributed—weariness of dissipated life, jealousy of his numerous rivals in *Mademoiselle de Champmeslé's* favour, pique at Pradon's success, fear of losing still further the position of greatest tragic poet, which after *Corneille's Suréna* was indisputably his, religious sentiment, and so forth—entered more or less into his action. At any rate what is certain is that he reconciled himself with Arnauld and Port Royal generally, and on the 1st June married Catherine de Romanet and definitely settled down to a quiet domestic life, alternated with the duties of a courtier. For his repentance was by no means a repentance in sackcloth and ashes. The drama was not then very profitable to dramatists; but Louis Racine tells us that his father had been able to furnish a house, collect a library of some value, and save 6000 livres. His wife had money,

and he had possessed for some time (it is not certain how long) the honourable and valuable post of treasurer of France at Moulins. His annual 'gratification' had been increased from 800 to 1500 livres, then to 2000, and in the October of the year of his marriage he and Boileau were made historiographers-royal with a salary of 2000 crowns. Besides all this he had, though a layman, one or two benefices. It would have been pleasanter if Louis Racine had not told us that his father regarded His Majesty's choice as 'an act of the grace of God to detach him entirely from poetry.' Even after allowing for Louis Racine's religiosity and the conventional language of all times, there is a flavour of hypocrisy about this which is disagreeable, and has shocked even Racine's most uncompromising admirers. For the historiographer of Louis XIV was simply his chief flatterer. Before going further it may be observed that very little came of this historiography. The joint incumbents of the office made some campaigns with the king, sketched plans of histories, and left a certain number of materials and memoirs; but they executed no substantive work. Racine, whether this be set down to his credit or not, was certainly a fortunate and apparently an adroit courtier. His very relapse into Jansenism coincided with his rise at court, where Jansenism was in no favour, and the fact that he had been in the good graces of Madame de Montespan did not deprive him of those of Madame de Maintenon. Neither in *Esther* did he hesitate to reflect upon his former patroness. But a reported sneer of the king, who was sharp-eyed enough, 'Cavoie avec Racine se croit bel esprit; Racine avec Cavoie se croit courtisan,' makes it appear that his comparatively low birth was not forgotten at Versailles.

Racine's first campaign was at the siege of Ypres in 1678, where some practical jokes are said to have been played on the two civilians who acted this early and peculiar variety of the part of special correspondent. Again in 1683, in 1687, and in each year from 1691 to 1693 Racine accompanied the king on similar expeditions. The literary results of these have been spoken of. His labours brought him, in addition to his other gains, frequent special presents from the king, one of

which was as much as 1000 pistoles. In 1690 he further received the office of 'gentilhomme ordinaire du roi,' which afterwards passed to his son. Thus during the later years of his life he was more prosperous than is usual with poets. His domestic life appears to have been a happy one. Louis Racine tells us that his mother 'did not know what a verse was,' but Racine certainly knew enough about verses for both. They had seven children. The eldest, Jean Baptiste, was born in 1678; the youngest, Louis, in 1692. It has been said that he was thus too young to have many personal memories of his father, but he tells one or two stories which show Racine to have been at any rate a man of strong family affection, which his letters also prove. Between the two sons came five daughters, Marie, Anne, Elizabeth, Françoise, and Madeleine. The eldest, after showing 'vocation,' married in 1699, Anne and Elizabeth took the veil, the youngest two remained single but did not enter the cloister. To complete the notice of family matters—much of Racine's later correspondence is addressed to his sister Marie, Madame Rivière.

The almost complete silence in the literary sphere which Racine imposed on himself after the comparative failure, shameful not for himself but for his adversaries, of *Phèdre*, was broken once or twice even before the appearance of the two exquisite tragedies in which under singular circumstances he took leave of the stage. The most honourable of these occasions was the reception of Thomas Corneille on 2nd January 1685 at the Academy in the room of his brother. The discourse which Racine then pronounced turned almost entirely on his great rival, of whom he spoke even more than becomingly. The history of his reintroduction to theatrical work will be told in the introduction to the play now printed. Almost immediately after the success of *Esther* the poet was at work on another and a still finer piece of the same kind, and he had probably finished *Athalie* before the end of 1690. The fate of the play, however, was very different from that of *Esther*. Some fuss had been made about the worldliness of great court fêtes at Saint Cyr, and the new play, with settings as before by Moreau, was acted both at Versailles and at Saint Cyr with much less pomp and ceremony than *Esther*. It was printed

in March 1691 and the public cared very little for it. The truth is that the last five-and-twenty years of the reign of Louis XIV were marked by one of the lowest tides of literary accomplishment and appreciation in the history of France. The just judgment of posterity has ranked *Athalie*, if not as Racine's best work (and there are good grounds for considering it to be this), at any rate as equal to his best. Thenceforward Racine was practically silent, except for four *cantiques spirituels*, in the style and with much of the merit of the choruses of *Esther* and *Athalie*. The general literary sentiment, led by Fontenelle (who inherited the wrongs of Corneille, his uncle, and whom Racine had taken care to estrange further), was against the arrogant critic and the irritable poet, and they made their case worse by espousing the cause of La Bruyère, whose personalities in his *Caractères* had made him one of the best hated men in France, and by engaging in the Ancient and Modern battle with Perrault. Racine, moreover, was a constant and spiteful epigrammatist, and the unlucky habit of preferring his joke to his friend stuck by him to the last. A savage epigram on the *Sesostris* of Longepierre, who had done him no harm and was his familiar acquaintance, dates as late as 1695. Still the king maintained him in favour, and so long as this continued he could afford to laugh at Grub Street and the successors of the Hôtel de Rambouillet alike. At last, however, there seems (for the matter is not too clear) to have come a change. Some say that he disoblged Madame de Maintenon, some (and this would be much to his honour, but not exactly in accord with anything else known of him) that, like Vauban and Fénelon, he urged the growing misery of the people. But there seems to be little doubt of the fact of the royal displeasure, and it is even probable that it had some effect on his health. Disease of the liver appears to have been the immediate cause of his death, which took place on 12th April 1699. The king seems to have, at any rate, forgiven him after his death, and he gave the family a pension of 2000 livres. Racine was buried at Port Royal, but even this transaction was not the last of his relations with that famous home of religion and learning. After the destruction

of the abbey in 1711 his body was exhumed and transferred to Saint Étienne du Mont, his gravestone being left behind and only restored to his ashes a hundred years later, in 1818. His eldest son was never married; his eldest daughter and Louis Racine have left descendants to the present day.

A critical biography of Racine is, in more ways than one, an exceptionally difficult undertaking—not in regard to the facts, which, as will have been seen, are fairly abundant, but as to the construction to be placed on them. The admirers of Racine's literary genius have made it a kind of religion to defend his character; and strictures on his character, it seems to be thought, imply a desire to depreciate his literary worth. The reader of the above sketch of his life must judge for himself whether Racine is or is not to be ranked with those great men of letters, fortunately the greater number, whose personality is attractive and their foibles at worst excusable. There is no doubt that the general impression given, not merely by the flying anecdotes of the time, but by ascertained facts, is somewhat unfavourable. Racine's affection for his family and his unbroken friendship for Boileau are the sole points of his life which are entirely creditable to him. His conduct to Molière and to Nicole cannot be excused; his attitude towards his critics and his rivals was querulous and spiteful; his relation to Corneille contrasts strikingly with the graceful position which young men of letters, sometimes by no means his inferiors, have often taken up towards the surviving glories of a past generation; his 'conversion,' though there is no just cause for branding it as hypocritical, appears to have been a singularly accommodating one, enabling him to tolerate adultery, to libel his friends in secret, and to flatter greatness unhesitatingly. None of these things perhaps are very heinous crimes, but they are all of the class of misdoing which, fairly or unfairly, mankind are apt to regard with greater dislike than positive misdeeds of a more glaring but less unheroic character.

The personality of an author is, however, by all the laws of the saner criticism, entirely independent of the rank to be assigned to his work, and, as in other cases, the strongest dislike for the character of Racine as a man is compatible

with the most unbounded admiration of his powers as a writer. But here again his injudicious admirers have interposed a difficulty. There is a theory common in France, and sometimes adopted out of it, that only a Frenchman, and not every Frenchman, can properly appreciate Racine. The charm of his verse and of his dramatic presentation is so esoteric and delicate that foreigners cannot hope to taste it. This is of course absurd, and if it were true it would be fatal to Racine's claims as a poet of the highest rank. Such poets, such writers, are not parochial or provincial, and even the greatest nations are but provinces or parishes in the realm of literature. Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, even Molière, Rabelais, Goethe, are not afraid to challenge the approval of the whole world, and the whole world is not found incompetent or unwilling to give it. Nor need Racine in reality avail himself of this unwise pretension. Judged by the common tests of literature he is a consummate artist: but he is scarcely a great poet; for his art, though unsurpassed in its kind, is narrow in range, and his poetry is neither of the highest nor of the most genuine.

He may be considered from two very different points of view,—(1) as a playwright and poetical artificer, and (2) as a dramatist and a poet. From the first point of view there is hardly any praise too high for him. He did not invent the form he practised, and those who, from want of attention to the historical facts, assume that he did are unskilful as well as ignorant. When he came upon the scene the form of French plays was settled, partly by the energetic efforts of the Pléiade and their successors, partly by the reluctant acquiescence of Corneille. It is barely possible that the latter might, if he had chosen, have altered the course of French tragedy; it is nearly certain that Racine could not. But Corneille, though he was himself more responsible than any one else for the acceptance of the single-situation tragedy, never frankly gave himself up to it, and the inequality of his work is due to this. His heart was, though not to his knowledge, elsewhere, and with Shakespeare. Racine, in whom the craftsman dominated the man of genius, worked with a will and without any misgivings.

Every advantage of which the Senecan tragedy adapted to modern times was capable he gave it. He perfected its versification; he subordinated its scheme entirely to the one motive which could have free play in it—the display of a conventionally intense passion; he set himself to produce in verse a kind of Ciceronian correctness. The grammar criticisms of Vaugelas and the taste criticisms of Boileau produced in him no feeling of revolt, but only a determination to play the game according to those new rules with triumphant accuracy. And he did so play it. He had supremely the same faculty which enabled the rhétoriciens of the fifteenth century to execute apparently impossible *tours de force* in ‘ballades couronnées,’ and similar tricks. He had besides a real and saving vein of truth to nature, which preserved him from tricks pure and simple. He would be and he was as much a poet as prevalent taste would let him be. The result is that such plays as *Phèdre* and *Andromaque* are supreme in their own way. If the critic will only abstain from thrusting in tierce, when according to the particular rules he ought to thrust in quart, Racine is sure to beat him.

But there is a higher game of authorship than this, and this game Racine does not attempt to play. He does not even attempt the highest poetry at all. His greatest achievements in pure passion—the foiled desires of Hermione and the jealous frenzy of *Phèdre*—are cold, not merely beside the crossed love of Ophelia and the remorse of Lady Macbeth, but beside the sincerer if less perfectly expressed passion of Corneille’s *Cléopâtre* and *Camille*. In men’s parts he fails still more completely. As the decency of his stage would not allow him to make his heroes frankly heroic, so it would not allow him to make them utterly passionate. He had, moreover, deprived himself, by the adoption of the Senecan model, of all the opportunities which would have been offered to his remarkably varied talent on a freer stage. It is indeed tolerably certain that he never could have achieved the purely poetical comedy of *As You Like It* or the *Vida es Sueño*; but the admirable success of *Les Plaideurs* makes it at least probable that he might have done something in a lower and a more conventional style. From all this, however,

he deliberately cut himself off. Of the whole world which is subject to the poet he took only a narrow artificial and conventional fraction. Within these narrow bounds he did work which no admirer of literary craftsmanship can regard without admiration. But at the same time no one speaking with competence can deny that the bounds are narrow. It would be unnecessary to contrast his performances with his limitations so sharply if those limitations had not been denied. But they have been and are still denied by persons whose sentence carries weight, and therefore it is still necessary to point out the fact of their existence.

II. PROGRESS OF FRENCH TRAGEDY.

There are still to be found people who regard the great French dramatists of the seventeenth century, Corneille in tragedy and Molière in comedy, as having no ancestry in their own country and only an indistinct and doubtful strain of indebtedness to any other. It is not necessary to remark that both *a priori* and from analogy this is exceedingly improbable. It is not only this, but it is utterly false in fact. In no literature is the genealogy of almost all literary forms traceable more clearly or for a longer period than in France. French comedy can trace its descent in unbroken line from the *Jeu de la Feuillie* and the *Robin et Marion* of Adam de la Halle at the end of the thirteenth century. French tragedy owes indeed more to foreign, and especially to classical influences ; but it, too, has a well made out parentage as far back as the eleventh, and possibly the tenth century of our era, in the mysteries and miracles *par personnages*, of which the first half-French half-Latin forms are now to be found in the sacred dramas of *Adam* and the *Ten Virgins*.

It is not, however, necessary here to concern ourselves with this mystery play, which, interesting as it is, has not much to do with the classical tragedy. But France possessed a largely attended and fertile school of tragedies and comedies

of distinctly modern stamp a century before the representation of *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, and more than three-quarters of a century before the representation of *Médée*. The comic writers of the period were indeed, with one exception, not of the most remarkable; and Corneille himself had to take French comedy in hand before Molière was possible. But in tragedy a chain of names, distinctly remarkable among the minor stars of literature, conducts us from what is generally called the birth of French tragedy in Jodelle's *Cléopâtre* to its sudden adolescence in *The Cid*.

The connection of the form of tragedy which was most to prevail in France with its predecessors was, as has been already remarked, somewhat looser than was the case with comedy. The comic work of the post-Renaissance time was merely the indigenous farce largely modified and improved by foreign and especially by classical models. The tragic productions of France, on the contrary, have rather been exotic in origin and nature, though some strain of the indigenous profane mystery may be observed in them. The acclimatisation of regular tragedy was one of the capital efforts and one of the most durable successes of the Pléiade. It was impossible that the study of the classics should not draw attention to the dramatic forms which are among the crowning glories of classical art. Both independently and in imitation of Italian predecessors the scholars of France busied themselves in translations of Greek and Latin plays; and before the sixteenth century was half past, the *Electra*, the *Hecuba*, the *Iphigenia*, the *Plutus* had been versified in French. The influence of Italy, combined, no doubt, with a reminiscence of the mysteries, also gave the early dramatists of the French Renaissance another class of subject very little cultivated on the English stage. This was the sacred tragedy, written after a semi-classical model but on Scriptural subjects, a class of composition which can boast not merely of *Esther* and *Athalie*, but of the best regular tragedy written before Corneille, Garnier's *Les Juives*, and of another, not far inferior, the *Aman* of Antoine de Montchrestien. For some time drama on these models was either merely translated, or else, like the plays of Buchanan, Mure-

tus, and Guérente, written in Latin. In 1549, however, appeared Du Bellay's *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française*, the profession of faith, and at the same time the act of association, of the Pléiade. A very short time only had elapsed when Jodelle, the youngest of the seven, carried out the principles of Du Bellay by creating French tragedy and comedy of the modern type, the one with his *Cléopâtre*, the other with his *Eugène*. These were both represented on the same day in 1552 before the Court of Henry II, the actors being Jodelle himself and others of the society, such as Belleau and Grévin. Few literary anecdotes are better known than that of the scene which followed the representation. The Pléiade had inherited a good deal of the somewhat pagan enthusiasm of the Italian humanists for antiquity, and nothing would satisfy them but a solemn Dionysiac festival to complete the introduction of drama into France. They journeyed to Arcueil for the purpose, and unluckily met a goat by the way. The coincidence was too strong to be resisted, and the beast was caught, crowned with flowers, and solemnly conferred upon Jodelle as the reward of his prowess. This escapade made a terrible disturbance. Catholics and Protestants alike raised the cry of atheism and profanity, and the story losing as usual nothing by repetition, it was soon asserted that the unfortunate goat had been sacrificed on the occasion to the god, whose part was said to have been played by Ronsard.

Besides *Cléopâtre* we also possess Jodelle's subsequent tragedy of *Didon*, in which a considerable advance is visible. The earlier drama is written irregularly, now in verses of ten, now in verses of twelve syllables. The regular interlacement of masculine and feminine rhymes is not attended to, and the chorus, an important part of the early French drama, attempts a regular sequence of strophe, antistrophe, and epode. *Didon* exhibits a considerable advance in this respect towards the model finally accepted. The dialogue is in alexandrines throughout, the alternation of rhymes is generally though not quite universally observed, and the complex division of the chorus is abandoned. It is exceedingly curious to observe in these two first tragedies the germ

of nearly all the merits and defects of the classical French drama. In some respects, too, though by no means in all, they are better than their immediate successors. The besetting sin of most tragedians from Jodelle to Corneille was the enormous length of their speeches. Even Garnier has tirades of nearly 200 lines, whole plays of Montchrestien read like monologues, here and there broken by the end and beginning of acts and scenes, and Jean de Schélandre sends his characters on the stage to talk to themselves and the audience for half a dozen pages. In Jodelle's work, especially in *Cléopâtre*, the speeches are of a much more reasonable length. In two other points, however, the founder of French tragedy set an example which almost all his successors followed. One of these is the *στιχομυθία* or snipsnap dialogue, which, more than a century afterwards, Butler so admirably ridiculed, as it appeared in the English heroic drama. The other is the device of beginning several successive lines with the same word or words, a device of which in its most famous and successful instance, the final speech of Camille in Corneille's *Horace*, every one must admit the effectiveness, but which becomes mannered and tedious when indiscriminately used.

The literary movement of the *Pléiade* was more than any other, except its counterpart the romantic outburst of the present century, a school movement, and Jodelle's example could not fail of imitators. If it was more troublesome to write a drama than to write a sonnet or an ode, it was also much more glorious. La Pérouse, Toustain, Jacques de la Taille, and Grévin at once adopted the new model, though only the last is of importance sufficient to deserve much notice. De la Taille, indeed, has earned an unenviable place in story by an attempt at realism. His dying Darius thus addresses Alexander:—

* Mes enfants et ma femme aie en recommanda. . . .
Il ne put achever car la mort l'engarda.'

Grévin, however, is of a different stamp. He was a Protestant, and did not a little to swell the literary renown which Du Bartas and D'Aubigné have acquired for the

French Calvinists of the sixteenth century. When only eighteen years old he wrote two comedies, *Les Esbahis* and *La Trésorière*, which are far livelier than *Eugène*, and are hardly surpassed by the adaptations of Larivey. He was scarcely older when he wrote his tragedy *La Mort de César*. Afterwards he became a physician, and accompanying to Savoy Marguerite, sister of Henry II (the second of the Valois Marguerites, a great patroness of the Pléiade, though not, like her aunt and niece, herself a famous author), he died, aged only thirty, at Turin. His *César* is not exactly a lively play, and it is still much encumbered with choruses and the rest of the unmanageable details of a classical drama. But it has some interest of action and the style is good, partaking of the easiness and grace of the author's *villanesques*—a simplified villanelle of which he was fond—and *baisers*.

A very different figure from any yet mentioned is that of Robert Garnier. If he be, as he certainly is, far inferior to the dramatists which a very few years after his time England produced, that is owing chiefly to the unfortunate model which he followed. It is acknowledged by all competent judges that *Les Juives* is not only the best French tragedy before the seventeenth century, but also the best French tragedy on the regular lines before Corneille, and that without Garnier it is more than probable that the French classical drama, as we now know it, would never have existed. He indeed may justly be regarded as the poet who made French tragedy. He took the accepted forms of classical and biblical subjects; he added to them the important form of tragi-comedy, and in each class he produced work of remarkable and permanent literary value. The perception of stage effect, for which French dramatists were later to be so justly famed, indeed escaped him. This was to be added by Hardy, the neglected and often, ridiculed playwright who immediately preceded Corneille. But when we compare Garnier with our own contemporary tragedians, it is only fair to remember that he exceeded them as much in the literary sense as they exceeded him in merely theatrical proficiency, in variety, and in poetical

vigour and grasp of character. The somewhat severe adherence to a definite critical standard, of which he set, if not the example, at least the most successful and attractive instance, was never afterwards quite forgotten; and the attempts of Jean de Schélandre, and the achievements of Hardy, only temporarily obscured this model. It is at least doubtful whether the French would have produced masterpieces in the romantic drama had they taken to it. It is matter of history that they have produced masterpieces on the classical models which the example of Jodelle and the brilliant seconding of Garnier led them to adopt.

Garnier, who was a lawyer, and whose life was noways eventful, was born in 1545, and died in the first year of the following century. His dramatic work consists of six tragedies on ancient topics and models, viz. *Porcie*, *Cornélie*, *Marc Antoine*, *Hippolyte*, *La Troade*, and *Antigone*; of the Biblical *Les Juives*, and of *Bradamante*, a tragicomedy suggested by Ariosto. The six antique tragedies have but little attraction for us, inasmuch as they are merely improved attempts on the *Cléopâtre* model, with the influence of Seneca more prominent than ever. One of them, the *Cornélie*, has for Englishmen, however, a certain interest unconnected with its intrinsic merit. Kyd adapted it to the English stage, and thus it formed almost the only link of connection between the early drama of the two countries. The proportion of adaptations from the French among our plays has scarcely proved a constant quantity. Perhaps no better instance of the faults of these tragedies could be found than that speech in *Hippolyte*, wherein the catastrophe is told. The length of this in Racine's *Phèdre* has always been felt to be a great blemish. Where Racine has eighty verses his predecessor has one hundred and seventy-two. *Les Juives*, however, is a play of much greater interest. The subject is the punishment of Zedekiah and his family after the fall of Jerusalem.

While Garnier was thus bringing the classical tragedy as Jodelle had imitated it from the ancients, and especially from Seneca, to the greatest height it could for the time attain, a number of minor poets were producing dramatic

work, sometimes based upon the same model, sometimes tracing a more direct lineage to the mysteries which still continued, especially in the provinces, to be performed. Among the names of Mathieu, Leger, Billard, Bounin, Filleul, and a dozen more equally forgotten, Jean de la Taille, brother of the already mentioned Jacques, deserves at least a passing notice. On the touching subject of Rizpah, the daughter of Ayah, and her sons, he wrote the tragedy of *Les Gabaonites*, containing not a few affecting scenes, and some attempt at careful character-drawing: he deserves especial credit for attempting to break up the dialogue into something at least distantly resembling an actual conversation. Somewhat younger than Garnier, and next to him in importance, was Antoine de Montchrestien, a man of remarkable life and of remarkable works. Even in those stormy times few stormier lives can have been lived than the life of this Protestant dramatist. He was born about 1560, being the son, it is said, of a surgeon of Falaise, though somehow or other he gained or took the title of Seigneur de Vasteville. He was left an orphan and robbed by his guardians, but succeeded in compelling restitution by force of law. Then he quarrelled with a certain Baron de Gourville, was half killed by him, and afterwards, again returning to the aid of the law, obtained the heavy damages of twelve thousand livres. Later he killed his man in another quarrel, and had to fly to England. James I (it is said in gratitude for the tragedy of *L'Ecossaise*) obtained his pardon from Henry IV, and he returned. He then took to a not very comprehensible business, which seems to have included the manufacture of cutlery and, according to his enemies, the manufacture of base money. In the anarchy of the early years of Louis XIII he joined a Huguenot rising in his native province, was killed in a skirmish, and after his death his body was broken on the wheel and burnt. He wrote six plays, of which *La Cartaginoise*, *L'Ecossaise* (Mary Stuart), and *Aman*, which Racine utilised in *Esther*, are the chief. His choruses are very beautiful.

