

BÉRÉNICE

**a tragedy by Jean Racine,
abridged and semi-staged in the original French,
with subtitles, images, and incidental music by Chopin**

Dans un mois, dans un an, comment souffrirons-nous,
Seigneur, que tant de mers me séparent de vous ?

Servons tous trois d'exemple à l'univers
De l'amour la plus tendre et la plus malheureuse
Dont il puisse garder l'histoire douloureuse.



Directed by Patrick Boyde

**Main Theatre, Old Divinity School
St John's College**

22 and 23 November 2023

Special thanks are due to the following:

The Master and Fellows of St John's College.

Gillian Jondorf and Mary Emerson, who composed the surtitles.

Mark Harrison, who gave indispensable help and advice on all the technical aspects of the PowerPoint Presentation.

Michael Horton and John Bruce-Jones for long hours on the PPT.

Fabienne Bonnet, who kept watch on the watchdog.

Sally Sheppard and Tom Pearson, who make everything run smoothly in the Divinity School Theatre.

Gerd Amelung, Leo Duarte, Dionysios Kyropoulos and Ruth Smith who were the unwitting 'begetters' of this event by involving the director in the first phase of their plans to create a pasticcio opera (*Tite l'Empereur*) to be performed next spring as part of the Handel Festival in Halle.

The incidental music
is taken from
the Nocturnes of Frédéric Chopin
opus 9 and opus 27

THE READERS

TITUS, empereur de Rome.	Reuben Thomas
BÉRÉNICE, reine de Palestine.	Léopoldine Apra
ANTIOCHUS, roi de Comagène.	Lorenzo Bastida
PAULIN, confident de Titus.	Michael Horton
ARSACE, confident d'Antiochus.	Patrick Boyde
PHÉNICE, confidente de Bérénice.	Célestine Barraquand
RUTILE, Romain.	Artur Dussart

THE MUSICIAN

Pianoforte	John Bryden
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SYNCHRONISATION

Surtitles	Artur Dussart, Laurence Fischer
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The cover page of a volume of essays on Berenice to be published early in 2024

Racine's Roman Tragedies

Essays on *Britannicus* and *Bérénice*



Edited by Nicholas Hammond
and Paul Hammond

A note on how the play came to be written and Racine's relationship with Corneille

The King came to Paris, on Saturday last about 5 in the evening. All the entertainment of the town are the two new plays, both of them called Berenice, one written by Monsieur Racine, the other by Corneille, of which that of Racine seems to take much, and the ladies melt away at it and proclaim them hardhearted who do not cry, so much they are concerned for the unfortunate Berenice.

Writing on 3rd December 1670, soon after two plays on the same subject by the two greatest French tragic dramatists of the age were first performed within a week of each other, Francis Vernon, secretary to the English embassy in Paris, seems to indicate his preference for the version written by the younger writer, Jean Racine.

Popular legend, one embraced fully by a number of scholars, has it that Louis XIV's sister-in-law and reputed love interest, Henriette d'Angleterre (Charles I's daughter), had commissioned both Pierre Corneille and Racine to write theatrical works on the subject of Bérénice, a foreign princess who renounces love. More recently, however, it has been demonstrated that this story was hatched in the eighteenth century, long after the deaths of both princess and playwrights. The rather more likely and mundane reality is that Corneille chose to stage his version (entitled *Tite et Bérénice*) with Molière's troupe at the Palais-Royal instead of the company based at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, who in turn asked Racine to write a rival piece on the same theme.

Apart from the proximity of the first performances of each play, Racine's *Bérénice* is in a number of ways his most Cornelian composition. While its Roman subject matter recalls the older dramatist's preference for Roman settings in the majority of his tragic output, the fact that this is Racine's only tragedy where no character dies seems to acknowledge the number of plays written by Corneille in his mature years that do not contain deaths.

And yet, in a strange way *Bérénice* is the most distinctively Racinian of all his theatre. While Corneille chooses to label his version a 'heroic comedy', Racine goes to great lengths to explore the failures of heroism and to explain why the 'majestic sadness' of his retelling of Bérénice's story is the stuff of tragedy, even without any blood being shed. If Corneille is content to complicate the ending of his version by marrying off subsidiary characters, the simplicity of Racine's three central characters leaving separately at the end shows that he has succeeded in 'making something out of nothing', as he declares in the Preface to his play.

