

Exoticism and the Jew:  
Racine's Biblical Tragedies

by  
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pour B. Ponthieu

[The Comédie française production of *Esther* (1987) delighted and surprised this spectator by the unexpected power of the play itself as pure theater, by the exotic splendor of the staging, with its magnificent gold and blue décor and the flowing white robes of the Israelite maidens, and most particularly by the insistent Jewish references, some of which seemed strikingly contemporary. That production underlies much of this discussion of the interwoven themes of exoticism and the Jewish character as they are played out in Racine's two final plays.]

Although the setting for every Racinian tragedy was spatially or temporally and culturally removed from its audience, the term "exotic" would hardly be applied to most of them. With the exception of *Esther* and *Athalie*, they lack the necessary 'local color' which might give them the aura of specificity.<sup>1</sup> The abstract Greece of *Andromaque* or *Phèdre*, for example, pales in comparison with the more circumstantial Roman world of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus*, to say nothing of the lavish sensual Oriental Egypt in which Gautier's *Roman de la Momie* luxuriates.

To be sure, there are exotic elements, even in Racine's classical tragedies: heroes of Greco-Roman history and legend, melifluous place and personal names ("la fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë"), strange and barbaric customs (human sacrifice in *Iphigénie*). Despite such features, however, the essence of these plays is ahistorical.

Racine's Biblical tragedies present a far different picture. Although they may have more in common

structurally with the rest of the corpus than is often admitted, these plays are anything but ahistorical. This fact has been recognized, to be sure, but from the Christian perspective. Thus *Esther* and *Athalie* have been viewed eschatologically, as part of the Story, which culminated with the birth of Christ: the individual Jewish characters, according to Picard,

sont les figurants bientôt oubliés d'un mince épisode de ce qui est la Tragédie par excellence: l'Histoire et l'Alliance conservée entre le Seigneur et sa créature.... Joas est un chaînon, et sa seule raison d'être est d'unir dans la suite des temps ce qui est à venir à ce qui est venu;... Joas est bien plus que Joas, car cet enfant annonce l'Enfant.(868)<sup>2</sup>

It is my contention the the Jewish characters in these two plays function also, if not principally, within their own context as Jews.<sup>3</sup> I propose to trace the history of the Jewish character in prior French theater, show how Racine adapts this tradition to his own dramatic purposes, how he uses the exotic environment associated with the Jewish character, and how *his* Jewish characters function within that environment.

Racine is certainly not the first French writer to create Jewish characters, nor even the first to depict them on stage. Rather, there is a long tradition, going back to the origins of French theater in the Middle Ages. The Jew was a prominent figure in both the *mystère* and the *miracle*.<sup>4</sup> Although the former was set in Biblical times and the latter in the ahistorical present, the Jewish character's function in both genres was quite similar: to represent evil in a fallen world demanding spiritual purification, and the alien element in a Christian community nervously striving for unity. His function was thus to focus the fears, anxieties and discordances of that society, and then to be purged from it, either by ostracism or death.

The Jew underwent a metamorphosis in the Renaissance *drame biblique*. The change affected both the type of Jewish character and his function. French Protestant literature, d'Aubigné's *Les Tragiques* as well as the plays, returned again and again to the ancient Hebrews, but in these writings the idealized Old-Testament world served both as an implicit critique of Catholic Europe, and as an alternative model. The vivid Jewish characters of medieval theater were Christ-killers, blasphemers, usurers, and general all-around scoundrels. Those of the *drame biblique*—Abraham, Isaac, King David—were bloodless models for the new man who would inhabit the Protestants' longed-for brave new world. They were noble patriarchs—virtuous but one-dimensional. Medieval theater thus featured alien Jewish characters, who were outwardly indistinguishable from Jewish neighbors the audience might meet offstage in the towns and villages of medieval France. The *drame biblique* portrayed positive, indeed exemplary, Jewish figures, but set them in a comfortably remote past, with no reference to contemporary Jews—who had by this time been banished from France for several centuries.

