

Trinity University

## Digital Commons @ Trinity

---

Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty  
Research

Modern Languages and Literatures Department

---

5-1993

### The Destabilization of the Future in Racine's *Iphigénie*

Nina Ekstein

Trinity University, nekstein@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/mll\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/mll_faculty)



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

#### Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. (1993). The destabilization of the future in Racine's *Iphigénie*. *French Review*, 66(6), 919-931.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

## The Destabilization of the Future in Racine's *Iphigénie*

by Nina Ekstein

THE ACTION of Racine's *Iphigénie* is only a prelude, a pretext, to a much greater future event. The Trojan War looms large before the entire dramatic universe, drawing the characters inexorably forward.<sup>1</sup> The force of the future in this play has long been evident: Georges Poulet discussed it in relation to the weight of the past in *Andromaque*: "[o]uvrant ou fermant un récit, le moment de l'action perd donc presque entièrement sa valeur propre, sa qualité de seul moment 'présent.' . . . Sa 'réalité' n'est pas assez riche en soi pour triompher d'un passé ou d'un futur. Le moment racinien se trouve ainsi devenir l'esclave d'une durée antérieure ou postérieure" (153-54). That the past may influence the present is an easily acceptable notion. That the future may have the same effect on the present, however, is considerably less obvious, and leads to questions of *vraisemblance* and the conditions of knowledge, eventually opening the door to the supernatural. *Iphigénie* (1674) and *Andromaque* (1667) may represent the beginning and end points of the same story, but the basic differences between the future and the past have ramifications that result in the creation of two fundamentally different dramatic worlds.

*Iphigénie* is not the only of Racine's plays to give a role to the postdramatic future.<sup>2</sup> To give only a few examples, in *Britannicus*, Agrippine foresees her own death as well as Néron's (V, vi); Bérénice and Titus envision their future separated from one another in *Bérénice* (IV, v); and in *Athalie* Joad foresees his own son's death at Joas's order (III, vii). The future can be seen to play a significant role in almost all of Racine's tragedies, but nowhere is that role as extensive and complex as in *Iphigénie*.

The treatment of the future in this play differs from that found in Racine's other tragedies in both degree and kind. The weight attached to the future is significantly greater here than elsewhere. It is not a single specific event that is situated in the future, but a whole complex series of events. Concomitantly, the role of the past is minor relative to Racine's other tragedies. Normally, the past overwhelms the present; here much of that force has been transferred to the future. There exists a difference in kind because in the case of *Iphigénie* the characters *and* the spectators share a general (and often even specific) foreknowledge of what is to come.<sup>3</sup> These two differences, degree and kind, operate in tandem: except for Eriphile, who dies during the course of the play, the specific futures of all

the other principal characters are known to the spectator and several are the subject of one or more oracles. The normal imbalance of knowledge concerning past and future, characteristic of the world as we know it, is thus altered.

The situation of the characters vis-à-vis the future is imbued with tragic irony. While virtually everyone in the play is privy to some form of authoritative foreknowledge (generally through oracles), that foreknowledge is not always complete or entirely clear. Characters receive very specific indications concerning the future, and yet significant doubts remain. Will Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter? Will Achille save Iphigénie? The resulting uncertainty is reminiscent of the traditional condition of the spectator who watches a tragedy with whose story line s/he is familiar: split, that is, simultaneously knowing and not knowing the outcome (Barthes 76). For both *Iphigénie's* spectators and characters, the future has a peculiarly double status: everyone both knows and does not know what will happen. The future is thus revealed and hidden in *Iphigénie*. Racine further complicates this basic paradox in two ways. First, within the dramatic universe, Achille acts in a manner totally inconsistent with his own foreknowledge. Second, what the spectator "knows" to be the denouement of the play in fact does not occur. Through these contradictions, the relationship of first the characters and then the spectator to the future is destabilized.