About the same time an experiment was tried which, had it been followed up, might have changed the whole

course of French drama. Jean de Schélandre was of a noble family of Lorraine, entered the army early, and served nearly all his life on the northern frontiers of France. He was born in 1585 or thereabouts, and died of wounds received in battle in 1635. His principal work is *Tyr et Sidon*, a tragi-comedy of formidable proportions, which was twice printed during the lifetime of the author (once in 1608, once in 1628), and then was forgotten until M. Charles Asselineau called attention to it some five-and-twenty years ago, with the satisfactory result that it was reprinted in the Bibliothèque Elzévirienne. It consists of some five or six thousand lines, and the original editor, François Ogier, seems to have considered it at least doubtful whether it would ever be represented except in private theatricals. It is constructed far more on the model of contemporary English dramas than on the accepted French plan, though the influence of the latter is apparent enough.

Schélandre had no imitators, and as far as we know exercised no influence. It was far otherwise with Alexandre Hardy (1560-1631). Hardy was the first of the eminent playwrights rather than dramatists of whom France has produced so many. He was regularly engaged as author by different troops of actors, and the number of pieces which he wrote is sometimes put as high as eight hundred, and never lower than five hundred. A play was to Hardy a week's work, and his price was fifty crowns (others improbably say three). Forty-one of his pieces, including a series of dramatisations of the *Theagenes and Chariclea* of Heliodorus, remain in print, and enable us to form a good idea of their author. He was evidently, like most of his English contemporaries, a man of considerable reading and scholarship; and he took his subjects, and sometimes a little more, wherever he chose. The Spanish stage supplied him with much material, and to a certain extent with models. His work is not—and from the circumstances of its production could hardly be expected to be—of much literary value. His incidents are very often preposterous, and his language almost always extravagant. But he withstood the growing taste for what were called *pointes*, smart

antithetic sayings, and he had the knack of presenting situations, if not character, effectively enough, and of carrying his audience with him. He departed somewhat widely from the Jodelle-Garnier model, but only so far as to make that model acceptable to miscellaneous audiences. Thus *Mariamne*, his best play, takes rank rather with *Le Comte d'Essex* and *Mademoiselle de Belle-Isle* than with *Phèdre* or *Hernani*, and its author rather with Thomas Corneille and Alexandre Dumas than with Racine or Hugo. He deserves, however, the credit of having made the French drama possible as an acting medium. It was becoming more and more suitable only for reading and recitation, and his great experience and immense fecundity helped to rescue it from this fate. He is therefore, in one sense, the most important figure in the pre-Cornelian theatre of France, but that sense is by no means a literary one.

Hardy is the last name deserving mention as properly before Corneille in French tragedy. Corneille's own immediate predecessors and early contemporaries were very numerous, and their productions extremely voluminous. The names of Théophile de Viaud, of Tristan L'Ermitte, of Du Ryer, of Mairet, have some importance in the history of French literature, and that of Rotrou marks a genius which with better cultivation might have been hardly inferior to Corneille's own. But for the present purpose it is sufficient to say that none of these made important innovations in plan, nor achieved any remarkable successes in execution. Their model was the model of Hardy, altered a little to suit each man's temper, education, and capacities. That is to say, they, as did Corneille in his early works, retained the scanty action and limited interest of the Senecan tragedy, but allowed themselves, after the example of their Spanish predecessors, a considerable licence of incident on the stage. They were thus for the most part at once cramped and extravagant, their practice and their theory matching ill. To the large conception of the English drama, with its manifold interests and its free working out of the story, they did not attain or even aspire, but they still less attempted the narrower but exquisitely proportioned perfection of the

Greek tragedy. To reproduce this latter in a form suited to the tastes and conditions of his day was the work of Corneille, and of his younger contemporary Racine ; and this form requires some attention.

The most rapid and uninstructed survey of any example of the work of these two writers will show at once some remarkable differences from the model to which the merely English student is accustomed. Other differences, not less vital but not so evident at first sight, would be discovered by a closer inspection. In the first place, every one must see at once that one remarkable difference between Corneille and Shakespeare is that the former writes entirely in rhyme, and in a single metre. Those who have some little acquaintance with English tragedy, need not be told that blank verse was not the original form of tragic writing even in England. But the practice of Marlowe and Shakespeare first, and then of their great successors, fixed it as such (with a brief interval in the third quarter of the seventeenth century) to the great benefit of English literature. French poets however, are not to be blamed for not following this example. Blank verse in French is impossible, owing to the structure of the language and the peculiarities of French pronunciation. Apart from regular poetical form there is no such rhythm in French as there is in English and German ; and verse itself needs not merely the assistance of metre, but also that of rhyme, to produce its effect. But this deficiency is compensated by a peculiarity which is as strange to English eyes as blank verse is to French ears. A glance at this or any French tragedy will show that every four lines exhibit a remarkable difference between the first and the second couplet. The first is always 'masculine'—that is to say, it ends in a full vowel-sound, which counts in the twelve syllables of the line. The second is 'feminine'—that is to say, it ends with the mute *e*, either final or contained in the *es* of the plural, the *ent* of the verbal third person, or some other similar form. This alternation, except in a very few lyric metres which were long unfashionable became obligatory in France in the sixteenth century, and it has been so long practised that it is now absolutely demanded. This

peculiarity, and the accompanying recitative which enables the actors to make it fully appreciable, substitute an artificial attraction for that of the more natural charm, as it seems to northern critics, of the rhythmical verse of English tragedy. It is, indeed, in the highest degree contrary to common sense that in the impassioned moments of ordinary life which find their chronicle in tragedy, any such refinements should be thought of. Accordingly, the less ornate form of rhymed verse, which for some twenty or thirty years found a home in English tragedy during the latter half of the seventeenth century, was soon disused. But the French tragedy is so emphatically a work of art, so little a reproduction of nature, that the greater its refinement the greater was the compliment paid to the critical powers of the audience, and the greater the strain laid on the power of exposition of the actors. This is the secret of the entire structure of the classical French tragedy. It is not at all (in the words of an old English writer) the 'muses' looking-glass,' it is an entirely artificial product constructed with the most delicate ingenuity to appeal to the sense of satisfaction at seeing a difficult game played successfully. Just as in the game of croquet the hoops were constantly narrowed and the ball constantly enlarged, so as to make it as difficult as possible, so the rules of French tragedy were drawn ever tighter.

The secret of the general theory becomes more obvious when we come to the second and less prominent class of differences between the French and the English tragedy. It has been observed that in the selection of rhymed verse of a singularly artificial pattern for the dialogue, a great violence was apparently done to the verisimilitude of the stage. But the rules which governed the arrangement of the plot and incidents, oddly enough sacrificed everything to this same verisimilitude. The famous three unities, though not uniformly observed to the letter, were incumbent in general on every French classical dramatist. These unities are derived partly from the theory and partly from the practice of the Greeks, whose example was made entirely inapplicable by the fact of the system of representing trilogies or groups of plays which was customary at Athens.

The Unity of Time requires that the incidents of every play shall be contained within the space of a natural day at most; the Unity of Place, in its narrowest form, requires that the scene shall never be changed; the Unity of Action that only one story shall be told, and that there shall be no subdivision of plot. The ostensible reason for these severe restrictions is that the breach of them shocks the spectator as unreal. It is perhaps sufficient to say that no possible unreality in respect of any one of the three could be equal to the unreality of Phaedra or Medea at the crisis of their fate observing Alexandrine measure, *rimes difficiles* (carefully adjusted rhymes extending to as many letters as might be), and masculine and feminine alternations. But no such merely controversial argument as this is necessary. The unities were not as a matter of fact exactly observed by any of the great poets of antiquity, and even if they had been, the bad results of their observance would have been a sufficient reason for a reform. Among those bad results, when the custom of trilogies and of theatrical representations extending over the greater part of a day ceased, the most prominent was the almost entire stagnation of the action, and the resort to the most unnatural devices to keep the spectators aware of its course.

A third grave objection lies against this drama, which is less directly chargeable on its form, but which is soon seen to be closely connected with it. It has been said that the very last object of the French drama of Racine's time was to hold the mirror up to nature. The model which, owing to admiration of the classics, the Pléiade had almost at haphazard followed, rendered this process simply impossible. The so-called irregularity of the English stage, which used to fill French critics with alternate wonder and disgust, is nothing but the result of an unflinching adherence to this standard. It is impossible to reproduce the *subtilitas naturae* in its most subtle example—the character of man—without introducing a large diversity of circumstance and action. That diversity in its turn cannot be produced without a great multiplication of characters, a duplication or a triplification of plot, and a complete disregard of pre-established

'common form.' Now this 'common form' was the essence of French tragedy. There was to be no action on the stage, or next to none, the interest of the play was to be rigidly reduced to a central situation, subsidiary characters were to be avoided as far as possible; the only means afforded to the characters of explaining themselves was by dialogue with confidantes—the curse of the French stage; and the only way of informing the audience of the progress of the action was by messengers. Corneille accepted these limitations partially, and without too much good-will, but he evaded the difficulty by emphasising the moral lesson. The ethical standard of his plays is perhaps higher on the whole than that of any great dramatist, and the wonderful bursts of poetry which he could command served to sugar the pill. But Racine was of a less elevated morality, and he evidently distrusted the willingness of audiences perpetually to admire moral grandeur, whether he did or did not hold that 'admiration was not a tragic passion.' Probably he would have put it that it was not a passion that would draw. Love-making, on the contrary, would draw, and love-making accordingly is the staple of all his plays. But the defect which has weighed on all French literature, which was facilitated enormously by this style of drama, and which is noticeable even in his greater contemporaries, Corneille and Molière, manifested itself in his work almost inevitably. If there is one fault to be found with the creations of French literary art, it is that they run too much into types. It has been well said that the duty of art is to give the universal in the particular. But this is difficult. It is the fault of English and German literature to give the particular without a sufficient tincture of the universal, to lose itself in mere 'humours.' It is the fault of French art to give the type only without differentiation. An ill-natured critic constantly feels inclined to alter the lists of Racine's dramatis personae, and instead of the proper names to substitute 'a lover,' 'a mother,' 'a tyrant,' and so forth. So great an artist, and so careful a worker as Racine, could not, of course, escape giving some individuality to his creations. Hermione, Phèdre, Achille, Bérénice, Athalie, are all in-

dividual enough of their class. But the class is the class of types rather than of individuals. After long debate this difference has been admitted by most reasonable French critics, and they now confine themselves to the argument that the two processes, the illustration of the universal by means of the particular, and the indication of the particular by means of the universal, are processes equally legitimate and equally important. The difficulty remains that, by common consent of mankind—Frenchmen not excluded—Hamlet, Othello, Falstaff, Rosalind, are fictitious persons far more interesting to their fellow-creatures who are not fictitious than any personages of the French stage. There is, moreover, a simple test which can be applied. No one can doubt that, if Shakespeare had chosen to adopt the style, and had accepted the censorship of a Boileau, he could easily have written *Phèdre*. It would be a bold man who should say that Racine could, with altered circumstances but unaltered powers, have written *Othello*.

What has been here said applies less to the dramas of Corneille, in which the observance of the model had not reached its full rigour, than to those of Racine, but with differences it applies to both. Yet it would be uncritical not to acknowledge the merits which accompany these defects. The very limitations and difficulties of the plan required unusual excellence of execution. The clumsy verses, the prosaic expressions, which pass unnoticed in the animated bustle of an English play, are impossible here, if the author is to satisfy his audience. The besetting sin of the English playwright, both tragic and comic, the neglect of the main action in attending to minor interests, finds no opening for its indulgence when the main action is the only one which is admitted at all. The dangers of the style, its monotony, its stereotyped character, its lack of vividness and interest, can only stimulate a man of true genius to overcome the difficulty by brilliant achievement in the opportunities which remain to him. It may be said that a French tragedy must be extraordinarily good to be tolerable at all. This is not the place to discuss at any length the means to which any particular tragedian resorted in order

to make his tragedies good. But it may be generally repeated that the object of the French tragedian in this style is to present strikingly a single character, in a single situation, very slightly varied by circumstance.

To complete the literary survey of the subject we are handling, a short sketch of the fortunes of French tragedy subsequent to the classical or Corneille-Racine period, and of the extraordinary revolution which, within the memory of living men, it has undergone, is required. The younger contemporaries and immediate successors of Racine were very far inferior to himself and to his great rival. Racine had begun to write tragedies fully thirty years after Corneille. He had the advantage of the latter's example and of the tutorship of Boileau, a critic not very trustworthy in principle, but wonderfully expert in detail, in developing the special class of classical love-tragedy to a point never reached before or since. At the same time Racine restricted and weakened the style still further. He was punished for the somewhat indecent eagerness he had shown to contend with a man old enough to be his grandfather, by the temporary popularity of Pradon, a fifth-rate tragedian in his own style. Pradon, with Thomas Corneille (the younger brother of Pierre and a man of talent), with Campistron, La Fosse, Duché, and a few others, were the tragedians of the extreme end of the seventeenth century. The style remained entirely unaltered. At the beginning of the eighteenth, Crébillon the elder displayed in it talent and energy which have sometimes induced critics to rank him next to Corneille and Racine. His chief piece, *Rhadamiste et Zénobie*, is in parts exceedingly fine, and has vigour which is quite Cornelian. But the defects of the model began to be felt. Lamotte-Houdart, a paradoxical but very able writer, who himself produced one good tragedy, *Inès de Castro*, maintained that all plays ought to be in prose, and that the formal restrictions of unities and the like should be done away with. He was answered by numerous adherents to the academical ways, of whom by far the most important was the young Voltaire in his introduction to his tragedy of *Oedipe*. Voltaire is the third and last great name in the annals of classical French

tragedy. His plays—*Zaïre*, *Alzire*, *Mahomet*, *Mérope*—although destitute of the nobility of Corneille and the tenderness and exquisite versification of Racine, are extraordinarily clever: and the introduction to the present play will show the favourable and unfavourable senses of the word ‘clever’ as applied to them. It so happened that Voltaire, independently of his literary power, was a practised, though amateur, actor and stage manager, and accordingly he had every qualification for accomplishing his task. His great authority, and the popularity and indeed merit of his plays, helped to maintain the regular tragedy in vogue during the century. But in one way and another various inroads were made upon its theory. Both Voltaire and his followers subordinated the drama to the purposes of the political, ecclesiastical, and other disputes in which their age was interested, more than most ages. The *Tragédie Bourgeoise* of La Chaussée and Diderot, in which subjects of ordinary and modern life were substituted for the heroic conventionalities of the classical model, obtained a footing on the stage. De Belloy introduced what he called a ‘Tragédie Nationale’ in the *Siège de Calais* and other pieces, while Ducis made a certain approach to English practice by dramatising, in French form, Shakespearian subjects, and keeping a little while he sacrificed much of the liberty of the originals. During the period of the Revolution and the Empire however, which in point of literature ranks below almost every other in the history of France, tragedy sank to its lowest depths, being hardly relieved by the fitful and eccentric talent of Népomucène Lemercier. Almost every situation, almost every historical incident that would lend itself to the orthodox treatment, was catalogued and ready arranged, with the scenes and characters necessary to unfold the plot. The versification and diction, always somewhat stiff and formal, became more so than ever, and the latter in particular had fallen into a silly mannerism of periphrasis which forbade anything to be mentioned except in the most elaborate and roundabout terms. It was accordingly in tragedy (respecting which even the actors, usually a most conservative body, complained that the plays commonly furnished

to them gave them no opportunity of displaying any variety of talent) that the first and greatest innovation of what is called the romantic movement took place. M. Victor Hugo's first play, *Cromwell*, was not acted owing to the death of Talma, and in its existing form was hardly written to be acted; but as published it was furnished by its author with an elaborate argumentative preface, impugning the existing tragic model. This challenge was fully carried out in the famous play of *Hernani*, which was acted at the Théâtre Français shortly before the downfall of the monarchy of Charles X. Of this play, of the many that followed it as well as of some that preceded it (from the pen of Alexandre Dumas), no account can be given here. It is enough to say that the chief changes in the style of French tragedy, all of them drawn mainly from the study of the English and Spanish dramas, were as follows:—In the first place, the unities, except that of action, which was considerably modified, were entirely swept away. In the second, action on the stage, which, in accordance with the precepts of Horace rather than of any older writer, had been forbidden, was restored. In the third (and this was of much importance), the practice which had grown up since Corneille's day of rigidly confining the sense of each couplet to its own limits, was broken through in the direction of what is called *enjambement*, that is to say, 'overlapping.' Lastly, the conventional diction of the stage, as well as the confidantes, the messengers, and all the rest of the regular conditions, were dispensed with. Blank verse, as has been said, was impossible in French, and the ears of audiences had been so trained to demand the alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes that no innovation in this direction was ventured upon. But in other respects, national and social differences excepted, the French play was approximated as much as possible to the model of Shakespeare.

This new tragedy or, as it is more accurately called, *drame*, has been written for fifty years now, while no tragedy entirely of the old model has been attempted during that time. Various reactions, however, at different times have drawn somewhat nearer to that model, and its masterpieces,

especially those of Racine, with Corneille and Voltaire more rarely, have never ceased to be played. For, in the first place, this tragedy is much more closely associated with the traditional interests of the French people than any literary or theatrical product of England. The theatre is to France what different national sports—cricket, racing, foxhunting—are to England. Besides this, it is worth observing that as the original production of a tragedy on this artificial model at once tasks to the utmost and exhibits to the utmost the powers of the poet, so the performance of it tasks and exhibits to the utmost the powers of the actor and actress. The interest is so entirely concentrated, the accessory and distractions of incident and by-play so small, the traditional methods of making the utmost of each utterance and gesture so manifold, that emulation between accomplished performers reaches the highest point. Besides, the audience is compelled, whether it will or no, to concentrate critical attention on the merits of the individual performer, the interest of incident being for the most part little or none. Hence the greatest actors and actresses have always looked favourably on the classical tragedy, in which their comparative excellence is made much more evident than in the bustling and many-parted *drame*. As long, therefore, as the art of acting is sedulously cultivated and eagerly appreciated in France, these plays are never likely altogether to lose their popularity, though it must be admitted that of late years they have scarcely held their ground so well as formerly.

III. INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER.

The circumstances of the production of *Esther* have been to some extent described in the preceding article on the life and writings of Racine. The poet had given up poetical or at least dramatic composition for nearly twelve years and had

definitely betaken himself to the formal and perhaps sincere practice of religious observances. It was not an open breach of this devotion that the inspirer and (to speak more plainly) commissioner of *Esther* was Madame de Maintenon. Her equivocal relations with Louis XIV had been five years before legitimated by a private but canonical marriage, she was recognised as a patroness of the church, and two years before the appearance of *Esther* she had founded the so-called 'Maison de St. Louis' at St. Cyr, where young orphan girls of family but no fortune were educated on a strict but not illiberal system. The first superior of St. Cyr, Madame de Brinon, was a person of literary tastes though not of great literary faculties, and, following a practice then universal in the boys' schools conducted by the Jesuits and others, she made her pupils act dramatic pieces composed by herself. It would appear that Madame de Maintenon liked the general notion better than the particular examples, and suggested the substitution of chosen plays of Corneille and Racine. The suggestion was carried out, but with an obvious awkwardness of consequence. Love-making played too great a part in all the tragedies of Racine and in almost all those of Corneille for them to be exactly suitable to a company of girls educated on monastic principles and in some if not most cases themselves destined for monastic life. Madame de Caylus, a former pupil of St. Cyr whose subsequent life did much credit to its literary education at any rate, and from whom we have most of the details of the production of *Esther*, tells us in the pointed way of her time (though she puts the words in Madame de Maintenon's mouth addressing Racine), that 'the little girls played *Andromaque*, and played it so well that they shall not play it any more nor any other of your pieces.' But it not unnaturally occurred to the favourite that Racine might write something which, originally planned for the purpose, might be much more suitable. He hesitated a little, and his friend Boileau dissuaded him from the attempt. But Racine was a courtier born and bred: he had beyond all doubt suffered from the withdrawal from the stage which his indignation at the cabal in Pradon's favour had forced on him: he knew that here he would be free from any similar danger, and he

could not but know that his own abilities were far more than equal to the severest dramatic task that could be imposed on him. He hit upon the subject of Esther, the mere selection of which was, considering his unequalled talents of dramatic working-out, a guarantee of success. His next step, the adoption of the Greek (which was also the early French) form of the tragedy with chorus, prologue, etc. made that success still more certain. Striking, pathetic, dramatic in its revolutions and discoveries, free from any of the dangerous possibilities of the ordinary *tragédie de soupirs et de flammes*, the story of Queen Esther supplied all that Madame de Maintenon could wish. The choric form provided employment for a number of the 'demoiselles de St. Cyr' much greater than could possibly have been admitted to parts in an ordinary tragedy, exercised them in an art which was a special subject of their studies, and gave them work which permitted them to display their talents and teaching without any indecorous forwardness. It does not seem by any means certain how long Racine took to execute Madame de Maintenon's orders: but it is agreed that *Esther* was written during the last half of 1688 and was actually completed by the very first days of the new year. It was rehearsed or at least read by the author before the King and Madame de Maintenon on the 7th of January. The music was written by Jean Baptiste Moreau, a composer holding court office, and also organist of St. Cyr, and it satisfied Louis or his wife or both so well that Moreau received 200 pistoles at once and a pension yearly of the same number of crowns. It was at one of the readings or rehearsals that the young Madame de Caylus, who was Madame de Maintenon's niece, showed so much desire to take part in the piece that Racine at his patroness's desire wrote the prologue, on purpose for her. He himself acted as stage manager and master in declamation to the girls of St. Cyr.