By the late seventeenth century, Medieval and Renaissance drama had established the Jew within the French theatrical tradition and given him certain distinctive traits. In the medieval theater, the Jew might at first appear to be a deceptively innocuous player like any other. But he was transformed, or rather *revealed*, by the action to be alien and, indeed, thoroughly inimical. In the *drame biblique*, on the other hand, the Jew belonged to an ideal world—and thus equally distant from the community of play-writer and reader. Either the Jew represented an alien element which must be purged for society to achieve wholeness, or a model, ensconced in an alien society, to be emulated; whether a positive or negative ideal, the Jew represented the "Other." He was thus an exotic character, perhaps *the* exotic character par excellence, taking the word in its primary meaning of "foreign, strange, non-indigenous."<sup>5</sup>

Although Racine's Biblical plays grow out of a long and complex tradition, his use of that tradition is thoroughly original. In *Esther* and *Athalie*, Jewish characters continue to play central roles, but they are clearly *not* the stock embodiment of evil familiar from the *miracle* and *mystère*. Nor are they the idealized patriarchs of the *drame biblique*. Instead, Racine exploits features from each tradition to forge a Jewish figure new for French literature.

Racine adopts the *drame biblique's* Biblical setting and sympathetic attitude toward Jewish protagonists. He portrays those characters, however, as real, flesh-and-blood people. Indeed, Racine's Jews, like those of the medieval theater, seem to share a common destiny with the living, breathing Jews of the playwright's own day. (Whereas the *drame biblique* qualified its patriarchs as Hebrews, one is struck, observing a modern stage production of *Esther*, by the insistent repetition of the term "juif".)<sup>6</sup> Racine's *préfaces* further emphasize the reference to his Jewish contemporaries. For Racine, then, the Jews are neither merely the abstract figures of Christian redemption nor models of Christian life, but characters specifically identified as Jews and believable in their own right—yet they play a positive role.

Racine thus reflects a new—or regained—awareness of the Jewish people, not as an abstract entity known only from the Bible, but as a *nation*—a term he employs—with its own history and identity. This is not just the result of an imaginative leap. Louis XIV's conquests in Eastern France, bringing significant Jewish communities under French rule, created the conditions for a renewed French interest in the Jews.<sup>7</sup> The King himself honored the Jews of Metz with a visit to their synagogue, while Bossuet and Pascal directly addressed the Jews, the former in his sermons to the Jews, the latter in his apologetic writings.<sup>8</sup> Going beyond Pascal or Bossuet, Racine was the first modern French author to create realistically rounded Jewish characters. What then are the elements of the exotic in Racinian Biblical drama, and what is the specific function of the Jewish characters therein?

A Persian palace, the ancient Jewish temple of Jerusalem: settings which resonate with exotic associations! *Esther* and *Athalie* are not only removed in space and time; they are set in that most exotic of elsewhere, the Orient, an orient within whose severe landscapes the audience discovers architectural splendor, pomp-filled ceremony, mysterious ritual, as well as violent passions, bloody sacrifices—human *and* animal, hot-tempered despots, devious counsellors, and byzantine intrigues of a political and personal nature. *Esther* makes oblique reference to the King's harem;<sup>9</sup> *Athalie* is played out against a background of palace revolutions.

Racine also uses language to intensify the oriental atmosphere. Once more he exploits the musical effects of exotic names in lines such as "L'infidèle Joram, l'impie Ochosias" (Ath. IV, 2; p. 923).<sup>10</sup> *Athalie* conjures up the ancient Biblical world through the accumulation of its exotic personal, national and place names:

Par moi Jérusalem goûte un calme profond.  
Le Jourdain ne voit plus l'Arabe vagabond,  
Ni l'altier Philistin, par d'éternels ravages,  
Comme au temps de vos rois, désoler ses rivages;  
Le Syrien me traite et de reine et de soeur.  
Enfin de ma maison le perfide oppresseur,  
Qui devait jusqu'à moi pousser sa barbarie,  
Jéhu, le fier Jéhu, tremble dans Samarie.

(Ath., II, 5; p. 892)

Similarly, *Esther* lists the names of the provinces of the Persian Empire, with an accumulation of the tense /i/ /y/ /er/ and /yr/:

De l'Inde à l'Hellespont ses esclaves coururent.  
Les filles de l'Egypte à Suse comparurent.  
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.

(Esth. I, 1, 818)

In the last few lines, where attention shifts to Esther, the tone transmutes into the clear /e/ and reassuring /'/, /o/ and /a/, further softened by the sibilants /z/, /zh/, or /ch/.

