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## BRITANNICUS OR THE SECRETS OF SPACE

*Il faut que, lorsque le mouvement cesse sur la scène, il continue derrière.*  
---Diderot, *De la poésie dramatique*.

Gita May concludes her seamless biography of Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun pointing out that she “presents the unique case of a great woman artist who consistently subscribed to all the political, social, and religious values of Old Regime France, yet was a revolutionary in the way she fearlessly pursued an independent career as a self-taught, self-supporting painter and as an exile wandering on her own in a Europe torn by revolution and war” (*Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun*, 202). She also reminds us that, before proclaiming the superiority of the novel over the theater, Stendhal flirted with the idea of becoming a playwright not unlike his “beloved literary masters,” among them, Racine (*Stendhal*, 117). To understand her treasured eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Mme May had to set the context of the Age of Louis XIV and its avatars who, like Racine, served as examples (positive and negative) for the authors she illuminated.

And so, *sur les traces de Gita May*, let us look at Racine, who was worthy of inspiring those who saw him not only as a master of poetry and poetics, but also of theatrical staging.

Annie Übersfeld makes this significant distinction about the relationship of stage and off-stage: “Le but est de voir si l’espace du texte s’organise et comment il s’organise en espaces oppositionnels par clivages à l’intérieur de la scène ou entre la scène et le hors-scène” (Übersfeld, 190-91). In the instance of *Britannicus* the interaction between

stage and off-stage defines the meaning of the tragedy. As many scholars have noted—almost all with a nod to Roland Barthes—the usurpation of space, symbolic of power and position, is central to any analysis of *Britannicus*.<sup>1</sup>

Gay McAuley makes the salient point about the particular space(s) of the tragedy: “On the physical level the palace is labyrinthine: Burrhus speaks of means of access to Néron’s chamber *par une porte au public moins connue* (l.135), and Albine refers to the *chemins écartés* (l.1725) by which Junie reaches the doors of the palace.”<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, the world of this play is severely restricted, limited to the palace and just beyond, which makes this historical tragedy radically different from the mythological one of *Andromaque*. As Ralph Albanese, Jr., points out: “malgré quelques références aux ‘déserts’ (209) et aux lieux d’exil (847, 1154), ainsi qu’au temple des Vestales (1076, 1743), Racine fait peu de cas de l’univers de la grandeur romaine au-delà du palais imperial” (Albanese, 125). The reason seems to be that Racine conceives of *Britannicus* as a family tragedy, involving the “birth” of Néron, the “fall” of his mother, and the murder of his “brother.”

Jacques Scherer notes the tripartite division of the tragic space in the play:

*Britannicus* implique trois [...] lieux, disposés de façon concentrique. Au centre, les appartements secrets, ou du moins privés au sens le plus fort du terme, de Néron; Agrippine n’a pas le droit d’y pénétrer, et Britannicus y mourra; c’est le lieu du pouvoir. Autour, d’autres appartements impériaux, que le décor représente et qui permettent des contacts entre le palais et l’extérieur. Plus loin encore, cet extérieur, Rome, qui comprend, parmi ses bâtiments, le temple des Vestales; Junie

<sup>1</sup> To cite but one example, Henry Phillips, “Racine et l’histoire: personnage, sujet, texte,” p. 42: “en effet, l’usurpation de l’espace de l’autre, et la tentative de le reconquérir forme l’un des grands thèmes de *Britannicus*.”

<sup>2</sup> P. 345 of “Spatial Dynamics of *Britannicus*: Text and Performance.” This statement and our imminent development of the importance of the doors in this play would seem to contradict the view of David Maskell that “L’essentiel du lieu scénique, défini dès les premiers vers, est que tout se passe devant la porte de Néron,” p. 156 of “La Précision des lieux dans les tragédies de Racine.”

pourra s'y réfugier, et Narcisse y mourir. C'est dire que le pouvoir de Néron, qui va en décroissant à partir du centre, ne se manifeste plus guère aux extrémités de cet espace symbolique. (*Racine et/ou la cérémonie*, 208-09)

This containment to the palace and its immediate surroundings creates not only an atmosphere of political and personal intimacy (the two are forever intertwined in *Britannicus*<sup>3</sup>), it also accentuates the importance of the physical displacement of the characters, that is, their entrances and exits, and where they spend their time off stage. Finally, such a relatively closed situation appears calculated to permit secrets and clandestine intentions to flourish.<sup>4</sup>