Esther was represented for the first time on the 26th of January at St. Cyr. The audience were as a matter of course all specially invited by the king, or at least by Madame de Maintenon, the performance being adorned with a certain luxury of apparatus (glass chandeliers, elaborate court dresses,

and so forth) which must have contrasted not a little with the rather homely properties of the actual theatre of the time, though Court ballets and other spectacle-pieces performed in the palace had often been splendidly mounted. In such circumstances success of a certain kind was assured, but we have the play before us to show that it was deserved, and we have testimonies of the period to show that it was genuine.

The more important parts were distributed as follows : Prologue, Madame de Caylus. Esther, Mlle. de Veilhenne (or Veillanne) ; Assuérus, Mlle. de Lastic ; Mardochee, Mlle. de Glapion ; Aman, Mlle. d'Avancourt. None of the actresses was older than seventeen : Esther and Mordecai were two years younger. It is not surprising that girls of such an age, brought up in the fashion which until very recently has been traditional in France for centuries, were somewhat daunted by their duties, and a story is told which that age and the next found touching, though it has a flavour of the ridiculous to the more cynical nineteenth century. At one performance the actress who played Elise, Esther's confidante, forgot her part. 'Ah, Mademoiselle,' cried Racine, and the remark is characteristic of his rather selfish temperament, 'Quel tort vous faites à ma pièce !' The girl cried, and touched by her grief, says the legend (it should have said ashamed of himself) the poet ran to her, wiped her eyes with his handkerchief, and wept with her.

The play had six representations at short intervals between its first performance and the 19th of February, each being attended by a brilliant company. On the 5th February the exiled King and Queen of England, James the second and Mary of Modena, were present ; on the 19th Madame de Sévigné (to whom we owe not a little information about the piece) at last received an invitation, to her great delight. It is always rash to attempt to tell over again what the most charming of letter-writers has told ; and she shall speak for herself.

"Je fis la mienne l'autre jour à Saint-Cyr, plus agréablement que je n'eusse jamais pensé. Nous y allâmes samedi, madame de Coulanges, madame de Bagnols, l'abbé Têtu et moi. Nous trouvâmes nos places gardées. Un

officier dit à madame de Coulanges que madame de Maintenon lui faisait garder un siège auprès d'elle ; vous voyez quel honneur. Pour vous, Madame, me dit-il, vous pouvez choisir. Je me mis avec madame de Bagnols au second banc derrière les duchesses. Le maréchal de Bellefonds vint se mettre, par choix, à mon côté droit, et devant c'étaient mesdames d'Auvergne, de Coislin et de Sully. Nous écoutâmes, le maréchal et moi, cette tragédie avec une attention qui fut remarquée, et de certaines louanges sourdes et bien placées, qui n'étaient peut-être pas sous les *fontanges* de toutes les dames. Je ne puis vous dire l'excès de l'agrément de cette pièce. C'est une chose qui n'est pas aisée à représenter, et qui ne sera jamais imitée : c'est un rapport de la musique, des vers, des chants, des personnes, si parfait et si complet, qu'on n'y souhaite rien. Les filles qui font des rois et des personnages sont faites exprès. On est attentif, et on n'a point d'autre peine que celle de voir finir une si aimable pièce. Tout y est simple, tout y est innocent, tout y est sublime et touchant : cette fidélité de l'histoire sainte donne du respect ; tous les chants, convenables aux paroles, qui sont tirées des psaumes ou de *La Sagesse*, et mis dans le sujet, sont d'une beauté qu'on ne soutient pas sans larmes. La mesure de l'approbation qu'on donne à cette pièce, c'est celle du goût et de l'attention. J'en fus charmée, et le maréchal aussi, qui sortit de sa place pour aller dire au roi combien il était content, et qu'il était auprès d'une dame qui était bien digne d'avoir vu *Esther*. Le roi vint vers nos places ; et après avoir tourné, il s'adressa à moi, et me dit : 'Madame, je suis assuré que vous avez été contente.' Moi, sans m'étonner, je répondis : 'Sire, je suis charmée ; ce que je sens est au-dessus des paroles.' Le roi me dit : 'Racine a bien de l'esprit.' Je lui dis : 'Sire, il en a beaucoup ; mais en vérité ces jeunes personnes en ont beaucoup aussi : elles entrent dans le sujet, comme si elles n'avaient jamais fait autre chose.' 'Ah, pour cela,' reprit-il, 'il est vrai.' Et puis Sa Majesté s'en alla, et me laissa l'objet de l'envie. Comme il n'y avait quasi que moi de nouvelle venue, le roi eut quelque plaisir de voir mes sincères admirations sans bruit et sans éclat. M. le Prince et madame la Princesse vinrent me dire

un mot ; madame de Maintenon, un éclair : elle s'en allait avec le roi. Je répondis à tout, car j'étais en fortune. Nous revînmes le soir aux flambeaux. Je soupai chez madame de Coulanges, à qui le roi avait parlé aussi avec un air d'être chez lui, qui lui donnait une douceur trop aimable. Je vis le soir M. le chevalier ; je lui contai tout naïvement mes petites prospérités, ne voulant point les cachotter sans savoir pourquoi, comme de certaines personnes. Il en fut content, et voilà qui est fait ; je suis assurée qu'il ne m'a point trouvé dans la suite ni une sottise vanité ni un transport de bourgeoise : demandez-lui."

The play was printed early in March, and a considerable reaction took place against its popularity, a reaction perfectly intelligible when it is remembered, first, that it had been performed only to limited and privileged audiences, exclusion from which naturally prejudiced the excluded ; secondly, that it was not in a style likely to please the general public ; and thirdly, that a great deal of silent opposition was already forming against the increasing and enforced religiosity of the court. A wit described the publication as a *requête civile* (judicial appeal) against the popularity of the performance. In all this there is nothing surprising, and it is still less matter of surprise that when the piece again began to be acted at St. Cyr, at the beginning of the next year, such serious objection was taken, not by courtiers or rivals, but by grave ecclesiastics and others interested in the establishment, that the performances were stopped. Indeed no further public theatricals were permitted, and the still greater play of *Athalie* with which the author had followed *Esther* up was never performed with full equipments at St. Cyr at all. It was asserted with some show of reason that the heads of the young ladies of St. Cyr were in considerable danger of being turned by their novel occupation and the attentions it brought them. Yet the play was at intervals, though in a much quieter fashion, performed in the institution and by the successors of the persons for whom it had been written. A story of quite a different order of pathos from that quoted above is told to the effect that the last of the 'dames de saint Louis' or mistresses of the school, who was not

expelled from her home by the Revolution, died singing, without consciousness of what she was doing, the choral verses of the play. This was in 1792, and it would seem not improbable from the lady's name (Catherine de *Cockborne* de Villeneuve) that she was of Scotch Jacobite extraction, and may have been descended from one of the exiled followers of the king who, as we have seen, was present at the first brilliant performance of the play.

Meanwhile the strictly dramatic fortune of *Esther* had not been great, nor has it since been so. The original *privilége* (licence to print) of the published play contains a 'défense expresse à tous acteurs et autres montant sur les théâtres publics d'y représenter ni chanter ledit ouvrage,' and it was never put on the boards during the reign of Louis XIV or the life of Madame de Maintenon. But on the 8th of May, 1721, it was performed at the theatre of the Rue des Fossés St. Germain by Baron, with a fairly good company and ran for eight nights. Accounts of its reception differ not a little. Very long runs were then quite the exception, and there can have been no actual failure or the piece would not have been acted eight times. But it excited so little public attention that Louis Racine, the author's son, biographer, and critic, never heard of the performance till years afterwards. He consulted those who had been present, and was told that the reception was very cool. It ought, however, to be said that what was acted was not in the least what Racine designed. Not merely was the music cut out altogether, but even the dialogue of the chorus was dropped almost entirely. The adverse criticism by Voltaire (who if not actually present must have known many who were) will be noticed presently. But it certainly expressed the feeling of the time pretty fairly, since Louis Racine himself, who had none of Voltaire's prejudice against religious subjects, practically acquiesced in it beforehand. Nor was *Esther* again publicly acted at any time during the eighteenth century. It was revived on the 2nd of June, 1803 (in the chronology of the day, 13 prairial, An xi.), to serve as a benefit piece for Mme. Vestris. Proper choruses were supplied by the company of the opera, a new musical accompaniment was written by the composer Plantade, and the cast was

a very strong one, including Talma, Mlle. Duchesnois, Lafon and Monvel. The first consul ordered a special representation at St. Cloud, and, after becoming Emperor, seems to have taken further interest in the drama, in part no doubt as a consequence of his well-known desire to play Louis XIV. The warlike spirit of the original prologue was imitated in an anti-English copy of verses, and Talma himself is said to have found the part of Assuérus well suited to him. This popularity however was personal and adventitious, and the piece again dropped out of sight for years. An attempt to revive it by Rachel in 1839 failed even more completely than that of 1721, partly in consequence of the same foolish attempt to transform the play into something else by cutting out the choruses, partly no doubt because the half-ingénue part of Esther did not in the least suit Rachel, Jewess as she was. Yet the play had a third triumph in circumstances not unlike the two former. Following Louis XIV and Napoleon I, Napoleon III took it under his protection. It was played with considerable success, and in a fashion more magnificent than ever, at the Théâtre Français in the summer of 1864. The music was again rewritten, this time by M. Jules Cohen, the choruses were supplied by the pupils of the Conservatoire or State Academy of Music, and the piece was un mutilated, though the rather doubtful experiment of introducing male voices in the choir was made. The *mise en scène* is said to have been elaborately archæological as well as magnificent. The part of Esther fell to Mme. Favart and was, as might be expected, well rendered by that admirable actress. Since this date I have not heard of *Esther* being revived.

It remains for us, having thus given an account of the dramatic fortunes of the play, to consider it on its merits, literary as well as dramatic. This may be perhaps best done by taking in order the character of the subject, the dramatic peculiarities of the form under which Racine has treated it, his indebtedness to his predecessors, and lastly the literary character of *Esther* considered in itself and without reference to origin, subject, or general form. The story of Queen Esther is known to every English reader, and there is no need here either to construct an argument or, as French editors have

usually done, to give the numerous passages of the Bible which Racine has closely followed both in general and in detail. In the story itself he has made very few omissions, and practically no alterations of any great importance, though he has contracted the time of the events to suit the stage ideas of his day, has omitted the full catastrophe, and has made one or two other minor changes for mere convenience's sake. Two different charges have been made against the literary and dramatic capabilities of the story of Esther. The first and most sweeping is that of Voltaire above alluded to. It is natural and no doubt partly right to set down this antagonism to the intense and almost insane aversion which Voltaire had to the Bible narratives generally, and which made him, great as were his talents, guilty of the grossest excesses of bad taste and false judgment. Yet it is fair to remember that he was an ardent if not wholly consistent admirer of *Athalie* (as biblical as *Esther*); while there is also to be set against the merely prejudiced theory of his dislike the admiration of Chamfort, a man who certainly had no more respect for the Bible as the Bible than Voltaire himself. The terms of Voltaire's criticism are however so curiously uncritical that the hypothesis of some special prejudice is almost unavoidable. He pronounces the situation 'without interest and without verisimilitude; and he proceeds to justify this verdict by particular criticisms which show that his very frequently faulty knowledge and not much less frequently faulty taste were both to blame for his error. Assuérus is a 'roi insensé qui a passé six mois avec sa femme sans savoir, sans s'informer même, qui elle est.' The study of antiquity and of the East was not then far advanced, but Voltaire certainly had friends who could have told him that an eastern king, if he was satisfied with Esther's beauty, wit, and character, would not have cared unless some sudden whim took him even to wonder 'qui elle était.' Haman is a 'ministre assez ridiculement barbare pour demander au roi qu'il extermine une nation, parce qu'on ne lui a pas fait la révérence.' Now if the sacred narrative does not explicitly state it, Jewish traditions agree that the race-hatred of Amalek against Israel was the cause, and Mordecai's supposed insolence only the occasion, of

Haman's demand. Then the author of *Candide* stigmatises Haman yet further as 'assez bête' to postpone the execution of the massacre for eleven months so that the Jews might have organized resistance or escaped; thereby proving his own complete forgetfulness or ignorance of the rate of travelling of the days referred to (a rate which would make a long delay necessary for the simultaneous execution of the orders). Lastly, Assuérus is an 'imbécile' who 'sans pitié' signs the order (as if a despot of the Cambyses or Xerxes class would have hesitated for one moment when a clever favourite urged the punishment of treasonable subjects), and also 'sans prétexte' suddenly hangs his favourite (as if not merely the apparent insult to Esther but the trick played on himself were not enough to make such a despot hang fifty favourites). This criticism, however, splenetic, inartistic and grossly inaccurate from the point of view of history as it is, carries a certain sting in its tail, for Voltaire ends by denouncing the play as presented to the public 'sans intrigue, sans action, sans intérêt.' And here of course he is entitled to his opinion, and the opinion, whether we agree with it or not, is that of a man specially skilled in the subject he discusses. Moreover, curiously enough, the partial and in both senses pious judgment of Louis Racine had pronounced a not very different verdict already, and had acknowledged, though apologetically, a deficiency of tragic action in the piece. La Harpe, the chief academic critic of the older and purely classical school in France, followed Voltaire. On the other hand, Chamfort, one of the wittiest and most cynical of Frenchmen, champions the piece warmly, as has been said; Geoffroy, an irreproachable censor of the academic school, did the same, and Sainte-Beuve, again a person not to be suspected of any excessive weakness for sacred subjects, while admitting the piece to be less dramatic than *Athalie*, actually preferred it on the whole.

This contrast is very remarkable, and it is perhaps impossible to account for it without considering the peculiar form of the tragedy. It is sufficiently well understood, and has been already considered in the Essay on French Tragedy, how the 'classical' drama of France differs from that of

England and of Spain. Its incidents are severely cut down, its situations still more severely reduced to a few all grouped round a central theme, and the exposition has to be done almost entirely by word of mouth with hardly any action. In the story of Esther, and especially in the way in which Racine chose to handle that story, the resources of the dramatist are cramped still further. It is impossible to acknowledge with Voltaire, La Harpe and the rest that the story is not in itself dramatic. The fate which hangs over the Jewish people is appalling and (despite Voltaire's opinion) not in the least improbable: the unapproachableness of the Persian king makes it specially difficult to avert: and the reader or spectator (who it must be remembered is always supposed not to know the story beforehand) cannot be sure whether Esther will succeed in breaking through the severe court etiquette or whether the influence of Haman and the king's disgust at the mere idea of having married a Jewess (a most important element in the tragic interest which Voltaire seems to have missed altogether) will prevail over his affection for his wife. Speaking as a critic, I should myself say that the sudden exit of Assuérus and the incident of Haman's prostration to Esther, the former of which is blamed as improbable by some French critics, are both as introduced in the sacred narrative and as borrowed by the dramatist of the highest interest and importance in the story. Nor can anything be more dramatic than the confusion of Haman at the honour he is forced to pay to his hated enemy, or the complete and instantaneous revolution when, high of hope at his invitation to the queen's banquet, he is cast down by a turn of fortune's wheel, to be exalted no more except to the bad eminence of the 'gibbet fifty cubits high.' Moreover by resuming the choric form and composing his chorus of young girls, Racine succeeded in infusing in a very remarkable degree the tragic element of pity—an element which is perforce struck out by the omission of the choruses as in Baron's and Rachel's revivals. The massacre of a whole nation, though a tremendous event and historically to be paralleled, is too large to affect the mind much. We do not see enough of Mordecai to be personally interested

in him ; and though Esther's technical peril may be admitted, the fact that no one except those whose interest it was to conceal the fact knew that she was a Jewess no doubt a little cools the sympathy. The lamentations of the chorus, not too much prolonged, and conveyed in very charming if somewhat conventional verse, happily restore the sense of personal interest. Nor is it possible to deny that, according to the standard of the Greek drama which Racine intended after his own fashion to follow, the tragedy is amply tragic.

Racine, who was emphatically a man of letters, is never likely to have been completely ignorant of his forerunners in the treatment of a subject, though on the other hand he is equally unlikely to have made indiscreet use of them. The Pléiade school of tragedians, of whose activity only a faint idea is given in the foregoing essay, had more than once tried the subject of Esther. The earliest essays of this kind, those of Rivaudeau (1566) and Matthieu (1578), are by common consent valueless, and it is in the highest degree unlikely that Racine either took any hints from them or even was aware of their existence. It is otherwise with the remarkable *Aman* of Antoine de Montchrestien (see p. 34), the exact date of which is not clearly known, though it was probably written in the latest years of the sixteenth century. Some quotations will be given in the Notes to enable the reader to compare the two plays. But there can be little doubt that Racine did derive from Montchrestien's remarkable work in this and his other plays the tone and general scheme of the choruses of *Esther*. These are perfectly different from any previous work of his, though they were followed by the similar choruses of *Athalie* and by the *Cantiques*. They strike a note which had been long silent in French literature, and which, despite the imitations of J. B. Rousseau and others, was not to sound again for even a longer period—the note of grave melancholy poetry. For this Montchrestien's choruses, like (but even more than) those of his master Garnier, are extremely noteworthy. In 1617 an anonymous tragedy on the same theme, with comic interludes, appeared, and shortly afterwards another by a certain Maufrière, both valueless. But in 1643 Du Ryer,

a writer of real merit, produced an *Esther* which has been brought into some comparison with Racine's and from which some extracts will also be given.

From Montchrestien, Racine pretty certainly took the idea of reverting to the classical model of the tragedy with chorus ; but he by no means slavishly followed either the Greek, or the Senecan, or the Pléiade model. In the Greek tragedy itself, the chorus, though sometimes taking regular part in the conversation through its spokesman, and sometimes engaging in lyrical dialogues, in which half its body usually answer or at least continue the utterances of the other half, makes its chief contribution to the play in long lyrical outpourings very accurately divided in metrical scheme, but continuous in general subject and not distinguishable in sense from monologues. The Latin language being less susceptible of what must be called, for want of a better word in English, 'Pindaric' metres, the choruses of Seneca take even more the form of independent lyrical poems ; and it was from these choruses, much more than from those of the Greek tragedies, that Jodelle, Garnier and their followers constructed their own choric odes. Racine, on the other hand, as a glance at the play will show, has infused much more life and movement into his own chorus. In no single instance is any speech or song, whether of one chorister or of many together, allowed to extend beyond a dozen verses or so, while by far the greater number are much shorter. There is a certain amount of that repetition of the same phrase which is supposed to lend itself to musical purposes, and which is so greatly abused in the usual arrangement of anthems ; but it is applied sparingly and with judgment. The choric scenes themselves vary between speech and song, between lyric measures and Alexandrine couplets. All this—the quick alternation of voices from different parts of the theatre, the intermixture of short solos and short concerted pieces, the musical conversation (so to speak)—has for the ordinary spectator a considerable advantage both over the unbroken pronunciation of long lyrical monologues in complicated metre (as in the Greek model) and over regular and rather monotonous stanzas

(as in the Latin and old French models). Nor is what may be called the poetical material of which these choric scenes are made to be ill spoken of. To the merely English reader it may seem wanting in lyrical flow, and somewhat conventional in phraseology. It is a curious instance of the ineradicable differences of national taste that no French commentator, as far as I know, has seen anything to condemn or to ridicule in the speech at line 328, where one of the chorus, after a touching enough phrase about her youth, cries 'Je tomberai comme une fleur, qui n'a vu qu'une aurore.' Yet almost any Englishman would say at once that though the old comparison of a girl to a flower is very appropriate and affecting in somebody else's mouth, it comes rather ill from her own. These things however are exactly the things to be avoided and guarded against in estimating foreign work. Judged by the standard of Racine's own time, country, and language, his later lyrics, of which these are the first, have not only exquisite elegance but real poetical merit. He did not—and no one for more than a century did—succeed in shaking off the stiffness, the mannerisms of language, the inability to achieve rich and varied rhythm such as lyric demands, which had been the result of a century's practice of Alexandrines. But he evaded his difficulties wonderfully, and the harmony of his numbers, as his own contemporaries in England would have said, is irreproachable.

This quality is not less perceptible in the body of the piece, and has been recognised there even by decriers of the play as a play, such as Voltaire. There is no passage in *Esther* quite equal in force and glow to the famous speech of Athalie describing her dream. But the prologue disguises its flattery of Louis in verse of singular variety and vigour. Esther's account of her previous fortunes to Elise is as free from tedium as the telling of a long story in a drama can ever be. The expostulation of Mardochée with Esther as she hesitates to expose herself to danger is fine even among Racine's fine things, while the prayer of Esther is better still. The poet has been extremely happy in the scenes of Haman with Hydaspes and Zarès, where the 'obsession' (as it is called in a Latin-French word which should be English), that

is to say, the obstinate preoccupation with a single unwelcome idea which Mordecai exercises over the mind of the favourite, is indicated in a series of the most masterly touches. Nor perhaps is the skill of the practised dramatist in making a very small part interesting anywhere better shown than in the single scene where, with the least possible basis of authority, Racine introduces Zarès (the Zeresh of the English Bible), Haman's wife. Yet another mark of the old dramatic hand is to be found in the final scenes. It was necessary that Esther after revealing her nationality should make a speech of some length both for the purpose of removing the king's prejudices as excited by Haman and to turn his wrath against Haman himself. Yet a long speech at such a crisis is always in danger of heaviness. The interruption of Haman at once breaks the speech, assists Esther's indictment, puts the king's touchy and irritable dignity on her side, and revives the interest of the audience in her exposition of the case. The substitution of a simple revocation of the decree for the permission of defence given to the Jews in the original seems to us less happy, but it is another curious instance of the difference of taste referred to above that this change is distinctly approved by most French critics as a concession to ideas of regal dignity and decency. Yet it utterly sets at nought the striking and famous principle as to 'the law of the Medes and Persians which altereth not,' and at the same time deprives of a fully sufficient excuse the signal vengeance which the history assigns to the Jews. Its chief excuse is that it prevents what is repugnant to the classical theory of the drama, the idea of an appendix of action intimately connected with the action of the piece itself and yet not capable, owing to unities and such like things, of being included in it. Nor can it for a moment be considered as in any way a serious blot on a piece of work singularly graceful and masterly.

Whatever else has to be said will be best said in the Notes. It need only be added that editors after Racine's death took considerable liberties with the arrangement of the play. One alteration, the separation of the eighth and ninth scenes of Act II, is perhaps an improvement, and is certainly

required according to the ordinary principles of the author and the stage he worked for. It is therefore adopted. The arbitrary substitution of four or five acts for three, which was also attempted by some, is a very different matter. It disturbs without a shadow of excuse or compensation the symmetrical march of the action, alters the effect which the author must have intended his choric interludes to produce, and is in short wholly indefensible.

E S T H È R.

