

LOVE IN RACINE'S BRITANNICUS

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Roland Barthes, in his critical study, Sur Racine, identifies two kinds of love in Racine's tragedies.¹ The first one he calls "l'amour sororal," which is a love with a past and with a "légalité" since it was founded by the parents. The other love he refers to as "l'amour immédiat" since it comes suddenly and is inspired by the sight of someone. Mr. Barthes furnishes a point of departure for a study of love in Britannicus,² Racine's fifth tragedy, which was chosen because Mr. Barthes' idea applied particularly well. I have begun with Mr. Barthes' concept of two loves and have tried to see what their precise nature is. This is not a literary study based on research but rather an analysis of the play from one particular point of view, involving a close reading of the play.

In working with the concept that there are two types of love in Racine in general and in Britannicus in particular, it is necessary to analyze the foundations of each type of love and the kind of relations between

¹Roland Barthes, Sur Racine(Paris, 1963), pp. 25-26.

²Citations from Britannicus are to Théâtre de Jean Racine, Tome II, ed. Henri Clouard(Paris,--).

the lover and his beloved, or, in other words, the relations between the "amants". To study love in this way, it must be seen not by itself but as it relates to other elements in the play, to other forces at work to influence and shape it.³

The foundation or appearance of love can be looked at in two ways--~~in~~ relation to time and in relation to parents. In each of these categories there is a radical contrast between the two loves: Britannicus-Junie and Néron-Junie.

In analyzing the relation to time, it is appropriate to begin with the love between Junie and Britannicus, since it is characterized by a past and a duration. First of all, it appeared in the historical past with the promise of the previous emperor, Claude, who was also the father of Britannicus, that Junie should be the wife of Britannicus. Néron, after having had Junie kidnapped, tries to persuade her to marry him but she reminds him of Claude's promise to Britannicus:

Peut-être il se souvient qu'en un temps plus heureux
Son père me nomma pour l'objet de ses vœux.
(II, iii)

Later in the scene, Junie reiterates the historical foundation of their love:

J'aime Britannicus. Je lui fus destinée
Quand l'empire devait suivre mon hyménée.
(II, iii)

³A summary of the play appears after the text.

Britannicus, too, implies this and uses it as a kind of argument when Junie pretends to no longer love him:

Faut-il que je dérobe, avec mille détours,
Un bonheur que vos yeux m'accordaient tous les jours?
(II, vi)

Not only does this love endure in the sense that it began in the past and continues into the present, but it also has a duration or continuation into the future in terms of Junie's fidelity. In reassuring Britannicus of her love, Junie says:

Votre image sans cesse est présente à mon âme:
Rien ne peut l'en bannir.
(III, vii)

Her fidelity consists of her refusal to succumb to Néron's pressure to marry him and of her flight to the temple of the vestal virgins in Act V. Albine, Agrippine's confidante, summarizes Junie's reason for withdrawing to the temple:

Pour accabler César d'un éternel ennui,
Madame, sans mourir elle est morte pour lui.
(V, viii)

While the love between Britannicus and Junie has a past and a continuation, Néron's love for Junie, in the relation to time, appears completely in the present or even more precisely, in an instant. Instead of a beginning in the historical past, with a deliberate plan, it comes all of a sudden. In Act II, scene ii, Néron explains to Narcisse, the tutor of Britannicus, how this love came about. The night that Junie was kidnapped, Néron watched as she was brought to his

palace. He was so struck by the sight of her that the result is as he tells Narcisse:

Depuis un moment, mais pour toute ma vie
J'aime; que dis-je, aimer? j'idolâtre Junie.
(II, 11)

Or, later, when Néron is angered because his love is not returned, he mentions its suddenness to Burrhus:

Quoi! toujours enchainé de ma gloire passée
J'aurai devant les yeux je ne sais quel amour
Que le hasard nous donne et nous ôte en un jour?
(IV, 111)

Thus, the two loves, when seen in relation to the element of time in the play, differ greatly; one is historical, the other is instantaneous. A contrast also appears in the relation of the loves to another important side of the play, the parents and specifically Agrippine, Néron's mother and Britannicus' step-mother.