The secret motives and decisions of the play are generally confined to the wings where no prying eye or ear, including the spectator's, can perceive them.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the first act opens with Néron off-stage. Agrippine eventually learns (II.2) that Néron has left by a secret door after consulting in private with Burrhus (and perhaps unnamed others) while she was waiting in front of the door to his chambers. These are the first two doors mentioned in the play but there are others: the one to Octavie's space, the entrance to Junie's apartment, and the one through which she leaves in the fifth act: "Des portes du Palais elle sort éperdue" (1747). Two of the doors are, therefore, visible and the others are

3 In *Etudes sur Britannicus*, p. 82, René Pommier declares "Ce n'est pas l'amour qui pousse Néron au crime; c'est seulement l'amour-propre." Pommier does not believe that the play is a political tragedy. The truth is that one cannot distinguish the sentimental from the political in this play as in the rest of Racine's theater until one comes to *Phèdre*, where the political is clearly a secondary motive. This is true despite Jean-Pierre Miquel's assertion, "Dans cet univers nocturne et glacé de la lutte du Pouvoir, il n'y a pas de place pour le sentiment. *Tout discours est mensonge*" (p. 152).

4 For an analysis of Racine's recourse to the secret, see my article "Le Secret dans le théâtre de Racine."

5 The verbs *cacher*, *se cacher*, *fuir*, and *se dérober* are prominent in the lexicon of concealment in this play.

not.<sup>6</sup> This is characteristic of a play in which movements appear confined but from which and among which there is necessary physical displacement. The various places also serve to distinguish and divide the antagonists, while offering the opportunity for them to spy on each other. There is thus tension between the stage and the off-stage, which Racine maintains skillfully throughout.

The point about Néron's departure from his chamber—assuming he really leaves and is not simply hiding from Agrippine—is that we do not know where he has gone. While this information is not essential, it is typical of a play in which uncertainty and ambiguity—the stuff of secrets—reign.

Wherever the Emperor has gone, we learn in II.1 that Burrhus leaves the stage to see Néron and inform him that Agrippine will cause trouble. Indeed, in I.3 Agrippine and Britannicus decide to consult Pallas, the head of a conspiratorial clan, in a meeting that takes place between the end of act I and the beginning of act II. This entr'acte is, typically, of considerable significance not only for its political implications but also for its spatial ones, since it seems likely that Pallas lives outside of the palace and, therefore, beyond the wings, in an off-stage that stretches the boundaries of the action.

Both Burrhus and Narcisse go to see Néron in the entr'acte to divulge what was surely in the eyes of at least Britannicus, if not of Agrippine, a significant confidence: their plans to see how much support they have from their allies. Néron, not yet visible to

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the two visible doors will be the focus of the entries and exits that create the movement onto and off the stage so necessary to the continuity of action. Lucien Dubech in *Jean Racine politique*, p. 64, notes that “De même qu'on a pu dire que le vent était le personnage principal d'*Iphigénie*, on pourrait dire que la porte est le personnage principal de *Britannicus*.” After saying this, Dubech curiously spends no time on the importance of the door. He mentions it only again on p. 105 because Agrippine includes it in her long speech to Néron in act IV.

the spectator, is very busy in the time between the two acts, as are his adversaries. There are probably four meetings in two locales between acts I and II: Burrhus and Néron, and Narcisse and Néron in Neron's chamber just off stage; and in Pallas's home Agrippine, Burrhus, Britannicus, and Narcisse joined by the potential anti-Néron conspirators.

It is in act II that the much anticipated Néron arrives on stage, admitting that "Cette nuit je l'ai vue [Junie] arriver en ses lieux" (386). "Ses lieux" is imprecise but we can assume that it was within the palace walls. By informing Narcisse that he allowed Junie to go to her room and that he went to his, Néron is pointing out the symbolism of the respective doors as prison, for Junie, and as the locus of sexual fantasy for him. He is dreaming of replacing one woman with another and, in his reverie, he is most willing to allow Junie to penetrate the space that he refused to Agrippine. Junie's role as catalyst of the action is pertinently noted by McAuley: "The dramatic action begins with the violent entry of Junie into the palace and ends with her equally violent flight from it, two off stage actions recounted in graphic detail on stage" (p. 345).

Néron sends Narcisse to bring to him Britannicus, who is probably still with Pallas. Britannicus and Pallas are farther from the stage than Néron, the space where Néron exerts his power. Proximity is power in *Britannicus*, but, as we learn in the course of the play, the lesson of the warring twins in *La Thébaïde* is still true: the closer the relationship and the physical presence, the more intense the hatred.