TRAGÉDIE (1689).

PERSONNAGES.

ASSUÉRUS, roi de Perse.

ESTHER, reine de Perse.

MARDOCHÉE, oncle d'Esther.

AMAN, favori d'Assuérus.

ZARÈS, femme d'Aman.

HYDASPE, officier du palais intérieur d'Assuérus.

ASAPH, autre officier d'Assuérus.

ÉLISE, confidente d'Esther.

THAMAR, Israélite de la suite d'Esther.

GARDES du roi Assuérus.

CHŒUR de jeunes filles Israélites.

La scène est à Suse, dans le palais d'Assuérus.

LA PIÉTÉ fait le Prologue:

PRÉFACE D'ESTHER.

LA célèbre maison de Saint-Cyr ayant été principalement établie pour élever dans la piété un fort grand nombre de jeunes demoiselles rassemblées de tous les endroits du royaume, on n'y a rien oublié de tout ce qui pouvait contribuer à les rendre capables de servir Dieu dans les différents états où il lui plaira de les appeler. Mais, en leur montrant les choses essentielles et nécessaires, on ne néglige pas de leur apprendre celles qui peuvent servir à leur polir l'esprit et à leur former le jugement. On a imaginé pour cela plusieurs moyens qui, sans les détourner de leur travail et de leurs exercices ordinaires, les instruisent en les divertissant : on leur met, pour ainsi dire, à profit leurs heures de récréation. On leur fait faire entre elles, sur leurs principaux devoirs, des conversations ingénieuses qu'on leur a composées exprès, ou qu'elles-mêmes composent sur-le-champ. On les fait parler sur les histoires qu'on leur a lues, ou sur les importantes vérités qu'on leur a enseignées. On leur fait réciter par cœur et déclamer les plus beaux endroits des meilleurs poètes ; et cela leur sert surtout à les défaire de quantité de mauvaises prononciations qu'elles pourraient avoir apportées de leurs provinces. On a soin aussi de faire apprendre à chanter à celles qui ont de la voix, et on ne leur laisse pas perdre un talent qui les peut amuser innocemment, et qu'elles peuvent employer un jour à chanter les louanges de Dieu.

Mais la plupart des plus excellents vers de notre langue ayant été composés sur des matières fort profanes, et nos plus beaux airs étant sur des paroles extrêmement molles et efféminées, capables de faire des impressions dangereuses sur de jeunes esprits, les personnes illustres qui ont bien

voulu prendre la principale direction de cette maison ont souhaité qu'il y eût quelque ouvrage qui, sans avoir tous ces défauts, pût produire une partie de ces bons effets. Elles me firent l'honneur de me communiquer leur dessein, et même de me demander si je ne pourrais pas faire sur quelque sujet de piété et de morale une espèce de poème où le chant fût mêlé avec le récit, le tout lié par une action qui rendît la chose plus vive et moins capable d'ennuyer.

Je leur proposai le sujet d'Esther, qui les frappa d'abord, cette histoire leur paraissant pleine de grandes leçons d'amour de Dieu et de détachement du monde au milieu du monde même. Et je crus, de mon côté, que je trouverais assez de facilité à traiter ce sujet ; d'autant plus qu'il me sembla que, sans altérer aucune des circonstances tant soit peu considérables de l'Écriture sainte, ce qui serait, à mon avis, une espèce de sacrilège, je pourrais remplir toute mon action avec les seules scènes que Dieu lui-même, pour ainsi dire, a préparées.

J'entrepris donc la chose et je m'aperçus qu'en travaillant sur le plan qu'on m'avait donné, j'exécutais en quelque sorte un dessein qui m'avait souvent passé dans l'esprit ; qui était de lier, comme dans les anciennes tragédies grecques, le chœur et le chant avec l'action, et d'employer à chanter les louanges du vrai Dieu cette partie du chœur que les païens employaient à chanter les louanges de leurs fausses divinités.

À dire vrai, je ne pensais guère que la chose dût être aussi publique qu'elle l'a été. Mais les grandes vérités d'Écriture et la manière sublime dont elles y sont énoncées, pour peu qu'on les présente, même imparfaitement, aux yeux des hommes, sont si propres à les frapper, et d'ailleurs ces jeunes demoiselles ont déclamé et chanté cet ouvrage avec tant de grâce, tant de modestie et de piété, qu'il n'a pas été possible qu'il demeurât renfermé dans le secret de leur maison : de sorte qu'un divertissement d'enfants est devenu le sujet de l'empressement de toute la cour, le roi lui-même, qui en avait été touché, n'ayant pu refuser à tout ce qu'il y a de plus grands seigneurs de les y mener, et ayant eu la satisfaction de voir, par le plaisir qu'ils y ont pris, qu'on se peut

aussi bien divertir aux choses de piété qu'à tous les spectacles profanes.

Au reste, quoique j'aie évité soigneusement de mêler le profane avec le sacré, j'ai cru néanmoins que je pouvais emprunter deux ou trois traits d'Hérodote, pour mieux peindre Assuérus ; car j'ai suivi le sentiment de plusieurs savants interprètes de l'Écriture, qui tiennent que ce roi est le même que le fameux Darius, fils d'Hystaspe, dont parle cet historien. En effet, ils en rapportent quantité de preuves, dont quelques-unes me paraissent des démonstrations. Mais je n'ai pas jugé à propos de croire ce même Hérodote sur sa parole, lorsqu'il dit que les Perses n'élevaient ni temples, ni autels, ni statues à leurs dieux, et qu'ils ne se servaient point de libations dans leurs sacrifices. Son témoignage est expressément détruit par l'Écriture, aussi bien que par Xénophon, beaucoup mieux instruit que lui des mœurs et des affaires de la Perse, et enfin par Quinte-Curce.

On peut dire que l'unité de lieu est observée dans cette pièce, en ce que toute l'action se passe dans le palais d'Assuérus. Cependant, comme on voulait rendre ce divertissement plus agréable à des enfants en jetant quelque variété dans les décorations, cela a été cause que je n'ai pas gardé cette unité avec le même rigueur que j'ai fait autrefois dans mes tragédies.

Je crois qu'il est bon d'avertir ici que, bien qu'il y ait dans Esther des personnages d'hommes, ces personnages n'ont pas laissé d'être représentés par des filles avec toute la bienséance de leur sexe. La chose leur a été d'autant plus aisée, qu'anciennement les habits des Persans et des Juifs étaient de longues robes qui tombaient jusqu'à terre.

Je ne puis me résoudre à finir cette préface sans rendre à celui qui a fait la musique la justice qui lui est due, et sans confesser franchement que ses chants ont fait un des plus grands agréments de la pièce. Tous les connaisseurs demeurent d'accord que depuis longtemps on n'a point entendu d'airs plus touchants, ni plus convenables aux paroles. Quelques personnes ont trouvé la musique du dernier chœur un peu longue, quoique très belle. Mais qu'aurait-on dit de

ces jeunes Israélites qui avaient tant fait de vœux à Dieu pour être délivrés de l'horrible péril où elles étaient, si, ce péril étant passé, elles lui en avaient rendu de médiocres actions de grâces ? Elles auraient directement péché contre la louable coutume de leur nation, où l'on ne recevait de Dieu aucun bienfait signalé, qu'on ne l'en remerciât sur-le-champ par de fort longs cantiques ; témoin ceux de Marie, sœur de Moïse, de Débora et de Judith, et tant d'autres dont l'Écriture est pleine. On dit même que les Juifs, encore aujourd'hui, célèbrent par de grandes actions de grâces le jour où leurs ancêtres furent délivrés par Esther de la cruauté d'Aman.

PROLOGUE.

LA PIÉTÉ.

Du séjour bienheureux de la Divinité
Je descends dans ce lieu par la Grâce habité :
L'Innocence s'y plaît, ma compagne éternelle,
Et n'a point sous les cieux d'asile plus fidèle.
Ici, loin du tumulte, aux devoirs les plus saints 5
Tout un peuple naissant est formé par mes mains :
Je nourris dans son cœur la semence féconde
Des vertus dont il doit sanctifier le monde.
Un roi qui me protège, un roi victorieux,
A commis à mes soins ce dépôt précieux. 10
C'est lui qui rassembla ces colombes timides,
Éparses en cent lieux, sans secours et sans guides :
Pour elles, à sa porte, élevant ce palais,
Il leur y fit trouver l'abondance et la paix.

Grand Dieu, que cet ouvrage ait place en ta mémoire !
Que tous les soins qu'il prend pour soutenir ta gloire 16
Soient gravés de ta main au livre où sont écrits
Les noms prédestinés des rois que tu chéris !
Tu m'écoutes : ma voix ne t'est point étrangère ;
Je suis la Piété, cette fille si chère, 20
Qui t'offre de ce roi les plus tendres soupirs :
Du feu de ton amour j'allume ses désirs.
Du zèle qui pour toi l'enflamme et le dévore
La chaleur se répand du couchant à l'aurore :
Tu le vois tous les jours, devant toi prosterné, 25
Humilier ce front de splendeur couronné,
Et, confondant l'orgueil par d'augustes exemples,
Baiser avec respect le pavé de tes temples.
De ta gloire animé, lui seul de tant de rois
S'arme pour ta querelle, et combat pour tes droits. 30
Le perfide intérêt, l'aveugle jalousie,
S'unissent contre toi pour l'affreuse hérésie ;
La discorde en fureur frémit de toutes parts ;
Tout semble abandonner tes sacrés étendards ;

Et l'enfer, couvrant tout de ses vapeurs funèbres, 35
 Sur les yeux les plus saints a jeté ses ténèbres :
 Lui seul invariable, et fondé sur la foi,
 Ne cherche, ne regarde, et n'écoute que toi,
 Et, bravant du démon l'impuissant artifice,
 De la religion soutient tout l'édifice. 40
 Grand Dieu, juge ta cause, et déploie aujourd'hui
 Ce bras, ce même bras qui combattait pour lui,
 Lorsque des nations à sa perte animées
 Le Rhin vit tant de fois disperser les armées.
 Des mêmes ennemis je reconnais l'orgueil ; 45
 Ils viennent se briser contre le même écueil :
 Déjà, rompant partout leurs plus fermes barrières,
 Du débris de leurs forts il couvre ses frontières.
 Tu lui donnes un fils prompt à le seconder,
 Qui sait combattre, plaire, obéir, commander ; 50
 Un fils qui, comme lui suivi de la victoire,
 Semble à gagner son cœur borner toute sa gloire ;
 Un fils à tous ses vœux avec amour soumis,
 L'éternel désespoir de tous ses ennemis :
 Pareil à ces esprits que ta justice envoie, 55
 Quand son roi lui dit : Pars ! il s'élançe avec joie,
 Du tonnerre vengeur s'en va tout embraser,
 Et, tranquille, à ses pieds revient le déposer.
 Mais, tandis qu'un grand roi venge ainsi mes injures,
 Vous qui goûtez ici des délices si pures, 60
 S'il permet à son cœur un moment de repos,
 À vos jeux innocents appelez ce héros ;
 Retracedez-lui d'Esther l'histoire glorieuse
 Et sur l'impiété la foi victorieuse.
 Et vous qui vous plaisez aux folles passions 65
 Qu'allument dans vos cœurs les vaines fictions,
 Profanes amateurs de spectacles frivoles,
 Dont l'oreille s'ennuie au son de mes paroles,
 Fuyez de mes plaisirs la sainte austérité :
 Tout respire ici Dieu, la paix, la vérité. 70

ESTHER.

TRAGÉDIE.



ACTE PREMIER.

(*Le théâtre représente l'appartement d'Esther.*)



SCÈNE I.

ESTHER, ÉLISE.

Esther. Est-ce toi, chère Élise ? ô jour trois fois heureux !
Que béni soit le ciel qui te rend à mes vœux :
Toi qui, de Benjamin comme moi descendue,
Fus de mes premiers ans la compagne assidue,
Et qui, d'un même joug souffrant l'oppression, 5
M'aidais à soupirer les malheurs de Sion !
Combien ce temps encore est cher à ma mémoire !
Mais toi, de ton Esther ignorais-tu la gloire ?
Depuis plus de six mois que je te fais chercher,
Quel climat, quel désert a donc pu te cacher ? 10

Élise. Au bruit de votre mort justement éplorée,
Du reste des humains je vivais séparée,
Et de mes tristes jours n'attendais que la fin.
Quand tout à coup, Madame, un prophète divin :
' C'est pleurer trop longtemps une mort qui t'abuse, 15
Lève-toi, m'a-t-il dit, prends ton chemin vers Suse :
Là tu verras d'Esther la pompe et les honneurs,
Et sur le trône assis le sujet de tes pleurs.
Rassure, ajouta-t-il, tes tribus alarmées,
Sion ; le jour approche, où le dieu des armées 20
Va de son bras puissant faire éclater l'appui ;

Et le cri de son peuple est monté jusqu'à lui.
 Il dit : et moi, de joie et d'horreur pénétrée,
 Je cours. De ce palais j'ai su trouver l'entrée.
 O spectacle ! ô triomphe admirable à mes yeux, 25
 Digne en effet du bras qui sauva nos aïeux !
 Le fier Assuérus couronne sa captive,
 Et le Persan superbe est aux pieds d'une Juive !
 Par quels secrets ressorts, par quel enchaînement
 Le ciel a-t-il conduit ce grand événement ? 30

Esther. Peut-être on t'a conté la fameuse disgrâce
 De l'altière Vasthi, dont j'occupe la place,
 Lorsque le roi, contre elle enflammé de dépit,
 La chassa de son trône ainsi que de son lit.
 Mais il ne put sitôt en bannir la pensée : 35
 Vasthi régna longtemps sur son âme offensée.
 Dans ses nombreux États il fallut donc chercher
 Quelque nouvel objet qui l'en pût détacher.
 De l'Inde à l'Hellespont ses esclaves coururent :
 Les filles de l'Égypte à Suse comparurent ; 40
 Celles même du Parthe et du Scythe indompté
 Y briguèrent le sceptre offert à la beauté.
 On m'élevait alors, solitaire et cachée,
 Sous les yeux vigilants du sage Mardochée :
 Tu sais combien je dois à ses heureux secours. 45
 La mort m'avait ravi les auteurs de mes jours :
 Mais lui, voyant en moi la fille de son frère,
 Me tint lieu, chère Élise, et de père et de mère.
 Du triste état des Juifs jour et nuit agité,
 Il me tira du sein de mon obscurité ; 50
 Et, sur mes faibles mains fondant leur délivrance,
 Il me fit d'un empire accepter l'espérance.
 À ses desseins secrets, tremblante, j'obéis ;
 Je vins : mais je cachai ma race et mon pays.
 Qui pourrait cependant t'exprimer les cabales 55
 Que formait en ces lieux ce peuple de rivales,
 Qui toutes, disputant un si grand intérêt,
 Des yeux d'Assuérus attendaient leur arrêt ?
 Chacune avait sa brigade et de puissants suffrages :

L'une d'un sang fameux vantait les avantages ; 60

L'autre, pour se parer de superbes atours,

Des plus adroites mains empruntait le secours :

Et moi, pour toute brigue et pour tout artifice,

De mes larmes au ciel j'offrais le sacrifice.

Enfin on m'annonça l'ordre d'Assuérus. 65

Devant ce fier monarque, Élise, je parus.

Dieu tient le cœur des rois entre ses mains puissantes ;

Il fait que tout prospère aux âmes innocentes,

Tandis qu'en ses projets l'orgueilleux est trompé.

De mes faibles attraits le roi parut frappé. 70

Il m'observa longtemps dans un sombre silence ;

Et le ciel, qui pour moi fit pencher la balance,

Dans ce temps-là, sans doute, agissait sur son cœur.

Enfin, avec des yeux où régnait la douceur :

Soyez reine, dit-il ; et, dès ce moment même, 75

De sa main sur mon front posa son diadème.

Pour mieux faire éclater sa joie et son amour,

Il combla de présents tous les grands de sa cour ;

Et même ses bienfaits, dans toutes ses provinces,

Invitèrent le peuple aux noces de leurs princes. 80

Hélas ! durant ces jours de joie et de festins,

Quelle était en secret ma honte et mes chagrins !

Esther, disais-je, Esther dans la pourpre est assise,

La moitié de la terre à son sceptre est soumise,

Et de Jérusalem l'herbe cache les murs ! 85

Sion, repaire affreux de reptiles impurs,

Voit de son temple saint les pierres dispersées !

Et du Dieu d'Israël les fêtes sont cessées !

Élise. N'avez-vous point au roi confié vos ennuis ?

Esther. Le roi, jusqu'à ce jour, ignore qui je suis. 90

Celui par qui le ciel règle ma destinée

Sur ce secret encor tient ma langue enchaînée.

Élise. Mardochée ? Eh ? peut-il approcher de ces lieux ?

Esther. Son amitié pour moi le rend ingénieux.

Absent, je le consulte ; et ses réponses sages 95

Pour venir jusqu'à moi trouvent mille passages :

Un père a moins de soin du salut de son fils.
 Déjà même, déjà, par ses secrets avis,
 J'ai découvert au roi les sanglantes pratiques
 Que formaient contre lui deux ingrats domestiques. 100
 Cependant mon amour pour notre nation
 A rempli ce palais de filles de Sion :
 Jeunes et tendres fleurs, par le sort agitées,
 Sous un ciel étranger comme moi transplantées.
 Dans un lieu séparé de profanes témoins, 105
 Je mets à les former mon étude et mes soins ;
 Et c'est là que, fuyant l'orgueil du diadème,
 Lasse de vains honneurs, et me cherchant moi-même,
 Aux pieds de l'Éternel je viens m'humilier,
 Et goûter le plaisir de me faire oublier. 110
 Mais à tous les Persans je cache leurs familles.
 Il faut les appeler. Venez, venez, mes filles,
 Compagnes autrefois de ma captivité,
 De l'antique Jacob jeune postérité.

SCÈNE II.

ESTHER, ÉLISE (*le Chœur*).*Une Israélite (chantant derrière le théâtre).*

Ma sœur, quelle voix nous appelle? 115

Un Autre. J'en reconnais les agréables sons :
C'est la reine.*Toutes Deux.* Courons, mes sœurs, obéissons.

La reine nous appelle :

Allons, rangeons-nous auprès d'elle.

Tout le Chœur (entrant sur la scène par plusieurs endroits différents). La reine nous appelle : 120

Allons, rangeons-nous auprès d'elle.

Élise. Ciel ! quel nombreux essaim d'innocentes beautés
S'offre à mes yeux en foule, et sort de tous côtés !
Quelle aimable pudeur sur leur visage est peinte !
Prospérez, cher espoir d'une nation sainte. 125

Puissent jusques au ciel vos soupirs innocents —
 Monter comme l'odeur d'un agréable encens!
 Que Dieu jette sur vous des regards pacifiques! —

Esther. Mes filles, chantez-nous quelque'un de ces cantiques
 Où vos voix si souvent, se mêlant à mes pleurs, 130
 De la triste Sion célèbrent les malheurs.

Une Israélite (chante seule).

Déplorable Sion, qu'as-tu fait de ta gloire?
 Tout l'univers admirait ta splendeur:
 Tu n'es plus que poussière; et de cette grandeur
 Il ne nous reste plus que la triste mémoire. 135

Sion, jusques au ciel élevée autrefois,
 Jusqu'aux enfers maintenant abaissée,
 Puissé-je demeurer sans voix,
 Si dans mes chants ta douleur retracée
 Jusqu'au dernier soupir n'occupe ma pensée! 140

Tout le Chœur.

✓ O rives du Jourdain! ô champs aimés des cieux!
 Sacrés monts, fertiles vallées
 Par cent miracles signalées!
 Du doux pays de nos aïeux
 Serons-nous toujours exilées? 145

Une Israélite (seule).

Quand verrai-je, ô Sion! relever tes remparts,
 Et de tes tours les magnifiques faites?
 Quand verrai-je de toutes parts
 Tes peuples en chantant accourir à tes fêtes?

Tout le Chœur.

O rives du Jourdain! ô champs aimés des cieux! 150
 Sacrés monts, fertiles vallées
 Par cent miracles signalées!
 Du doux pays de nos aïeux
 Serons-nous toujours exilées?

SCÈNE III.

ESTHER, MARDOCHÉE, ÉLISE (*le Chœur*).

Esther. Quel profane en ce lieu s'ose avancer vers nous ?
 Que vois-je ? Mardochée ! O mon père, est-ce vous ?
 Un ange du Seigneur sous son aile sacrée
 A donc conduit vos pas et caché votre entrée ?
 Mais d'où vient cet air sombre, et ce cilice affreux,
 Et cette cendre enfin qui couvre vos cheveux ? 160
 Que nous annoncez-vous ?

✓ *Mardochée.* O reine infortunée !
 O d'un peuple innocent barbare destinée !
 Lisez, lisez l'arrêt détestable, cruel. . .
 Nous sommes tous perdus ! et c'est fait d'Israël !

Esther. Juste ciel ! tout mon sang dans mes veines se glace.

Mardochée. On doit de tous les Juifs exterminer la race.
 Au sanguinaire Aman nous sommes tous livrés ; 167
 Les glaives, les couteaux sont déjà préparés :
 Toute la nation à la fois est proscrite.
 Aman, l'impie Aman, race d'Amalécite, 170
 A pour ce coup funeste armé tout son crédit ;
 Et le roi, trop crédule, a signé cet édit.
 Prévenu contre nous par cette bouche impure,
 Il nous croit en horreur à toute la nature :
 Ses ordres sont donnés, et dans tous ses États 175
 Le jour fatal est pris pour tant d'assassinats.
 Cieux, éclairerez-vous cet horrible carnage ?
 Le fer ne connaîtra ni le sexe ni l'âge ;
 Tout doit servir de proie aux tigres, aux vautours ;
 Et ce jour effroyable arrive dans dix jours. 180

Esther. O Dieu, qui vois former des desseins si funestes,
 As-tu donc de Jacob abandonné les restes ?

Une des plus jeunes Israélites.

Ciel, qui nous défendra, si tu ne nous défends?

Mardochée. Laissez les pleurs, Esther, à ces jeunes enfants.
 En vous est tout l'espoir de vos malheureux frères : 185
 Il faut les secourir ; mais les heures sont chères ;
 Le temps vole, et bientôt amènera le jour
 Où le nom des Hébreux doit périr sans retour.
 Toute pleine du feu de tant de saints prophètes,
 Allez, osez au roi déclarer qui vous êtes. 190

Esther. Hélas ! ignorez-vous quelles sévères lois
 Aux timides mortels cachent ici les rois ?
 Au fond de leur palais leur majesté terrible
 Affecte à leurs sujets de se rendre invisible ;
 Et la mort est le prix de tout audacieux 195
 Qui sans être appelé se présente à leurs yeux,
 Si le roi dans l'instant, pour sauver le coupable,
 Ne lui donne à baiser son sceptre redoutable.
 Rien ne met à l'abri de cet ordre fatal,
 Ni le rang, ni le sexe ; et le crime est égal. 200
 Moi-même, sur son trône à ses côtés assise,
 Je suis à cette loi, comme une autre, soumise ;
 Et sans le prévenir, il faut pour lui parler
 Qu'il me cherche, ou du moins qu'il me fasse appeler.

