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Reading the Racinian Kaleidoscope through the Colour Red in *Phèdre*

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Abstract Notwithstanding the generous amount of scholarly inquiry on Racine and, more precisely, on his use of metaphors, few scholars have directly and substantially approached the ways in which precise colours are deployed by Racine. Consequently, this article explores the progression of words related to the colour red in Racine's *Phèdre*, demonstrating that the colour red goes from being deployed as dead metaphor to becoming the literal instrument of tragedy. The article concludes by suggesting further inquiry into a literal kaleidoscope of colours in Racine's work.

Keywords Racine · Phèdre · Colour metaphors · Dead metaphors · Red

In the past decade, Racine studies have undergone a sort of paradigm shift, particularly in "Anglo-American" spheres, embodied in some regards by John Campbell's *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (2005), which, as the title suggests, questions the notion that there is a singular, cohesive set of works that can be subsumed under the broad label of Racinian tragedy and understood through any one critical approach. Rather, Campbell argues that Racine's plays are marked by their individualities, discrepancies, incoherencies, and differences. The coherent and whole Racine, he concludes, is a critical myth. Campbell writes:

> Whatever the variety of approaches, the critical foundation remains: that of 'Racinian tragedy' as a coherent whole. In the seminal works of Lucien Goldmann, Charles Mauron, and Roland Barthes, in those of their principal inheritor Jean Rohou, as in the many others by different critics proposing

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> related hypotheses, a basic premise is that of Racinian tragedy as a closed set, a single unit of human experience, *le tragique racinien*. This premise admitted, the organizing principles of 'Racine' can thus more easily be related to permanent features of the biographical, historical and cultural context. (2005, p. 20)

In other words, one could say that the critical construction and defence of a coherent "Racine" allows literary scholars, such as those cited above by Campbell, to relate and adapt "Racine" to their own perspectives and contexts. Following Campbell, scholars have since sought to demonstrate the irreducibility of Racine's *œuvre*.[1] Indeed, recent work on Racine has largely avoided the type of totalizing approaches of Goldmann, Mauron, Barthes, and Rohou.[2] In any case, within the broad categories of "totalizing approaches" and "non-totalizing approaches," many aspects of Racine's plays have been explored, ranging from questions of space to the importance of the body. Yet, notwithstanding the generous amount of scholarly inquiry on Racine and, more precisely on his use of metaphors, few have directly and substantially approached the ways in which precise colours are deployed by Racine.[3] This is despite three sets of suggestive comments by Richard Goodkin, in 1991, Robert Hartle, in 1961, and John Lapp, in 1952. Before discussing these comments, I would like to bring up an enduring binary pitting Shakespeare against Racine, a binary that I will dissolve through the conclusion of this article.

In an essay from *Language and Silence* (1967), George Steiner briefly discusses Robert Lowell's 1961 translation of Racine's *Phèdre* (1677). Steiner quotes the opening lines of Racine's *Phèdre* and Lowell's *Phaedra* to demonstrate that Lowell fails to capture the "muted, dubious tone" upon which Racine's play opens. (1967, p. 318) Towards the end of his remarks on Lowell and Racine, he suggests that Lowell's *Phaedra* is less the product of translating than that of traducing. Steiner's main accusation is that Lowell makes no attempt to retain the restraint, austerity and ambiguity of Racine's play. Racine's Phèdre "retains that fineness of spirit which makes her a tragic and not melodramatic heroine," while under Lowell's quill she loses any semblance of poise and appears brutally "in all her madness." (Steiner 1967, p. 319) Steiner, then, reproduces the common conception of Racine's work as—to echo Voltaire on French theatre in general—elegant, harmonious and endowed with charming verses. Voltaire would go on to oppose the textual elegance of Racine to the passionate action of Shakespeare. (1859, pp. 207–217) In the nineteenth-century, Stendhal would insist upon this opposition to characterize Racine and Shakespeare at antithetical poles of theatre:

[1] See, for example, Ronald Tobin's and Angus Kennedy's *Changing Perspectives: Studies on Racine in Honor of John Campbell* (2012).

[2] This is not to say that there have been no "totalizing" approaches since Campbell. Consider, for example Mitchell Greenberg's *Racine: From Ancient Myth to Tragic Modernity* (2010), which argues that "the entire Racinian endeavour would be the rescription of Oedipus legend as it becomes intertwined with the ideological dilemma of the nascent absolutist state." (p. 15).

[3] Sylvaine Guyot's *Racine et le corps tragique* (2014) does make a few quick, but interesting, notes on chromatic changes related to blushing, but does not subsequently develop them.