Before pursuing this line of discussion any further, I would like to pause to discuss briefly the more general question of the presence of the future in theater. The future, except as it unfolds, cannot be represented onstage.<sup>4</sup> It thus appears to be essentially alien to the theater. In Ubersfeld's words, "le problème fondamental du temps au théâtre est qu'il se situe par rapport à un *ici-maintenant*. . . . Le théâtre est ce qui par nature nie la présence du passé et du futur. L'écriture théâtrale est une *écriture au présent*" (198). References to the future are in some ways similar to onstage references to the past: while alien to the representation on stage, both expand the temporal and spatial limitations of the stage. The past and the future differ profoundly, however: the past has a referent and carries the weight of truth and reality. The future, by contrast, is a far more speculative realm, open to the projections of the speaker. Because it lacks both referent and the possibility of representation, it might seem that the future is not often referred to in the theater, but such is not the case, at least in the theater of seventeenth-century France. In Racine's tragedies, references to the future employing future verbs occur in an average of 7% of the lines.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, *Iphigénie* is an extreme case, tying *Britannicus* for the highest frequency of references employing a future tense (8.5%). While I have examined the question in detail only in Racine's theater, references to the future are frequent in both tragedy and comedy in the seventeenth century, and appear to be commonplace in theater in general. Despite the impossibility of representation, reference to the future is well-suited for some distinctly dramatic activities, such as dialogue: the future provides a

perfect domain for the clash of wills. It is also a privileged vehicle for the discussion of suicide, particularly the speaker's. Speculation about the future allows a slowing of a play's tempo. Plans and even hopes expressed through the future tense are often linked to the subsequent action of the play, either prefiguring or misleading. In fact, reference to the future is firmly allied with the notion of suspense, a common dramatic component involving anticipation. The dramatic possibilities for references to the future, then, are numerous, and highly varied.<sup>6</sup> The apparent paradox of a non-representable time frame in the theater is thus easily resolved.

Other paradoxes are less yielding. The future tense, quite apart from its role in theater, presents certain dualities or ambiguities that have implications for our reading of the future in *Iphigénie*. First, while the future is indeed a tense (expressing time) in the French language, it is a mode (indicating the speaker's mood) in others, and we find a tension embedded within the French use of the future between the modal and the indicative. Bernard Comrie sees the difference between past and present as one of tense, but between future and present as one of mood (44). We see this linguistic uncertainty reflected in the absence of modal future forms in French, such as for the subjunctive, as well as in the use of the present tense of a modal to refer to some future moment or event.

The future occupies a curious position in the linguistic system, wavering between certainty and uncertainty. When contrasted with the conditional mood, the future tense expresses certainty. While the domains of the future and the conditional often overlap, in this particular respect they are in opposition to each other. Conversely, when the future is placed in opposition to the past (with which, however, it shares no common ground), the future is given the role of representing uncertainty, while the past presents certainty. Jacques Scherer notes that "l'avenir . . . est fait d'une matière moins lourde que le passé, puisqu'on peut toujours douter de la réalisation des événements futurs" (218). It is this indeterminate position of the future with respect to certainty that Racine explores in *Iphigénie*, multiplying references to the future, endowing them with an authority not known in our own world, and yet simultaneously fostering doubt and instability. The most obvious vehicle that Racine employs is the oracle.

Oracles are invariably difficult if not impossible to interpret correctly. A sub-class of prophecies, oracles share their authority and truth value, but while a prophecy is direct and straightforward, the oracle lacks clarity. The oracle is a form of ironic language, open to multiple and often contradictory interpretations. Some characters are aware of the difficulties that oracles pose, as Clytemnestre indicates: "Un oracle dit-il tout ce qu'il semble dire?" (IV, iv, 1262). Furthermore, in a curious reduplication of its own authority vis-à-vis the future, the oracle seems to assure, by virtue of its status as oracle, that its recipient will not settle upon the correct interpretation. The oracle therefore is normally accompanied by tragic irony.

While oracular discourse may exist to confound, its power and authority

are nonetheless considerable. An oracle is the voice of the gods, a divine communication, the weight of which cannot be escaped. Calchas, a transmitter of oracles, is almost universally viewed with fear and awe, even by Agamemnon. Doris says of him: "Le ciel souvent lui parle: instruit par un tel maître, / Il sait tout ce qui fut et tout ce qui doit être" (II, i, 457-48).

There are three characters in the play whose future is addressed by oracles: Iphigénie, Achille, and Eriphile. In each case the discourse pertaining to their future is referred to as an oracle, so that there may be no doubt concerning either the force or the obscurity of the statements.<sup>7</sup> In the first two cases, the oracles offer alternatives—not so much of interpretation, but rather real choices; in Eriphile's case, an alternative seems implicit in that there are two pronouncements which appear to be contradictory.

