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Mithridate, Displacement, and the Sea

NINA EKSTEIN

When *Mithridate* opens, the king is rumored dead in Colchide, killed by the Romans in battle. His return by sea at the end of the first act is not merely a surprise, but also a temporal, geographical, and almost metaphysical displacement. Mithridate's homecoming turns everything upside down and brings the full force of incest to the amorous rivalry between Phamace and Xipharès. Having successfully spread rumors of his own demise, Mithridate seems to return from the dead, arriving after an absence of a year, from a relatively distant land by the waters of the Pont-Euxin (the Black Sea). Life and death as well as land and sea suddenly seem open to transformation. In a play riddled with oppositions and dualities, these two specific polarities define both the force and the tragedy of Mithridate the king¹. Suspended between two deaths – the death rumored when the curtain rises and the death we witness onstage as the curtain falls² – Mithridate grasps at life with force and energy. Despite his advanced age and his military defeat, he returns full of desires, both sexual and military. In some measure, Mithridate's tragedy is that he is unable to fulfill these desires. He has lived too long, as Donna Kuizenga has remarked³, and finds himself displaced sexually by his sons and militarily by the Romans.

The setting of *Mithridate* differs from that of Racine's earlier plays: no longer an enclosed space, the location is defined simply as "à Nymphée". There is thus an openness of space here that is not found elsewhere. "Now,

¹ Among the critics who speak of *Mithridate* in terms of dualities are Madeleine Defrenne, "Formes scéniques et création des personnages dans le *Mithridate* de Racine", in *Racine: théâtre et poésie*, ed. Christine M. Hill (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1991), p. 108; Richard E. Goodkin, "The Death(s) of Mithridate(s): Racine and the Double Play of History", *PMLA* 101 (1986): p. 203; John C. Lapp, *Aspects of Racinean Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955), p. 73; Michael O'Regan, *The Mannerist Aesthetic: A Study of Racine's Mithridate* (Bristol: University of Bristol Press, 1980), pp. 20 and 63; Jacques Vier, "Le *Mithridate* de Racine", *Littérature à l'emporte-pièce* (Paris: Editions du Cèdre, 1958), p. 32.

² According to Roland Barthes, "La tragédie de *Mithridate* se joue entre deux morts, la mort feinte et la mort réelle d'un même homme" (*Sur Racine* [Paris: Seuil, 1968], p. 99).

³ "Ironically, he does not die, so to speak, on time. To have been killed in combat, believing in the illusory allegiance of Monime, would have been Mithridate's personal *belle mort*" (*Mithridate: A Reconsideration*, *French Review* 52 [1978], p. 284).

for the first time", says John Lapp, "the palace as setting yields in importance to a wider area, the sea and shore, where important actions occur."⁴ David Maskell mentions that in the Hôtel de Bourgogne production of *Andromaque* the sea and ships appeared in the background. But in that earlier play, while maritime references are numerous, no event occurs on the water until after the curtain falls. The ships wait at port throughout the tragedy, as Maskell points out, reinforcing the painted immobility of the decor and underlining the impossibility of departure⁵. In *Mithridate* the offstage sea and ships are the site of significant events during the play, and furthermore they are directly linked to Mithridate, his character, his military might, and his dreams. Jesse Dickson calls Mithridate a "roi marin", simply noting the large number of maritime images⁶. I would like to pursue this line of thought, focusing on Mithridate's complex relationship to bodies of water.

The most obvious feature of water in terms of the king is its potential for allowing swift physical displacement, whether in flight or in attack. Mithridate's return to Nymphée by sea is a bit of both. Defeated by the Romans, he flees, but nonetheless crosses the sea for the purpose of claiming his betrothed, Monime. Mithridate presents his escape from the Romans in terms of water: "Quelque temps inconnu, j'ai traversé le Phase" (II, 3, 451)⁷. The Phase is a river which flows into the Black Sea where the king met up with boats that were waiting to bring him back to Nymphée. The choice of the verb "traverser" is significant, suggesting a crossing of the river Styx in reverse⁸. It is by water that Mithridate cheats death and returns to the land of the living. Mithridate's return brings with it upheaval and chaos, immediately altering the situations of Pharnace, Xipharès, and

⁴ Lapp, p. 72. He sees the division of space as another example of duality in the play. The action oscillates between the palace, where the love intrigue is enacted mimetically, and the seaport area which is associated with military action and which is never seen onstage (p. 73).

⁵ Racine, *A Theatrical Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 21.