The love between Britannicus and Junie is based on an accord with the parents, both in the sense of obedience and of dependence. Claude instituted their love with the intention of marriage. Junie and Britannicus are obeying him in their love for one another and Junie uses this as an argument against Néron's proposal. Referring to Britannicus, she says:

Il m'aime; il obéit à l'empereur son père,
(II, 111)

Agrippine attempts to carry on the promise of Claude, thus giving her support to the couple Junie-

Britannicus. In a long speech where she castigates Neron for having kidnapped Junie, she expresses this support:

Aujourd'hui je promets Junie à votre frère;
Ils se flattent tous deux du choix de votre mère:
(IV, ii)

Narcisse, too, points out to Britannicus that Agrippine is on their side:

Elle se sent comme vous outragée;
A vous donner Junie elle s'est engagée;
(I, iv)

In the important scene when Néron is watching Junie, whom he has commanded to repudiate her love for Britannicus, Britannicus tries to assuage Junie's doubts and fears by reminding her of Agrippine's support:

La mère de Néron se déclare pour nous.
(II, vi)

Not only is it a matter of Agrippine's support for Britannicus and Junie; they also, to a great extent, depend upon her for the existence of their love. From the beginning, Agrippine sees herself as a kind of mediator between the well-being of Britannicus and Junie and the attacks of Néron, as she explains to her confidante, Albine:

Il faut qu'entre eux et lui je tienne la balance,
(I, i)

Three scenes later, after Agrippine has expressed her outrage at Néron's action and has revealed that she has already complained to him, Britannicus shows his

somewhat skeptical awareness of Agrippine's role:

La croirai-je, Narcisse? et dois-je sur sa foi
 La prendre pour arbitre entre son fils et moi?
 (I, iv)

Throughout the play, it is Agrippine who intervenes in behalf of Junie and Britannicus as, for example, in the case of the ultimatums which she delivers to Néron in Act IV, scene ii, asking him to reconcile himself with his brother and to allow Junie to choose her own husband.

In the case of Néron's love for Junie, a contrast is again involved as it was in the time relation, for Néron's love is connected to a revolt against the parents, especially a revolt against his domineering mother. This revolt has two aspects to it; first of all, a simple disregard for the wishes of either parent, which Néron expresses in a conversation with Junie:

Ma mère a ses desseins, madame, et j'ai les miens.
 Ne parlons plus ici de Claude et d'Agrippine;
 Ce n'est point par leur choix que je me détermine.
 (II, iii)

While Claude instituted the love between Junie and Britannicus, Néron wants to institute this love himself, which means ignoring and thwarting his parents' decree.

But this mere disregard for the wishes of his parents is less important than Néron's assertion of his independence from Agrippine. First, however, it is necessary to analyze the nature of Agrippine's domination, how she has influence over Néron. The main instrument

with which she can dominate Néron is the fact that he owes her gratitude:

Dans le fond de ton coeur je sais que tu me hais;
Tu voudras t'affranchir du joug de mes bienfaits.
(V, vi)

She saw to it that the legitimate heir to the throne, Britannicus, was deprived of it and her own son, Néron, placed in power instead, as Albine reminds her:

Quoi? vous à qui Néron doit le jour qu'il respire,
Qui l'avez appelé de si loin à l'empire?
Vous qui, déshéritant le fils de Claudius,
Avez nommé César l'heureux Domitius?
(I, 1)

She also deprived Junie's brother of his intended wife, Octavie, so that Néron could marry her. In addition, Agrippine occupies a position of apparently equal power in the political system, as she indicates to Albine in Act II, scene iv. Up until now, Octavie lacked influence at court and Agrippine has had the position of importance:

Les grâces, les honneurs par moi seule versés,
M'attiraient des mortels les voeux intéressés.
(III, iv)

In other words, she has been acting like the empress and Octavie has been in the background. Finally, her promise to allow Britannicus to marry Junie constitutes a kind of domination over Néron; if the emperor before him was able to determine a spouse for someone, then it should also be within his realm of power to do the same and not have to follow the wishes of his mother. And it

is exactly this promise which constitutes Agrippine's greatest power over him, something she realizes in the first act:

En vain, pour détourner ses yeux de sa misère,
J'ai flatté son amour d'un hymen qu'il espère:
A ma confusion, Néron veut faire voir
Qu'Agrippine promet par delà son pouvoir.
(I, 11)

Furthermore, Néron is well aware of her domination and is extremely eager to assert his independence from Agrippine. In a conversation with Narcisse, he explains that when he is away from Agrippine, he is able to function as an emperor but as soon as he is again within sight of her, he senses her power over him:

Mais enfin mes efforts ne me servent de rien:
Mon génie, étonné, tremble devant le sien.
(II, 11)

But he also wants to rid himself of her domination, as he says later in the same conversation:

Et c'est pour m'affranchir de cette dépendance
Que je la fuis partout, et même je l'offense
(II, 11)

Therefore, the problem facing Néron is expressed very simply by Narcisse:

N'êtes-vous pas, seigneur, votre maître et le sien?
Vous verrons-nous toujours trembler sous sa tutelle?
Vivez, régnez pour vous: c'est trop régner pour elle.
(II, 11)

And the way for Néron to assert his independence revolves around the choice of a spouse for Junie:

Et je veux de ma main vous choisir un époux.
(II, 111)

By marrying Junie, Néron would effectively break Agrippine's power over him--her promise would no longer be valid in any sense.