The oracle concerning Iphigénie is the source of the action of the entire play:

Vous armez contre Troie une puissance vaine,  
Si, dans un sacrifice auguste et solennel,  
          Une fille du sang d'Hélène,  
De Diane en ces lieux n'ensanglante l'autel.  
Pour obtenir les vents que le ciel vous dénie,  
          Sacrifiez Iphigénie.

(I, i, 57-62)

It is Calchas who speaks this oracle, although not on stage. That the divine proclamation filtered through him is again filtered through the voice of Agamemnon only serves to increase the oracle's power and authority.

The presence of choices within an oracle (to sacrifice Iphigénie or to be left without the winds needed to sail) is unexpected. The word of the gods, however obscure, carries with it the force of predetermination. Mortal choice is basically incompatible with oracular discourse. But it is not entirely out of place in *Iphigénie*, particularly insofar as the idea of choice carries with it strong dramatic overtones. Tragedy, after all, entails the balance of fatality and free will. Racine presents an oracle that reproduces that very balance: predestination but with a choice of two options.

Agamemnon wrestles with his dilemma through much of the play, but he alters the terms of the oracle. Rather than focusing on the choice between sacrificing Iphigénie or giving up the effort to go to war against Troy (which includes giving up his own elevated position), Agamemnon deliberates between the sacrifice of his daughter and resisting the gods through subterfuge. He changes his mind on several occasions, wavering between revolt and compliance. Agamemnon thus simultaneously denies predetermination and refuses to take responsibility for exercising his own free will.

The oracle concerning Achille is articulated twice in the same scene. Here the source of the oracular discourse is even more authoritative: "le ciel," "les Dieux," "les Parques." And while Agamemnon entertains illusions of suppressing public knowledge of the oracle concerning his daughter, Achille's

fate is widely known. Arcas is well aware of it,<sup>8</sup> as is Agamemnon, who uses the oracle in discussion with Achille:

Vous-même consultez ce qu'il prédit de vous.  
 Que sert de se flatter? On sait qu'à votre tête  
 Les dieux ont d'Ilion attaché la conquête;  
 Mais on sait que, pour prix d'un triomphe si beau,  
 Ils ont aux champs troyens marqué votre tombeau,  
 Que votre vie, ailleurs et longue et fortunée,  
 Devant Troie en sa fleur doit être moissonnée.  
 (I, ii, 220–26)

Twenty lines later, in the same scene, Achille covers the same ground from another angle.<sup>9</sup> Both versions point to two alternative futures: either Achille will die a glorious death at Troy or live a long, unmemorable life. There is no doubt expressed concerning the authority of the oracle; the repetition of "on sait que" (221, 223) indicates widespread acceptance. With respect to the oracle concerning Iphigénie, Agamemnon assumed that the implicit choice it contained was his to make; in fact the power is wrested from his hands by Calchas and the army. Here Achille explicitly affirms that the choice is his ("Je puis choisir" [I, ii, 249]), and it is clear that he intends to accept an early death and go off to Troy.<sup>10</sup>

In both cases the alternatives are undesirable: Achille does not want to die young, but neither does he want to live without glory; Agamemnon wants to sacrifice neither his daughter nor his own position. But the issue is finally a false one: while neither option is desirable, in each case one of the options is impossible. The egos of both men make the sacrifice of their own glory unthinkable. Both men prefer death, their own or someone else's. Agamemnon does not consider for long the possibility of giving up his position, and there is no question but that Achille will go off to fight in Troy.