A further element of linguistic exoticism is Racine's use of Biblical imagery, which—restrained as it is in Racine's transposition—must still have seemed new and strange to ears accustomed to classical alexandrine verse on the tragic stage:

Comment en un plomb vil l'or pur s'est-il changé?  
 Quel est dans le lieu saint ce pontife égorgé?  
 Pleure, Jérusalem, pleure, cité perfide,  
 Des prophètes divins malheureuse homicide.  
 De son amour pour toi don Dieu s'est dépouillé.  
 Ton encens à ses yeux est un encens souillé.  
 Où menez-vous ces enfants et ces femmes?  
 (Ath. III, 7; 917)

The exotic elements are not limited to the text alone. Racine's intended staging of the plays added to their oriental appeal.<sup>11</sup> One of the criticisms of *Esther*, indeed, was the impropriety of the Persian costumes for young ladies of St. Cyr.<sup>12</sup> Racine goes further in *Athalie*, setting this play "dans le temple de Jérusalem," (876), and resorting to the use of machinery in Act V, scene 5, where, at the critical moment, "le fond du théâtre s'ouvre. On voit le dedans du temple, et les lévites sortent de tous côtés sur la scène." (940).<sup>13</sup> Add to this Moreau's highly praised music<sup>14</sup> and it is not surprising that *Esther* and *Athalie* have been said to resemble operas more than classical tragedies.<sup>15</sup> Picard, for example, writes:

avec sa mise-en-scène et bientôt sa couleur locale, ses mouvements de foule, ses coups de théâtre, elle devient une *machine* à grand spectacle. Cette pièce, dont l'intention devait être scolaire, rappelle, avec ses choeurs, les fastes de l'opéra.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the writing, the staging, and the subject matter of these plays all contribute to transport the reader or

viewer into an exotic world.<sup>17</sup> But how do the Jewish characters function in the exotic, alien, and wondrous atmosphere of Racine's last two tragedies? Are they simply part of the exotic furniture, or do they in fact stand apart?

In this remote environment, ironically, the Jewish characters constitute the most familiar element. Racine, Knapp writes,

began feeling an affinity, consciously, with the Hebrews of the Old Testament; and, with such understanding, new springs and sources of inspiration had been tapped. No longer the Greek world, but his own heritage, the Judaeo-Christian concepts. (239)

They are distant ancestors from within the author's (and audience's) own cultural heritage, early representatives of the "Judeo-Christian" ("Western?") tradition struggling to survive in a strange, barbarian world.

The Jews, moreover, are not isolated pariahs or heroes, but members of a nation. *Athalie* is set in the Jewish kingdom of Judah. Even *Esther*, whose Jews dwell among a foreign people, nonetheless depicts them as a separate nation. The poetry of the Jewish chorus is charged with nostalgic longing for the landscapes of their formerly independent state, to which they in fact return at the end of the play. Racine consistently emphasizes their national bonds, defining the Jews as a "race" (in the more restrictive seventeenth-century sense), "peuple" and even (as we have seen) "nation."

In Racine, moreover, the Jews are not all members of a single social class, as had frequently been the case in literary representations, but fill the various ranks of a differentiated social hierarchy—one of the attributes of an autonomous people. Mardochée is their "chef" (*Esth.* II, q; 831), a title which possibly corresponds to the high office of exilarch which did exist among the Jews of the Babylonian exile; both he and Esther are of royal blood;

the chorus is composed of "filles de Sion, / Jeunes et tendres fleurs, par le sort agitées, / Sous un ciel étranger comme moi transplantées" (Esth. I, 1, 819); finally, all the above characters are only the élite pinnacle of a numerous Jewish populace which, although offstage, is repeatedly referred to. Similarly, in *Athalie*, the high priest, Joad, is at the top of the hierarchy, commanding a literal army of Levites, while the Jewish people is again (and even more so) a continual presence *dans les coulisses*. In this play, indeed, the people is summoned to the temple by Joad that it may participate as an actor (once more, offstage) in the final *dénouement* (Ath. v, 7; 942). After the rightful heir, Joas, assumes the throne a normal social and political hierarchy has been in fact reconstituted. The traditional three estates are complete, and Joad addresses them by name: "Roi, prêtres, peuple, [allons, pleins de reconnaissance, / De Jacob avec Dieu confirmer l'alliance.]" (ibid.)