> Racine met toujours en récit pompeux et emphatique ce que Shakspeare se borne à mettre sous nos yeux. Si le poëte anglais l'emporte, Racine est enterré comme ennuyeux, et tous les petits tragiques français le suivent dans sa tombe. (1854, p. 233)

Racine tells and Shakespeare shows—such is the image of the two playwrights (one French and the other English) that endured for centuries and found its mid-twentieth century expression through, *mutatis mutandis*, Steiner's comparison of Racine's (French) text and Lowell's (English) translation.

What sets Racine apart from Shakespeare is also the relatively limited vocabulary of the French playwright as compared to the much richer and more varied Shakespearean lexicon. In *Le Vocabulaire de Racine* (1946), Jacques-Gabriel Cahen accordingly notes that Racine's vocabulary is "particulièrement pauvre et peu varié." (p. 16) In terms of unique words per play, this is certainly true. Racine's work is known for its relatively small number of unique words, around 2000 words, which is a small fraction of Shakespeare's 24,000, or so, words. Certainly, this would seem to validate Cahen's statement on the "poverty" of Racine's vocabulary. Yet, Racine is also celebrated for subtle profundity. How does a text be subtle and profound at the same time? Richard Goodkin offers the following explanation:

> Racine uses few words, and unlike Shakespeare, whose elaborate and inventive language spans many registers, he limits himself almost exclusively to quite common words, repeating them in endlessly varying combinations, like a kind of kaleidoscope made up of a few colours which become all the more striking as they appear to take on different qualities in different contexts. (1991, p. 10)

Racine manages to attain, by a restricted poetic economy, the same—or similar—levels of vibrancy and richness of text that abounds in Shakespeare. This is to acknowledge that the differences between Racine and Shakespeare are at the level of execution and not of effect. Goodkin correctly writes that it is precisely in using common words in various combinations and giving them different meanings in different contexts that Racine's work approaches that of Shakespeare.

"A kind of kaleidoscope made up of a few colours," writes Goodkin. These "colours" that are reused in different contexts to form "a kind of kaleidoscope" include, for example, the term "sérail" in *Bajazet* (1672), which refers to either the harem or the palace, depending on the context. This notion of a kaleidoscope formed with only a few colours coincides with the viewpoint of Robert Hartle who proposes that the richness of the Racinian play lies in its hidden metaphors:

> One of the discreet ways by which Racine effects this shift from identification to contemplation is through the use of "dead" metaphors as key words. Metaphors through conventional usage lose their metaphorical force to become merely signs. […] Racine uses a dead metaphor to express the moral problem in a play, and then suddenly in the final scenes of the play he uses that metaphor quite literally and quite concretely as the instrument of catastrophe. He resolves the moral problem into its own plastic image; this pattern is repeated in play after play. (1961, pp. 134–135)

Hartle convincingly demonstrates how the word "sang" in *La Thébaïd (1664)* and the words "poison" and "monstre" in *Phèdre* first appear in the texts in their metaphorical senses before being turned "into the literal instrument[s] of catastrophe." As Hartle cautions, no one can be certain whether this was Racine's intention, but the linguistic shift from metaphorical to literal is analogous to the development of the action of the play.

Similarly, John Lapp has shown how certain key words in Racine develop through three stages:

> 1. Words, which through the influence of *préciosité* have lost their metaphorical or metonymic quality, function primarily as euphemisms. 2. They become "demetaphorized," so that they function concretely. 3. They are "re-metaphorized," and they either rediscover an earlier metaphorical meaning or assume new metaphorical or symbolic force. (1952, p. 40)

Lapp emphasizes, of course, that these stages are neither necessarily chronological nor mutually exclusive. Often, key words undergo at least two of the three stages, explaining, perhaps, the subtle profundity in the Racinian play. Like Goodkin, who notes that Racine draws upon a limited kaleidoscope, and like Hartle, who explains the mechanisms of the utilization of this kaleidoscope, Lapp demonstrates how specific symbolic words in Racine go through at least two of his stages in order to become, in effect, "primary vehicle[s] of dramatic irony." (Lapp 1952, p. 41) One of the examples that Lapp provides concerns the word "autel," as it appears in three Racinian plays, namely *Alexandre le grand* (1665), *Andromaque* (1667), and *Iphigénie* (1674). Lapp describes how "autel" goes from meaning "veneration" or "reputation," in *Alexandre le grand*, to taking on a more concrete meaning in *Iphigénie*, and then, through this more concrete meaning, symbolizing both love and death, towards which the characters both physically and metaphorically move, despite themselves. (1952, pp. 41–43) "Autel" ends up being both a symbolic mirror of the progression of the action in the play, and in the words of Hartle, an "instrument of catastrophe."