⁶ "Le *Mithridate* de Racine", diss., U of Pennsylvania, 1973, pp. 104-105. Little has been said elsewhere about Mithridate and the sea. Jean Emelina notes that "Tout un vocabulaire guerrier et maritime imprègne la pièce" ("L'espace dans les tragédies romaines de Racine", *Littératures classiques* 26 [1996], p. 135). Alia Bornaz Baccar makes no mention of this play in her book, *La Mer, source de création littéraire en France au XVII^e siècle (1640-1671)*. While the dates of her study exclude *Mithridate*, she does mention the important role the sea plays in Racine's later tragedies, *Iphigénie* and *Phèdre* (Paris-Seattle-Tübingen: PFSCL, 1991 [Biblio 17, vol 62], p. 273).

⁷ Jean Racine, *Théâtre complet*, eds. Jacques Morel et Alain Viaia (Paris: Garnier, 1980). All references are to this edition.

⁸ All the more so because *traverser* is not called for logically. Mithridate did not need to cross the river so much as travel upon it in order to reach the Black Sea.

Monime. The terms in which his arrival is presented suggest that the upheaval extends to the sea itself. "Princes, toute la mer est de vaisseaux couverte" (I, 4, 328), announces Phoedime. The image is one of the sea unnaturally transformed from water to an unstable carpet of ships in a strange commingling of land and sea. In his defeat, Mithridate has lost land; in Nymphée he finds two sons with designs upon land which he has not yet lost. In contrast the sea is the site of Mithridate's dominance, and his "vaisseaux", which cover the water of the port as he arrives, are both signs of his power and the means by which Mithridate turns the water into an avenue for displacement, stealth, and attack. "Heureux vaisseaux" (I, 1, 77), Xipharès calls them. The multiplicity of the ships, made manifest by their transformation of the water's surface, is reinforced by the frequency of the term "vaisseaux" in the play: it appears thirteen times, ten of which refer to Mithridate's ships⁹.

Mithridate and those around him repeatedly associate the king with water. Even physically, Mithridate is first presented at sea: Arbate is ferried out to meet him "loin du bord" (I, 4, 334). Xipharès describes the breadth of his father's domain in terms of shores, "des rives de Pont aux rives du Bosphore" (I, 1, 76), as though this were a universe made up less of different lands than of the watery borders between them. Mithridate expresses his situation metaphorically in the language of seafaring: "Tout vaincu que je suis et voisin du naufrage" (II, 2, 431). To be a king involves ruling over land, and yet the water seems to offer Mithridate consolation when he imagines total defeat at the hands of the Romans: "Vaincu, persécuté, sans secours, sans Etats, / Errant de mers en mers, et moins roi que pirate" (II, 4, 562-3). Mithridate envisions a kind of glory in defeat wherein other kings "sur le trône assis, m'enviassent peut-être / Au-dessus de leur gloire un naufrage élevé" (II, 4, 568-9). The sea seems to offer Mithridate a possible apotheosis that is closely allied to the king's ability to cheat death. Roland Barthes finds that "le retour du Père, après une mort feinte, participe d'une théophanie; Mithridate revient de la nuit et de la mort."¹⁰ To whatever extent, albeit limited, that Mithridate may be viewed as godlike, it is clearly in the context of the sea.

Water represents a potential danger for Mithridate as well: both the danger of the water itself and the danger of military attack. Xipharès describes the favorable outcome of his own battle to take back the region his mother had given over to the Romans: "Tout reconnu mon père; et ses heureux vaisseaux / N'eurent plus d'ennemis que les vents et les eaux" (I, 1, 75-78).

⁹ This figure is higher than in any other of Racine's plays, even than in *Andromaque* (8 references) and *Iphigénie* (9) where boats play a significant role as well.

¹⁰ Barthes, p. 101.

The two Roman attacks that frame the play both are linked to water. The Romans attacked and defeated Mithridate on the Euphrates River, and they arrive by sea to attack Nymphée at the end of the fourth act. The water may be Mithridate's element but it is also the source of his downfall.