Although the Jews constitute a nation, their situation is far from regular. For they find themselves in a seemingly precarious position, defenseless in the face of a threat to their very existence. In both *Esther* and *Athalie*, the Jews are ruled by alien despots, whose desire to destroy them is whipped up by duplicitous counselors.<sup>18</sup> Mathan dreams alternately of transforming the Jewish temple into a shrine to Baal or of razing it; in either event the Jews would be forced to choose between conversion and death. Aman proposes definitive physical annihilation, with no such options:

Je veux qu'on dise un jour aux siècles effarés:  
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 desparurent tous.

(Esth. II, 1; 832)

There is an almost sensual delectation in Aman's repeated reference to the extermination of the Jews. Innocence threatened and this lust for a power which is meaningless if not total, which can only be satisfied by violating or

annihilating the interlocutor, are familiar themes in Racinian tragedy. Here, however, the interlocutor is not an individual but an entire nation, the Jewish people.

In a strange way, Racine mirrors the structure of the old *miracle* and *mystère*. There, the Jew was an alien element to be eliminated in order to reestablish the harmony and sanctity of the community. In *Esther* and *Athalie*, the situation is reversed: it is the violent, rapacious enemy of the Jews, seeking their elimination, that represents evil. It is this element, and not the Jew, which must be neutralized if society is to be set right. In sharp contrast to the medieval works, then, each of Racine's Biblical plays is at least partly a *plaidoyer* for tolerance. In the end, the good King Assuérus assures the Jews equal rights: "A l'égal des Persans je veux qu'on les honore" (*Esth.* III, 7; 858). As a reward for such exemplary tolerance his wish,

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.

(Ibid)

is granted, as Racine points out in the *Préface*. *Athalie* serves as a monitory counter-example. Joad makes the lesson explicit in the last lines of that tragedy:

Par cette fin terrible, et due à ses fortaits,  
 Apprenez, roi des Juifs, en n'oubliez jamais  
 Que les rois dans le ciel ont un juge sévère,  
 L'innocence un vengeur, et l'orphelin un père.

(*Ath.* V, 8; 943)

In the post-Holocaust era, many passages in each play ring with an eerie clairvoyance. Change a single place name, for example, and Aman's words might come from the mouth of a minor Nazi official stirring up antisemitism in 1920's Bavaria:

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

Etrangers en [Bavière], à nos lois opposés,  
 Du reste des humains ils semblent divisés,  
 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.  
 (Esth. II, 1; 833)

Although such musings may appeal to the popular imagination, however, they have little to do with serious literary criticism.

More to the point, and just as intriguing, is the seventeenth-century fit. In reality, as in the plays, seventeenth-century Jews were universally at the mercy of non-Jewish rulers. Even where they were tolerated, they had no rights, and lived under constant fear of forced conversion, banishment, or death. The Jews' fate in the seventeenth century depended not on popular sentiment, but royal tolerance. Neither Aman nor Mathan need stir up popular hatred of the Jews; they achieve their ends as a seventeenth-century courtier might, insinuating the poison of their anti-Jewish slanders in private meetings with their monarchs. Even the arguments used against the Jews in the plays are the familiar ones of early modern anti-Semitic rhetoric: the inherent disloyalty of Jews, their hostility to the state religion, their pride and stubbornness, their difference, indeed their alien status within the nation, and their undue (and tempting) wealth. In this context, Racine's plays seem a very pointed critique of the situation still imposed on the Jews.

The anti-Jewish charge most frequently encountered in seventeenth-century documents, one repeated by no less a figure than Blaise Pascal, was that the Jews must suffer in eternal retribution for the sins of their ancestors:

C'est une chose étonnante et digne d'une étrange attention, de voir ce peuple juif subsister depuis tant d'années, et de le voir toujours misérable: *étant nécessaire* pour la preuve de Jésus-Christ, et

qu'il subsiste pour le prouver, et qu'il soit  
misérable, puisqu'ils l'ont crucifié.<sup>19</sup>

Though both plays are set in the pre-Christian era, Racine manages indirectly to allude to, and refute, this argument. The chorus in *Esther* seems at first to validate it, exclaiming:

Des offenses d'autrui malheureuses victimes (...)  
Nos pères ont péché, nos pères ne sont plus,  
Et nous portons la peine de leurs crimes.  
(*Esth.* I, 5; 827)

