Poetic Characterization in *Mithridate*: Xipharès and Pharnace

by
Mary A. Kirschner

While much has been written about Racine's characterization in *Mithridate*, and specifically about that of Mithridate's sons, Xipharès and Pharnace, this criticism has focused on each character considered separately. However, the contrast between their personalities is striking and worthy of consideration, since it plays a crucial role in the action of the play. Although Xipharès, with 340 lines in 13 scenes, occupies a much more central role in the play than Pharnace, with 129 lines in 6 scenes, Racine has certainly not neglected to develop the latter as a dramatic character; his speeches are as self-revelatory as his brother's. Do we perceive the contrast in the two brothers solely through their actions and the content of their speeches, or do we hear differences in their speech patterns pointing to personality differences? Using the computer-assisted studies of Charles Bernet, Bryant C. Freeman, and Mary Lynne Flowers, as well as Peter France's work on Racine's rhetoric, we will examine the question of Racine's differentiation of the two brothers in their mode of expression, particularly as evidenced in their vocabulary, the patterns of their rhetoric (often to express passion or to persuade others), and their own personal manner in which they reveal themselves.

Each of the brothers has a predilection for certain characteristic words and expressions. Significantly, we find that their repeated use is far more typical of Xipharès's speech than Pharnace's, and that in fact it plays an important role in his characterization. As these key words appear in his opening scene with Arbate, they introduce leitmotifs which recur throughout the play and contribute to the emotional complexity of his role. The spectator, having heard them before, recognizes them

subliminally when they appear later, sometimes with ironic or tragic effect.

An analysis of the key words used by Xipharès and Pharnace reveals that they fall into thematically related groups which express the preoccupations of the two characters. Let us first look at these categories of terms used by Xipharès. By far the most numerous of these, totalling 50 occurrences, concerns Mithridate or Xipharès's relationship with him: *père*, 22; *roi*, 12; *fils*, 7; *Mithridate*, 5; *rival*, 4. Xipharès's repeated use of these words reflects the crucial importance of his father, who dominates his whole life. Most often he uses the word *père* in the phrase *mon père*, revealing his closeness to his father. Less often, he uses *Mithridate* or *roi*, designating his father as a venerated sovereign to whom he owes obedience and homage. For example, the antithesis contained in his opening lines: "Rome en effet triomphe, et Mithridate est mort" (2) equates Mithridate in prestige with the Roman Emperor. Xipharès's use of the demonstrative in *ce roi* (9) distantiates his father even more, with the effect that he is depicted as an almost legendary figure, now a part of history (Spitzer 11). Pharnace also employs such terms to a significant extent as well (9 occurrences), but with revealing differences. First, he never uses the word *rival*. He calls Mithridate *père* only four times, twice with distantiating terms (*ce* and *un*). Most important, he refers to his father much less often than Xipharès does. While Mithridate dominates his life and love as much as his brother's, he does not pose for Pharnace the obsessive dilemma between filial loyalty and love for Monime that we see absorbing Xipharès.

It is not surprising to find a large number of terms concerning love (*amour*, *aimer*, *amant*, etc.), in the speech of both brothers; it is one of the great themes of the play. what is worthy of note is the much more frequent use by Xipharès (29, compared to 9 by Pharnace), indicating the more crucial importance of this theme in his role. He uses these terms more often to describe himself, while Pharnace, whose character is noticeably reticent and even secretive, uses them almost exclusively to describe others.

Twenty-one times during the play, Xipharès uses such expressions as *malheur*, *malheureux*, *misère*, *funeste*, or *désespoir* to describe his suffering as a tragic hero, a victim of fate. These are affective words, characteristic of a man who openly reveals his innermost feelings. In his speech the word *malheureux* often has its original meaning of being pursued by misfortune. Telling Monime of his love, he describes his family as persecuted by the gods: "Attestez, s'il le faut, les puissances célestes/ Contre un sang malheureux, né pour vous tourmenter" (172-3). To the modern spectator these metonymic lines might seem to be an example of conventional *langage précieux*, but taken in the context of Xipharès's character, we must believe that he means them literally. Denied the woman he loves because the fates have destined her to be the object of his father's affections, Xipharès has also been fated to see himself as a criminal, sharing in the guilt of a despicable mother who betrayed his father. In his eyes, he is forever fated to attempt to avenge her crime. Moreover, the tragic position in which he finds himself, as the object of his father's jealousy in spite of all his loyalty, reinforces his feeling of being a victim of fate: "Je suis un malheureux que le destin poursuit" (1218).