No wonder the ladies of Paris - and probably Vernon himself – melted away at it.

Nicholas Hammond

From Racine's Preface to *Bérénice*

Titus, reginam Berenicen, cum etiam nuptias pollicitus ferebatur, statim ab Urbe dimisit, invitus invitam.

This means: 'Titus, who was passionately in love with Berenice and was even said to have promised to marry her, sent her away from Rome, against his wishes and against hers, in the opening days of his reign.' This episode is very well known in history, and I thought it very suitable for the theatre, given the strength of feeling it could provoke.

Indeed, there is nothing more affecting in all the poets than the parting of Aeneas and Dido in Virgil. And who can doubt that a story which could supply the material for one whole book of an epic, where the action lasts several days, could suffice for a tragedy, whose action can last only a few hours? It is true that I have not driven Berenice to kill herself like Dido, because as Berenice has not, in my play, made the same total commitment to Titus as Dido had to Aeneas, she is not obliged, unlike Dido, to take her own life.

Apart from that, her final farewell to Titus, and the effort that she makes in parting from him, is not the least tragic part of the play, and I would claim that it succeeds in renewing in the hearts of the spectators the emotion which the rest of the play had already stirred up. There is no need for blood and deaths in a tragedy. It is enough for the action to be impressive, the characters heroic, for passions to be roused, and for everything to be permeated with that majestic sadness which constitutes the whole pleasure of tragedy.

I thought that I could find all these elements in my subject. But what pleased me more about it is that I found it to be extremely simple. For a long time I had been wanting to see if I could write a tragedy with that simplicity of plot so favoured by the classical authors. It was one of the principal pieces of advice they left to us: 'Let whatever you write,' says Horace, 'be simple and on a single theme.' They admired Sophocles' *Ajax*, whose plot consists only of Ajax killing himself in horror, because of the madness into which he fell after being refused the armour of Achilles. They admired *Philoctetes*, where all that happens is that Odysseus arrives to seize the arrows of Hercules. Even *Oedipus Rex*, though it is full of recognition scenes, has a less complicated plot than the simplest modern tragedy. Finally, we can see that the admirers of Terence, who rightly rank him above all the comic authors, because of his elegant diction and convincing characterisation, nevertheless admit that Plautus is far ahead of him in the simplicity of most of his subjects. And it is probably this wonderful simplicity which caused so much praise to be heaped on Plautus by classical writers. And how much simpler still was Menander, given that Terence had to use two of Menander's comedies to make one of his own!

And no one should suppose that this rule is based only on the whim of those who devised it. Only the believable can move us in tragedy. And how believable is it that a multitude of things should happen in one day which could hardly take place over several weeks? Some people think that simplicity is a sign of lack of creativity. They don't realise that, on the contrary, creativity consists entirely in making something out of nothing, and that the piling up of incident has always been the refuge of poets who did not think their talent rich enough or strong enough to hold their audience's attention for five acts by a simple action, sustained by violent passions, beautiful feelings, and elegant style. I am far from thinking that all these things are to be found in this work of mine; but equally, I cannot believe that the public will be displeased that I have given them a tragedy that has received the tribute of so many tears, and whose thirtieth performance was as successful as its first.

Not but what some people have reproached me for that very simplicity which I took such care to achieve. They thought that a tragedy with such a straightforward plot could not conform to the rules of drama. I asked if they complained that it had bored them. I was told they all admitted that it was not boring, that they had even found it moving at various points, and that they would take pleasure in seeing it again. What more do they want? I beg them to have a good enough opinion of themselves not to think that a play which moves them, and gives them pleasure, can in any sense be against the rules. The first rule is to please and to move. All the other rules were devised only to satisfy this first one. But all these rules go into a great deal of detail, which I advise them not to bother their heads with. They have more important things to think about. Let them leave to us the chore of elucidating the difficulties of Aristotle's *Poetics*, let them enjoy the pleasure of weeping and being touched, and let them allow me to quote to them what a musician said to Philip of Macedonia who had claimed that a song did not obey the rules: 'God forbid, Sire, that you should ever be so unfortunate as to know more about such things than I do!'