However, Aman himself reveals that the arguments of an anguished theodicy, although they may appeal to the Jewish sense of guilt, are irrelevant to the unprincipled courtiers who use them for opportunistic gain:

Mais, crois-moi, dans le rang où je suis élevé,  
Mon âme à ma grandeur tout entière attachée,  
Des intérêts de sang est faiblement touchée.  
(*E.* II, 1; 833)

In *Athalie*, Racine speaks even more clearly. When Josabet fears that Joas might suffer divine punishment for the sins of his fathers:

Et c'est sur tous ces rois sa justice sévère  
Que je crains pour le fils de mon malheureux  
[frère.  
Qui sait si cet enfant, par leur crime entraîné,  
Avec eux en naissant ne fut pas condamné?  
(*Ath.* I, 2; 884)

Joad immediately reassures her:

...Dieu veut qu'on espère en son soin paternel.  
Il ne recherche point, aveugle en sa colère,  
Sur le fils qui le craint l'impiété du père.  
(*Ibid.*)

There is no inherited, collective guilt in the eyes of God.

These two plays, then, reflect the varied relationship of the Jews to power very much as it existed in several European states in Racine's own day. In *Mathan and Aman*, Racine has not only painted accurate and circumstantial portraits of the anti-Jewish courtiers of certain seventeenth-century courts. He has provided a subtle analysis of the psychology and motives of anti-Semitism. Moreover, in *Mardochée* and *Abner* he sketches traits of those few influential Jews who did accede to the periphery of power in the seventeenth century ("les Juifs de cour"),<sup>20</sup> while *Mathan* represents the attested figure of the Jewish renegade. Most impressive is Racine's moving depiction of innocent suffering. In terms specifically adequate to the seventeenth-century context, each play pleads for tolerance. The Jews themselves are portrayed sympathetically, on the whole, yet given a wide enough range of human emotions to partake of our common humanity.

The portrait Racine paints of the Jews and their situation is a revolutionary innovation in French literature. This departure was less noticeable, perhaps, to the degree that he accentuated the exotic elements which seem to distance the Jews and define them, comfortably, as "Other." For whatever reason, although a close reading of these plays shows that the latter is not really their role here, no contemporary of Racine's, as far as I have discovered, noticed the playwright's unusual treatment of his Jewish characters.

Nonetheless, this seeming incongruity in Racine's characterization of the Jews apparently disturbed contemporary commentators sufficiently that they were prompted to explain the plays by elaborate allegorical readings.<sup>21</sup> The unjustly suffering Jews, attacked by the political establishment of their day, it was argued, represent the sisters of "la congrégation des Filles de l'Enfance, de Toulouse, qu'un arrêt, signé par le Roi, trop crédule, avait supprimée en 1686 et dont Arnaud avait pris la défense"<sup>22</sup> or, more credibly, the followers of Port-Royal itself.<sup>23</sup> However, if the Jews of *Athalie* stand for the Christians of Port-Royal, then Joad's final speech,

after Athalie's murder by a vengeful mob, threatening similar vengeance to any king guilty of such persecution, would imply a direct threat to Louis XIV (this itself would be extraordinary), proffered by Racine at a public court ceremony in which the king was not only present but indeed the playwright's patron and the audience's host. The King's anger if he even suspected Racine capable of intimating regicide would clearly go beyond limiting public notice of the play (while maintaining Racine's prestige and pension). Another theory, that Joas is a figure for King James III, is not much more convincing, and seems to have been abandoned by recent critics.<sup>24</sup> In addition to all the other problems with these interpretations, no public or private testimony, either from supporters of any of these causes or from their enemies, indicates that Racine's contemporaries saw such allusions in the plays. (The one exception is so vague as to be of no help whatsoever.)<sup>25</sup>

Two recent articles argue that Athalie, representing religious tolerance and the sweetness and light of polytheistic paganism, is the true heroine of the play that bears her name, while the Jews are villains condemned for their intolerance, corruption, and violence.<sup>26</sup> Such a reading, as should be evident from this essay, will simply not stand up to a close reading of the text.<sup>27</sup> I hope to expand on this point in a separate study.