Pharnace's language is totally lacking in such expressions. The only instance of his self-revelation through affective vocabulary is his exclamation, "Mithridate revient! Ah! fortune cruelle! / Ma vie et mon amour tous deux courent hasard" (336-337). Pharnace has no confidant in the play to whom he can reveal his thoughts, and it is only in this aside that we learn of them. He is a man who plans everything and normally betrays none of his private emotions, but the announcement of Mithridate's arrival has caught him by surprise and overwhelmed him, causing him to blame Fortune for the only time in the play.

Lastly, we must consider a group of terms expressing the primacy of duty and honor in Xipharès's ethic: *devoir* (4); *foi* (4); and *gloire* (4). *Venger* is an important verb in his vocabulary (eight occurrences), and he justifies his love with the words *premier* and *légitime*. Opposing such

terms, he uses the words *crime* and *criminel* seven times to refer to himself or his mother. In his preoccupation with duty and honor, Xipharès resembles a Cornelian hero, as critics have pointed out. He is a *généreux* with a highly developed sense of obligation to his father and devotion to the kingdom. Xipharès's love is a source of guilt because it is in conflict with his duty to his father, and this guilt is augmented by his mother's crime. It even seems that this emotion is stronger than his jealousy of his father: "Je ne regardai plus mon rival dans mon père; / J'oubliai mon amour par le sien traversé" (68-69). The return of Mithridate places Xipharès in a dilemma. He could satisfy his love, but only at the cost of his obligation to Mithridate as father and king. In his view, there is no solution but death, for death as a warrior is bound up with his idea of *gloire*. He assures Mithridate that he will carry the war to Rome for his father:

> Mais je cherche un trépas utile à votre gloire;
> Et Rome, unique objet d'un désespoir si beau,
> Du fils de Mithridate est le digne tombeau.
> (944-46)

In dramatic opposition to Xipharès's concern for princely ethics and obligations as shown by his lexicon, we see in Pharnace's speech a total silence on this subject. Unlike his brother, he has no interest in honor and duty, and his relationship with Mithridate in this respect differs radically from Xipharès's. This polarity of the two brothers in the matter of ethics is basic to the dramatic construction of *Mithridate*.

Our examination of thematic lexical groups has so far focused on Xipharès, and we have seen only one significant group in Pharnace's expression, that referring to Mithridate. However, there is in his speech an additional lexical characteristic: Pharnace often finds it necessary to use words relating to secrecy, such as *déguisements*, *secrets*, and *tromper*. Being a secretive, devious person, Pharnace is also very conscious of those qualities in others. (Xipharès too uses the word *secret* five times, as the need for secrecy is of course present in his life as well.)

These comparisons clearly demonstrate that Racine uses vocabulary differently in the two roles. Repetition of key words plays a much more important part in Xipharès's expression than in Pharnace's. The focus is on Xipharès, and the interplay of thematically related words in his speeches is a poetic means of heightening the emotional impact of his love, suffering, and heroism.

A study of the rhetoric used by Xipharès and Pharnace is equally revealing. Xipharès's sentences, more varied in length than those of Pharnace, are also longer on the average (Flowers 101). The extended, harmonious periods found in many of Xipharès's speeches flow on, one thought seeming to lead to another in an *élan* characteristic of his youth and ardor. For example, his opening *récit* recounting his father's death ends in a sentence (9-14) consisting of a long series of subordinate clauses that lead up to a *rejet*, placing tremendous emphasis on the word *meurt* (Turnell 185). Thus Xipharès reveals his deep sense of the tragedy inherent in his father's death.

Often, too, it is a contrast between long, flowing periods and short, abrupt sentences that serves to communicate Xipharès's feelings (France 150). A dramatic example occurs when Xipharès tells Arbate how first he, then his father fell in love with Monime: "Que je vis. . . Il la vit" (46, 49). The brevity of the sentence, "Il la vit," conveys a brutal finality, especially emphatic because of its assonance and rhythmic parallelism with the earlier brief phrase. There could be no more dramatic way of underlining the tragic rivalry between son and father. We also find, as might be expected, many short exclamations, especially in Xipharès's scenes with Monime. His dialogues with Arbate and especially with Monime contain a number of broken Alexandrines, reflecting the emotional impact of one character upon the other. Sometimes it is Xipharès who interrupts (1215-16); sometimes it is Monime, as when she warns him of Pharnace's approach (223).