Junie arrives through "her" door, attempting to see Octavie. Until the previous night she was "absente de la cour" (641). Her presence is disruptive in some sense of the court culture, and of Néron's psyche. She will be the mid-wife of the "monstre naissant." At the end of act II, scene 7 she leaves the stage in tears, passing undoubtedly through her

door. After having instructed Narcisse to embolden Britannicus so that he show his subversive hand, Néron departs, probably through his door. Act II displays the fact, therefore, that, if Junie is Néron's captive, she and the emperor still inhabit separate private spaces and sensibilities.

Act III opens with Burrhus informing Néron that, "Pallas obéira, Seigneur" (761). The discreet collaboration agreed upon in the off-stage meeting of Pallas with Agrippine and Britannicus between acts I and II has had an unexpected result: the plot against the emperor is exploded off-stage and Pallas has been dispatched into exile. Burrhus notices Agrippine arriving on stage. She has heard, in the wings, that Pallas has been exiled, probably at the hands of Burrhus, whom she would like to blame for Néron's estrangement from her. In III, 2 Britannicus tells Agrippine that Narcisse went to see the conspirators off stage (between acts II and III). So many of the conspiracies in the complicated politics of this play take place out of sight, that we might well talk of the "politics of the wings" in *Britannicus*. It is, in fact, off stage that Agrippine will confront Néron during III, 6.

Unexpectedly, Junie rushes in at the beginning of III, 7, having escaped her "nouvel Amant" (954), as Narcisse teasingly predicts, because Néron had to deal with Agrippine. Narcisse quickly departs to warn Néron that Junie is free, but we wonder where he is going. The first confrontation of the two protagonists within the confines of the play occurs off-stage in a place that is not specified, thereby intensifying the ambiguous atmosphere in which the characters circulate.

Wherever the meeting took place, it must have been very proximate to the stage, for only 67 verses are spoken before Néron returns in III, 8. Frustrated and furious, Néron

gives these orders: “Dans son Appartement, Gardes, qu’on la [Junie] ramène. / Gardez Britannicus dans celui de sa Soeur” (1080-81). June will be escorted to her rooms through her door, and Britannicus will traverse the stage to be confined in Octavie’s chambers. The place of refuge that Junie sought is now a prison for Britannicus, albeit, like its principal occupant, an invisible one.<sup>7</sup> Néron is assured that his enemies will not retain any ability to circulate by stripping them of their usual protection (Agrippine) or by relegating them to a place of impotence (Britannicus). Britannicus cannot be allowed to remain on stage as simply a prisoner because Néron also needs him to be out of earshot when he tells Burrhus that Agrippine must be imprisoned too. Understanding that his power is best levied when others are close by, Néron keeps Agrippine within the palace. Roland Racevskis makes the point succinctly: “[Néron] occupies the central seat of authority and constructs an uncomfortable in-between space for others to occupy. This interstitial zone is not the threshold to the throne, as it is in *La Thébaïde*, but rather the point of potential access to Néron himself, the possibility of speaking to the sovereign” (Racevskis, 97).

Act IV always contains the moment of greatest intensity in Racine’s tragedies. In the time that separates the end of III and the start of IV of *Britannicus* much has transpired in anticipation of the long-awaited confrontation, on stage this time, of the two protagonists. The spectator wonders what Néron will do in reaction to the last moments of act III when he learned that Britannicus was made aware of the emperor’s spying on

<sup>7</sup> As Georges Forestier points out about Néron’s surrounding Agrippine with his guards not hers (“Burrhus, dans ce Palais, je veux qu’on la retienne, / Et qu’au lieu de sa Garde, on lui donne la mienne,” 1091-92), “Racine adapte ici un événement consécutif à la mort de Britannicus: inquiet des manoeuvres de sa mère, Néron la priva de sa garde et la rélégua dans un autre palais (Tacite, Annales, XIII, xviii).” *Racine: Théâtre-Poésie*, p. 1434, note 2. This is the edition I have used for all quotes from Racine.



him and Junie. To what degree does he feel threatened by Britannicus, Agrippine, Junie, perhaps Pallas, and even Burrhus, whose faithfulness he now suspects? We learn in IV, 4 that he must have been both so insecure and furious that he planned the assassination of his brother. His reasons appear to have been definitely more personal than political. And it is to both, with an emphasis on the personal, that Agrippine speaks in IV, 2 where she delivers the longest tirade in all of Racine's theater.