The orthodox interpretation is that the Old Testament prefigures the New, and consequently the triumph of the Jews in *Esther* and *Athalie* that of Christianity over both Judaism and paganism. This traditional Christian reading of the Old Testament may certainly be applied to these plays, and contributed in no small measure to the seventeenth-century audience's sympathetic reception. However, precisely because it is so obvious, this inoffensive allegoric reading may obscure other more revolutionary implications. It is significant that, while the *Préfaces* do of course adopt the standard view of the ancient Hebrews as important only in their relation to the New Testament, they also contain references—and this is much more unusual for the age—to modern Jewry. Racine concludes the *Préface* to *Esther* by remarking on the

continuing significance to modern Jews of the story he is about to tell. The *Préface* to *Athalie*, while it does not distinguish between ancient and modern Jews in quite the same way, nonetheless contrasts the universal literacy of Jewish children with the lower educational standards of Racine's countrymen. In both cases, Racine points to the Jews as a people with its own history and culture, and not just a Christian myth.

Regardless of Racine's conscious (or unconscious) intentions, which cannot be determined in any case, it is incontrovertible that these plays were a turning point in the representation of the Jew. Shortly after the first public performance of *Athalie* in 1716,<sup>28</sup> writers such as Montesquieu, Diderot, and Rousseau began to introduce more rounded and realistic Jewish characters into works which implicitly or explicitly condemned the oppression to which Jews were subject.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, the older theological view represented by Pascal, which attributed Jewish suffering to (and justified it by) their ancestral guilt, did not immediately disappear: it lived on in secular form in the vicious polemics of Voltaire. But even Voltaire presented Jews as individuals and part of the modern world; he was in fact hailed by the Jewish community of France for his role as a champion of more humane treatment for religious minorities.<sup>30</sup> Although even in today's France the Jew still functions as an exotic element in a certain popular literature,<sup>31</sup> for serious writers of the Enlightenment and after, philosemitic or not, the Jew was no longer an element of exotica, a remote, semi-mythical figure, but a part of the human family.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>"Couleur locale" is present in the two Biblical tragedies. See Picard, 870.

<sup>2</sup>Odette de Mourgues decries this approach: "Racinian criticism since Sainte-Beuve has tended to ... give the Christian pattern such an overwhelming importance that it

blurs the outlines of the tragic pattern" (124). Nonetheless, Mourgues herself attributes considerable importance to the "Christian pattern": in *Esther* "all the resources of [Racine's] dramatic lyricism and of his stagecraft are directed towards the glorification of the Christian order. ...the presence of the Christian order permeates every scene" (131); in *Athalie* "the pattern of order runs throughout the play. It is the Christian order ... and divine justice shines on, untarnished, affixed on a Christian sky" (124).

<sup>3</sup>Giraudoux was one of the few to acknowledge this fact. Cf. his *Jean Racine*, 3.

<sup>4</sup>For an exhaustive study of this theme see the well-documented dissertation by Manya Lifschitz-Golden.

<sup>5</sup>The Oxford English Dictionary defines exotic as "introduced from abroad, not indigenous (in popular language with the added sense of 'not naturalized or acclimatized')." Henry Shaw, in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines exoticism: "the state or condition of strangeness, unusualness, or foreignness."

<sup>6</sup>I count 32 occurrences of 'juif' and 'juive' in *Esther*; the term 'hébreu' is used only once.

<sup>7</sup>Although Metz had been French since 1552, its Jewish population increased only slowly from the three illegal Jewish residents at annexation to the hundreds who lived there openly a century later. Alsace, with a significant Jewish population of some 300 families, became French by the treaty of Westphalia (1648). Cf. Gilbert Cahen, "La Région lorraine" (79-84) and Georges Weill, "Alsace" (148-151) in *Blumenkrantz*.

<sup>8</sup>On Bossuet, see Cahen in *Blumenkrantz*, p. 117. On Pascal, see Levine, 66-72.

<sup>9</sup>The harem references play a significant role in the Jungian interpretation of the play. Cf. Knapp, 205.

<sup>10</sup>All quotations from *Esther* and *Athalie* refer to the Pléiade edition, cited below under Raymond Picard, ed.

<sup>11</sup>Yarrow points out that *Esther* was performed before "a succession of splendid settings" (84) and reminds the reader that "*Athalie* not only contains some of Racine's finest verse, but that the priestly robes, the numerous cast, and the enthronement of Joas provide an element of spectacle" (89-90).

<sup>12</sup>The young actresses wore "Persian-inspired costumes embroidered with pearls and diamonds." (Knapp, 196).