The significance of the maritime associations with Mithridate is strongly underlined by the paucity of ties between water and the other three characters. Monime in particular, as the focal point of the mimetically enacted love plot, is entirely linked to the land: she refuses Phamace's offer to marry him, board his ships and be "Souveraine des mers qui vous doivent porter" (I, 3, 242); she even refuses to go down to the shores to greet Mithridate. Mithridate's betrothal to Monime was itself attached to land: we learn that he awaited Monime "au sein de ses Etats" (I, 3, 257). The case of the two sons is more complex. Like Mithridate, Phamace and Xipharès have both come to Nymphée solely to seek out Monime. Indeed the name "Nymphée" with its obvious similarity to "nymphé", links the themes of the woman and water¹¹. Ostensibly, all three men came by sea, Nymphée being a port on the Black Sea, but no mention is made of the subject except in the case of Mithridate. While Phamace clearly has boats (witness his offer to Monime), he too prefers the land. He seeks to take control of Nymphée, "cette place" (I, 5, 360), and he refuses when Mithridate offers him the opportunity to act as his true son by going off (by water) to marry Le Parthe's daughter: "et repassant l'Euphrate, / Faites voir à l'Asie un autre Mithridate" (III, 1, 859-60). Xipharès is never explicitly associated with water; implicitly, however, there are certain links to the sea in the younger son's desire to enact Mithridate's projects or even when he expresses regret at not having been able to help his father fight the Romans at the Euphrates. Essentially, Phamace and Xipharès seem to have had more success or more interest in displacing their father with Monime than in displacing him on the seas. When we focus on the maritime imagery of the play, Monime, Xipharès, and Phamace, along with most considerations of love and jealousy, fade almost completely into the background.

Mithridate's arrival is curiously marked by a contrary movement of departure. Almost as soon as he touches land he makes plans to return to the water, as though he were ill at ease ashore. On six different occasions Mithridate makes reference to his impending departure, his boats, and the preparations he must make¹². The king has returned to Nymphée because

¹¹ In Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel*, the first definition of the terme "nymphé" makes precisely this association: "fausse divinité que les Payens croyoient presider aux eaux, fleuves et aux fontaines."

¹² "D'un voyage important les soins et les apprêts, / Mes vaisseaux qu'à partir il faut tenir tout prêts" (II, 5, 621-2); "Demain, sans différer, je prétends que l'aurore /

of his love for Monime: he wants to finalize their marriage. Phamace made his own offer of marriage in the first act, but tied the ceremony to an immediate departure: "Prêts à vous recevoir, mes vaisseaux vous attendent, / Et du pied de l'autel vous y pouvez monter" (I, 3, 240-1). Mithridate, on the contrary, gives no indication that he plans to take Monime with him when he leaves. In fact, since his project is to launch a sea-borne attack on Rome, it seems unlikely that he would intend to bring his young wife along. The impossibility of any union between Monime and Mithridate is thus underlined by their spatial incompatibility: he is a creature of the sea and she is attached to the land. He does not even make an effort to place her on one of his ships. While Mithridate is in love with Monime and deeply concerned about his sons as potential rivals, he is drawn back to the sea, away from both love and jealousy¹³. It would seem that Mithridate's sexual desires (to marry Monime) and his military ones (to attack Rome) cannot be satisfied simultaneously. There is an oscillating movement of displacement between the two, wherein Mithridate's desire for military supremacy is displaced onto his desire for Monime, and then subsequently back onto his plans for an attack on Rome. That is, the king's desire for Monime coincides tellingly with his military defeat. This desire is then seemingly displaced, at least in practical terms, by plans for immediate military action. Furthermore both desires – the military and the sexual – are appropriate to a younger man. As such, Mithridate's desires can be read as a displacement of his anxiety about facing old age and death.

This anxiety is reiterated in Mithridate's attempt to effect a temporal as well as a spatial displacement. He asks Monime to see him as he once was: "Ne me regardez point vaincu, persécuté: / Revoyez-moi vainqueur, et partout redouté" (IV, 4, 1293-4). He wants her image of him to be situated in the past, elsewhere ("partout"). Both the temporal and the spatial displace-

Découvre mes vaisseaux déjà loin du Bosphore" (III, 1, 855-6); "Sortant de mes vaisseaux, il faut que j'y remonte" (III, 5, 1047); "Tandis que mes soldats... / Rentrent dans mes vaisseaux pour partir avec moi" (IV, 4, 1273-4); Phœdime says of Mithridate: "...hâtant son voyage, / Lui-même ordonne tout, présent sur le rivage. / Ses vaisseaux en tous lieux se chargent de soldats" (IV, 1, 1155-7); also II, 5, 619-20 (see note 13).

¹³ "Phamace, en ce moment, et ma flamme offensée

Ne peuvent pas tout seuls occuper ma pensée.
D'un voyage important les soins et les apprêts
[...]
Dans ce même moment demandent ma présence."

