

THE QUEEN WHO WOULD BE KING

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Racine's plays stage men and women as models of human behavior. As Bérénice says of herself, Titus and Antiochus, "Servons tous trois d'exemple à l'univers" (Racine 350). Yet, unlike the ideal man, the model woman should accept the limitations imposed upon her by her unstable emotions and her passive role in society. Thus, the accomplishment of her civic religious or familial duties must be carried out with respect to socially defined feminine roles. Unable to take direct physical action, she must have recourse to the assistance of a male character, much as Hermione is aided by Orestes in *Andromaque*. At no time may the woman usurp the power that patriarchal society reserves for the man. As Racine shows, to do so will result in merciless punishment. In *Phédre*, the title character's symbolic appropriation of Hippolyte's sword is both an admission of her illicit love and a movement towards the assumption of a masculine aggressive role. *Athalie*, Racine's last play, develops this physical and symbolic moment of transgression into male space and its subsequent punishment through its discourse, whose meanings modify relative to the sex of the one who wields it.

The first allusion to *Athalie* in the play labels her as "femme" (13), albeit an audacious (13), impious (747), and insolent (1548) one (*Athalie*). Throughout the play will be expressed the horror of the patriarchy for the woman whose very name is blasphemy: "Une femme . . . peut-on la nommer sans blasphème?/ Une femme . . . c'était Athalie elle-même" (395-96). This is because, by placing herself onto the "trône de ses pères" (1374), *Athalie* transgresses the rights of the woman in the political domain. Her entrance into the sanctuary of the temple further incurs the outrage of her subjects, not just because she is not of the faith, but because she has entered an area only permitted to men. The penetration of *Athalie* into the "enceinte" of the temple (certainly ironic since outside the religious realm it would imply a feminine space) is shocking because she, like a man, can "penetrate." Thus *Athalie* brings about political and religious conflict as a matriarch who places herself in opposition to the patriarchy, creating a rift "entre le permis et le réprouvé, . . . à l'issue (duquel) le monothéisme patriarcal triomphant fera assumer aux femmes le rôle de l'abomination" (Bruneau 377). The chorus' disapproval of *Athalie* stems in part from her cruelty, but particularly from her gender: "Sion Chère Sion, que dis-tu quand tu vois/ Une impie étrangère/ Assise, hélas ! au trône de tes rois ?" Joab repeats this accusation in line seventy-two. *Athalie* herself states that: "David m'est en horreur, et les fils de ce roi/

Quoique nés de mon sang, sont étrangers pour moi" (729-730). Athalie, a woman, is "foreign," "other," and therefore unacceptable.

Heredity and destiny are significant in reinforcing the distinction between masculine and feminine space in Racine's tragedies. The fact that Jezebel's and Athalie's descendants are also the descendants of David is greatly downplayed in Racine's play. Jezebel and David are treated as the creators of two distinct races, constantly placed in opposition: "Autant que de David la race est respectée./ Autant de Jézabel la fille est détestée" (271-272). Abner traces Athalie's lineage back to Jezebel, rather than to her father, Achab, opposing in this way the maternal line to David's paternal line (Bruneau 379).

Athalie as a continuation of her maternal ancestor, is "cette autre Jézabel" (761 and 1074). In contrast, even though Eliacin will become guilty to the same degree as Athalie, he is "Ce roi fils de David" (138). Even when Athalie discovers that Eliacin lives, she defines him as heir to her father rather than as her own grandson: "Fidèle au sang d'Achab, qu'il a reçu de moi/ Conforme à son aïeul, à son père semblable/ On verra de David l'héritier détestable" (1786-1788). Athalie acknowledges the system of paternal inheritance and at the same time refuses to associate herself with motherhood which is the function of a woman and is therefore inferior, although others attribute such qualities to her and her lineage (1295--"une mère en fureur" and 1492--"une mère cruelle"). The only time at which she herself recognizes her role as mother is when she is about to die- "Voici ce qu'en mourrant lui souhaite sa mère" (1783).