In summary, the two loves differ in their foundation; the love of Britannicus for Junie involves a history and an accord with the parents, showing a consistency in both time and parent relations. In other words, it is orderly in both areas. On the other hand, Néron's love for Junie also shows a same kind of consistency in its suddenness and its rebelliousness--it is disruptive, violent.

The same pattern holds true for the second part of this study, the nature of the relations between the loves. One can look at these relations first in terms of power, and then in terms of the type and manifestation of feelings in the case of each couple.

Up until this point, the couple Britannicus-Junie seemed to occupy a more favorable position; they have the past and Agrippine to support them. But in terms of the power forces existing in the play, they are in a position of weakness, primarily because Britannicus was deprived of the throne through the machinations of Agrippine. Linked to this is the fact that, in large measure, Agrippine's support for Junie and Britannicus comes from a desire to console Britannicus for the loss

of the throne:

En vain, pour détourner ses yeux de sa misère,
J'ai flatté son amour d'un hymen qu'il espère:
(I, ii)

As a result of this political weakness, a kind of unhappiness or "misère" seems to unite Junie and Britannicus. While lamenting the kidnapping of Junie, Britannicus acknowledges what it is that binds them:

Enfin on me l'enlève. Une loi trop sévère
Va séparer deux coeurs qu'assemblait leur misère:
(I, iii)

Junie reiterates this attachment founded in unhappiness in her interview with Néron in Act II:

Mais ces mêmes malheurs qui l'en ont écarté,
Ses honneurs abolis, son palais déserté,
La fuite d'une cour que sa chute a bannie,
Sont autant de liens que retiennent Junie.
(II, iii)

Thus, the weak political position of Britannicus and of Junie causes an unhappiness which is to a great extent that which binds them in the play. But in the case of Néron and Junie, there is again the difference that was seen in the foundations of the loves. Néron, quite simply, is in a position of political strength since he is the emperor; for example, he is able to command the support of the senate regarding the kidnapping of Junie.

While it is weakness that is the basis for the couple Junie-Britannicus, Néron's love for Junie is born out of violence, that is to say, the kidnapping. He uses his power as emperor to have her surprised in

the middle of the night and taken against her will to his palace. And it is at this time that Néron falls in love with Junie.

Not only does this love come out of violence, or a violent use of power and strength, but Néron also uses his political position as a means of persuasion. Néron flatters Junie in their first interview, trying to convince her of a marriage with him:

Songez-y donc, madame, et pesez en vous-même
Ce choix digne des soins d'un prince qui vous aime,
Digne de vos beaux yeux trop longtemps captivés,
Digne de l'univers à qui vous vous devez.
(II, iii)

He then puts the problem very directly to Junie:

Et ne préférez point à la solide gloire
Des honneurs dont César prétend vous revêtir
La gloire d'un refus sujet au repentir.
(II, iii)

But Junie refuses both Néron's offer and arguments and remains faithful to Britannicus. Thus, Britannicus' weak position causes a common misery, something which unites them. On the other hand, Néron's very glorious and powerful position as emperor of Rome fails to influence Junie in favor of him.

This contrast leads directly into the type and manifestation of feelings. The loves again are opposed. The love between Junie and Britannicus, which is one of duration, accord with parents, weakness vis-à-vis the forces of power, is characterized by tenderness, which

Junie expresses very well:

Britannicus est seul. Quelque ennui qui le presse,
Il ne voit dans son sort que moi qui s'intéresse,
Et n'a pour tout plaisir, Seigneur, que quelques pleurs
Qui lui font quelquefois oublier ses malheurs.

(II, iii)

At the basis of this tenderness is the fact that their love is a reciprocated love. It is apparent from the beginning of the play that Junie loves Britannicus and that she will not change.