Pharnace's speech patterns are more regular; short sentences and enjambement are rare, and the broken

Alexandrine is not characteristic of his discourse. He speaks with the dignity and eloquence of a prince; the comparative regularity of his fairly long periods is indicative of his cold self-control. Thus, two exceptions to this usual regularity gain in dramatic impact. The first is his confrontation with Xipharès in Act I, Scene III. Their angry speeches fly back and forth, three lines each, then two, and finally one, as their quarrel becomes increasingly heated. Pharnace's last, menacing line begins with a one-word question: "Ici?" and continues: "Vous y pourriez rencontrer votre perte..." (327). The second exception is his reaction to the news of Mithridate's return, when his exclamation, following upon those of Monime and Xipharès, completes a single Alexandrine: "Ah! que viens-je d'entendre?" (331). And in an aside he exclaims, "Mithridate revient! Ah! fortune cruelle!" (336), but soon returns to his usual controlled periods.

It is clear from the foregoing that the pattern of Xipharès's rhetoric shows far greater variety than that of Pharnace, for several reasons. First, his role is more varied. He speaks to Monime in *style coupé* (see France 148-51), with its interjections, questions, and all the variations in sentence length and verse rhythm to express the height of emotion; his use of tropes also lends warmth and color to his speech. Xipharès's language of passion is in the style of *beau désordre*, much appreciated in Racine's day and still beautiful and moving. Xipharès also uses the rhetoric of persuasion on occasion, and because his own feelings are involved in his argumentation, it can almost be a hybrid of rhetoric of passion and rhetoric of persuasion, to use Peter Franc's differentiation (167-244). Pharnace's expression, on the contrary, is almost entirely confined to rhetoric of persuasion, with the two exceptions I have noted.

Having seen some of the differences between Xipharès and Pharnace in their use of vocabulary and rhetorical patterns, let us now examine two instances in which many stylistic elements combine to represent the two characters in contrasting ways. These two instances of dramatic opposition in *Mithridate* are, first, the brothers' respective

courtship of Monime; and second, their attempts to persuade their father not to go to Rome.

Xipharès's language as he confesses his love to Monime is the conventional rhetoric of passion couched in *langage précieux*; but at the same time it reveals, in a very personal way, a man deeply in love and unsure of himself. His protestations may seem a trifle exaggerated to us but were, however, quite appropriate in seventeenth-century France. In his anxiety to learn how Monime feels about him, Xipharès poses a long series of questions, characteristic of his anxious timidity. When he apostrophizes her as "belle Monime," his use of the epithet reminds us of the courtly knight of medieval romance, perfectly in keeping with the seventeenth-century image of the noble *galant* rather than the barbaric warrior of the ancient world. "Belle Monime" is given added value by its accented position in the verse and by its graceful melody (191). The words, "vos charmes naissants," which could be a cliché, acquire a freshness because followed by a verse rendering their meaning literal and evoking a very young girl: "N'avaient encor paru qu'aux yeux de votre mère?" (196). And the famous lines, "...avouez-le, Madame, / Je vous rappelle un songe effacé de votre âme" (203-4) far from being stereotyped, are, on the contrary, very characteristic of Xipharès's love in their "extreme gentleness, verging on shyness, and . . . refined courtesy . . ." (Mourges 156).

Pharnace, on the other hand, is not one to express his own feelings of love in emotional terms, either to himself or to another. His first appearance in the play is an aggressive confrontation with the one he loves: "Jusqu'à quand, Madame, attendrez-vous mon père?" (224). His manner is cold and arrogant as he delivers what practically amounts to an ultimatum: Monime must marry him, and immediately, since "nos intérêts communs et mon coeur le demandent" (a word order that demonstrates his priorities). This speech to Monime (224-40) is a striking example of rhetoric of persuasion. Pharnace appeals to Monime's ambition, painting a compelling picture of the worldly glory that would be hers if she married him. He speaks of

"un peuple obéissant" awaiting her "à genoux" (229). He reminds her of the "bandeau royal," "la marque souveraine" of her power over Pont, and ends his speech by telling her that waiting vessels will be ready to carry her away, "souveraine des mers qui vous doivent porter" (242). He presses Monime to hurry with her decision: "Mais il faut, croyez-moi, sans attendre plus tard, / Ainsi que notre hymen presser notre départ" (237-38). Again, his juxtaposition of "hymen" and "départ" is not calculated to convince Monime of the strength of his passion for her. His arguments, which might appear logical and well chosen if used in the political arena, seem strangely lacking in warmth and sentiment in this context. His elegant, persuasive words are misdirected; he is judging Monime by his own motivations and does not realize that worldly ambition is not her compelling passion. What a contrast between this cold-blooded, political "love speech" and Xipharès's appealing, lyrical words!

