

# LETTERS

## THE EDITOR:

In my article, "Racine and Lowell" (*London Magazine*, October 1966), where I demonstrated why Robert Lowell's *Phaedra* could not be considered a translation or version of Racine's *Phèdre* (a question requiring no demonstration to those of his readers who know French sufficiently well to savour the original), I begged Mr. Lowell, in the interest of artistic integrity, "to insist that in future" his *Phaedra* "be not represented by publisher or producer to an unsuspecting public, liable to be seduced by the authority of his name, as a translation or version of Racine."

Of course one cannot reasonably expect him to take any action in the printed field before the next edition of the work, but as, subsequent to the appearance of my article, I found that his play at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre continued to be advertised in Britain as a translation of Racine, I am seeking the courtesy of your columns to bring home to Mr. Lowell, in case he missed the *London Magazine* article, the desirability of his taking prompt action to minimize further damage to Racine's reputation among the unwary, which Mr. Lowell's very eminence in other fields enhances.

It is impossible in the space permissible in a letter to recapitulate the many distortions of the original that can be marshalled in an article, so I may be allowed to confine myself to the major damage Lowell has done to Racine's heroine herself. For instance in Act III, scene 1, Racine's *Phaedra*, still believing her husband to be dead and crushed by her longing for Hippolytus, is beside herself and beseeches Oenone, her nurse, to win over the young man for her in an agonized utterance where Racine makes her touch the depths of humiliation. Racine, vss. 807-812, translated fairly closely:

Indeed, try every means to make him bend;  
Your words will please him better than  
did mine.

Go, press him hard, weep, moan, wail  
Phaedra's dying;

Be not ashamed to assume a pleading voice.  
I'll own it all; you are my one hope. Go:  
On your return depends my destiny.

Now Lowell:

Oenone, rush to him, use every means  
to bend or win him; if he fears the Queen's  
too proud, he'll listen to her slave. Plead,  
groan,  
insist. Say I am giving him my throne . . .  
No, say I'm dying.

The Queen's too proud! This is not the first time that Lowell's English is precisely the contrary of Racine's meaning. If it is intended as irony, never was irony less dramatic than in this nadir of uncontrolled self-abasement, while the cool calculation of the grotesque "no" in Lowell's last line completely destroys the impact of this most moving scene in the original.

Or let us look at Act IV, scene 6, perhaps the greatest scene in all Racine, which any true translator, whatever his eminence, is bound to approach with reverence. The news of Hippolytus' love for Aricia throws *Phaedra* into the pit of jealousy, the flames of which Racine consummately depicts in a series of eight questions darting out from *Phaedra*'s mouth at the unfortunate Oenone. Racine, vss. 1231-1236, translated fairly closely:

They are in love. By what spell did they  
cheat me?  
How did they see each other? Where?  
Since when?  
You knew it all. Then why let them mis-  
lead me?  
Could you not warn me of their secret  
bliss?  
Have they been often seen to seek, to greet  
each other?  
Would they flee hiding to the deepest  
woods?

Lowell:

They love each other! Passion blinded me.  
I let them blind me, let them meet and see  
each other freely! Was such bounty wrong?  
Oenone, you have known this all along.

You must have seen their meetings,  
watched them sneak  
off to their forest, playing hide-and-seek!

The sole interrogation mark that Lowell permits himself serves merely to point an otiose question covering up the contrary of Racine's meaning and psychological finesse.

Further on, Phaedra's jealousy drives her to wish the elimination of Aricia. This murderous thought suddenly brings her back in horror to her senses. Racine, vss. 1259-1268, translated fairly closely:

Ah! we must crush Aricia, must incite  
My husband's anger against her odious  
blood.

Let him not be content with a light sentence;

The sister's trespass far exceeds her  
brothers'.

In my wild woe I will exact it from him.  
What am I doing? How my reason  
wanders!

I, jealous, and from Theseus I'll exact it!  
My husband lives and still I'm all desire!

For whom? Whose is the heart I long to  
bend?

My every hair at each word stands on end!

Lowell:

I'll drive my husband to annihilate  
Aricia—let no trivial punishment,  
her instant death, or bloodless banishment . . .

What am I saying? Have I lost my mind?  
I am jealous, and call my husband! Bind  
me, gag me; I am frothing with desire.

My husband is alive, and I'm on fire!

For whom? Hippolytus. When I have said  
his name, blood fills my eyes, my heart  
stops dead.

If Lowell, in his zeal to represent Phaedra "frothing with desire," has smudged beyond recognition perhaps the most important line in the play portraying Phaedra's horror, *i.e.*, "My every hair at each word stands on end," he has completely ignored in this same speech the most important single word in the play, the climactic "*pardonne*," where Phaedra begs forgiveness for her trespasses from her fa-



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ther, Minos, the judge of souls in Hades. In fact he has distorted beyond forgiveness Phaedra's remorse and despair into desperate lust. Racine, vss. 1289-1294, fairly literally translated:

Forgive! A cruel god destroys your breed;  
Behold her vengeance in your daughter's  
frenzies!

Alas! my sad heart never tasted once  
The fruit of the dark crime whose shame  
pursues me.

Until the last gasp hunted my misfortunes,  
In torment I must yield my bitter life.

Lowell:

You cannot kill me; look, my murderer  
is Venus, who destroyed our family;  
Father, she has already murdered me.  
I killed myself—and what is worse, I  
wasted

My life for pleasures I have never tasted.  
My lover flees me still, and my last gasp  
is for the fleeting flesh I failed to clasp.

It is the height of irony that Lowell's last couplet, perhaps the most Racinian in tone in the whole work, should have been fashioned to crown his travesty of Racine's whole conception. If therefore Mr. Lowell, as he states in his foreword to the Faber edition, is indeed "tormented by the fraudulence of my own heavy touch," he can make honorable amends by ensuring his work is no longer misrepresented as a translation or version of Racine, but rather as *Phaedra* by Robert Lowell, based on Racine's *Phèdre*. This would give him the freedom to indulge in even more of those passages and lines where he may be Lowell at his best, without troubling to consider how remote he may be from Racine.

Samuel Solomon  
London

The non-Lowell English extracts are from Volume II of the author's version of Racine's plays (Random House).

## IN REPLY:

I've long been thinking of doing a drastic revision of my *Phaedra*, making it in places closer to Racine, and in other places less close. My objection to entitling my play *Phaedra* by Robert Lowell, based on Racine's *Phèdre*, is that this would be cumbersome

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