Mardochée. Quoi ! lorsque vous voyez périr votre patrie,
 Pour quelque chose, Esther, vous comptez votre vie ! 206
 Dieu parle, et d'un mortel vous craignez le courroux !
 Que dis-je ? votre vie, Esther, est-elle à vous ?
 N'est-elle pas au sang dont vous êtes issue ?
 N'est-elle pas à Dieu dont vous l'avez reçue ? 210
 Et qui sait, lorsqu'au trône il conduisit vos pas,
 Si pour sauver son peuple il ne vous gardait pas ?
 Songez-y bien : ce Dieu ne vous a pas choisie
 Pour être un vain spectacle aux peuples de l'Asie,
 Ni pour charmer les yeux des profanes humains : 215
 Pour un plus noble usage il réserve ses saints.
 S'immoler pour son nom et pour son héritage,

D'un enfant d'Israël voilà le vrai partage :
 Trop heureuse pour lui de hasarder vos jours !
 Et quel besoin son bras a-t-il de nos secours ? 220
 Que peuvent contre lui tous les rois de la terre ?
 En vain ils s'uniraient pour lui faire la guerre :
 Pour dissiper leur ligue il n'a qu'à se montrer ;
 Il parle, et dans la poudre il les fait tous rentrer.
 Au seul son de sa voix la mer fuit, le ciel tremble, 225
 Il voit comme un néant tout l'univers ensemble ;
 Et les faibles mortels, vains jouets du trépas,
 Sont tous devant ses yeux comme s'ils n'étaient pas.
 S'il a permis d'Aman l'audace criminelle,
 Sans doute qu'il voulait éprouver votre zèle. 230
 C'est lui qui, m'excitant à vous oser chercher,
 Devant moi, chère Esther, a bien voulu marcher :
 Et s'il faut que sa voix frappe en vain vos oreilles,
 Nous n'en verrons pas moins éclater ses merveilles.
 Il peut confondre Aman, il peut briser nos fers 235
 Par la plus faible main qui soit dans l'univers :
 Et vous, qui n'aurez point accepté cette grâce,
 Vous périrez peut-être, et toute votre race.

Esther. Allez : que tous les Juifs dans Suse répandus,
 À prier avec vous jour et nuit assidus, 240
 Me prêtent de leurs vœux le secours salutaire,
 Et pendant ces trois jours gardent un jeûne austère.
 Déjà la sombre nuit a commencé son tour :
 Demain, quand le soleil rallumera le jour,
 Contente de périr, s'il faut que je périsse, 245
 J'irai pour mon pays m'offrir en sacrifice.
 Qu'on s'éloigne un moment.

(Le chœur se retire vers le fond du théâtre.)

SCÈNE IV.

ESTHER, ÉLISE (*le Chœur*).

Esther. O mon souverain roi,
 Me voici donc tremblante et seule devant toi !

Mon père mille fois m'a dit dans mon enfance
 Qu'avec nous tu juras une sainte alliance, 250
 Quand, pour te faire un peuple agréable à tes yeux,
 Il plut à ton amour de choisir nos aïeux :
 Même tu leur promis de ta bouche sacrée
 Une postérité d'éternelle durée.
 Hélas ! ce peuple ingrat a méprisé ta loi. 255
 La nation chérie a violé sa foi ;
 Elle a répudié son époux et son père,
 Pour rendre à d'autres dieux un honneur adultère :
 Maintenant elle sert sous un maître étranger.
 Mais c'est peu d'être esclave, on la veut égorger : 260
 Nos superbes vainqueurs, insultant à nos larmes,
 Imputent à leurs dieux le bonheur de leurs armes,
 Et veulent aujourd'hui qu'un même coup mortel
 Abolisse ton nom, ton peuple et ton autel.
 Ainsi donc un perfide, après tant de miracles, 265
 Pourrait anéantir la foi de tes oracles,
 Ravirait aux mortels le plus cher de tes dons,
 Le saint' que tu promets, et que nous attendons ?
 Non, non, ne souffre pas que ces peuples farouches,
 Ivres de notre sang, ferment les seules bouches 270
 Qui dans tout l'univers célèbrent tes bienfaits ;
 Et confonds tous ces dieux qui ne furent jamais.
 Pour moi, que tu retiens parmi ces infidèles,
 Tu sais combien je hais leurs fêtes criminelles,
 Et que je mets au rang des profanations 275
 Leur table, leurs festins, et leurs libations ;
 Que même cette pompe où je suis condamnée,
 Ce bandeau dont il faut que je paraisse ornée
 Dans ces jours solennels à l'orgueil dédiés,
 Seule et dans le secret je le foule à mes pieds ; 280
 Qu'à ces vains ornements je préfère la cendre,
 Et n'ai de goût qu'aux pleurs que tu me vois répandre.
 J'attendais le moment marqué dans ton arrêt,
 Pour oser de ton peuple embrasser l'intérêt.
 Ce moment est venu, ma prompte obéissance 285
 Va d'un roi redoutable affronter la présence.

C'est pour toi que je marche : accompagne mes pas
 Devant ce fier lion qui ne te connaît pas ;
 Commande en me voyant que son courroux s'apaise,
 Et prête à mes discours un charme qui lui plaise. 290
 Les orages, les vents, les cieux te sont soumis :
 Tourne enfin sa fureur contre nos ennemis.

† SCÈNE V.

(*Toute cette scène est chantée.*)

LE CHŒUR.

Une Israélite (seule).

Pleurons et gémissons, mes fidèles compagnes :
 À nos sanglots donnons un libre cours :
 Levons les yeux vers les saintes montagnes 295
 D'où l'innocence attend tout son secours.

O mortelles alarmes !

Tout Israël pèrit. Pleurez, mes tristes yeux.

Il ne fut jamais sous les cieux

Un si juste sujet de larmes. 300

Tout le Chœur. O mortelles alarmes !—

Une autre Israélite.

N'était-ce pas assez qu'un vainqueur odieux
 De l'auguste Sion eût détruit tous les charmes,
 Et traîné ses enfants captifs en mille lieux ?

Tout le Chœur. O mortelles alarmes ! 305

La même Israélite.

Faibles agneaux livrés à des loups furieux,
 Nos soupirs sont nos seules armes.

Tout le Chœur. O mortelles alarmes !

Une Israélite.

Arrachons, déchirons tous ces vains ornements ✓
 Qui parent notre tête. 310

Une autre. Revêtons-nous d'habillements
Conformes à l'horrible fête
Que l'impie Aman nous apprête.

Tout le Chœur.

Arrachons, déchirons tous ces vains ornements
Qui parent notre tête. 315

Une Israélite. Quel carnage de toutes parts !
On égorge à la fois les enfants, les vieillards,
Et la sœur et le frère,
Et la fille et la mère,
Le fils dans les bras de son père ! 320
Que de corps entassés, que de membres épars,
Privés de sépulture !
Grand Dieu, tes saints sont la pâture
Des tigres et des léopards !

Une des plus jeunes Israélites.

Hélas ! si jeune encore, 325
Par quel crime ai-je pu mériter mon malheur ?
Ma vie à peine a commencé d'éclorre :
Je tomberai comme une fleur
Qui n'a vu qu'une aurore.
Hélas ! si jeune encore, 330
Par quel crime ai-je pu mériter mon malheur ?

Une autre. Des offenses d'autrui malheureuses victimes,
Que nous servent, hélas ! ces regrets superflus !
Nos pères ont péché, nos pères ne sont plus,
Et nous portons la peine de leurs crimes. 335

Tout le Chœur.

Le Dieu que nous servons est le Dieu des combats :
Non, non, il ne souffrira pas
Qu'on égorge ainsi l'innocence.

Une Israélite (seule). Hé quoi ! dirait l'impiété,
Où donc est-il ce Dieu si redouté 340
Dont Israël nous vantait la puissance ?

Une autre. Ce Dieu jaloux, ce Dieu victorieux
Frémissez, peuples de la terre,

— Ce Dieu jaloux, ce Dieu victorieux,
 Est le seul qui commande aux cieus : 345
 Ni les éclairs ni le tonnerre
 N'obéissent point à vos dieux.

Une autre. Il renverse l'audacieux.

Une autre. Il prend l'humble sous sa défense.

Tout le Chœur.

Le Dieu que nous servons est le Dieu des combats : 350
 Non, non, il ne souffrira pas
 Qu'on égorge ainsi l'innocence.

Deux Israélites. O Dieu, que la gloire couronne,
 Dieu, que la lumière environne,
 Qui voles sur l'aile des vents, 355
 Et dont le trône est porté par les anges ;

Deux autres des plus jeunes.

Dieu, qui veux bien que de simples enfants
 Avec eux chantent tes louanges ;

Tout le Chœur. Tu vois nos pressants dangers ;
 Donne à ton nom la victoire ; 360
 Ne souffre point que ta gloire
 Passe à des dieux étrangers.

Une Israélite (seule). Arme-toi, viens nous défendre ;
 Descends, tel qu'autrefois la mer te vit descendre ;
 Que les méchants apprennent aujourd'hui 365
 À craindre ta colère.

Qu'ils soient comme la poudre et la paille légère
 Que le vent chasse devant lui.

Tout le Chœur. Tu vois nos pressants dangers ;
 Donne à ton nom la victoire ; 370
 Ne souffre point que ta gloire
 Passe à des dieux étrangers.

ACTE II.

(Le théâtre représente la chambre où est le trône d'Assuérus.)

SCÈNE I.

AMAN, HYDASPE.

Aman. Hé quoi ! lorsque le jour ne commence qu'à
luire,

Dans ce lieu redoutable oses-tu m'introduire ?

Hydaspe. Vous savez qu'on s'en peut reposer sur ma foi,
Que ces portes, Seigneur, n'obéissent qu'à moi. 376
Venez. Partout ailleurs on pourrait nous entendre.

Aman. Quel est donc le secret que tu me veux
apprendre ?

Hydaspe. Seigneur, de vos bienfaits mille fois honoré,
Je me souviens toujours que je vous ai juré 380
D'exposer à vos yeux, par des avis sincères,
Tout ce que ce palais renferme de mystères.
Le roi d'un noir chagrin paraît enveloppé ;
Quelque songe effrayant cette nuit l'a frappé.
Pendant que tout gardait un silence paisible, 385
Sa voix s'est fait entendre avec un cri terrible.
J'ai couru. Le désordre était dans ses discours :
Il s'est plaint du péril qui menaçait ses jours ;
Il parlait d'ennemi, de ravisseur farouche ;
Même le nom d'Esther est sorti de sa bouche. 390
Il a dans ces horreurs passé toute la nuit.
Enfin, las d'appeler un sommeil qui le fuit,
Pour écarter de lui ces images funèbres,
Il s'est fait apporter ces annales célèbres
Où les faits de son règne, avec soin amassés, 395
Par de fidèles mains chaque jour sont tracés ;
On y conserve écrits le service et l'offense,
Monuments éternels d'amour et de vengeance.)

Le roi, que j'ai laissé plus calme dans son lit,
D'une oreille attentive écoute ce récit. 400

Aman. De quel temps de sa vie a-t-il choisi l'histoire ?

Hydaspe. Il revoit tous ces temps si remplis de sa gloire,
Depuis le fameux jour qu'au trône de Cyrus
Le choix du sort plaça l'heureux Assuérus.

Aman. Ce songe, Hydaspe, est donc sorti de son idée ?

Hydaspe. Entre tous les devins fameux dans la Chaldée,
Il a fait assembler ceux qui savent le mieux
Lire en un songe obscur les volontés des cieux. . . .
Mais quel trouble vous-même aujourd'hui vous agite ?
Votre âme en m'écoutant paraît tout interdite : 410
L'heureux Aman a-t-il quelques secrets ennuis ?

Aman. Peux-tu le demander dans la place où je suis ?
Hai, craint, envié, souvent plus misérable
Que tous les malheureux que mon pouvoir accable !

Hydaspe. Ah ! qui jamais du ciel eut des regards plus
doux ? 415
Vous voyez l'univers prosterné devant vous.

Aman. L'univers ! Tous les jours un homme, un vil
esclave,
D'un front audacieux me dédaigne et me brave.

Hydaspe. Quel est cet ennemi de l'État et du roi ?

Aman. Le nom de Mardochée est-il connu de toi ? 420

Hydaspe. Qui ? ce chef d'une race abominable, impie ?

Aman. Oui, lui-même.

Hydaspe. Eh, Seigneur ! d'une si belle vie
Un si faible ennemi peut-il troubler la paix ?

Aman. L'insolent devant moi ne se courba jamais.
En vain de la faveur du plus grand des monarques 425
Tout révère à genoux les glorieuses mârques ;
Lorsque d'un saint respect tous les Persans touchés
N'osent lever leurs fronts à la terre attachés,

Lui, fièrement assis, et la tête immobile,
 Traite tous ces honneurs d'impïète servile, 430
 Présente à mes regards un front séditieux,
 Et ne daignerait pas au moins baisser les yeux.
 Du palais cependant il assiège la porte :
 À quelque heure que j'entre, Hydaspe, ou que je sorte,
 Son visage odieux m'afflige et me poursuit ; 435
 Et mon esprit troublé le voit encor la nuit.
 Ce matin j'ai voulu devancer la lumière :
 Je l'ai trouvé couvert d'une affreuse poussière,
 Revêtu de lambeaux, tout pâle ; mais son œil
 Conservait sous la cendre encor le même orgueil. 440
 D'où lui vient, cher ami, cette impudente audace ?
 Toi, qui dans ce palais vois tout ce qui se passe,
 Crois-tu que quelque voix ose parler pour lui ?
 Sur quel roseau fragile a-t-il mis son appui ?

Hydaspe. Seigneur, vous le savez, son avis salutaire
 Découvrit de Tharès le complot sanguinaire. 446
 Le roi promit alors de le récompenser.
 Le roi, depuis ce temps, paraît n'y plus penser.

Aman. Non, il faut à tes yeux dépouiller l'artifice.
 J'ai su de mon destin corriger l'injustice : 450
 Dans les mains des Persans jeune enfant apporté,
 Je gouverne l'empire où je fus acheté ;
 Mes richesses des rois égalent l'opulence ;
 Environné d'enfants, soutiens de ma puissance,
 Il ne manque à mon front que le bandeau royal : 455
 Cependant (des mortels aveuglement fatal !)
 De cet amas d'honneurs la douceur passagère
 Fait sur mon cœur à peine une atteinte légère ;
 Mais Mardochée, assis aux portes du palais,
 Dans ce cœur malheureux enfonce mille traits ; 460
 Et toute ma grandeur me devient insipide
 Tandis que le soleil éclaire ce perfide.

Hydaspe. Vous serez de sa vue affranchi dans dix jours :
 La nation entière est promise aux vautours.

Aman. Ah ! que ce temps est long à mon impatience !
 C'est lui, je te veux bien confier ma vengeance, 466
 C'est lui qui, devant moi refusant de ployer,
 Les a livrés au bras qui les va foudroyer.

C'était trop peu pour moi d'une telle victime :
 La vengeance trop faible attire un second crime 470
 Un homme tel qu'Aman, lorsqu'on l'ose irriter,
 Dans sa juste fureur ne peut trop éclater.

Il faut des châtimens dont l'univers frémisses ;
 Qu'on tremble en comparant l'offense et le supplice ;
 Que les peuples entiers dans le sang soient noyés. 475
 Je veux qu'on dise un jour aux siècles effrayés :

Il fut des Juifs, il fut une insolente race ;
 Répandus sur la terre, ils en couvraient la face :
 Un seul osa d'Aman attirer le courroux,
 Aussitôt de la terre ils disparurent tous. 480

Hydaspe. Ce n'est donc pas, Seigneur, le sang amalécite

Dont la voix à les perdre en secret vous excite ?

Aman. Je sais que, descendu de ce sang malheureux,
 Une éternelle haine a dû m'armer contre eux ;
 Qu'ils firent d'Amalec un indigne carnage ; 485
 Que, jusqu'aux vils troupeaux, tout éprouva leur rage ;
 Qu'un déplorable reste à peine fut sauvé :

Mais, crois-moi, dans le rang où je suis élevé,
 Mon âme, à ma grandeur tout entière attachée,
 Des intérêts du sang est faiblement touchée. 490

Mardochée est coupable ; et que faut-il de plus ?

Je prévins donc contre eux l'esprit d'Assuérus,
 J'inventai des couleurs, j'armai la calomnie,
 J'intéressai sa gloire : il trembla pour sa vie.
 Je les peignis puissants, riches, séditieux, 495

Leur Dieu même ennemi de tous les autres dieux.

'Jusqu'à quand souffre-t-on que ce peuple respire,
 Et d'un culte profane infecte votre empire ?

Étrangers dans la Perse, à nos lois opposés,
 Du reste des humains ils semblent divisés, 500

N'aspirent qu'à troubler le repos où nous sommes,
 Et, détestés partout, détestent tous les hommes.
 Prévenez, punissez leurs insolents efforts ;
 De leur dépouille enfin grossissez vos trésors.'
 Je dis, et l'on me crut. Le roi, dès l'heure même 505
 Mit dans ma main le sceau de son pouvoir suprême :
 'Assure, me dit-il, le repos de ton roi ;
 Va, perds ces malheureux : leur dépouille est à toi.'
 } Toute la nation fut ainsi condamnée.
 Du carnage avec lui je réglai la journée. 510
 Mais de ce traître enfin le trépas différé
 Fait trop souffrir mon cœur de son sang altéré.
 Un je ne sais quel trouble empoisonne ma joie.
 Pourquoi dix jours encor faut-il que je le voie ?

Hydaspe. Et ne pouvez-vous pas d'un mot l'exterminer ?
 Dites au roi, Seigneur, de vous l'abandonner. 516

Aman. Je viens pour épier le moment favorable.
 Tu connais comme moi ce prince inexorable :
 Tu sais combien terrible en ses soudains transports,
 De nos desseins souvent il rompt tous les ressorts. 520
 Mais à me tourmenter ma crainte est trop subtile :
 Mardochée à ses yeux est une âme trop vile.

Hydaspe. Que tardez-vous ? Allez, et faites promptement
 Élever de sa mort le honteux instrument.

Aman. J'entends du bruit ; je sors. Toi, si le roi
 m'appelle. . . . 525

Hydaspe. Il suffit.

SCÈNE II.

ASSUÉRUS, HYDASPE, ASAPH (*suite d'Assuérus*)

Assuérus. Ainsi donc, sans cet avis fidèle,
 Deux traîtres dans son lit assassinaient leur roi ?
 Qu'on me laisse ; et qu'Asaph seul demeure avec moi.

SCÈNE III.

ASSUÉRUS, ASAPH.

Assuérus (assis sur son trône). Je veux bien l'avouer :
de ce couple perfide

J'avais presque oublié l'attentat parricide ; 530

Et j'ai pâli deux fois au terrible récit

Qui vient d'en retracer l'image à mon esprit.

Je vois de quel succès leur fureur fut suivie,

Et que dans les tourments ils laissèrent la vie.

Mais ce sujet zélé qui, d'un œil si subtil, 535

Sut de leur noir complot développer le fil,

Qui me montra sur moi leur main déjà levée,

Enfin par qui la Perse avec moi fut sauvée,

Quel honneur pour sa foi, quel prix a-t-il reçu ?

Asaph. On lui promet beaucoup : c'est tout ce que j'ai su.

Assuérus. O d'un si grand service oublié trop condamnable !

Des embarras du trône effet inévitable !

De soins tumultueux un prince environné

Vers de nouveaux objets est sans cesse entraîné ;

L'avenir l'inquiète, et le présent le frappe : 545

Mais, plus prompt que l'éclair, le passé nous échappe ;

Et, de tant de mortels à toute heure empressés

À nous faire valoir leurs soins intéressés,

Il ne s'en trouve point qui, touchés d'un vrai zèle,

Preignent à notre gloire un intérêt fidèle, 550

Du mérite oublié nous fassent souvenir,

Trop prompts à nous parler de ce qu'il faut punir.

Ah ! que plutôt l'injure échappe à ma vengeance,

Qu'un si rare bienfait à ma reconnaissance !

Et qui voudrait jamais s'exposer pour son roi ? 555

Ce mortel qui montra tant de zèle pour moi

Vit-il encore ?

Asaph. Il voit l'astre qui vous éclaire.

Assuérus. Et que n'a-t-il plus tôt demandé son salaire ?

Quel pays reculé le cache à mes bienfaits ?

✓ *Asaph.* Assis le plus souvent aux portes du palais, 560
Sans se plaindre de vous ni de sa destinée,
Il y traîne, Seigneur, sa vie infortunée.

Assuérus. Et je dois d'autant moins oublier la vertu,
Qu'elle-même s'oublie. Il se nomme, dis-tu ?

Asaph. Mardochée est le nom que je viens de vous lire.

Assuérus. Et son pays ?

Asaph. Seigneur, puisqu'il faut vous le dire,
C'est un de ces captifs à périr destinés,
Des rives du Jourdain sur l'Euphrate amenés.

Assuérus. Il est donc Juif ? O ciel ! sur le point que la vie
Par mes propres sujets m'allait être ravie, 570
Un Juif rend par ses soins leurs efforts impuissants !
Un Juif m'a préservé du glaive des Persans !
Mais, puisqu'il m'a sauvé, quel qu'il soit, il n'importe.
Holà, quelqu'un !

SCÈNE IV.

ASSUÉRUS, HYDASPE, ASAPH.

Hydaspe. Seigneur ?

Assuérus. Regarde à cette porte ;
Vois s'il s'offre à tes yeux quelque grand de ma cour. 575

Hydaspe. Aman à votre porte a devancé le jour.

Assuérus. Qu'il entre. Ses avis m'éclaireront peut-être.

SCÈNE V.

ASSUÉRUS, AMAN, HYDASPE, ASAPH.

Assuérus. Approche, heureux appui du trône de ton
maître,
Âme de mes conseils, et qui seul tant de fois

Du sceptre dans ma main as soulagé le poids. 580

Un reproche secret embarrasse mon âme.

Je sais combien est pur le zèle qui t'enflamme :

Le mensonge jamais n'entra dans tes discours,

Et mon intérêt seul est le but où tu cours.