While Goodkin and Lapp both use the term "colour" as a metaphor in their articles on Racine and symbolism—with Goodkin speaking of a "kaleidoscope made up of a few colours" and Lapp describing how Racine's words "colour" his plays, neither of them (nor Hartle, for that matter) are primarily interested in actual colours as they are deployed by Racine. (Goodkin 1991, p. 10; Lapp 1952, p. 40) Nevertheless, the observations of Goodkin, Hartle, and Lapp still hold true with regards to colour symbolism in Racine. As we shall see, the colour red, one of the components of Goodkin's kaleidoscope that is endowed with differing and diverse qualities in different contexts, goes from being, as in Hartle's analysis, a dead metaphor to becoming literally and concretely the "instrument of catastrophe," by undergoing the three stages described by Lapp. To further develop Goodkin's, Hartle's, and Lapp's observations and to bring actual colours into the conversation, I propose studying the progression of the colour red in Racine's *Phèdre*, demonstrating that its progression both mirrors the progression of the entire play and is a key instrument in its *déroulement*.

Racine's *Phèdre* deals with sentiments such as love, passion, lust, anger, shame, and death, all of which can be potentially evoked through the colour red. Certainly, the caveat here is that there is a great diversity in colour symbolisms across cultures and even within same cultures across different periods of time. The statement that love, passion, lust, anger, shame, and death can be evoked through the symbolic use of the colour red should not be taken to be universal, but rather a demonstrable hypothesis for a given society at a given time, all while noting that any particular colour may have multiple symbolic values within the same society and historical period. The comments that follow, then, relate to the various uses of the colour red, specifically in Racine's period and its relevant social space, although these symbolic values may also resonate with other places and periods.

With regards to love and its relation to the colour red, consider the expression "burning with passion" *(brûler de passion)*. Indeed, the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694) describes "rouge" as that which is "de couleur semblable à celle du feu, du sang." Regarding anger and shame, it also says: "lors que la honte ou la colere fait monter le sang au visage, on dit, que *Le rouge monte au visage*" ("Rouge"). Shame, through the act of blushing, can also be expressed through the verb "rougir." "Rougir," of course, has two meanings—(1) to literally make something red, i.e. to redden and (2) to figuratively be red with shame, i.e. to blush. Both of these meanings ("rendre rouge" and "avoir honte," as well as "rougir de colere," are attested in the 1694 Académie française dictionary ("Rougir"). Finally, while death might not seem to be directly linked to the colour red, it can be by extension through the image of spilt blood. By analysing the recurrence and the conditions of use of words and themes that relate to the colour red, I seek to elaborate the role that specific words play in the evolution of ideas and emotions in Racine's *Phèdre* and to suggest a potentially fertile ground for future studies on Racine's language, to wit the use of colours in Racine's oeuvre.

The first word tied to the colour red in *Phèdre* appears when Hippolyte announces to Théramène his desire to flee Trézène:

> Le dessein en est pris: je pars, cher Théramène,
> Et quitte le séjour de l'aimable Trézène.
> Dans le doute mortel dont je suis agité,
> Je commence à rougir de mon oisiveté. (Act 1, scene 1, verses 1–4)

Thus, the colour red first appears in the play to mark what seems to be Hippolyte's shame. He begins to "rougir," or to blush. Of course, while he claims to wish to flee out of shame, the truth, as the reader soon discovers, is that he wishes to get away from Aricie with whom he is in love. His shame is but a disguise to hide his real intention. In any case, Racine's use of the verb "rougir" is not a metaphor at this point, or at least, if it is, it is a dead metaphor.

Two scenes later, Phèdre and Œnone use the word "red" and the verb "rougir" a number of times, while discussing the shame that Phèdre is bringing upon herself for lusting over her stepson Hippolyte. Phèdre admits her shame, describing how redness covers her face. Subsequently, she sees only one solution: her death. (Act 1, scene 3, verse 182) Œnone, for her part, finds Phèdre's avowal so shameful and horrid that the blood in her veins freezes. (Act 1, scene 3, verse 265) This time, it is

quite evident that the appearance of the colour red is tied to a profound and genuine sense of shame—unlike in the earlier case where Hippolyte's shame was merely camouflage. Phèdre is so ashamed that she wants to die. In this case, her would-be suicide is a way of fleeing her fatal passion for Hippolyte. Resigning herself to suicide is also an admission that her passion for Hippolyte has drastically overwhelmed her. The colour red appears, principally, in this scene as a dead metaphor (in the verb "rougir," for example), just as in the first scene, but the key difference is that it is associated, here, with a genuine and intense sense of shame.