Translated by Gillian Jondorf

The surtitles

Bérénice is Pat Boyde's second engagement with the repertory of 17th-century French classical tragedy. The first was Corneille's *Horace* (in 1919), which I thought would be difficult to write surtitles for, because the stylised language and formal rhetoric used by Corneille might well produce a very stilted text. However, when we had agreed on the various possible meanings of '*gloire*', '*vouloir*' and '*devoir*', and recognised the need to add a name here and there (as the plot is quite complicated and it is necessary for the audience to understand who is married to whom and who merely betrothed), the work went quite smoothly. When Pat told me he was proposing to do a semi-staged performance of *Bérénice* I guessed that Racine would be more of a problem than Corneille, though the difficulties were not always those I had foreseen.

I found that the first thing I had to decide was how the characters should address each other. In the original, *Bérénice*, Titus and Antiochus all call each other '*Seigneur*' or '*Madame*'. (There are a few exceptions, at moments of particular tension or heightened emotion.) I chose 'Sir' for *Seigneur* because there seemed to be no other word that would be appropriate for both Titus and Antiochus to use to each other, and *Bérénice* to use to both of them. When the men addressed *Bérénice*, I chose, rather inconsistently, the French form '*Madame*' because 'Madam' reminded me of an old-fashioned shop assistant addressing a customer. Some problems of vocabulary were ones I had already encountered in Corneille. Like his senior, Racine uses '*gloire*' in several different senses, though it means 'fame' more often than in Corneille. '*Éclat*' was sometimes a problem, if 'brilliance' did not fit. And I did get a bit weary of 'farewell(s)', but felt that there was no alternative for '*adieu(x)*'. But the toughest word we had to deal with was '*ingrate*', used by Titus about himself and (much more frequently) by *Bérénice* when she is raging at him. In my first draft I simply used the archaic English word 'ingrate' as a place-holder, though I knew Pat would not accept it. I now wonder if 'brute' might have been possible in some places, but in the end we usually simply agreed to omit it, though not without feeling slightly guilty.

There were two other main problems. The first arose from the fact that Racine practically never pads, so it was impossible to make the surtitles substantially shorter than the French text. The most I could do was to take out a couple of conventional adjectives which I could persuade myself were there for the metre rather than the meaning. So these surtitles are closer to a translation than the ones I have done for many other Boyde productions. Finally, there is the mystery of how Racine achieves such poetic effects with such prosaic language. People who love the play can often recite a passage from Act IV even if it is many decades since they read it:

Dans un mois, dans un an, comment souffrirons-nous,
Seigneur, que tant de mers me séparent de vous;
Que le jour recommence, et que le jour finisse,
Sans que jamais Titus puisse voir *Bérénice*,
Sans que, de tout le jour, je puisse voir Titus?

There is not a word here which rises above the register of everyday speech, but the effect is almost unendurably poignant. How did Racine do that? I do not know, and I do not claim to have achieved the same effect.

Gillian Jondorf

Introduction to:- www.boydesclassicdramas.org

If you would like to see the performance again you will find it – in a few weeks time – on a newly created website, together with all previous productions.

(The following brief excerpts from the introductory pages to the site give an idea of its riches.)

This is the archive of Patrick Boyde's dramatic productions of the classics. Start from here and semi-stage your own performance of scenes from Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Milton, Wordsworth, Byron or the Bible.

Patrick Boyde is Emeritus Professor of Italian. He has been adapting and directing dramas in eight different languages since 2002.

He writes: "In my retirement I have become well known for a series of semi-staged productions of great works of literature, which are always performed in their original language. The plays have all been abridgements of rarely performed verse-dramas, or dramatisations of episodes in classical epics or of books in the Bible. All have been enhanced by live music and illuminated by appropriate images. The meaning has always been made crystal-clear by specially composed surtitles, or by the projection of the original text.

The key word is 'semi-staged' – by which I imply a low-budget production analogous to a 'concert performance' of an opera (in which a well-rehearsed cast sing from the score under the baton of an inspiring but unobtrusive conductor).

In every case my focus has been on the language of a major text which is to be enjoyed on its own terms and for its own sake, just like a symphony. Every directorial choice is intended to heighten the impact of the Word, to rouse it from its hibernation on the page, to bring it from potency to act".