Achille makes another choice as well: he chooses to marry Iphigénie. This poses a serious problem, precisely at the point where the two oracles intersect. The love between Iphigénie and Achille is countermanded by two virtual death sentences, decreed by the gods, and confirmed by the choices of the two men in question. What is so curious is that Achille refuses to acknowledge the contradiction. His determination is unshakable. But why marry Iphigénie if she is to be sacrificed? Why marry her if he is to die in battle before their marriage can be consummated? The consummation seems to have been displaced onto the Trojan battlefield, as Achille informs his prospective mother-in-law that he cannot but cherish the opportunity "D'aller du sang troyen sceller [leur] union" (III, iii, 848). Agamemnon had cruelly lured Iphigénie to Aulis with the promise of a wedding with Achille; ironically, Achille tricks himself with the same promise. In both cases, this marriage is but a clumsy mask behind which is hidden death.<sup>11</sup>

The contradiction implicit in Achille's conduct—choosing a glorious death *and* choosing to marry Iphigénie—marks him as an ironic figure,

fated to die, but at least as occupied by plans for marriage as by the impending war.<sup>12</sup> Within this contradiction there can be glimpsed the contrary pulls of Eros and Thanatos, the basic contradiction of the human condition: all humankind is fated to die, yet absorbed by life and by plans for living that seemingly deny the inevitable reality of death. In this sense the future is as universally known as the past: it is invariably death.

The third object of an oracle is Eriphile, a character that Racine constructed on the most flimsy of bases.<sup>13</sup> Only (and all of) the young protagonists are the subjects of oracles.<sup>14</sup> Eriphile says:

Un oracle effrayant m'attache à mon erreur,  
Et, quand je veux chercher le sang qui m'a fait naître,  
Me dit que sans périr je ne me puis connaître.  
(II, i, 428-30)

Here, the message seems quite straightforward. But Doris argues that even such a simple statement, because it is an oracle, is ambiguous.<sup>15</sup> While there are no alternatives articulated, in fact Eriphile seems to have some choice in her fate: she may choose not to seek her own identity. Her freedom, like Agamemnon's and Achilles's, however, is more illusory than real. Her presence in Aulide, the necessary site of her death, is not accidental: "Une secrète voix m'ordonna de partir" (II, i, 516), she informs Doris, luring her to Aulide with hopes of spoiling Achilles's and Iphigénie's happiness.

A second voice speaks about Eriphile's future, serving to complicate her situation:

Hélas! dans cette Troie où j'étais attendue,  
Ma gloire, disait-il, m'allait être rendue;  
J'allais, en reprenant et mon nom et mon rang,  
Des plus grands rois en moi reconnaître le sang.  
(II, i, 441-44)

The "il" referred to in the second line above, the source of this seemingly oracular discourse, is Doris's father. While a mere mortal, the authority of his foreknowledge is nonetheless vouched for in several ways. First, it was he who transmitted the actual oracle to Eriphile, and he who carefully guarded the limits of what Eriphile might know ("Et ton père . . . / Ne me permit jamais de pénétrer plus loin" [II, i, 439-40]). Second, he is dead, which retrospectively magnifies his words. Finally, dead or alive, he spoke from the position of authority of the Father.

The juxtaposition of the two statements concerning Eriphile's future is not a comfortable one; interestingly, it was Doris's father who placed the two together while refusing to explain the apparent contradiction. The problem is resolved in the denouement of the play, where we discover that Eriphile's death and her glory, both linked to her discovery of her own identity, are one and the same. Death and glory are as intimately linked for Eriphile as they are in Achilles's destiny. Achilles and Eriphile are both ironic

figures. In Eriphile's case, however, we find tragic irony. Her zeal to doom her rival—by betraying Iphigénie's whereabouts to Calchas and by being present at the altar to witness Iphigénie's sacrifice—becomes the path to her own death. Eriphile serves as a double for Achille, destined for death, yet preoccupied by love and desire. The three sets of oracles create the framework for the play: Iphigénie's forms the focus of the play's action, Eriphile's its denouement, and Achille's the postdramatic resolution.

Oracles are not the only source of discourse about the future in *Iphigénie*. For a dramatic universe structured by multiple oracles, it is perhaps surprising to note how often characters present their own vision and version of the future. Several of the characters contest the gods' oracle concerning Iphigénie, some claim the power to determine what the future will be, and others simply recount their own visions of the future. These individual incursions serve to destabilize further the domain of the future.

Ulysse is mildest in his approach: he presents a seductive image of the future at Troy for Agamemnon, implicitly making a case for its substantiality with the use of the verb "voir":

Voyez tout l'Hellespont blanchissant sous nos rames,  
Et la perfide Troie abandonnée aux flammes,  
Ses peuples dans vos fers, Priam à vos genoux,  
Hélène par vos mains rendue à son époux.  
Voyez de vos vaisseaux les poupes couronnées  
Dans cette même Aulide avec vous retourneés,  
Et ce triomphe heureux qui s'en va devenir  
L'éternel entretien des siècles à venir.