To do so, she sits (Agrippine, *s'asseyant*, scene 2). We have the impression that she may have dared to place herself on the throne, for she says to Néron, in a manner that suggests her physical elevation compared to him, "Approchez-vous, Néron, et prenez votre place " (1115).

Once Agrippine has made her case, Néron apparently yields and requests that she inform Britannicus of the reconciliation. Although she does not know where Britannicus is, we assume that the guards do and they lead her off to Octavie's apartment.

Near the end of IV, 2, Burrhus, asked to leave the stage by Agrippine at the outset of this scene, reappears and in IV, 3 congratulates Néron on the reconciliation with his mother, only to be told that Néron was playing the role of obedient son and was, in reality, still planning to crush Britannicus. Burrhus then takes great pains to warn him of his terrible image in history if he follows his murderous instinct. While we might expect this recourse to history from a tutor, it is nonetheless curious that Néron should apparently yield to an argument based on his political heritage, when his principal concerns at the end of act III were deeply personal. This misreading of Néron, however temporarily successful, ultimately reflects the narrow—and self-serving—vision of the

emperor by his counselor. The time Burrhus spent between acts III and IV meditating on a strategy for controlling the violent instincts of Néron was wasted.

From what Narcisse reports in act IV, scene 4, Néron must have told him, off stage between acts III and IV, to prepare the assassination of Britannicus. The “fraternal” banquet has been set for the relative intimacy of the space behind Néron’s door to which he repairs at the end of act IV. Racine has once again relegated a crucial event to the wings: this time it is the catastrophe of the play. He prefers that the public not witness the ugly scene of the poisoning of one brother by another, during a moment of what should have been political and personal communion.<sup>8</sup>

In the entr’acte between acts IV and V Britannicus and Narcisse have met offstage so that Narcisse could invite the young prince to Néron’s banquet. Britannicus has also spoken to Burrhus off stage, while Agrippine had the opportunity to become even more convinced of her son’s apparent submission to her wishes. In essence, she believes that the play has come full circle to the point, some time before the rise of the curtain, when she dominated him and, through him, the empire. Since every major character is involved in the period between the end of act IV and the beginning of act V, the time away from the spectator’s gaze has been very rich indeed, perhaps even richer than previously thought.

Let us return to the last minutes of act IV when Burrhus temporarily derails Néron’s plans for having Britannicus killed. What principles does the Counselor use to dissuade the Emperor? Does he not paint a scene of Néron *in bivio*, at the crossroads

<sup>8</sup> In his Folio edition of *Britannicus* (pp. 12-13), Georges Forestier points out that Néron and Britannicus are not true brothers and that the appeal to “fraternity” occurs only late in the play (1060, 1085).

between continuing a life as an exemplary and well-loved leader and the temptations of the tyrant?

Ah! de vos premiers ans l'heureuse experience  
Vous fait-elle, Seigneur, haïr votre innocence?  
Songez-vous au bonheur qui les a signalés?  
Dans quell repos, ô Ciel, les avez-vous coulés?  
Quel plaisir de penser et de dire en vous-même,  
*Partout en ce moment on me bénit, on m'aime.* (1355-60)

Burrhus then pursues the point by recalling how Néron once felt such sympathy for a man condemned by the Senate that he hesitated before signing the execution mandate—a reminiscence of Seneca's *De Clementia*, II, 2: "Vellem litteras nescirem" ("I wish I didn't know how to write!"). In fact, Burrhus's lengthy speech (1338-1385) is sprinkled with verses inspired by the same Senecan text.<sup>9</sup> Even if Burrhus has already noted that Seneca is "Occupé loin de Rome" (806) at this point, it is clear that the soldier has sought arguments of a moral and political nature that the Stoic has undoubtedly expressed at one time or another to make it clear that "Magnam fortunam magnus animus decet," ("Greatness of spirit adorns greatness of standing"). Seneca's influence is needed at this moment because, from the beginning, Burrhus has insisted on his own usefulness as a conduit to and from the army and not as a moral instructor. To make the point that he is a soldier and not a sycophant, Burrhus tells Agrippine, "Mais, Madame, Néron suffit pour se conduire. / J'obéis, sans prétendre à l'honneur de l'instruire" (215-16). One wonders whether he has not undermined his own position with this statement.