<sup>13</sup>*Athalie* is "la seule pièce de Racine suggérant un décor, un sombre décor d'une majesté orientale, le Temple des Juifs, des costumes d'un hiératisme mordoré, toute une atmosphère...." (Ubersfeld, 311).

<sup>14</sup>Knapp, 196; Yarrow, 90; Abraham, 136, 148. None of these authors, however, cites a contemporary source for the judgment expressed.

<sup>15</sup>For Odette de Mourgues, *Esther* is an "opéra sacré" (131). Ubersfeld, following Picard (see note 16), disputes Racine's claim to imitate Greek tragedy and describes his purpose in *Esther* as to "rapprocher la tragédie de l'opéra" (308).

<sup>16</sup>Picard, 870. On *Esther*, Picard writes: "Racine peut bien prétendre que les chœurs d'*Esther* marquent un retour à la tragédie grecque: le plaisir que prenaient les spectateurs en les entendant chanter était pourtant bien différent; c'était celui de l'opéra" (810-811).

<sup>17</sup>Picard writes of *Esther*: "Cette tapisserie orientale ... a l'exotisme anodin, conventionnel, et charmant de certains Gobelins" (808). He does not hesitate to apply the term "couleur locale" to *Athalie* (870).

<sup>18</sup>Although *Athalie* is half-Jewish through her father, King Ahab, Racine emphasizes her maternal lineage as the

idolâtres "fille de Jézabel." According to Jewish law, Judaism can be inherited only from the mother.

<sup>19</sup>*Pensées* #505 in Pascal, 1234. (My emphasis.)

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Poliakov.

<sup>21</sup>Pommier, 221-237, presents some of these theories.

<sup>22</sup>Jean Orcibal, *La Genèse d'Esther et d'Athalie* (Paris, 1950) quoted in Picard, 1158 [822, n. 2]. Both Picard and Pommier (225ff.) argue convincingly against this thesis. Pommier does not exclude the analogy with Port-Royal.

<sup>23</sup>Ubersfeld sees in all Racine's *innocentes persécutées* from *Andromaque* to *Esther* the subtle influence of Racine's identification with Port-Royal, but she nuances her judgment appropriately: "Non sans doute que la pièce soit un plaidoyer conscient pour Port-Royal, mais quand s'estompe, comme ici [*Esther*], la peinture des passions, se fait entendre mieux l'élégie des vaincus, la cantate des persécutés" (309).

<sup>24</sup>This interpretation, proposed by a certain M. Charlier in "Mercure de France," (July 1, 1931), was expanded by Orcibal (cf. note 22). Picard, 1163 [p. 875, n. 3], demolishes the theory and argues convincingly against all attempts to find a *clef*.

<sup>25</sup>"Le seul texte qui insinue—sans dire lesquelles—qu'*Athalie* contient certaines allusions est une phrase du P. Quesnel...: 'Il y a des endroits qui sont des dénonciations en vers et en musique...et il ya des portraits où l'on n'a pas besoin de dire à qui ils ressemblent.'" (Picard, 1164 [p. 875, n. 3]). Given the multiplicity of interpretations, this testimony is of little value in supporting any of them.

<sup>26</sup>Bruneau and McDermott.

<sup>27</sup>The evil with which Racine marks *Athalie* has not escaped the notice of the major studies on Racine. Cf.

Ubersfeld, 309-310; Knapp, 223; Yarrow, 93; Picard, 866 and 869. Barthes' 'deconstructionist' defense of *Athalie* is based precisely on the evidence that she, as the other Racinian villains who exercise a similar Satanic attraction, represents "le Mal, qu'il [i.e., Racine] condamne" (129).

<sup>28</sup>Picard, 1161 [871, n. 1].

<sup>29</sup>On the Jewish character in eighteenth-century French literature, see my *The Jewish Presence in Pre-Revolutionary French Literature*.

<sup>30</sup>Most notably Zalkind-Hourwitz who, in 1789, writes: "Quoiqu'il en soi [sic], les Juifs lui pardonnent tout le mal qu'il a dit d'eux, en faveur du bien qu'il leur a fait, ...par ses nombreuses ouvrages contre le fanatisme" (56-57).

<sup>31</sup>In works devoid of literary interest, such as Guy des Cars' pulp novel, *Le Château de la Juive*.

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