(I, v, 381-88)

Ulysse's presentation is organized so as to appeal to Agamemnon in the most dramatic fashion possible. Ulysse engages Agamemnon with repeated references to him ("vos," "vous"), while effacing himself entirely.

Achille is far more direct. He is less concerned with painting the future, and more interested in expressing his opposition to the gods and his determination to exert his own will over events:

Votre fille vivra, je puis vous le prédire:  
Croyez du moins, croyez que, tant que je respire,  
Les dieux auront en vain ordonné son trépas.  
Cet oracle est plus sûr que celui de Calchas.

(III, vii, 1077-80)

Ulysse sought to convince his auditor to do his bidding through careful verbal seduction; in Achille's words, there is the barely veiled threat of violence.

Upon learning of the oracle concerning Iphigénie, Agamemnon, like Achille, sets himself up against the gods. He immediately "[fit] vœu sur leurs autels de leur désobéir" (I, i, 68). Both Achille and Agamemnon directly challenge the authority and power of the gods. It is hardly surprising, then, that they oppose each other with great force as well. They are not

alone; the triad of subjects of oracles is balanced by a triad of human wills: Agamemnon, Achille, and finally Clytemnestre. She too directly opposes the will of the gods as well as her husband's:

Non, je ne l'aurai point amenée au supplice,  
 Ou vous ferez aux Grecs un double sacrifice.  
 Ni crainte ni respect ne m'en peut détacher;  
 De mes bras tout sanglants il faudra l'arracher.  
 (IV, iv, 1305-08)

It is the young who are the subject of oracles and the old(er) who act as rival gods themselves, dictating Iphigénie's destiny and threatening, implicitly or explicitly, any who oppose their will. Achille, curiously, belongs to both groups. His double presence serves to underline his tragic status: possessor of a ferocious will, he is nonetheless a mere victim of the gods.

Counterbalancing the clash of wills concerning the future—the will of the gods, the wills of Agamemnon, Achille, and Clytemnestre—are the personal visions of the future that virtually all of the characters present at some point in the play. These visions often have an oneiric or hallucinatory quality to them. Agamemnon imagines what will happen if Iphigénie arrives:

Si ma fille une fois met le pied dans l'Aulide,  
 Elle est morte: Calchas, qui l'attend en ces lieux,  
 Fera taire nos pleurs, fera parler les dieux;  
 Et la religion, contre nous irritée,  
 Par les timides Grecs sera seule écoutée.  
 (I, i, 134-38)

Clytemnestre too envisions her daughter's sacrifice, but her imagery is far more graphic. She precedes her "non" above with a series of questions that conjure up the horrific sacrifice:

Un prêtre, environné d'une foule cruelle,  
 Portera sur ma fille une main criminelle,  
 Déchirera son sein, et d'un œil curieux,  
 Dans son cœur palpitant consulera les dieux?  
 (IV, iv, 1297-1300)

Achille employs even more violent images to describe, not Iphigénie's sacrifice, but how he will rescue her:

Jamais de plus de sang ses autels n'ont fumé:  
 A mon aveugle amour tout sera légitime;  
 Le prêtre deviendra la première victime,  
 Le bûcher, par mes mains détruit et renversé,  
 Dans le sang des bourreaux nagera dispersé,  
 Et si dans les horreurs de ce désordre extrême,  
 Votre père frappé tombe et périt lui-même. . . .  
 (V, ii, 1600-06)

These three characters—Agamemnon, Clytemnestre, and Achille—all oppose the will of the gods, and in these passages they assume the divine attribute of “seeing” into the future. There is a revealing hierarchy in the three passages above. Achille alone offers a vision that develops out of his own will to power. He inspires himself to action through his vision, giving himself the leading role. Agamemnon, on the contrary, expresses only his fear and casts himself in a passive role. Clytemnestre, like her husband, begins with images of her fears, but she progresses beyond passive paralysis, saying “non” to the horror of her vision, and substituting another vision in which she is an active participant, defending her daughter unto death. These visions of the future are realized insofar as they pertain to the speakers’ own roles in Iphigénie’s fate. As Iphigénie approaches the altar, Achille stands ready to attack, Clytemnestre is held back only by the army which blocks her path, and Agamemnon “s’est voilé le visage” (V, v, 1706), ready to let the unbearable occur with no intervention on his part.