The art of semi-staging

"You wouldn't be reading this unless you were allured by words like Classic, Drama and Poetry, and unless you were already wanting to 'put something on stage' and were looking for some fresh and practical ideas.

It's assumed you want to 'do' or 'make' something, rather than study or theorise. 'Drama' derives from the Greek verb *dran*, 'to do'; while 'poetry' comes from the equally basic verb *poiein*, 'to make'.

This brief introduction will show you what can be achieved on a zero budget, in less than a month, in any venue which has some seating, a blank wall and a projector, with just five music stands and a guitar. All you'll have to do is find an instrumentalist and a small group of friends or pupils who enjoy reading aloud. We call it '*semi-staging*'... The result can be very 'dramatic'."

...

The Powerpoint Slides

“This minor miracle of modern technology is the *sine qua non*. Semi-staging of the present kind did not become feasible until about 1995.

Each slide has been composed with fanatical care. The subtitles are deceptively simple and can be absorbed in 3-4 seconds, allowing the audience to listen for perhaps 8–10 seconds each time. The character who is speaking is always identified by the repeated image of an appropriate head (top right). Other images or maps may be projected as the occasion arises. There will always have something new to look at on screen.”

The Films and Recordings

“In many of the packs, you will find the film of our amateur performance, given before a live audience, on a single evening, at some point between 2005 and 2023.

No excuses need to be made for the outstanding musicians; but please listen to the readers indulgently—most of them were press-ganged—and empathise with the cameraman crouching behind the back row. The images and the soundtrack are directing attention beyond themselves to the meaning, rhythms, emotions and poetry of a very unfamiliar classic. They are not the record of a revolutionary *régie*, by an up-and-coming Director, of a play like *Hamlet*!”

“Each of these performance-packs is a gold mine, being based on long experience and the best scholarship. The quality of the later films is so high that anyone might watch them on television in the same spirit as they would watch a classic noir thriller. The great names are shown to deserve their classic status. All the readers are totally committed and demonstrate what might be achieved in a professional, small-screen production, while some of the acting with voice, face and gesture is so expressive that it would be hard to surpass in any medium.”

www.boydesclassicrodramas.org



The arch of Titus, as seen in the late eighteenth century



Who's Who?

LÉOPOLDINE APRA grew up in France. She studied Drama at the University of Manchester, before doing her Master's at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in directing and dramaturgy.

CÉLESTINE BARRAQUAND is a French Master's student in English Studies at ENS de Lyon. She is the French Lectrice at King's College for a year.

LORENZO BASTIDA is a poet, translator, and teacher of Italian Language and Literature for Foreigners in Florence. Friend and pupil of the actor Vittorio Sermonti, he devotes himself to the vocal performance of Dante and other classics of European poetry.

PATRICK BOYDE is Emeritus Professor of Italian. He has been adapting and directing dramas in English, French, German, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Polish since 2004.

JOHN BRYDEN is a well-known concert pianist, accompanist and teacher. He spent his first Cambridge nights in a room in St John's, next to the Bridge of Sighs; followed by three years at Emmanuel. A Chopin devotee!

ARTUR DUSSART is a French Master's student in English Studies at ENS de Lyon. He is the French Lecteur at Girton College for a year.

MICHAEL HORTON studied Italian and French at St John's in the 1970s and went on to become a teacher, and, after studying Theology at Oxford, an Anglican Priest.

GILLIAN JONDORF, former Senior Lecturer in Renaissance French and Fellow of Girton, has been composing surtitles for semi-staged productions in Greek, Latin, French, Hebrew, Italian and Polish every year since 2004.

REUBEN THOMAS has appeared in many previous productions as an angel, Samson, Comus, and the Protagonist of *Maud*. A chorister and Choral Student at St John's, where he took a BA and PhD in Computer Science, he works and plays as a baritone, programmer, editor, translator, and librettist. He created the website described on pages 10 and 11 of this programme.

James WILLETTS used to be Principal Teacher of Classics at Ardrossan Academy and is now a documentary film maker. He will be filming the performance.

Liz WILLETTS is a writer, having taken her PhD in English Literature. She assists with the photography and filming – and everything.