Dis-moi donc : que doit faire un prince magnanime 585

Qui veut combler d'honneurs un sujet qu'il estime ?

Par quel gage éclatant, et digne d'un grand roi,

Puis-je récompenser le mérite et la foi ?

Ne donne point de borne à ma reconnaissance ;

Mesure tes conseils sur ma vaste puissance. 590

Aman (à part). C'est pour toi-même, Aman, que tu vas prononcer ;

Et quel autre que toi peut-on récompenser ?

Assuérus. Que penses-tu ?

Aman.

Seigneur, je cherche, j'envisage

Des monarques persans la conduite et l'usage ;

Mais à mes yeux en vain je les rappelle tous ; 595

Pour vous régler sur eux, que sont-ils près de vous ?

Votre règne aux neveux doit servir de modèle.

Vous voulez d'un sujet reconnaître le zèle ;

L'honneur seul peut flatter un esprit généreux :

Je voudrais donc, Seigneur, que ce mortel heureux, 600

De la pourpre aujourd'hui paré comme vous-même,

Et portant sur le front le sacré diadème,

Sur un de vos coursiers pompeusement orné,

Aux yeux de vos sujets dans Suse fût mené :

Que, pour comble de gloire et de magnificence, 605

Un seigneur éminent en richesse, en puissance,

Enfin de votre empire après vous le premier,

Par la bride guidât son superbe coursier ;

Et lui-même, marchant en habits magnifiques,

Criât à haute voix dans les places publiques : 610

' Mortels, prosternez-vous ! c'est ainsi que le roi

Honore le mérite, et couronne la foi.'

Assuérus. Je vois que la sagesse elle-même t'inspire :

Avec mes volontés ton sentiment conspire.

Va, ne perds point de temps : ce que tu m'as dicté, 615
 Je veux de point en point qu'il soit exécuté :
 La vertu dans l'oubli ne sera plus cachée.
 Aux portes du palais prends le Juif Mardochée
 C'est lui que je prétends honorer aujourd'hui :
 Ordonne son triomphe, et marche devant lui ; 620
 Que Suse par ta voix de son nom retentisse,
 Et fais à son aspect que tout genou fléchisse.
 Sortez tous.

Aman (à part). Dieux !

cf. suite
 - Andromaque

SCÈNE VI.

ASSUÉRUS.

significatif

Le prix est sans doute inouï ;
 Jamais d'un tel honneur un sujet n'a joui :
 Mais plus la récompense est grande et glorieuse, 625
 Plus même de ce Juif la race est odieuse,
 Plus j'assure ma vie, et montre avec éclat
 Combien Assuérus redoute d'être ingrat,
 On verra l'innocent discerné du coupable :
 Je n'en perdrai pas moins ce peuple abominable ; 630
 Leur crime. . . .

SCÈNE VII.

ASSUÉRUS, ESTHER, ÉLISE, THAMAR (*partie du Chœur*).

(*Esther entre s'appuyant sur Élise : quatre
 Israélites soutiennent sa robe.*)

Assuérus. Sans mon ordre on porte ici ses pas !
 Quel mortel insolent vient chercher le trépas ?
 Gardes . . . C'est vous, Esther ? quoi ! sans être attendue ?

Esther. Mes filles soutenez votre reine éperdue.
 Je me meurs. (*Elle tombe évanouie.*)

Assuérus. Dieux puissants ! quel étrange pâleur 635
 De son teint tout à coup efface la couleur !

Esther, que craignez-vous? suis-je pas votre frère?
 Est-ce pour vous qu'est fait un ordre si sévère?
 Vivez : le sceptre d'or que vous tend cette main
 Pour vous de ma clémence est un gage certain. 640

Esther. Quelle voix salutaire ordonne que je vive,
 Et rappelle en mon sein mon âme fugitive?

Assuérus. Ne connaissez-vous pas la voix de votre
 époux?

Encore un coup, vivez, et revenez à vous.

Esther. Seigneur, je n'ai jamais contemplé qu'avec
 crainte 645

L'auguste majesté sur votre front empreinte ;
 Jugez combien ce front irrité contre moi
 Dans mon âme troublée a dû jeter d'effroi :
 Sur ce trône sacré qu'environne la foudre
 J'ai cru vous voir tout prêt à me réduire en poudre. 650
 Hélas ! sans frissonner, quel cœur audacieux
 Soutiendrait les éclairs qui partaient de vos yeux ?
 Ainsi du Dieu vivant la colère étincelle. . . .

Assuérus. O soleil ! ô flambeaux de lumière immortelle !
 Je me trouble moi-même ; et sans frémissement 655
 Je ne puis voir sa peine et son saisissement.
 Calmez, reine, calmez la frayeur qui vous presse.
 Du cœur d'Assuérus souveraine maîtresse,
 Éprouvez seulement son ardente amitié.
 Faut-il de mes États vous donner la moitié? 660

Esther. Eh ! se peut-il qu'un roi craint de la terre
 entière,
 Devant qui tout fléchit et baise la poussière,
 Jette sur son esclave un regard serein,
 Et m'offre sur son cœur un pouvoir souverain?

Assuérus. Croyez-moi, chère Esther, ce sceptre, cet
 empire, 665

Et ces profonds respects que la terreur inspire,
 À leur pompeux éclat mêlent peu de douceur,
 Et fatiguent souvent leur triste possesseur.
 Je ne trouve qu'en vous je ne sais quelle grâce

Qui me charme toujours et jamais ne me lasse. 670
 De l'aimable vertu doux et puissants attraits !
 Tout respire en Esther l'innocence et la paix :
 Du chagrin le plus noir elle écarte les ombres,
 Et fait des jours sereins de mes jours les plus sombres.
 Que dis-je ? sur ce trône assis auprès de vous, 675
 Des astres ennemis j'en crains moins le courroux,
 Et crois que votre front prête à mon diadème
 Un éclat qui le rend respectable aux dieux même.
 Osez donc me répondre, et ne me cachez pas
 Quel sujet important conduit ici vos pas. 680
 Quel intérêt, quels soins vous agitent, vous pressent ?
 Je vois qu'en m'écoutant vos yeux au ciel s'adressent.
 Parlez : de vos désirs le succès est certain,
 Si ce succès dépend d'une mortelle main.

/ *Esther.* O bonté qui m'assure autant qu'elle m'honore !
 Un intérêt pressant veut que je vous implore : 686
 J'attends ou mon malheur ou ma félicité ;
 Et tout dépend, Seigneur, de votre volonté.
 Un mot de votre bouche, en terminant mes peines,
 Peut rendre Esther heureuse entre toutes les reines. 690

Assuérus. Ah ! que vous enflammez mon désir curieux !

Esther. Seigneur, si j'ai trouvé grâce devant vos yeux,
 Si jamais à mes vœux vous fûtes favorable,
 Permettez, avant tout, qu'Esther puisse à sa table
 Recevoir aujourd'hui son souverain seigneur, 695
 Et qu'Aman soit admis à cet excès d'honneur.
 J'oserai devant lui rompre ce grand silence ;
 Et j'ai pour m'expliquer besoin de sa présence.

Assuérus. Dans quelle inquiétude, Esther, vous me jetez !
 Toutefois, qu'il soit fait comme vous souhaitez. 700
 (*À ceux de sa suite.*)

Vous, que l'on cherche Aman ; et qu'on lui fasse entendre
 Qu'invité chez la reine, il ait soin de s'y rendre.

SCÈNE VIII.

ASSUÉRUS, ESTHER, ÉLISE, THAMAR, HYDASPE

(partie du Chœur).

Hydaspe. Les savants chaldéens, par votre ordre appelés,
Dans cet appartement, Seigneur, sont assemblés.

Assuérus. Princesse, un songe étrange occupe ma pensée :
Vous-même en leur réponse êtes intéressée. 706

Venez, derrière un voile écoutant leurs discours,
De vos propres clartés me prêter le secours.

Je crains pour vous, pour moi, quelque ennemi perfide.

Esther. Suis-moi, Thamar. Et vous, troupe jeune et
timide, 710

Sans craindre ici les yeux d'une profane cour,
À l'abri de ce trône attendez mon retour.

SCÈNE IX.

*(Cette scène est partie déclamée et partie chantée.)*ÉLISE *(partie du Chœur).*

Élise. Que vous semble, mes sœurs, de l'état où nous
sommes ?

D'Esther, d'Aman, qui le doit emporter ?

Est-ce Dieu, sont-ce les hommes, 715

Dont les œuvres vont éclater ?

Vous avez vu quelle ardente colère
Allumait de ce roi le visage sévère.

Une Israélite. Des éclairs de ses yeux l'œil était ébloui.

Une autre. Et sa voix m'a paru comme un tonnerre
horrible. 720

Élise. Comment ce courroux si terrible
En un moment s'est-il évanoui ?

Une Israélite (chante). Un moment a changé ce courage
inflexible :

Le lion rugissant est un agneau paisible.

Dieu, notre Dieu sans doute a versé dans son cœur 725

Cet esprit de douceur.

Le Chœur (chante).

Dieu, notre Dieu sans doute a versé dans son cœur
Cet esprit de douceur.

La même Israélite (chante). Tel qu'un ruisseau docile
Obéit à la main qui détourne son cours, 730
Et, laissant de ses eaux partager le secours,
Va rendre tout un champ fertile :

Dieu, de nos volontés arbitre souverain,
Le cœur des rois est ainsi dans ta main. 734

Élise. Ah ! que je crains, mes sœurs, les funestes nuages
Qui de ce prince obscurcissent les yeux !
Comme il est aveuglé du culte de ses dieux !

Une Israélite. Il n'atteste jamais que leurs noms odieux.

Une autre. Aux feux inanimés dont se parent les cieux
Il rend de profanes hommages. 740

Une autre. Tout son palais est plein de leurs images.

Le Chœur (chante).

Malheureux, vous quittez le maître des humains
Pour adorer l'ouvrage de vos mains !

Une Israélite (chante).

Dieu d'Israël, dissipe enfin cette ombre :
Des larmes de tes saints quand seras-tu touché ? 745
Quand sera le voile arraché

Qui sur tout l'univers jette une nuit si sombre ?

Dieu d'Israël, dissipe enfin cette ombre :

Jusqu'à quand seras-tu caché ?

Une des plus jeunes Israélites.

Parlons plus bas, mes sœurs. Ciel ! si quelque infidèle, 750
Écoutant nos discours, nous allait déceler !

Élise. Quoi ! fille d'Abraham, une crainte mortelle
Semble déjà vous faire chanceler !

Eh ! si l'impie Aman, dans sa main homicide
Faisant luire à vos yeux un glaive menaçant, 755
À blasphémer le nom du Tout-Puissant
Voulait forcer votre bouche timide !

Une autre Israélite.

Peut-être Assuérus, frémissant de courroux,
 Si nous ne courbons les genoux
 Devant une muette idole, 760
 Commandera qu'on nous immole.
 Chère sœur, que choisirez-vous ?

La jeune Israélite.

/ Moi, je pourrais trahir le Dieu que j'aime !
 J'adorerais un dieu sans force et sans vertu,
 Reste d'un tronc par les vents abattu, 765
 Qui ne peut se sauver lui-même !

Le Chœur (chante).

Dieux impuissants, dieux sourds, tous ceux qui vous implorent
 Ne seront jamais entendus ;
 Que les démons, et ceux qui les adorent,
 Soient à jamais détruits et confondus ! 770

Une Israélite (chante).

/ Que ma bouche et mon cœur, et tout ce que je suis,
 Rendent honneur au Dieu qui m'a donné la vie.
 Dans les craintes, dans les ennuis,
 En ses bontés mon âme se confie.
 Veut-il par mon trépas que je le glorifie ? 775
 Que ma bouche et mon cœur, et tout ce que je suis,
 Rendent honneur au Dieu qui m'a donné la vie.

Élise. Je n'admire jamais la gloire de l'impie.

Une autre Israélite.

Au bonheur du méchant qu'une autre porte envie.
Élise. Tous ses jours paraissent charmants ; 780
 L'or éclate en ses vêtements ;
 Son orgueil est sans borne ainsi que sa richesse ;
 Jamais l'air n'est troublé de ses gémissements ;
 Il s'endort, il s'éveille au son des instruments ;
 Son cœur nage dans la mollesse. 785

Une autre Israélite. Pour comble de prospérité.
 Il espère revivre en sa postérité ;
 Et d'enfants à sa table une riante troupe
 Semble boire avec lui la joie à pleine coupe.

(*Tout le reste est chante.*)

Le Chœur. Heureux, dit-on, le peuple florissant 790
Sur qui ces biens coulent en abondance !

Plus heureux le peuple innocent
Qui dans le Dieu du ciel a mis sa confiance !

Une Israélite (seule). Pour contenter ses frivoles désirs
L'homme insensé vainement se consume : 795
Il trouve l'amertume
Au milieu des plaisirs.

Une autre (seule).

Le bonheur de l'impie est toujours agité :

Il erre à la merci de sa propre inconstance.

Ne cherchons la félicité 800

Que dans la paix de l'innocence.

La même (avec une autre). O douce paix !

O lumière éternelle !

Beauté toujours nouvelle !

Heureux le cœur épris de tes attraits ! 805

O douce paix !

O lumière éternelle !

Heureux le cœur qui ne te perd jamais !

Le Chœur. O douce paix !

O lumière éternelle ! 810

Beauté toujours nouvelle !

O douce paix !

Heureux le cœur qui ne te perd jamais !

La même (seule).

Nulle paix pour l'impie. Il la cherche, elle fuit ;

Et le calme en son cœur ne trouve point de place. 815

Le glaive au dehors le poursuit ;

Le remords au dedans le glace.

Une autre.

La gloire des méchants en un moment s'éteint :

L'affreux tombeau pour jamais les dévore.

Il n'en est pas ainsi de celui qui te craint ; 820

Il renaîtra, mon Dieu, plus brillant que l'aurore.

Le Chœur. O douce paix !

Heureux le cœur qui ne te perd jamais !

Élise (sans chanter).

Mes sœurs, j'entends du bruit dans la chambre prochaine.
On nous appelle : allons rejoindre notre reine. 825

ACTE III.

*(Le théâtre représente les jardins d'Esther, et un
des côtés du salon où se fait le festin.)*

SCÈNE I.

AMAN, ZARÈS.

Zarès. C'est donc ici d'Esther le superbe jardin ;
Et ce salon pompeux est le lieu du festin ?
Mais tandis que la porte en est encor fermée,
Écoutez les conseils d'une épouse alarmée,
Au nom du sacré nœud qui me lie avec vous, 830
Dissimulez, Seigneur, cet aveugle courroux ;
Éclaircissez ce front où la tristesse est peinte :
Les rois craignent surtout le reproche et la plainte
Seul entre tous les grands par la reine invité,
Ressez donc aussi cette félicité. 835
Si le mal vous aigrit, que le bienfait vous touche.
Je l'ai cent fois appris de votre propre bouche :
Quiconque ne sait pas dévorer un affront,
Ni de fausses couleurs se déguiser le front,
Loïn de l'aspect des rois qu'il s'écarte, qu'il fuie ! 840
Il est des contre-temps qu'il faut qu'un sage essuie :
Souvent avec prudence un outrage enduré
Aux honneurs les plus hauts a servi de degré.

Aman. O douleur ! ô supplice affreux à la pensée !
O honte, qui jamais ne peut être effacée ! 845
Un exécration Juif, l'opprobre des humains ;
S'est donc vu de la pourpre habillé par mes mains !
C'est peu qu'il ait sur moi remporté la victoire ;

Malheureux, j'ai servi de héraut à sa gloire !
 Le traître ! il insultait à ma confusion ; 850
 Et tout le peuple même, avec dérision
 Observant la rougeur qui couvrait mon visage,
 De ma chute certaine en tirait le présage.
 Roi cruel ! ce sont là les jeux où tu te plais !
 Tu ne m'as prodigué tes perfides bienfaits 855
 Que pour me faire mieux sentir ta tyrannie,
 Et m'accabler enfin de plus d'ignominie.

Zarès. Pourquoi juger si mal de son intention ?
 Il croit récompenser une bonne action.
 Ne faut-il pas, Seigneur, s'étonner au contraire 860
 Qu'il en ait si longtemps différé le salaire ?
 Du reste, il n'a rien fait que par votre conseil ;
 Vous-même avez dicté tout ce triste appareil :
 Vous êtes après lui le premier de l'empire.
 Sait-il toute l'horreur que ce Juif vous inspire ? 865

Aman. Il sait qu'il me doit tout, et que, pour sa grandeur,
 J'ai foulé sous les pieds remords, crainte, pudeur ;
 Qu'avec un cœur d'airain exerçant sa puissance,
 J'ai fait taire les lois et gémir l'innocence ; 870
 Que pour lui, des Persans bravant l'aversion,
 J'ai chéri, j'ai cherché la malédiction :
 Et, pour prix de ma vie à leur haine exposée,
 Le barbare aujourd'hui m'expose à leur risée !

Zarès. Seigneur, nous sommes seuls. Que sert de se flatter ?
 Ce zèle que pour lui vous fites éclater, 875
 Ce soin d'immoler tout à son pouvoir suprême,
 Entre nous, avaient-ils d'autre objet que vous-même ?
 Et, sans chercher plus loin, tous ces Juifs désolés,
 N'est-ce pas à vous seul que vous les immolez ?
 Et ne craignez-vous point que quelque avis funeste . . . 880
 Enfin la cour nous hait, le peuple nous déteste.
 Ce Juif même, il le faut confesser malgré moi,
 Ce Juif, comblé d'honneurs, me cause quelque effroi.
 Les malheurs sont souvent enchaînés l'un à l'autre,
 Et sa race toujours fut fatale à la vôtre. 885

De ce léger affront songez à profiter.
 Peut-être la fortune est prête à vous quitter ;
 Aux plus affreux excès son inconstance passe :
 Prévenez son caprice avant qu'elle se lasse.
 Où tendez-vous plus haut ? Je frémis quand je voi 890
 Les abîmes profonds qui s'offrent devant moi ;
 La chute désormais ne peut être qu'horrible.
 Osez chercher ailleurs un destin plus paisible :
 Regagnez l'Hellespont et ces bords écartés
 Où vos aïeux errants jadis furent jetés, 895
 Lorsque des Juifs contre eux la vengeance allumée
 Chassa tout Amalec de la triste Idumée.
 Aux malices du sort enfin dérobez-vous.
 Nos plus riches trésors marcheront devant nous :
 Vous pouvez du départ me laisser la conduite ; 900
 Surtout de vos enfants j'assurerai la fuite.
 N'ayez soin cependant que de dissimuler.
 Contente, sur vos pas vous me verrez voler :
 La mer la plus terrible et la plus orageuse
 Est plus sûre pour nous que cette cour trompeuse. 905
 Mais à grands pas vers vous je vois quelqu'un marcher ;
 C'est Hydaspes.

SCÈNE II.

AMAN, ZARÈS, HYDASPE.

Hydaspe. Seigneur, je courais vous chercher.
 Votre absence en ces lieux suspend toute la joie ;
 Et pour vous y conduire Assuérus m'envoie.

Aman. Et Mardochée est-il aussi de ce festin ? 910

Hydaspe. À la table d'Esther portez-vous ce chagrin
 Quoi ! toujours de ce Juif l'image vous désole ?
 Laissez-le s'applaudir d'un triomphe frivole.
 Croit-il d'Assuérus éviter la rigueur ?
 Ne possédez-vous pas son oreille et son cœur ? 915
 On a payé le zèle, on punira le crime ;
 Et l'on vous a, Seigneur, orné votre victime.

Je me trompe, ou vos vœux par Esther secondés
Obtiendront plus encor que vous ne demandez.

Aman. Croirai-je le bonheur que ta bouche m'annonce ?

Hydaspe. J'ai des savants devins entendu la réponse :
Ils disent que la main d'un perfide étranger 922
Dans le sang de la reine est prête à se plonger.
Et le roi, qui ne sait où trouver le coupable,
N'impute qu'aux seuls Juifs ce projet détestable. 925

Aman. Oui, ce sont, cher ami, des monstres furieux :
Il faut craindre surtout leur chef audacieux.
La terre avec horreur dès longtemps les endure ;
Et l'on n'en peut trop tôt délivrer la nature.
Ah ! je respire enfin. Chère Zarès, adieu. 930

Hydaspe. Les compagnes d'Esther s'avancent vers ce lieu :
Sans doute leur concert va commencer la fête.
Entrez, et recevez l'honneur qu'on vous apprête.

SCÈNE III.

ÉLISE (*le Chœur*).*(Ceci se récite sans chante.)*

Une des Israélites. C'est Aman.

Une autre. C'est lui-même ; et j'en frémis, ma sœur. 934

La première. Mon cœur de crainte et d'horreur se resserre.

L'autre. C'est d'Israël le superbe oppresseur.

La première. C'est celui qui trouble la terre.

Élise. Peut-on, en le voyant, ne le connaître pas ?
L'orgueil et le dédain sont peints sur son visage. 939

Une Israélite. On lit dans ses regards sa fureur et sa rage.

Une autre. Je croyais voir marcher la mort devant ses pas.

Une des plus jeunes.

Je ne sais si ce tigre a reconnu sa proie :
Mais, en nous regardant, mes sœurs, il m'a semblé
Qu'il avait dans les yeux une barbare joie
Dont tout mon sang est encore troublé. 945

Élise. Que ce nouvel honneur va croître son audace !
 Je le vois, mes sœurs, je le voi :
 À la table d'Esther l'insolent près du roi
 A déjà pris sa place.

Une des Israélites. Ministres du festin, de grâce, dites-nous,
 Quels mets à ce cruel, quel vin préparez-vous? 951

Une autre. Le sang de l'orphelin,

Une troisième. Les pleurs des misérables,

La seconde. Sont ses mets les plus agréables ;

La troisième. C'est son breuvage les plus doux. 954

Élise. Chères sœurs, suspendez la douleur qui vous presse,
 Chantons, on nous l'ordonne ; et que puissent nos chants
 Du cœur d'Assuérus adoucir la rudesse,
 Comme autrefois David, par ses accords touchants,
 Calmait d'un roi jaloux la sauvage tristesse !

(*Tout le reste de cette scène est chanté.*)

Une Israélite. Que le peuple est heureux, 960

Lorsqu'un roi généreux,

Craint dans tout l'univers, veut encore qu'on l'aime !

Heureux le peuple ! heureux le roi lui-même !

Tout le Chœur. O repos ! ô tranquillité !

O d'un parfait bonheur assurance éternelle, 965

Quand la suprême autorité

Dans ses conseils a toujours auprès d'elle

La justice et la vérité !