The two sacrificial victims have visions of the future as well. Eriphile’s vision is based on passivity and fear, much like Agamemnon’s, with the added weight of masochism.<sup>16</sup> Iphigénie sees herself as passive as well, and offers no resistance to her plight (“Quand vous commanderez, vous serez obéi” [IV, iv, 1172]). In her vision, she situates herself beyond death, reduced to a memory, a source of Achille’s glory:

J’espère que du moins un heureux avenir  
 A vos faits immortels joindra mon souvenir,  
 Et qu’un jour mon trépas, source de votre gloire,  
 Ouvrira le récit d’une si belle histoire.  
 (V, ii, 1555–58)

In this passage Iphigénie rejects the role of Achille’s wife, to take on that of “mother” of his legend, in the non-human domain of “histoire.”

It should be clear from this lengthy discussion that the future is destabilized, manipulated, distorted and distended by all, from the lofty oracles to the helpless victims. It is a domain in which the conflicts of vision, will, and pronouncement operate to establish the dramatic tensions of the entire play. Up until this point, I have focused primarily on the inner workings of the tragedy. The perspective of the spectator offers a considerably different point of view. With a shift in perspective from within the dramatic universe to outside of it comes a radical increase in knowledge: the spectator generally knows far more than the characters. We move from the domain of tragic irony to that of dramatic irony: from the blindness of the characters rushing toward their tragic fate to the superior vision of the spectators. As noted earlier, the spectators of *Iphigénie* are, as a rule, well aware of the specific events that follow: the Trojan War, and the fates of Achille, Agamemnon, and Clytemnestre. While the spectators’ foreknowledge does not dispel all suspense, it does place us in the position of the gods, able to see accurately into the future. Racine is at pains to keep us conscious of our

own foreknowledge. Dramatic irony abounds. We know that Achille's destiny means his own death, and thus we view his plans for marriage as futile. We know that Clytemnestre will betray and murder Agamemnon, so that the tensions between them on stage are intensified by our foreknowledge.<sup>17</sup> Racine even goes so far as to twice mention Oreste. On the first occasion, Arcas inquires whether Agamemnon's tears are caused by some concern for his son's health: "Votre Oreste au berceau va-t-il finir sa vie?" (I, i, 37). Framing the play, the second reference comes as Iphigénie bids her mother farewell: "Vos yeux me reverront dans Oreste mon frère. / Puisse-t-il être, hélas! moins funeste à sa mère!" (V, iii, 1657-59). The heavy-handed nature of this reference in particular makes it clear that Racine is placing the spectator in a position of confidence concerning his/her knowledge of what is to occur. That confidence is justified: it is based on that most dependable source of knowledge: hindsight. The spectator knows of these events from myth and legend.

What a surprise then, when Racine presents the spectator with a version of the denouement quite different from the expected: Iphigénie is saved and Eriphile sacrificed in her place. In Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy, Iphigénie is sacrificed at the altar. Her death is not the subject of any of the three plays, but rather recounted in *Agamemnon*. It is one in a series of interconnected violent acts, and directly motivates Agamemnon's assassination which in turn leads to Clytemnestre's death at the hand of her son. Racine himself points out that Sophocles (*Electra*), Lucrece (*De natura rerum*), and Horace (*Satires*) make reference to Iphigénie's death (509). The only extant Greek play whose central subject is Iphigénie is Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis*.<sup>18</sup> In it, Artemis saves Iphigénie at the last minute, substituting a goat for the young woman on the altar. While Iphigénie is not killed, she has permanently disappeared: Artemis carries her off to Tauris where she becomes a sacrificial priestess. While there are significant differences in terms of violence and bloodshed, Aeschylus's and Euripides's versions share a significant feature: Iphigénie is no longer available for relationships with either her parents or Achille.