There are two aspects of this reciprocated, tender love. First of all, love is seen as all important-- it is apart from all other considerations. Britannicus states this very simply to Néron in Act III:

Le bonheur de lui plaire est le seul où j'aspire.
(III, viii)

This is seen, furthermore, in that Britannicus is content to have Junie's love and will gladly resign himself to the loss of the throne; in Act V, expecting Néron to be reconciled with him, he expresses this contentment to Junie:

Depuis qu'a mon amour cessant d'être contraire
Il semble me céder la gloire de vous plaire,
Mon coeur, je l'avou'rai, lui pardonne en secret,
Et lui laisse le reste avec moins de regret.
(V, 1)

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this reciprocated love is that Junie and Britannicus have an intuitive ability to please. Junie says of Britannicus:

Il a su me toucher,
Seigneur; et je n'ai point prétendu m'en cacher.
(II, iii)

Narcisse, too, is aware of this ability, as he tells Néron that Junie definitely loves Britannicus:

A ses moindres désirs il sait s'accommoder,
(II, ii)

It is significant because it points up the difference between this love and the love Néron has for Junie and gives some clues to the type and manifestation of feeling between Néron and Junie. The problem is that Néron does not have the ability to inspire love in Junie and therefore the love Néron-Junie is not reciprocated. Just as the reciprocated love formed the basis for the tenderness between Junie and Britannicus, the unreciprocated love forms the basis for the nature of Néron's relation to Junie.

Cruelty characterizes the love between Néron and Junie, since it is a frustrated love. Néron himself reveals this:

Du moins, si je ne sais le secret de lui plaire,
Je sais l'art de punir un rival téméraire.
(III, viii)

Perhaps the most important instance of Néron's cruelty is in the second act, when he forces Junie to tell Britannicus that she no longer loves him and that he must leave her. Néron puts on the further pressure of making Britannicus' life hinge upon how convincingly Junie can feign to no longer love him, since he, Néron,

will be watching:

Je vous laisse.
 Sa fortune dépend de vous plus que de moi.
 Madame, en le voyant, songez que je vous voi.
 (II, iv)

Néron's frustrated love finally turns to a hatred for Britannicus; after the interview between Junie and Britannicus that he watched, hidden, he realizes the intensity of their love and sees that there is no hope for him:

Elle aime mon rival, je ne puis l'ignorer;
 Mais je mettrai ma joie à le désespérer.
 (II, viii)

Thus, his cruelty takes on a sadistic aspect and is complete.

The pattern which emerges is exactly that of the first part in regard to the foundation of the loves. Again, the loves are opposite in the kinds of relations between the members of each couple; but the tenderness on Junie and Britannicus is consistent with their weakness while Néron's cruelty is tied up with his strength. Furthermore, the calmness of "misère" and tenderness which characterizes the relations between Junie and Britannicus coincides with the orderliness of the foundation of their love. The same kind of connection is true in Néron's case; the violence of his relation to Junie follows directly from the disruptive appearance of this love.

Despite the very fundamental differences of the two love, neither succeeds. Britannicus is killed,

Junie flees from Néron to become a vestal virgin, and Néron is in despair at the end of the play. Such a conception of love exists in other plays of Racine and reveals his pessimism in regard to love. The anarchistic love of Néron is associated with evil but the orderly, good love of Britannicus ultimately fares no better. They appear as antithetical yet parallel.

Summary of Britannicus

Néron, emperor of Rome and son of Agrippine, kidnaps Junie who is the beloved of Britannicus. Agrippine, however, had already promised Junie to Britannicus, who is the rightful heir to the throne but who was disinherited in favor of Néron through the machinations of Agrippine. The end of Act I finds Agrippine wishing to have an explanation of the kidnapping from Néron but instead finds only Burrhus, whom she reproaches for working against her. In Act II, Narcisse, the deceitful preceptor of Britannicus encourages Néron to throw off the domination of Agrippine, divorce his wife, Octavie, and marry Junie. In a very significant scene, Néron permits Junie to see Britannicus, but Néron hides, having commanded Junie to repudiate her love for Britannicus or cause his death. Act III is Junie's confession to Britannicus of her simulated lack of love, a confession which Néron overhears by accident. He then has both imprisoned. Agrippine attempts in Act IV to persuade Néron to follow her wishes and return Junie to Britannicus. Néron promises only hypocritically and Narcisse's news that Agrippine is boasting of her power over her son pushes Néron to the point of crime. In Act V, Britannicus leaves happily for a banquet of reconciliation with

Néron; but there he is poisoned. We learn through Albine, Agrippine's confidante, that Junie flees to become a vestal virgin, that Narcisse is stoned by the enraged citizens of Rome and that Néron is in despair.

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