The Queen's troubling dream further emphasizes the dichotomy of the sexes in the context of heredity. In order to weaken Athalie's masculine will while drawing her into a further transgression by entering the Temple, the vision manipulates the Queen's Feelings through contrast and association. It is in the Temple that she will become obsessed with the child, and will consequently fall into the trap Joad has prepared for her (Lépine 29). As Helen Bates McDermott explains, it is by means of the dream that Athalie's maternal instincts are awakened as she becomes aware of "cette région de son caractère qui était réprimée et niée" (McDermott 48). However, it is important to clarify that this new state of consciousness is very subtle, since Athalie is not able to comprehend her subsequent actions. The two parts of the dream place in parallel the death of two mother figures, underlining the powerful link of heredity by making Athalie's death a repetition of Jezebel's death. There is further identification between mother and daughter through the leitmotif of the mask. Like Athalie whose power and wealth is stolen from the kings, Jezebel's body and face are adorned by an "éclat emprunté." This brightness blinds the onlooker to "des ans l'irréparable outrage," (496) much like the lure of treasure blinds Athalie (1778). Mother and daughter are also comparable in function.

In the first part of the vision, the female child is the terrified witness to the mother's death at the hands of others, whereas in the second part, a male child is the murderer of Athalie, who is, in a sense, his mother (McDermott 58). The dream thus reinforces the division of gender roles, portraying the man as active and violent, the woman as the passive victim. Throughout the play Athalie chooses to disregard the strong influence of biological heredity and social beliefs in determining what is acceptable for her gender, and continues to believe that by behaving as a man she can retain the position of power she has usurped:

Et moi, reine sans coeur, fille sans amitié,
Eaclave d'une lâche et frivole pitié.
Où serais-je aujourd'hui, si domptant ma faiblesse,
Je n'eusse d'une mère étouffé la tendresse,
Si de mon propre sang ma main versant des flots
N'eût pas ce coup hardi réprimé vos complots?
(*Athalie* 717-726)

Athalie, although conscious of her cruelty, doesn't feel guilt. She justifies her acts: "il le fallait" (Delcroix 48). Jezebel's words, "Tremble . . . fille digne de moi" (497), constitute a warning to her daughter. The second part of the dream underscores the warning: "J'admirais sa douceur, son air noble et modeste/ J'ai senti tout à coup un homicide acier/ Que le traître en mon sein a plongé tout entier" (512-514). Yet, Athalie is not cautious and dismisses the vision as a "vapeur." Athalie, "poussée au meurtre par un amour filial dévoyé, . . . mourra à cause d'un amour maternel frustré . . . La tragédie renfermerait donc et le châtement de la mère infanticide et celui du fils matricide" (Heinein 104). The third time she sets eyes on Eliacin (the second time was in the temple), Athalie questions her ability to stifle the maternal instincts already manifest in the dream, yet will remain impotent: "Quel prodige nouveau me trouble et m'embarrasse?/ La douceur de sa voix, son enfance, sa grâce/ Font insensiblement à mon inimitié/ Succéder . . . Je serais sensible à la pitié?" (651-654). Her inability to act brings about a loss of the human faculties of sight and speech. The entire play is full of ironies that suggest blindness rather than vision (Campbell 393). Even when Athalie's eyes "see" Eliacin (621-22), she doesn't "see" who he is, and remains unable to speak: "sa langue en sa bouche à l'instant s'est glacée/ Et toute son audace a paru terrassée/ Ses yeux, comme effrayés, n'osaient se détourner" (411-413). Athalie's indecision after the dream is punctuated by the use of the preterite tense in her discourse when

she says "J'ai cru le devoir faire" (467). Her lack of resolve is attributed to her gender by the men of the court:

Ami, depuis deux jours je ne la connais plus.
 Ce n'est plus cette reine éclairée, intrépide,
 Elevée au-dessus de son sexe timide,
 ...
 La peur d'un vain remords trouble cette grande âme:
 Elle flotte, elle hésite; en un mot, elle est femme (870-876)

In this way, the prophesy contained in the violent dream remains obscure and will only become clear when it brings about Athalie's downfall (Williams 16). Additionally, it is only in the end that Athalie acknowledges her gender, referring to herself as "mother" to complete the cycle of the stabbed violated woman (1783). Her final order as queen is to command her own death, thus briefly reassuming her masculine power as ruler while killing off her weaker, feminine side as indicated the words "en mourant": "Qu'il règne donc ce fils, ton soin et ton ouvrage;/ Et que pour signaler son empire nouveau/ On lui fasse en mon sein enfoncer le couteau./ Voici ce qu'en mourant lui souhaite sa mère." (1780-1783).