(II, 5, 619-624)

Even taking into account the potential irony of these words – after all, he is speaking to Xipharès – the image of Mithridate drawn back to the sea is striking.

ments that Mithridate seeks have as their goal to displace the death that threatens him throughout the play.

The sea gives a hint of the inevitable failure of Mithridate's military ambitions. His planned attack on Rome involves bodies of water: first the Black Sea and then the Danube. Along the Danube he imagines his army welcomed – "Recueilli dans leurs ports" (III, 1, 801) – by peoples eager to join in his attack. He promises to reach Rome in only three months, a comment which has excited some objection for being unrealistic¹⁴. But the exaggeration is only a sign of Mithridate's vitality and desire in the face of defeat. It is significant that Mithridate does not mention the path he plans to take once he has left the waterways hundreds of miles north of Rome, which is itself inland from the sea. The large expanse of land lying between the Danube and Rome is a sign, similar to Monime's association with land, that Mithridate could not be successful in his attack on Rome¹⁵.

Furthermore, unlike Xipharès, Pharnace, and Monime, Rome is associated with the water, specifically in its role as a military power. The two worthy adversaries both travel by sea, the Romans attacking Mithridate on his land as Mithridate had hoped to attack the Romans on theirs. When Mithridate outlines his plans for assailing Rome, he makes the association between Rome and water explicit, describing the Romans as a torrent that, but for his efforts, "ira tout inonder" (III, 1, 810). It is nonetheless a shock when the Romans attack Nymphée by sea, on the same waters that Mithridate used to escape them and with which he has been repeatedly and heroically linked. The Romans retreat by sea as well, just as Mithridate had done. The association of Rome with water indicates that Mithridate cannot

¹⁴ Charles Mauron notes: "Le prince Eugène ayant critiqué en expert le plan de campagne de Mithridate, avec toute la naïveté d'un oncle Toby, l'abbé Du Bos pontifie: '...La chose est réellement impossible. L'armée navale de Mithridate, en partant des environs d'Asaph et du détroit de Caffa, où Racine établit la scène de sa pièce, avait près de trois cents lieues à faire avant de débarquer sur les rives du Danube. Des vaisseaux qui naviguent en flotte, et qui n'ont d'autres moyens d'avancer que des rames et des voiles ne sauraient se promettre de faire cette route en moins de huit ou dix jours.' Racine, sans craindre d'ôter le merveilleux de l'entreprise de Mithridate, pouvait encore accorder six mois de marche à son armée, qui avait sept cents lieues à faire pour arriver à Rome." Mauron points out that the exaggeration was obviously intentional on Racine's part (*L'Inconscient dans l'œuvre et la vie de Racine* [Paris: Corti, 1969], p. 122, n. 4).

¹⁵ An almost complete waterway path between Nymphée and Rome does exist (through the Bosphorus straits, the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean). I am indebted to my colleague Colin Wells for explaining that in practical terms this path was impossible for Mithridate, because war ships at that time could only journey short distances without stopping. The shores along this path would be far more hospitable to the Romans than to Mithridate; thus he would have had great difficulty getting supplies.

claim primacy on the seas. The King has been displaced on the sea by the Romans who find and attack him on land, a position of vulnerability for this "roi marin".

Earlier, I set out what I consider to be the two overarching polarities of the play: land and sea, and life and death. In both cases, the language of Racine's tragedy calls attention to the margins and boundaries between the two terms of the opposition. Between the land and the water lies the shore. Racine makes reference to this marginal space eleven times, using the terms "rive," "port," "bord," "marais," and "rivage." While only four of these references specifically refer to Mithridate¹⁶, the insistence on this marginal space is emblematic of the ambiguity of the king's own situation in which he returns only to depart once again. Mithridate repeatedly goes down to the shore, both to prepare his own departure, and to dispatch Xipharès' loyal troops by ship. Furthermore, much of the military action of the last act takes place on the shore, as some of Mithridate's men jump overboard rather than go out to sea, while others "avec transport embrassent le rivage" (IV, 6, 1428). Finally, the Romans appear on the shores to attack and later retreat from them to their boats¹⁷.