Racine provides some sources for his version of events, but, as Knight has demonstrated, they are problematic. More importantly, no historical antecedent can account for the fact that the author, through numerous ironic winks to the spectator, has established the expectation that Iphigénie will indeed be sacrificed. The surprise ending calls into question the whole issue of the future. We have seen, in considerable detail, how important the future is to this dramatic universe, and how Racine structured and layered the levels of knowledge and of pretension to knowledge. The future domain has become quite complex before the denouement: the gods know what is to be; some characters think they know as well; others are determined to impose their vision of the future upon reality; and the spectators believe that their foreknowledge rivals that of the gods. By having Eriphile die in Iphigénie's place, Racine overturns his careful constructions and

creates a second level of irony. When the spectator, abetted by hindsight, cannot foretell the future with any certainty, there are serious consequences: if Iphigénie does not die, then the motivation for Clytemnestre's betrayal of her husband has been removed. The play has been wrested free from the constraints of history. If Racine can change Iphigénie's death or disappearance, why not let Achille return triumphant to married bliss with her? Why not create a new universe in which Agamemnon lives and Oreste does not kill his mother? By choosing to allow Iphigénie to live, Racine has destabilized the status of the future in his dramatic universe. What may happen next is an open question, rather than a predetermined certainty.

Might this not be a play written against the preordained future, whether the source of the predestination is the gods or the legends of our past? Racine signals a sharp refusal—on the two levels of the play and the spectators—to take into account what has been preordained in favor of a radical free will that admits no fatality. The balance of fatality and free will characteristic of and necessary to tragedy has been upset by Racine's use of a destabilized future. This perspective may help to explain why critics have often shown reluctance to call this play a tragedy. The future, omnipresent in this dramatic universe, has in fact been shattered.

TRINITY UNIVERSITY (TX)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"Tous les personnages y sont comme aspirés vers l'avant, irrésistiblement entraînés vers Troie, vers le futur et vers la gloire" (Defaux 165). Anne Ubersfeld speaks of how "une guerre *future* . . . est inscrite comme fatalité; . . . Achille est virtuellement *déjà mort* devant Troie" (191); Judd Hubert remarks Achille's subjugation to his own future: "Achille, qui veut à tout prix jouer un rôle parfaitement héroïque, se sent, pour le moment, dépassé et surpassé par l'être héroïque et légendaire qu'il deviendra plus tard" (185).

<sup>2</sup>John C. Lapp describes Racine's technique as "the bursting of the play's terminal point so that the action embraces the post-dramatic future" (58).

<sup>3</sup>It is clearly necessary, for the purposes of this discussion, that the construct "character" be viewed as a center of consciousness.

<sup>4</sup>The future may be discussed on stage, but it cannot be represented, particularly in a theater such as Racine's which concerns itself with *vraisemblance*.

<sup>5</sup>Reference to the future can be made not only through verbs (the future tense and the "go-future" construction: *aller* + infinitive), but also through the imperative tense, which links present and future, and through other references, such as substantives (e.g., *demain*), as well as non-factive modalities (e.g., obligative). For a complete discussion of how the future may be expressed in French, see Fleischman and Imbs.

<sup>6</sup>Ubersfeld lists several others: "le futur marque l'urgence, la propulsion vers l'avenir, ou connote paradoxale l'absence d'avenir, l'ironie tragique (ou comique) montrant un futur qui ne se réalisera pas, ou la psychologie de l'incertitude" (204).

<sup>7</sup>About her daughter, Clytemnestre states: "Un oracle fatal ordonne qu'elle expire" (IV, iv, 1261); Arcas refers to Achille: "Le jeune Achille enfin, vanté par tant d'oracles" (I, i, 21); and Eriphile herself says: "Un oracle effrayant m'attache à mon erreur" (II, i, 428).

<sup>8</sup>"Le jeune Achille enfin, vanté par tant d'oracles, / Achille, à qui le ciel promet tant de miracles" (I, i, 21-22).

<sup>9</sup>"Les Parques à ma mère, il est vrai, l'ont prédit, / Lorsqu'un époux mortel fut reçu dans son lit: / Je puis choisir, dit-on, ou beaucoup d'ans sans gloire, / Ou peu de jours suivis d'une longue mémoire" (I, ii, 247-50).