(*Ces quatre stances sont chantées alternativement par une
 voix seule et par tout le Chœur.*)

Une Israélite. Rois, chassez la calomnie :

Ses criminels attentats 970

Des plus paisibles États

Troublent l'heureuse harmonie.

Sa fureur, de sang avide,

Poursuit partout l'innocent.

Rois, prenez soin de l'absent 975

Contre sa langue homicide.

De ce monstre si farouche
 Craignez la feinte douceur :
 La vengeance est dans son cœur,
 Et la pitié dans sa bouche. 980

La fraude adroite et subtile
 Sème de fleurs son chemin :
 Mais sur ses pas vient enfin
 Le repentir inutile.

Une Israélite (seule).

D'un souffle l'aquilon écarte les nuages,
 Et chasse au loin la foudre et les orages ; 985
 Un roi sage, ennemi du langage menteur,
 Écarte d'un regard le perfide imposteur.

Une autre. J'admire un roi victorieux,
 Que sa valeur conduit triomphant en tous lieux : 990
 Mais un roi sage et qui hait l'injustice,
 Qui sous la loi du riche impérieux
 Ne souffre point que le pauvre gémissé,
 Est le plus beau présent des cieux.

Une autre. La veuve en sa défense espère ; 995

Une autre. De l'orphelin il est le père ;

Toutes ensemble. Et les larmes du juste implorant son appui
 Sont précieuses devant lui.

Une Israélite (seule).

Détourne, roi puissant, détourne tes oreilles
 De tout conseil barbare et mensonger. 1000

Il est temps que tu t'éveilles :

Dans le sang innocent ta main va se plonger
 Pendant que tu sommeilles.

Détourne, roi puissant, détourne tes oreilles
 De tout conseil barbare et mensonger. 1005

Une autre. Ainsi puisse sous toi trembler la terre entière !
 Ainsi puisse à jamais contre tes ennemis
 Le bruit de ta valeur te servir de barrière !
 S'ils t'attaquent, qu'ils soient en un moment soumis :

Que de ton bras la force les renverse ; 1010
 Que de ton nom la terreur les disperse :
 Que tout leur camp nombreux soit devant tes soldats
 Comme d'enfants une troupe inutile ;
 Et si par un chemin il entre en tes États,
 Qu'il en sorte par plus de mille. 1015

SCÈNE IV.

ASSUÉRUS, ESTHER, AMAN, ÉLISE (*le Chœur*).

Assuérus (à Esther).

Oui, vos moindres discours ont des grâces secrètes :
 Une noble pudeur à tout ce que vous faites
 Donne un prix que n'ont point ni la pourpre ni l'or.
 Quel climat renfermait un si rare trésor ?
 Dans quel sein vertueux avez-vous pris naissance ? 1020
 Et quelle main si sage éleva votre enfance ?
 Mais dites promptement ce que vous demandez :
 Tous vos désirs, Esther, vous seront accordés ;
 Dussiez-vous, je l'ai dit, et veux bien le redire,
 Demander la moitié de ce puissant empire. 1025

Esther. Je ne m'égare point dans ces vastes désirs.
 Mais puisqu'il faut enfin expliquer mes soupirs,
 Puisque mon roi lui-même à parler me convie,
 (*Elle se jette aux pieds du roi.*)

J'ose vous implorer, et pour ma propre vie,
 Et pour les tristes jours d'un peuple infortuné 1030
 Qu'à périr avec moi vous avez condamé.

Assuérus (la relevant). À périr ! Vous ! Quel peuple ?
 Et quel est ce mystère ?

Aman (tout bas). Je tremble.

Esther. Esther, Seigneur, eut un Juif pour son père :
 De vos ordres sanglants vous savez la rigueur.

Aman (à part). Ah dieux !

Assuérus. Ah ! de quel coup me percez-vous le cœur ! 1035

Vous la fille d'un Juif! Hé quoi! tout ce que j'aime,
 Cette Esther, l'innocence et la sagesse même,
 Que je croyais du ciel les plus chères amours,
 Dans cette source impure aurait puisé ses jours!
 Malheureux!

Esther. Vous pourrez rejeter ma prière : 1040
 Mais je demande au moins que, pour grâce dernière,
 Jusqu'à la fin, Seigneur, vous m'entendiez parler,
 Et que surtout Aman n'ose point me troubler.

Assuérus. Parlez.

Esther. O Dieu, confonds l'audace et l'imposture!
 Ces Juifs, dont vous voulez délivrer la nature, 1045
 Que vous croyez, Seigneur, le rebut des humains,
 D'une riche contrée autrefois souverains,
 Pendant qu'ils n'adoraient que le Dieu de leurs pères,
 Ont vu bénir le cours de leurs destins prospères
 Ce Dieu, maître absolu de la terre et des cieux, 1050
 N'est point tel que l'erreur le figure à vos yeux.
 L'Éternel est son nom, le monde est son ouvrage;
 Il entend les soupirs de l'humble qu'on outrage,
 Juge tous les mortels avec d'égales lois,
 Et du haut de son trône interroge les rois : 1055
 Des plus fermes États la chute épouvantable,
 Quand il veut, n'est qu'un jeu de sa main redoutable.
 Les Juifs à d'autres dieux osèrent s'adresser :
 Roi, peuples, en un jour tout se vit disperser ;
 Sous les Assyriens leur triste servitude 1060
 Devint le juste prix de leur ingratitude.
 Mais, pour punir enfin nos maîtres à leur tour,
 Dieu fit choix de Cyrus avant qu'il vît le jour,
 L'appela par son nom, le promit à la terre,
 Le fit naître, et soudain l'arma de son tonnerre, 1065
 Brisa les fiers remparts et les portes d'airain,
 Mit des superbes rois la dépouille en sa main,
 De son temple détruit vengea sur eux l'injure :
 Babylone paya nos pleurs avec usure.
 Cyrus, par lui vainqueur, publia ses bienfaits, 1070

Regarda notre peuple avec des yeux de paix,
 Nous rendit et nos lois et nos fêtes divines ;
 Et le temple sortait déjà de ses ruines.
 Mais, de ce roi si sage héritier insensé,
 Son fils interrompit l'ouvrage commencé, 1075
 Fut sourd à nos douleurs. Dieu rejeta sa race,
 Le retrancha lui-même, et vous mit en sa place.
 Que n'espérions-nous point d'un roi si généreux !
 Dieu regarde en pitié son peuple malheureux,
 Disions-nous : un roi règne, ami de l'innocence. 1080
 Partout du nouveau prince on vantait la clémence.
 Les Juifs partout de joie en poussèrent des cris.
 Ciel ! verra-t-on toujours par de cruels esprits
 Des princes les plus doux l'oreille environnée,
 Et du bonheur public la source empoisonnée ! 1085
 Dans le fond de la Thrace un barbare enfanté
 Est venu dans ces lieux souffler la cruauté :
 Un ministre ennemi de votre propre gloire. . . .

Aman. De votre gloire ! moi ! Ciel ! le pourriez-vous croire ?
 Moi qui n'ai d'autre objet ni d'autre dieu. . . . 1090

Assuérus.

Tais-toi.

Oses-tu donc parler sans l'ordre de ton roi ?

Esther. Notre ennemi cruel devant vous se déclare.
 C'est lui ; c'est ce ministre infidèle et barbare
 Qui, d'un zèle trompeur à vos yeux revêtu,
 Contre notre innocence arma votre vertu. 1095
 Et quel autre, grand Dieu ! qu'un Scythe impitoyable
 Aurait de tant d'horreurs dicté l'ordre effroyable !
 Partout l'affreux signal en même temps donné
 De meurtres remplira l'univers étonné :
 On verra, sous le nom du plus juste des princes, 1100
 Un perfide étranger désoler vos provinces ;
 Et dans ce palais même, en proie à son courroux,
 Le sang de vos sujets regorger jusqu'à vous.
 Et que reproche aux Juifs sa haine envenimée ?
 Quelle guerre intestine avons-nous allumée ? 1105
 Les a-t-on vus marcher parmi vos ennemis ?

Fut-il jamais au joug esclaves plus soumis ?
 Adorant dans leurs fers le Dieu qui les châtie,
 Pendant que votre main sur eux appesantie
 À leurs persécuteurs les livrait sans secours, 1110
 Ils conjuraient ce Dieu de veiller sur vos jours,
 De rompre des méchants les trames criminelles,
 De mettre votre trône à l'ombre de ses ailes.
 N'en doutez point, Seigneur, il fut votre soutien :
 Lui seul mit à vos pieds le Parthe et l'Indien, 1115
 Dissipa devant vous les innombrables Scythes,
 Et renferma les mers dans vos vastes limites ;
 Lui seul aux yeux d'un Juif découvrit le dessein
 De deux traîtres tout prêts à vous percer le sein.
 Hélas ! ce Juif jadis m'adopta pour sa fille. 1120

Assuérus. Mardochée ?

Esther. Il restait seul de notre famille.
 Mon père était son frère. Il descend comme moi
 Du sang infortuné de notre premier roi.
 Plein d'une juste horreur pour un Amalécite,
 Race que notre Dieu de sa bouche a maudite, 1125
 Il n'a devant Aman pu fléchir les genoux,
 Ni lui rendre un honneur qu'il ne croit dû qu'à vous.
 De là contre les Juifs et contre Mardochée
 Cette haine, Seigneur, sous d'autres noms cachée.
 En vain de vos bienfaits Mardochée est paré : 1130
 À la porte d'Aman est déjà préparé
 D'un infâme trépas l'instrument exécration ;
 Dans une heure au plus tard ce vieillard vénérable
 Des portes du palais par son ordre arraché,
 Couvert de votre pourpre, y doit être attaché. 1135

Assuérus. Quel jour mêlé d'horreur vient effrayer mon âme !
 Tout mon sang de colère et de honte s'enflamme.
 J'étais donc le jouet. . . Ciel, daigne m'éclairer !
 Un moment sans témoins cherchons à respirer.
 Appelez Mardochée, il faut aussi l'entendre. 1140

(*Le roi s'éloigne.*)

Une Israélite. Vérité que j'implore, achève de descendre.

SCÈNE V.

ESTHER, AMAN, ÉLISE (*le Chœur*).

Aman (à Esther). D'un juste étonnement je demeure frappé.
 Les ennemis des Juifs m'ont trahi, m'ont trompé :
 J'en atteste du ciel la puissance suprême,
 En les perdant, j'ai cru vous assurer vous-même. 1145
 Princesse, en leur faveur employez mon crédit :
 Le roi, vous le voyez, flotte encore interdit.
 Je sais par quels ressorts on le pousse, on l'arrête ;
 Et fais, comme il me plaît, le calme et la tempête.
 Les intérêts des Juifs déjà me sont sacrés. 1150
 Parlez : vos ennemis aussitôt massacrés,
 Victimes de la foi que ma bouche vous jure,
 De ma fatale erreur répareront l'injure.
 Quel sang demandez-vous ?

Esther. Va, traître, laisse-moi :
 Les Juifs n'attendent rien d'un méchant tel que toi. 1155
 Misérable ! le Dieu vengeur de l'innocence,
 Tout prêt à te juger, tient déjà sa balance :
 Bientôt son juste arrêt te sera prononcé.
 Tremble son jour approche, et ton règne est passé !

Aman. Oui, ce Dieu, je l'avoue, est un Dieu redoutable.
 Mais veut-il que l'on garde une haine implacable ? 1161
 C'en est fait : mon orgueil est forcé de plier.
 L'inexorable Aman est réduit à prier.

(*Il se jette aux pieds d'Esther.*)

Par le salut des Juifs, par ces pieds que j'embrasse,
 Par ce sage vieillard, l'honneur de votre race, 1165
 Daignez d'un roi terrible apaiser le courroux :
 Sauvez Aman, qui tremble à vos sacrés genoux.

SCÈNE VI.

ASSUÉRUS, ESTHER, AMAN, ÉLISE

(le Chœur, Gardes).

Assuérus. Quoi ! le traître sur vous porte ses mains hardies !
 Ah ! dans ses yeux confus je lis ses perfidies ;
 Et son trouble, appuyant la foi de vos discours, 1170
 De tous ses attentats me rappelle le cours.
 Qu'à ce monstre à l'instant l'âme soit arrachée ;
 Et que devant sa porte, au lieu de Mardochée,
 Apaisant par sa mort et la terre et les cieux,
 De mes peuples vengés il repaisse les yeux. 1175
(Aman est emmené par les gardes.)

SCÈNE VII.

ASSUÉRUS, ESTHER, MARDOCHÉE, ÉLISE *(le Chœur.)**(Assuérus à Mardochée).*

Mortel chéri du ciel, mon salut et ma joie,
 Aux conseils des méchants ton roi n'est plus en proie,
 Mes yeux sont dessillés, le crime est confondu :
 Viens briller près de moi dans le rang qui t'est dû.
 Je te donne d'Aman les biens et la puissance : 1180
 Possède justement son injuste opulence.
 Je romps le joug funeste où les Juifs sont soumis,
 Je leur livre le sang de tous leurs ennemis :
 À l'égal des Persans je veux qu'on les honore,
 Et que tout tremble au nom du Dieu qu'Esther adore. 1185
 Rebâtissez son temple, et peuplez vos cités ;
 Que vos heureux enfants dans leurs solennités
 Consacrent de ce jour le triomphe et la gloire,
 Et qu'à jamais mon nom vive dans leur mémoire.

SCÈNE VIII.

ASSUÉRUS, ESTHER, MARDOCHÉE, ASAPH, ÉLISE

*(le Chœur).**Assuérus.* Que veut Asaph ?

Asaph. Seigneur, le traître est expiré,
 Par le peuple en fureur à moitié déchiré. 1191
 On traîne, on va donner en spectacle funeste
 De son corps tout sanglant le misérable reste.

Mardochée. Roi, qu'à jamais le ciel prenne soin de vos jours !
 Le péril des Juifs presse, et veut un prompt secours. 1195

Assuérus. Oui, jet'entends. Allons, par des ordres contraires
 Révoquer, d'un méchant les ordres sanguinaires.

Esther. O Dieu ! par quelle route inconnue aux mortels
 Ta sagesse conduit ses desseins éternels !

SCÈNE IX.

LE CHŒUR.

Tout le Chœur. Dieu fait triompher l'innocence, 1200
 Chantons, célébrons sa puissance.

Une Israélite. Il a vu contre nous les méchants s'assembler,
 Et notre sang prêt à couler ;
 Comme l'eau sur la terre ils allaient le répandre ;
 Du haut du ciel sa voix s'est fait entendre ; 1205
 L'homme superbe est renversé,
 Ses propres flèches l'ont percé.

Une autre. J'ai vu l'impie adoré sur la terre ;
 Pareil au cèdre, il cachait dans les cieux
 Son front audacieux ; 1210

Il semblait à son gré gouverner le tonnerre,
 Foulaît aux pieds ses ennemis vaincus :
 Je n'ai fait que passer, il n'était déjà plus.

Une autre.

On peut des plus grands rois surprendre la justice :
 Incapables de tromper, 1215
 Ils ont peine à s'échapper
 Des pièges de l'artifice.

Un cœur noble ne peut soupçonner en autrui
 La bassesse et la malice
 Qu'il ne sent point en lui. 1220

Une autre. Comment s'est calmé l'orage ?

Une autre. Quelle main salutaire a chassé le nuage ?

Tout le Chœur. L'aimable Esther a fait ce grand ouvrage.

Une Israélite (seule).

De l'amour de son Dieu son cœur s'est embrasé ;
 Au péril d'une mort funeste 1225
 Son zèle ardent s'est exposé ;
 Elle a parlé : le ciel a fait le reste.

Deux Israélites. Esther a triomphé des filles des Persans :
 La nature et le ciel à l'envi l'ont ornée.

L'une des deux.

↳ Tout ressent de ses yeux les charmes innocents. 1230
 Jamais tant de beauté fut-elle couronnée ?

L'autre.

↳ Les charmes de son cœur sont encor plus puissants.
 Jamais tant de vertu fut-elle couronnée ?

Toutes deux (ensemble).

Esther a triomphé des filles des Persans :
 La nature et le ciel à l'envi l'ont ornée. 1235

↳ *Une Israélite (seule).* Ton Dieu n'est plus irrité ;
 Réjouis-toi, Sion, et sors de la poussière ;
 Quitte les vêtements de ta captivité,
 Et reprends ta splendeur première.

- ✓ Les chemins de Sion à la fin sont ouverts 1240
 Rompez vos fers,
 Tribus captives ;
 Troupes fugitives,
 Repassez les monts et les mers ;
 Rassemblez-vous des bouts de l'univers. 1245
 Tout le Chœur. Rompez vos fers,
 Tribus captives ;
 Troupes fugitives,
 Repassez les monts et les mers ;
 Rassemblez-vous des bouts de l'univers. ✓ 1250
 Une Israélite (seule). Je reverrai ces campagnes si chères.
 Une autre. J'irai pleurer au tombeau de mes pères.
 Tout le Chœur. Repassez les monts et les mers ;
 Rassemblez-vous des bouts de l'univers.
 Une Israélite (seule).
 Relevez, relevez les superbes portiques 1255
 Du temple où notre Dieu se plaît d'être adoré :
 Que de l'or le plus pur son autel soit paré,
 Et que du sein des monts le marbre soit tiré.
 Liban, dépouille-toi de tes cèdres antiques ;
 Prêtres sacrés, préparez vos cantiques. 1260
 Une autre. Dieu descend et revient habiter parmi nous :
 Terre, frémis d'allégresse et de crainte ;
 Et, vous, sous sa majesté sainte,
 Cieux, abaissez-vous !
 Une autre.
 Que le Seigneur est bon ! que son joug est aimable ! 1265
 Heureux qui dès l'enfance en connaît la douceur !
 Jeune peuple, courez à ce maître adorable :
 Les biens les plus charmants n'ont rien de comparable
 Aux torrents de plaisirs qu'il répand dans un cœur.
 Que le Seigneur est bon ! que son joug est aimable ! 1270
 Heureux qui dès l'enfance en connaît la douceur !
 Une autre. Il s'apaise, il pardonne ;

Du cœur ingrat qui l'abandonne

Il attend le retour ;

Il excuse notre faiblesse ;

1275

À nous chercher même il s'empresse :

Pour l'enfant qu'elle a mis au jour

Une mère a moins de tendresse.

Ah ! qui peut avec lui partager notre amour ?

Trois Israélites. Il nous fait remporter une illustre victoire.

L'une des trois. Il nous a révélé sa gloire.

1281

Toutes trois (ensemble).

Ah ! qui peut avec lui partager notre amour ?

Tout le Chœur.

Que son nom soit béni ; que son nom soit chanté ;

Que l'on célèbre ses ouvrages

Au delà des temps et des âges,

1285

Au delà de l'éternité.

x



NOTES.

Prolegomena.

P. 48. l. 36. *La miennne* refers to 'cour,' which has occurred a little before. 'I paid *my* court.' The letter is No. 1139 in the *Grands Écrivains* edition of Madame de Sévigné (vol. viii. p. 476), where are given some various readings not necessary to mention here. It is written, like most of the letters, to Madame de Grignan, the writer's daughter, who was then in Provence, where her husband was Lieutenant-Governor. The letter bears date Monday the 21st February 1689, and, besides its lively style and interesting details of fact, shows the curious worship of Louis XIV, which he had had the art to cultivate in his court. To appreciate Madame de Sévigné's rapturous appreciations of royal favour, it must be remembered that though a widow, only moderately wealthy and not directly connected with any of the greatest personages, she was of unblemished nobility for many centuries in both her own and her husband's house, and had lived for fifty years in the best society of Paris.

P. 49. l. 10. *Fontanges*. Knots of ribbon in the hair, named from Mademoiselle de Fontange, a court beauty and favourite of Louis XIV, who was equally celebrated for her face and her folly.

l. 13. *Rapport*. 'Correspondence' or perhaps still better 'arrangement.'

l. 19. *Fidélité de*. One would rather have expected *à*, but Madame de Sévigné, as the academic critics complain, is a sadly 'incorrect' writer. 'Faithful following of' will keep both sense and form.

l. 21. *La Sagesse*. It does not appear that any considerable piece of chorus is exactly translated or even paraphrased from the wonderful book known as the 'Wisdom of Solomon,' and classed as apocryphal in the English Bible. The tone, however, of the moral reflections recalls it not unfrequently.

l. 24. *Du goût et de l'attention*. 'Of one's own taste and attention,' i.e. the better taste you have and the more attention you pay, the better you like it.

l. 37. *Quasi*. In the older French this Latinism 'as if,' 'as it were,' is very common, and sometimes seems to have little more than expletive force. It may be here rendered as 'hardly' or 'almost.' 'As I was almost the only new-comer.'

1. 39. *M. le Prince*. Condé, but not the great Condé, who had died three years before.

P. 50. l. 1. *Madame de Maintenon, un éclair*, 'Mad. de M. flashed me a word,' 'shot me a remark' in passing.

1. 6. *M. le Chevalier*. The Chevalier de Grignan, Madame de Grignan's brother-in-law.

1. 10. *Bourgeoise*. The G. E. edition reads 'bourgeoisie'—not so well.

P. 61. Title. It is usually noted and is worth noting that *Esther*, doubtless to humour the scruples referred to in the Introduction, is *not* described as a 'tragedy' but as an 'ouvrage de poésie tiré de l'Écriture sainte, propre à être récité et à être chanté,' in the original *privilege*.

P. 62. *Personnages*. The use of this word instead of 'Acteurs,' the usual equivalent for *Dramatis Personae*, is believed to have been another intentional distinction from profane plays.

La Piété fait le Prologue—that is to say not 'Piety speaks the prologue,' but 'performs the part of Prologue.' This personal use of the word Prologue for the actor and not the speech is said by Géroze to be rare if not unique in French, and to have been noticed in no dictionary. It is a correct Latin use, and was quite common in English at the time when Prologues were invariable accompaniments to plays. Compare Dryden's *Rival Ladies*, 'A second Prologue enters.'

P. 63. l. 1. *Maison de Saint-Cyr*. See Introduction. It was also often called Maison de Saint-Louis, from the royal saint to whom, not without flattering allusion to his namesake, it was dedicated. Saint-Cyr lies west of Paris, a short distance beyond Versailles, and since the Revolution has been famous for another school, one of military science.

P. 64. l. 14. *Tant soit peu considérables*, 'even slightly important.'

1. 32. *Déclamé et chanté*. Note that he does not say 'joué.'

P. 65. l. 5. *Hérodote*. The passages supposed to be more particularly referred to will be found at ll. 404 and 1114.

1. 6. *Assuérus*. It is unnecessary to enter here into the question of the identification of Ahasuerus. Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes Longimanus have all been proposed.