The marginal space between death and life, on the other hand, is occupied by blood. Mithridate, so clearly suspended before impending death from the opening moments of the play to his final words, has significant ties to blood. During his first appearance onstage, he says to Monime: "Toujours du même amour tu me vois enflammé: / Ce cœur nourri de sang et de guerre affamé" (II, 3, 452-3). His heart – the center of his vitality and of his love – requires the nourishment of blood. Physically, this makes perfect sense. The association of blood and love in the context of the heart seems to be a traditional one, but what are we to make of this tender lover's hunger for war? The image of blood takes on a coloration of violence that jars strongly with any suggestion of love. Mithridate can only stave off death as long as the blood – whether literal blood, love, or military action – reaches his heart. Once blood begins to leak out of his body, as in the descriptions of the king covered in his own blood, death draws near¹⁸. Many of the references to blood in the play are linked to life or death, depending

¹⁶ I, 4, 330; II, 1, 770 and 801; IV, 1, 1156. The remaining references are found in I, 1, 76 (twice); I, 4, 334; II, 1, 376; IV, 5, 1390; IV, 6, 1428; IV, 7, 1449.

¹⁷ "Des Romains le rivage est chargé" (IV, 7, 1449); "Fuyant vers leurs vaisseaux, abandonner la place" (V, 4, 1616).

¹⁸ "Enfin las, et couvert de sang et de poussière" (V, 4, 1595); "Ce héros dans mes bras est tombé tout sanglant" (V, 4, 1605).

on whether the blood is contained or spilled¹⁹. Blood, the specific margin between life and death, also provides the link between the two oppositions under consideration. Both blood and water are associated in this play with military action, water as the conveyance and blood as the outcome. More obvious, of course, is the liquid nature of both water and blood. Mithridate insists upon blood's liquidity when he speaks of his battle plans and again at the end of the play, where he evinces a strong desire to liquify Rome, turning it to blood, and in so doing, to destroy it. He wants to drown the city of Rome in the blood of its citizens and quench the thirst of the Parthian fields with Roman blood²⁰. He is urged on by Xipharès who envisions his father "Tout couvert de son sang" [Roman blood, not Mithridate's] (III, 1, 915), as though wearing on his person the pure sign of the enemy's defeat and death.

The tragedy ends in a liquid dissolve. No longer in the final act do we find numerous references to bodies of water, shores, or ships²¹. Instead there are frequent references to tears and blood. All five of the mentions of liquid grief ("pleurer," "larmes") are found in this act as well as eight of the sixteen references to blood²². Mithridate's power melts away as he dissolves into blood, his own rather than the Romans' (V, 4, 1595, 1605, 1646), while those around him dissolve into tears. Monime explicitly associates the two liquids, exclaiming: "Le sang du père, ô ciel! et les larmes du fils!" (V, 4, 1646). Mithridate understands that the power he once held is gone, and he counsels his son to flee and to forgo vengeance. The Roman attack by the sea, although repelled, marks the end of Mithridate's reign, illusory or real, on water. He is trapped on land and cornered in a position where his only escape is death. As he faces death, the possibilities for displacement disappear.

¹⁹ For example, Mithridate says about Xipharès: "Pourquoi répandre un sang qui m'est si nécessaire?" (IV, 5, 1396); Mithridate tells Monime: "vendez aux Romains le sang de votre père" (III, 5, 1088); Xipharès: "Tout mon sang doit laver une tâche si noire" (III, 1, 943).

²⁰ "Noyons-la dans son sang justement répandu" (III, 1, 837); "Dans leur sang odieux j'ai pu tremper les mains" (V, 5, 1665); "Que leurs champs bienheureux boiront le sang romain" (V, 5, 1673, variant).

²¹ There are just three such mentions in the last act: "rivage" (IV, 7, 1449); "vaisseaux" (V, 4, 1586); "vaisseaux" (V, 4 1616).

²² It is worth noting that poison is not explicitly presented as liquid. Mithridate attempts to poison himself when faced with the prospect of capture by the Romans, but he is unsuccessful because regular consumption of small quantities of poison has effectively inured him from its effects. It is Phèdre, not Mithridate, who insists upon the liquid nature of the poison she takes: "J'ai pris, j'ai fait couler dans mes brûlantes veines / Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes" (*Phèdre*, V, 6, 1637-38).

Mithridate is said to have been Louis XIV's favorite of Racine's plays²³. While we may speculate about the precise parameters of Louis's identification with Mithridate, such as his own painful experience with displacement during the Fronde, or even concerns relating to the balance of desire and political priorities, the mythic grandeur of this absolute monarch is perhaps central. For Mithridate, the water is the site of his mythic grandeur. And this grandeur, tragic in defeat, tragic in facing death, is all that is left to Mithridate as the play draws to a close. Displaced by his sons with Monime, displaced by the Romans on the sea, Mithridate has lost land, lost sea, lost blood, and finally lost his life. But his grandeur is not lost.



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²³ O'Regan, p. 7.