<sup>10</sup>"Mais, puisqu'il faut enfin que j'arrive au tombeau, / Voudrais-je, de la terre inutile fardeau, / Trop avare d'un sang reçu d'une déesse, / Attendre chez mon père une obscure vieillesse, / Et toujours de la gloire évitant le sentier, / Ne laisser aucun nom, et mourir tout entier?" (I, ii, 251-56).

<sup>11</sup>"Sa course [Achille's] vers Troie . . . est course de la vie vers la mort, fascination magique du tombeau" (Defaux 166).

<sup>12</sup>Other explanations for this contradiction have been offered. J. B. Ratermanis explains it as a kind of moral victory over destiny: "[l]a mort qui le menace est l'affaire des dieux; sa conduite à lui est dictée par un principe différent dont la valeur est constante: L'honneur parle, il suffit; ce sont là nos oracles" (267). Knight tries as well to provide a plausible explanation: he suggests that Achille pursues his marriage plans out of consideration for Iphigénie's delicate feelings. Achille chooses a brief but long-remembered life, and "sans naturellement en parler devant sa bien-aimée, qu'il sait qu'il ne reverra plus, il ne s'en dédit pas" (Knight, *Racine* 314).

<sup>13</sup>Knight dissects Racine's arguments and justifications for the existence of Eriphile, masterfully proving that she is but a pure fiction entirely of Racine's invention (*Racine* 316-19).

<sup>14</sup>We may speculate that this is because, lacking a past, no shadow is cast by the young characters' past acts onto the future. The future is thus poignantly open to be filled by the gods.

<sup>15</sup>"Un oracle toujours se plaît à se cacher, / Toujours avec un sens il en présente un autre" (II, i, 432-23). It is of course ironic that Doris interprets the death mentioned in the oracle as a simple change of names, the death of the name "Eriphile." The latter's name is indeed essential to the discovery of identity, but Eriphile's new name ensures, and does not merely in itself constitute, her "death."

<sup>16</sup>"Achille à son [Iphigénie's] malheur saura bien mettre obstacle. / Tu verras que les dieux n'ont dicté cet oracle / Que pour croître à la fois sa gloire et mon tourment, / Et la rendre plus belle aux yeux de son amant" (IV, i, 1105-08).

<sup>17</sup>"While we watch the terrible quarrel between Agamemnon and Clytemnestre, every word of hatred in Clytemnestre's mouth suggests to us the inevitable outcome of their relationship" (de Mourgues 20).

<sup>18</sup>Aeschylus and Sophocles both wrote plays entitled *Iphigenia* that have disappeared (Knight, "Ritual" 74). For much of the factual information concerning the different versions of the myth I am relying on Knight, *Racine* and "Ritual."

## Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Le Plaisir du texte*. Paris: Seuil, 1973.
- Comrie, Bernard. *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.
- Defaux, Gérard. "Violence et passion dans l'*Iphigénie* de Racine." *French Forum* 9 (1984): 162-80.
- Fleischman, Suzanne. *The Future in Thought and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Hubert, Judd D. *Essai d'exégèse racinienne*. Paris: Nizet, 1956.
- Imbs, Paul. *L'Emploi des temps verbaux en français moderne*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1960.
- Knight, R. C. *Racine et la Grèce*. Paris: Boivin, 1950.
- . "Ritual Muder at Versailles: Racine's *Iphigénie*." *Myth and its Making in the French Theatre*. Eds. E. Freeman, H. Mason, M. O'Regan, S. W. Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. 71-80.
- Lapp, John C. *Aspects of Racinian Tragedy*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1955.

- Mourgues, Odette de. *Racine or the Triumph of Relevance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967.
- Poulet, Georges. "Notes sur le temps racinien." *Études sur le temps humain*. Vol. 1. Paris: Plon, 1952. 3 vols. 1952-68. 148-65.
- Racine, Jean. *Théâtre complet*. Eds. Jacques Morel and Alain Viala. Paris: Garnier, 1980.
- Ratermanis, J. B. *Essai sur les formes verbales dans les tragédies de Racine*. Paris: Nizet, 1972.
- Scherer, Jacques. *Racine et/ou la cérémonie*. Paris: PUF, 1982.
- Ubersfeld, Anne. *Lire le théâtre*. Paris: Editions Sociales, 1982.