1. 25. *Dans mes tragédies*. Observe that he does not say 'mes autres tragédies.'

1. 27. *N'ont pas laissé de*, 'did not fail to be.'

P. 66. l. 7. *Marie*. Miriam.

1. 10. *Aujourd'hui*. The date of the modern feast of Purim is the 28th of February; in the same month, it may be observed, as the original production of the play.

P. 67. Prologue. Written it is said as an after-thought, to please Madame de Caylus, who was, as has been said, Madame de Maintenon's niece (in French parlance; she seems to have been really the daughter of a first-cousin). Later it was spoken by others. There is hardly a better example, either of Racine's splendid versification, or of his adroit flattery.

1. 2. *Grâce* (Divine) Grace.

1. 8. *Dont*, 'by which.' Regarded by strict grammarians as something of a poetical license.

1. 13. *À sa porte*. Saint-Cyr, as has been said, is near Versailles.

1. 24. Louis XIV was a patron of missions. Uncharitable judges have, both in his and later cases, associated this zeal with a baser motive—the knowledge that missionaries are sometimes useful political agents.

1. 32. *L'affreuse hérésie*. The orthodoxy of Louis XIV is beyond suspicion: but much dispute has arisen over the question whether in this and the following lines allusion is or is not made to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which took place four years earlier. It seems equally rash positively to affirm and positively to deny such allusion. It is certainly possible and perhaps probable. At any rate most of the Protestant powers (not all) were hostile to Louis, and the religious question entered largely into the quarrel between him and his exiled ally James II on the one hand, and the Augsburg League with the Prince of Orange (William III) at its head, on the other.

1. 36. Supposed (though not by all critics) to be a reflection on Pope Innocent XI, who was at the time on bad terms with Louis.

1. 44. Louis XIV had distinguished himself many years before by a 'Passage of the Rhine' celebrated in a famous and pompous Epistle of Boileau's; and there is no doubt a glance at this. But the Rhine as the frontier between France and Germany comes in naturally enough.

1. 48. *Il*. Some eighteenth century editors chose to read 'ils,' which will be found in many modern copies. It has no authority, and spoils the sense.

1. 49. The Dauphin (often called 'le grand Dauphin'), who died long before his father, was of no great ability. But as the nominal leader of the campaign of the year before in Germany he had been fortunate.

1. 52. *Son*, the king's.

The Play.

P. 69. 1. 6. *Soupirer*. The transitive sense of the verb 'sigh' in English is very rare, if not limited to the artificial poetical diction of the eighteenth century. Nor is it common in French, where it is only used in the so-called 'style noble.'

1. 18. *Sujet*. La Harpe would have it that this should be 'objet'—

a false and frivolous objection. One does not weep 'at' a person, except to annoy him.

1. 21. 'To make the support of his powerful arm break forth' would be awkward with us. But *éclater* in French often means little more than 'manifest.' Cf. l. 77.

1. 23. *Horreur*. Not 'horror' but 'religious fear.'

1. 32. *L'altière Vasthi*. This, though undoubtedly drawn from the sacred text, was universally supposed at the time to involve an innuendo at Madame de Montespan, whom Madame de Maintenon had succeeded in Louis' favour.

1. 43. *Parthe*. It is difficult to mention without a smile that most French commentators seriously discuss the question whether Racine is to blame for mentioning the Parthians, a people not historically known till later than the date of Esther. From this point of view it is not wonderful that Shakspeare should be found unpardonable.

1. 57. *Un si grand intérêt*. We must say 'a matter of such interest.'

1. 59. The excessive indication of parallel passages is a fault. There can however be no doubt that Racine was thinking of Tacitus (Ann. xii. 1.) 'nec minore ambitu feminae exarserant: suam quaeque nobilitatem formam opes contendere, ac digna tanto matrimonio ostentare.' The French word *brigue*, which is not singly translatable in English, expresses the whole process of endeavouring to secure a favour by interest and influence.

1. 80. *Leurs princes*. Some very precise grammarians would prefer 'son prince,' because 'le peuple' is singular, and only one 'prince' was married.

1. 82. *Quelle* in prose would be strictly 'quels.'

1. 88. *Ont cessé* would be more usual. Littré however gives two sixteenth-century examples of the active verb, and it is needless to say that in English 'cease' has always been active as well as neuter, though 'are ceased' would be odd.

1. 93. Note that 'Eh!' or 'Hé!' is not in French quite so familiar as in English. With us a king or queen might use it to an inferior but hardly vice versâ. The reply of Esther is supposed to be designed to obviate the objection that the women's apartments in the East have always been closed to strangers. But this is not certain either from sacred or profane history.

1. 96. *Passages*, 'Channels.'

1. 100. It is perhaps well to note that 'domestiques' does not mean 'menials,' but 'officers of the household.'

1. 114. Almost exactly translated from the first line of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

1. 145. For *Pays* Racine seems also to have written 'séjour.' This passage has been the subject in quite modern days of a criticism by a French Protestant of eminence (M. Coquerel) which is not unworthy of La Harpe. M. Coquerel objects that the Hebrews did not regard the skies as the special abode of God! The answer made by some, that 'champs aimés des cieux' need mean no more than 'fields favoured by climate,' though true enough, is weak as a retort to a piece of singularly uncritical literalism, as well of doubtful theology.

1. 159. *Cilice*, hair-shirt. The Jews no doubt only used sackcloth. But Racine's forerunner Montchrestien had already written—

'Son dos était chargé d'une poignante haire.'

1. 165. Also in *Phèdre* l. 270.

1. 178. 'Et tout sexe et tout âge' had said Du Ryer.

1. 184. Racine again keeps close to Du Ryer, who had said—

'L'infortune des Juifs, leurs douleurs et leurs craintes
Ont besoin de secours, et non pas de vos plaintes,
Ce n'est pas les aider que de craindre pour eux,
Et c'est agir pour vous d'aider ces malheureux.'

1. 201. There is something of a bull here. When Esther was sitting by the king's side she could hardly require a special messenger to summon her to his presence. But the mania for periphrasis naturally leads to such things. 'Sur son trône à ses côtés assise' simply equals 'reine.'

1. 218. *Partage*, 'portion.'

1. 225. The exact critics from whom Pope learnt his scorn of

'[The] ten low words [that] creep in one long line,'

were wont in France as in England to deprecate the use of monosyllables. M. Gérúzez well remarks that this instance is perfectly 'harmonious.' There is another in *Phèdre*: and in fact the objection is simply childish. A succession of monosyllabic lines would no doubt be bad: but only because it would interfere with the necessary variety of cadence.

1. 247. The admirable Prayer which Racine has here (keeping very close to the original), turned into beautiful verse, will not be found in *Esther* as usually printed in English Bibles. It occurs in the so-called 'Rest of the Book of Esther' which, as not appearing in the Hebrew, has been relegated to the Apocrypha. It there forms chapter xiv.

1. 272. *Qui ne furent jamais*, though an apparent 'bull,' is really only an effective hyperbole and is found in the original, 'them that be nothing'; or, as the Vulgate, which Racine of course had before him, translates, 'them that are not.'

Où for 'à laquelle' was even in Racine's time perhaps a rather uncommon usage, somewhat resembling that of 'dont' before noticed. Of late

years the more intelligent study of the literature which has prevailed has restored many of these forms.

l. 286. The non-natural order of this line (part of the regular 'classical' convention and one of the parts most justly scouted by the Romantic revival) is particularly felt in a passage of such simplicity and dignity.

l. 323. In this and the other choruses the reminiscences of Montchrestien are numerous and scarcely mistakable. That poet, it must be remembered, was a Huguënot, and, like all his co-religionists, very familiar with Biblical language. Thus he writes

'On a donné les corps de ton peuple en pâture
Aux oiseaux,' etc.

It is noteworthy that the resemblances to Montchrestien are by no means confined, as those to Du Ryer are for the most part, to passages where the actual Book of Esther may be taken as the common source of the three. Yet it must also be said that Racine, having been brought up at Port Royal, was likely to be more familiar with the Bible at large than most Frenchmen.

l. 349. The Abbé d'Olivet, in his capacity as Secretary of the Academy, objects that a man may 'prendre sous sa protection,' but not 'sous sa défense,' though he may 'prendre la défense de.' The bad side of this minute criticism is easily seen. Its good side is shewn by the great superiority of French, in freedom from slovenliness and ambiguity, to all modern languages.

l. 367. Montchrestien earlier and better, because more vividly,

'Comme le tourbillon
Qui pousse le fétu de sillon en sillon.'

l. 394. *Fuit* has been censured as the wrong tense, and it certainly seems to be, considering the other tenses of the passage, something of a license. The excuses that Ahasuerus is still awake as Hydaspes speaks, and that the present gives 'liveliness,' seem hardly adequate. The real excuse is that the license is only technical (for it was at the moment that the king called and sleep fled that he was tired), and that to remodel the whole couplet to get in 'fuyait' would have been useless trouble.

l. 396. Spiteful contemporaries laughed, and with some little reason, at these '*fidèles mains*,' remembering that the poet himself and his friend Boileau were historiographers to Louis XIV.

l. 449. Aman, distracted as before by his own thoughts, does not answer his interlocutor directly.

l. 452. *Acheté*. The Bible does not say that Haman had been a slave.

l. 462. *Tandisque* is not strictly 'so long as,' but is allowed to be used in poetry with that sense.

l. 476. As attempts have sometimes been made to pooh-pooh the idea

of indebtedness on Racine's part to Montchrestien it may be well to quote a few lines from the earlier poet. It should be observed that there is nothing in the Bible calculated to suggest the idea of the judgment of posterity, which is evidently common to the two writers :

' Je veux du sang des Juifs éteindre mon courroux
 Afin qu' à l'avenir il soit connu de tous
 Qu' Aman a sur les Juifs sa colère épanchée
 Pour punir à son gré l'orgueil de Mardochée ;
 Et qu' un peuple exilé sur la terre épandu
 Pour la faute d'un seul a tout été perdu.'

l. 493. *Couleurs*. 'Colour' in the sense of 'pretext,' 'plausible falsification,' is thus used in English, especially in the legal or quasi-legal phrase 'colourably.' It is said to have become chiefly colloquial in French.

l. 551. A grave monarch stating that he has '*twice* grown pale' may seem a little odd, but this is but another of those differences which are rather noticeable than explicable.

l. 557. *Il voit l'astre qui vous éclaire*. It would not be just or critical to regard this as one of the numerous instances of 'classical' aversion to the *mot propre*, to simple and straightforward speech. It is on the contrary a perfectly natural Orientalism.

l. 569. Doctors differ on the question whether '*sur le point que*' is or ought to be obsolete. It is certain that '*sur le point de*' with the infinitive is usually found.

l. 596. The usually impeccable Racine seems to be justly accused of false grammar here. In order to justify '*pour vous régler*' the rest of the phrase would have to be inverted so that '*vous*' should be the subject. As it is, '*pour que vous vous régliez*,' is demanded by purists.

l. 597. *Neveux, nepotes*, generally for 'posterity' seems to be very rare. But to object to it as not Hebraic (Coquerel) is uselessly puerile.

l. 608. A curious and interesting note of Geoffroy's is worth transcribing as characteristic of a vanished school of criticism. '*Cette expression par la bride placée au commencement du vers, se trouve relevée et ennoblie par le reste de la phrase, dont le style est pompeux. Ainsi Racine a su placer heureusement dans la poésie la plus noble, les mots de pavé, de chiens, de boucs, de chevaux, etc.*' That is to say, only Racine's skill could make such vulgar words pass. The 'style noble' would have required '*coursier fumant*' for '*cheval*' and so forth.

l. 678. A contemporary critic (Bouhours) speaks of '*respectable*' as a new word of court use and not previously known in books. It has always had in French a slightly different meaning from its English equivalent, and is more like '*estimable*' with us.

1. 685. *Assure* would be 'rassure' in modern use.

1. 702. Here begins the scene which, as noted in the Introduction, Luneau de Boisjermain, an editor of the eighteenth century, first marked off as separate. There is no doubt that, according to the strict theory of the classical tragedy, the introduction of a new actor, especially when it changes the subject of discourse, does require such a division. Racine, not writing a regular play for a regular theatre, was no doubt less careful than usual on a merely technical point.

1. 708. *Clartés*, 'intelligence,' 'lights,' as we say. Rather colloquial, though 'lumières' is perfectly dignified French. Not now used.

1. 729. This striking and not vulgar image is not Racine's own, but comes from the Book of Proverbs xx. 1.

1. 779. Nothing can better mark the timidity—if the word may be permitted—which came upon French poetry for two centuries, than the fact that all French critics noted the 'boldness' of the metaphor '*boire la joie à pleine coupe*.' They quote Virgil's *longum bibebat amorem* (which is quite different) as a kind of excuse; and note that Racine to his credit softens the metaphor 'by adding' '*à pleine coupe*.' It is certain that the phrase (which is more probably Biblical than Classical in suggestion, and connected with the metaphorical use of the word 'cup' in the Scriptures—'Let this cup pass from me' &c.) would not at any time have seemed audacious in an English poet. The difference is worth noting because it explains in the first place the difficulties under which Racine wrote, and secondly the surprise mingled with horror which Shakespeare and his like so long caused to Frenchmen. Since 1830 'they have changed all that,' and the late M. Victor Hugo accustomed critics to quite other 'audacities.'

1. 814. Strictly speaking *la* is here ungrammatical. The purists point out that the antecedent, being not 'paix' but 'nulle paix,' 'nulle paix' must be supplied here also: which makes nonsense. There is however no possibility of mistaking the meaning, and that is the principal thing.

1. 819. For *les* one early ed. has *le*, which is clearly wrong.

1. 825. The chorus which closes here is sometimes considered the finest in the play, but it is hardly equal to the finale at III. iii.

1. 826. As to the special merit of this scene see Introduction. It is also interesting as containing not a few references to the court life with which Racine was familiar. Another point of some note is that here, and here only, has Racine broken through the Unity of Place by transposing the scene from within the Palace to outside. The 'classical critics' excuse and indeed admire, but tremble at this courage; and La Harpe, without knowing it, sweeps all the Unities away at one fell

stroke by saying 'L'esprit du précepte est rempli quand la vraisemblance n'est pas violée.'

1. 827. A mark of interrogation has sometimes been put at the end of this line, unnecessarily.

1. 830. *Sacré* placed before its substantive has now quite a different and by no means complimentary sense. It was not so in Racine's time.

1. 864. *Après lui* was after Racine's death altered, much for the worse, to *près de lui*.

1. 866. *Il sait qu'il me doit tout*. Louvois, the disgraced war-minister of Louis XIV, is said to have actually used these or similar words in reference to his master.

1. 872. In the eighteenth century *opposée* got into the text instead of *exposée*. But it has no authority, though the repetition *exposée—expose* is certainly ugly. It has moreover been justly urged that *opposée* in this sense is but doubtful French.

1. 880. Zarès breaks off here, either thinking she has said enough, or perhaps unwilling to excite Haman further by the hint of an 'informer.'

1. 884. *L'Hellespont et ces bords écartés*. The 'Rest of the Book of Esther' ch. xv. calls Haman a Macedonian.

1. 897. The Amalekites were not strictly inhabitants of Edom or Idumæa, but neighbours of it, on the west or Egyptian side.

1. 890. *Voi*. A license very common in the older French poetry, and not proscribed even in the eighteenth century.

1. 893. *Osez*. 'Make up your mind to.'

1. 910. This question of Haman's is generally taken as ironical. It must be remembered that Haman was fresh from conducting Mordecai's triumphant progress, which might, not inconceivably, have been crowned by such an invitation.

1. 931. Geoffroy gives a good example of the straits to which the cutting of the choruses brought the remodellers of Racine (see Introduction). They did not know what to do with this speech of Hydaspes, and solved the difficulty by omitting its last two lines and changing the first into the clumsy and otiose verse :

'Esther, Assuérus, s'avacent etc.'

1. 946. *Croître* is generally neuter, but there are numerous examples of this active use in the best authors (chiefly poets) of the seventeenth century and later.

1. 955. In some early editions, though not in the first, this and the following verses are assigned to the 'Third Israelite,' which is clearly wrong. A fresh personage is wanted to break off the song.

1. 969. Racine is said to have been proud of these verses (the matter not the form), and afterwards, when he was himself out of favour, he

quoted the first in a letter to Madame de Maintenon. The whole chorus contains indeed pretty plain speaking to a despotic monarch, and despite its avoidance of real offence and its moral soundness, the poet might not have ventured on it but that the circumstances assured him impunity.

l. 1011. The minute critics complain with some justice that a camp entering a kingdom by one road and quitting it by a thousand is a very awkward phrase. '*Camp*' is no doubt often used as a mere synonym for 'army,' but the context should have been adapted to it.

l. 1016. This is perhaps the only passage which in any conceivable degree justifies Voltaire's strictures (see Introduction). A king floridly complimenting his queen, and elaborately asking her who she is before his minister, verges on the absurd, though the critics do not notice it. The Ahasuerus of the Biblical narrative, with his straightforward 'What is thy petition?' is much more dignified, as well as more natural. But compliment-making was one of the banes of the style.

l. 1025. 'Your desires shall be granted' is perfectly usual English, but French would more commonly employ 'satisfaire' with 'désir,' or 'demande' with 'accorder.' Racine's phrase is however only an example of the universally common 'abstract for concrete,' 'desire' for 'thing desired.'

l. 1032. Montchrestien and Du Ryer have set Racine the example of making Esther avow her nationality here. There is no exact warrant for it in the story, but it is an obvious amplification.

l. 1040. *Malheureux!* The occasional advantage of an inflected language is well illustrated here. In English, to show that it is himself and not Esther that the king calls wretched, we must go beyond the impressive single word and say '*Me miserable!*' or '*Wretch that I am!*'

l. 1044. *O Dieu, &c.* Taken by some as an aside, and not improbably.

l. 1049. *Prospère* was, for what reason is not clear, regarded as a doubtfully correct word in Racine's day, and has never been much used in prose.

l. 1055. It is in reference to this magnificent speech, one of the best examples of the French classical Alexandrine, that Voltaire is said to have cried out, 'On a honte de faire des vers quand on en lit de pareils.'

l. 1057. *De sa main.* We should say 'a pastime *for* his hand.'

l. 1075. *Son fils.* Cambyses.

l. 1077. *Vous.* Always, it must be remembered, on the supposition that Ahasuerus is Darius.

l. 1090. *Tais-toi.* Some admirers of periphrasis and the 'style noble' make a half-apology for this example of the opposite 'mot propre.' It is vigorous and apposite: but would have been much better without

the following line. The king should silence Haman, not argue with him.

l. 1106. *Vus*. The original has *vu*, the rule of agreement being then lax.

l. 1123. An inference from, not a statement of, the Biblical story.

l. 1139. French writers unanimously blame the king's exit, or excuse it only by the plea of adherence to the story (see Introduction). I think quite differently. The mental struggle and puzzle arising from the confusion of all the king's ideas would naturally prompt him to movement and solitude, while, had he not gone out, Haman would probably not have made the unlucky demonstration which sealed his fate.

l. 1190. *A expiré* would be more common, *expirer* with *être* being limited to times, not persons, and meaning 'pass' not 'die.'

l. 1182. *Où* as elsewhere for 'auquel.'

l. 1229. *À l'envi l'ont ornée*. 'Have vied with each other in adorning her.'

l. 1286. *Au delà de l'éternité*. This hyperbole is thought to have been furnished to Racine by the Vulgate, which, in the Song of Moses (Exod. xv.), incorrectly renders the Hebrew phrase translated in the A.V. by 'for ever and ever' *in aeternum et ultra*.

THE END.

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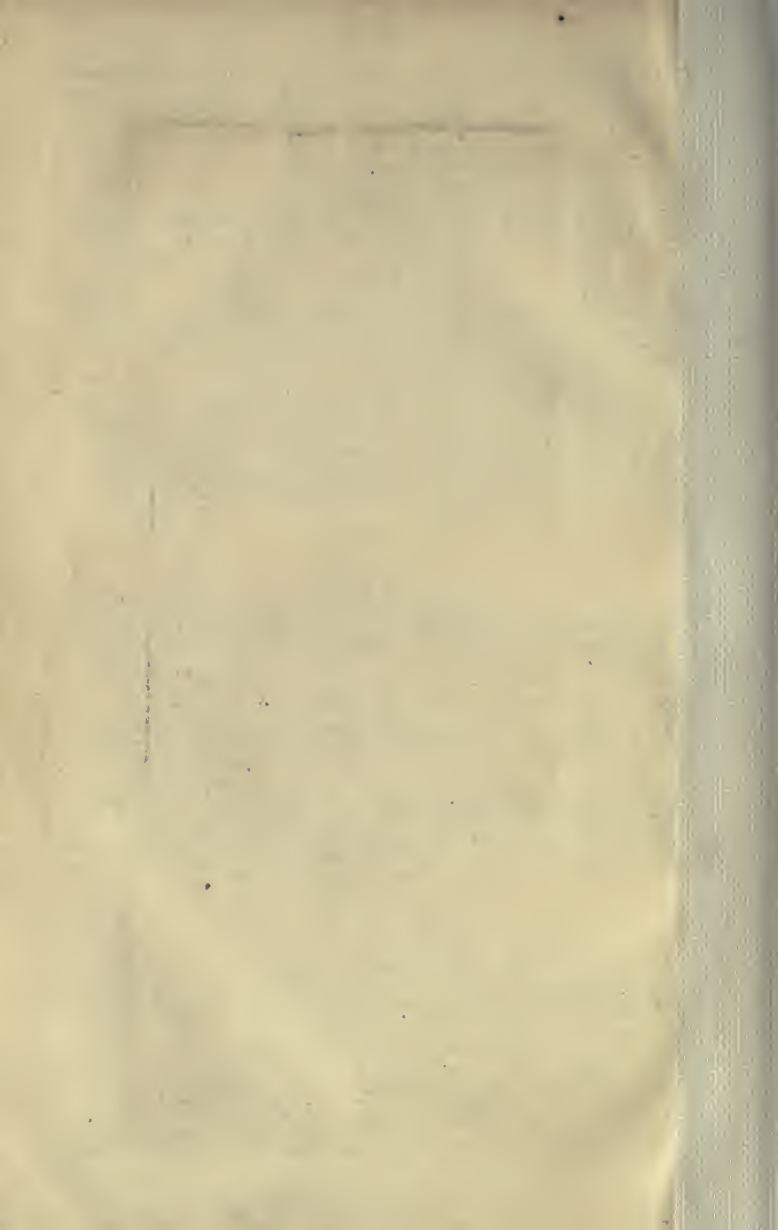
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