This sacrifice moves away from the realm of feminine bienséance present in Racine's theater. In his plays, a woman's self-sacrifice is either a sign of nobility, as with Esther who is subservient to her husband's laws, or an act of insanity as with Hermione (*Andromaque*) and Eriphile (*Iphigénie*). As indicated in lines 443 and 1260 of *Athalie*, the sacrifice of another being was the privilege of the biblical fathers, such as Jephthé and Abraham, who sacrificed their children to God. Solange Guénoun has pointed out that God in Racine's plays is "une métaphore culturelle et transbiologique de la paternité, [de la virilité]" (184). Athalie assumes the role of the great biblical fathers by sacrificing her children to her mother. This act is a complete abomination in the eyes of the religion of the father-God, particularly because this mortal is a woman (Henein 94).

This despite the "juste fureur" with which Athalie avenges her mother, and her compliance with the law of the patriarchal order: "meurtre pour meurtre, outrage pour outrage" (720). The justice of "an eye for an eye" which is generally accepted in the context of biblical history is condemned when carried out by a woman.

The sacrifice of the Other in the context of Racine's plays is illustrated not just through literal acts of such violence, but also through symbolic weapons. Athalie's brutality is captured in the image of her holding a dagger: "Un

poignard à la main, l'implacable Athalie/ Au carnage animait ses barbares soldats/ Et poursuivait le cours de ses assassinats" (244-246). The dagger, like the sword in *Phédre*, symbolizes the violence of acts allowed only to men, and visually suggests the masculine sex itself. There is a significant concentration of words of phallic connotation in *Athalie*. The most frequent such terms are "glaive," which appears seven times, "poignard" and "fer" which appear five times each, the four mentions of "couteau" and the three of "sceptre." This network is inextricably linked to the theme of aggression and violence of which Athalie herself is the most obvious incarnation (Corti 48). Her aggressive character is praised by Mathan precisely for its virility: she is a "reine éclairée, intrépide/ Elevée au-dessus de son sexe timide/ Qui d'abord accablait ses ennemis surpris" (871-873). The mark of her weapon identifies Jose as her heir: "Oui, c'est Joas, je cherche en vain à me tromper./ Je reconnais l'endroit où je le fis frapper" (769-1770). As Athalie's persona slips to reveal her feminine identity, there is a literal displacement of the dagger to Joas and a metaphorical transfer of power. The loss of the dagger/phallus castrates Athalie, who is transformed into a woman without authority and whose function shifts from violator to violated. The knife completes the tragic cycle whose ritualized roots are the "mythe ancien de purification et de renaissance par moyen de la mort sacrificiale de la victime" (Lap 32). Athalie's sacrifice to Eliacin fulfills the male-dominated system where punishment is essential to the restoration of masculine rule: "Et que pour signaler son empire nouveau/ On lui fasse en mon sein enfoncer un couteau" (1781-1782).

The blindfold is another element whose function relies on the gender of the bearer. Iphigénie uses it to describe her understanding: "Mais toujours sur mes yeux ma facile bonté/ A remis le bandeau que j'avais écarté/ Vous l'aimez." (Racine 499). The "bandeau" reappears as the sacrificial cloth to cover Iphigénie's eyes: "le fer, le bandeau, la flamme est toute prête" (Racine 506). In *Athalie* the "bandeau" is the crown of royalty and is meant for the male heir to David: "Montrons Eliacin; et loin de le cacher/ Que du bandeau royal sa tête soit ornée" (1094-1095). This "auguste bandeau" (1244) becomes a blindfold when worn by Athalie. Scientifically speaking, the inability to see is the result of a lack of light as with the blindfold or an excess of light. In both cases, light is knowledge which a woman is incapable of assimilating. The sixth scene of act two under-scores this second type of blindness. Athalie realizes that God "M'a vingt fois en un jour à moi-même opposée/ Tantôt pour un enfant excitant mes remords./ Tantôt m'éblouissant de tes riches trésors" (1776-1778). She didn't "see" that the "treasure" was Jose himself. Because of her political success, Athalie is blinded by her passions: she is "superbe" (51), "orgueilleuse" (1338), "jalouse" (31) and "avare" (1591). These "faults"