Equally striking is Racines' poetic contrast of the two brothers in Act III, Scene I, as each presents his argument to Mithridate. Each speech, couched in the conventional rhetoric of persuasion, is nevertheless characteristic of the individual personality of the speaker. Pharnace's speech opens with lines of adroit flattery more typical of a Machiavellian courtier than a son (863-70), then continues with a series of probing questions addressed to Mithridate. Like a diplomatic adviser, Pharnace addresses practical political and military realities, and ends by advising capitulation to the Roman enemy (871-905). Xipharès's speech begins very differently, as he interrupts his brother with an outraged exclamation: "Rome, mon frère! O ciel! qu'osez-vous proposer?" followed by four indignant questions addressed to Pharnace (906-10). The brevity of the questions and their parallel construction increase their aggressiveness. In a series of impassioned imperatives Xipharès then exhorts Mithridate to allow his sons to carry the war to Rome. The vision he presents of future conquest becomes increasingly grandiose, until finally it encompasses the whole universe, from sunrise to sunset. These are the long, majestic sentences of the rhetoric of persuasion, but in which hyperbole intensifies the level of

passion. Xipharès's metaphoric language lends his argument strength and vividness; blood as a metonymic image is given concrete meaning: "Tout couvert de son sang, quoi que vous puissiez faire, / N'en attendez jamais qu'une paix sanguinaire" (915-16) and linked in the conclusion of the argument to Xipharès's life itself in "Tout mon sang doit laver une tache si noir" (943). Using the image of fire in another impassioned metonymy, Xipharès appeals to the hero in Mithridate: "Brûlez le Capitole, et mettez Rome en cendre . . . Faites porter ce feu par de plus jeunes mains" (924-26). In Xipharès's arguments we thus hear a passionate eloquence and enthusiasm, very different from Pharnace's cold, analytical tone. The opposition between the brothers in this scene resembles that of the love scenes.

How do the stylistic differences that we have observed contribute to a differentiation of the two roles as a whole, taken in combination with the content of their speech? Xipharès, revealing his innermost feelings, expresses a wide range of emotion and through his vocabulary and syntax he exhibits a multifaceted character. His speech varies depending upon whom he is addressing. Through his words we hear him interact with others in characteristic ways: as a passionate lover, a man of honor and courage, a loyal son, heir to his father's prowess in battle and sense of history but very different from Mithridate in his almost naive openness and lack of guile. Pharnace, by the very opacity of his language, also characterizes himself. He is a secretive person who does not wish to reveal his feelings or thoughts; however, he ends up doing so inadvertently through his choice of arguments to convince others. It is because he is ambitious that he tries to appeal to Monime's ambition; it is because he cares more for his own security than for the honor of the country that he appeals to Xipharès to rebel. And lastly, it is because he is an opportunist and basically a man of lesser stature than his father that he believes he can convince Mithridate to capitulate to the Romans. He reveals himself in this way as the inheritor of Mithridate's guile but not of his greatness as a leader.

It has often been said that Racine's style is even and homogeneous. For example, contrasting Racine with Molière in terms of the "variations du vocabulaire en fonction des personnages auxquels l'auteur prête la parole," Jacques-Gabriel Cahen states: "Chez Racine, les différences sont beaucoup plus légères, parfois même presque inexistantes" (17). Odette de Mourges comments: "All the characters speak the same language. . . . This evenness of texture is one of the major qualities of the Racinian poetic universe. . ." (143). Yet, within the parameters of the conventional rhetoric of tragedy found in Racine's dramatization, we have seen very different styles of speech in the two brothers. Underlying the surface homogeneity of Racine's poetry is an individualized texture of interrelated stylistic effects, stunning in its complexity, which plays an important role in the differentiation of his characters.

Mary A. Kirschner
University of California, Davis

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