When the curtain rises for Act 3, Scene 1, Phèdre evokes the colour red once more to express a sense of shame that is becoming increasingly intense. She explains that the shame that Hippolyte feels, having discovered Phèdre's desire for him, has rendered her even more ashamed. Again, the result is that she wishes death upon herself:

> Comme il ne respirait qu'une retraite prompte !
> Et combien sa rougeur a redoublé ma honte !
> Pourquoi détournais-tu mon funeste dessein !
> Hélas ! quand son épée allait chercher mon sein,
> A-t-il pâli pour moi ? me l'a-t-il arrachée ? (Act 3, scene 1, verses 745–749)

Hippolyte's "rougeur" exacerbates Phèdre's initial shame. As already mentioned, she is so ashamed that she wishes death, but this time, due to her perfidy, the death that she seeks is a violent one. Once again, the colour red is used as a dead metaphor to signify shame, albeit a shame that grows increasingly intense and genuine—a stark difference to the false shame that Hippolyte uses to dissimulate his true intentions at the beginning of the play.

It is finally during the last act of the play that the truth explodes and Thésée learns that Hippolyte, now dead, was innocent and that it was his wife, Phèdre, who was guilty of perfidy. Thésée, of course, learns the truth only when it is too late to stop the deadly punishment that he has asked of Poseidon. This last act also marks the sole moment in the play where the colour red does not refer, via a dead metaphor, to shame, but to the proper sense of the word. Consider Théramène's account of the last moments of Hippolyte's life before Poseidon kills him:

> La frayeur les emporte, et sourds à cette fois,
> Ils ne connaissent plus ni le frein ni la voix;
> En efforts impuissants leur maître se consume;
> Ils rougissent le mors d'une sanglante écume. (Act 5, scene 6, verses 1535–1538)

The four lines above describe Hippolyte's horses, who, carried away by fear, no longer respond to Hippolyte. He tries in vain to stop them, but they have become deaf and "no longer recognize rein nor voice." Nevertheless, Hippolyte keeps on trying to rein in his horses and exhausts himself in useless efforts. The result of all this action, according to Théramène's account is that the horses stain their bridles red with bloody foam.

Thus, for the first time in the text, the colour red is employed in a non-figurative sense. The horses' bridles are literally red. This different and non-metaphorical use

of the verb "rougir" marks the end-point of its evolution from shame to violent fatality and from dead metaphor to "the literal instrument of catastrophe." However, it is the very last appearance of the word "red" that is the most revealing:

> Elle approche; elle voit l'herbe rouge et fumante;
> Elle voit (quel objet pour les yeux d'une amante !)
> Hippolyte étendu, sans forme et sans couleur. (Act 5, scene 6, verses 1577–1579)

Aricie sees the grass, red and fuming, and sees Hippolyte dead and colourless. The implication is that the grass is red with Hippolyte's blood and hence he is "sans couleur," having spilt his blood on the grass. The fact that the grass is fuming is meant to highlight that the last moments of Hippolyte's life were brutal, convulsive, and violent. The image is, of course, horrifying, but at the same time, this image is delicately conveyed, not directly, but indirectly. The bloodiness of the scene is implied by the Racinian sleight of hand that has displaced the colour red from the metaphorical plane to the literal one. As with the previous use of the verb "rougir," the word "red," which here leads the reader—and Hippolyte—to the end of Hippolyte's life, is used literally. The colour red has, quite concretely, become "the instrument of catastrophe." What is the effect of describing this bloody scene in such a subtle and indirect manner, by deploying a colour that has been progressively evolving from the metaphorical to the literal? This is, perhaps, part of the "dramatic irony" that Lapp evokes. The irony here lies in the fact that such a tragic, brutal, and bloody scene is described without an explicit description, in the manner of Shakespeare, for example. So much is invoked by so little.

In following the recurrence of words in the text that relate to the colour red, we observe that there is a direct link between the way a particular word is used and the progression of the play. At the beginning, the colour red is only tied to shame and the ambiance of the play is merely that of unease. As the play progresses, the colour red becomes increasingly associated with violence. Finally, at the violent and traumatic climax of the play, the colour red is used literally—as opposed to previous figurative uses—to describe the bloody and violent death of Hippolyte. This follows Hartle's study of the metaphorical to literal progression of terms like "sang," "poison" and "monstre" in Racine. Like these terms, the colour red reveals itself to be of particular importance in Racine's *Phèdre*. The importance of the other colours—literal and figurative—of the Racinian kaleidoscope remains, for now, a subject for further inquiry. What is certain, however, is that this ability to dynamically endow a single term with differing qualities under different situations is a crucial element of Racine's subtle profundity.

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