are, in fact, exaggerations of male psychic strength in the form of power, ambition and caution. In the context of a woman these same virile characteristics are perverted. Josabet asks for such blindness for Athalie when she says "Puissant maître des cieux/ Remets-lui le bandeau dont tu couvris ses yeux" (1669-1670). Athalie believes to see clearly, saying ironically to Mathan: "Vous m'ouvrez les yeux/ Je commence à voir clair" (610-611). This comment is doubly ironic since Mathan unknowingly speaks the truth while believing that he is only inventing stories about Joad and Joas. Nor does Athalie recognize the truth when it's before her. This gap between seeing (sight) and seeing (understanding) is resumed in the Queen's declaration "j'ai voulu voir ; j'ai vu" (737). The Queen has seen everything but understood little. Once the "bandeau", symbol of masculine power and therefore of female blindness is removed, Athalie will be able to recognize her situation as being an extension of the past and correctly identify Joas (1768-1770). In addition to seeing the past and the present with clarity, Athalie also becomes prophetic, seeing Jose's future with terrifying precision (1786-1790). This lucidity at the moment of sacrifice and revelation of her feminine weakness is in great contrast to her prior blindness when Athalie was in the position of power.

Athalie's punishment for being a woman who wishes to be a man is represented through physical death and a dissolution of verbal identity. Throughout the play, the use of words like "femme," "fille" and "reine" for Athalie alternate with her proper name. In the fifth Act, she is deprived of the exercise of her will and the expression of her "name." In line 1681, for example, Athalie is "cette reine" and "elle", both portraying Athalie as acting subject, but defining her by her function rather than as an individual. She is then further generalized and becomes "celle" (1695). In addition, the use of the "vous" to address Athalie becomes "tu" from line 1717 onwards. In this context, the word "Reine" (1720) is sarcastic and irreverent, and punctuates the command levelled at her. Ismaël describes her in function of a male figure: "la fille d'Achab" (1752). The last reference to the Queen reduces her to the direct object pronoun "la": "Le fer a de sa vie expié les horreurs/ Jérusalem, longtemps en proie à ses fureurs/ De son joug odieux à la fin soulagée/ Avec joie en son sang la regarde plongée" (1809-1812). Athalie becomes THE feminine punished, denuded of personal identity, thus a dangerous model for all women.

Beyond the dynastic and religious struggle, Athalie dies for being a woman (Bruneau 378). Like *Phèdre*, *Athalie* is the enactment of "la mise à mort des femmes, mères, filles... grands-mères, coupables de ne s'être pas tenues à leur place auprès du Père-Epoux, coupables d'avoir cru possible une humanité sexuée" (Lipietz 124). Athalie is not just a woman, but an audacious woman in an order dominated by males. Of "cette impie . . . [on a] puni

l'audace" (line 1808), that is, the audacity of wanting to pass herself off as a man. Joad's statement to Josabet "Jusque sur notre autel votre injuste marâtre/ Veut offrir à Baal un encens idolâtre" (lines 1171-1172) emphasizes the division of the sexes. Whereas the "notre" denotes the male priests, the "votre" clearly lays the blame on Josabet, and thus directs the accusation towards the female gender in general. The play ends with a reiteration of the masculine power of the "kings" (and not of the queens) by the Father par excellence: "n'oubliez jamais/ Que les rois dans le Ciel ont un juge sévère/ L'innocence un vengeur et l'orphelin un père" (1814-16). The imperative "vous" here is certainly intended to be directed at the audience. The condition of the triumph of patriarchal monotheism is matricide (Lipietz 384), the individual must be sacrificed for the order. The "bandeau," symbol of patriarchal power, will blindfold the woman who seeks to usurp this position. As accessory of sacrifice in Greek religion, it underlines the element of the sacrifice as warning to all women who rebel against their subordinate roles.

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