Ever counseling two principles—patience and silence—Burrhus has literally the last word of the drama before it goes mute, and it betrays the willful naïveté that allowed

<sup>9</sup> Georges Forestier has also noted this in *Racine Théâtre-Poésie*, p. 423, notes 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

him to suffer Néron's sins in the absence of Seneca. The Stoic is, clearly, an important (well-) off-stage presence.<sup>10</sup>

The action-filled entr'acte between IV and V gives momentum to the final act where Britannicus leaves a troubled Junie to join Néron offstage and within 40 verses he is reported to be dead. But before that point, Agrippine notes, without grasping the symbolism of the imminent darkness, that night is falling ("Cependant en ces lieux n'attendons pas la nuit," 1614).<sup>11</sup> She encourages Junie to accompany her to Octavie's apartment, just as Burrhus arrives from Néron's chamber, with the fatal news of Britannicus's death. Junie leaves in the panicked hope of saving Britannicus. To do this, she must enter Néron's apartments where Britannicus lies. She then reappears in the original scene 6, only to leave once more for Octavie's space. Again, therefore, Néron has caught Junie attempting to regain Octavie's apartment. This is awkward staging, with characters dashing about, and Gay McAuley has found the explanation in Racine's replacing the original scene with the one we witness today:

When Junie leaves the stage in act V, she says it is to run to the aid of Britannicus—who is in Néron's chamber. How does Junie get out of the palace since we last saw her entering Néron's space? Even if Albine later says "Elle a feint de passer

<sup>10</sup> We should recall that Seneca's influence appears earlier in the play when Burrhus echoes the tutor's oft-repeated counsel, in the *Apokolokyntosis*, that emperors risk becoming tyrants who subject citizens to slavery. See verses 202-14 of *Britannicus*.

<sup>11</sup> *La nuit* occurs 8 times in this drama, more than in any other by Racine. *Britannicus* had its premiere just over two years after Paris was illuminated at night for the first time on September 7, 1667. See DeJean, p. 205. In *Evening's Empire*, p. 342, Craig Koslovsky notes that "The association of the theater with darkness and illusion in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries becomes especially significant when we note that this age saw the theater as the supreme metaphor for human existence . . . . As one scholar of German literature has observed: 'At no time has the word 'Theater' or its Latin form 'theatrum' had anywhere near as wide a range of meaning as in the baroque. The darkness and illusion fundamental to the theater of the age shadowed this wide range of associations.'"

chez la triste Octavie” (1724), there is confusion because she never indicated that upon leaving. The omitted scene provides the solution. In it Junie emerges from Néron’s room, closely followed by Néron, and begs his permission to go to Octavie. . . . [W]hen [Néron] leaves the stage after his confrontation with Agrippine it is in the direction of the palace, not back into his room. For staging, this interpretation makes more sense than the traditional argument that the presence on stage together of Junie and her lover’s murderer would offend the seventeenth-century public’s sense of bienséance.<sup>12</sup>

The play ends with Junie having fled to her own impregnable space in the temple of the Vestal Virgins. Néron begins the play off-stage and ends it the same way: he remains out of sight of the spectators just as he is walking into the wings, the (off-)stage of history.

If Néron continues to dream about Junie, this time the fantasy is totally unrealizable. She is outside the palace, he appears to be trapped, wandering within its walls, as Racine projects the imagination of the spectator to the time when Néron will dominate the whole of the empire through acts of folly that emanate from his “appartements,” the space of secrets, power, and madness.

Secret, stealth, night, ambiguity, lack of precision for certain meetings all lend *Britannicus* a profound disquiet and dissonance that is put only in greater relief by the “comic” elements (especially Néron’s dark irony in the scenes with Junie and his hiding, in a “screen-scene” situation worthy of *School for Scandal*, while Junie and Britannicus suffer the pangs of incommunicability on stage). The reference to a “monstre naissant” in the *Seconde Préface* (1676) serves to designate a middle phase, inconclusive, as Agrippine and Burrhus indicate at the end. This imprecision, this “in-betweenedness” is

12 McAuley, p. 348. In general, on Racine’s use of apparently multiple spaces in this play, one has to recognize the sound advice of Jacques Scherer who points out that Racine may have striven for a unity of place but that sometimes “les personnages ennemis se succèdent non sans quelque invraisemblance . . . Racine a prudemment laissé ce point dans l’ombre,” *La Dramaturgie classique*, p. 282.

therefore crucial to the sense of time of the tragedy. The stage becomes an intermediary present between the past and another present happening out of sight, but just as significant.

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