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CHILDREN OF THE NATION

OR

France, Orphanhood, and Jean Racine

Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast by the hand; for I will make him a great nation.

—Gen. 21:18

INCEST AND CLAUSTROPHOBIA

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

—Richie Havens, “Freedom”

Jean Racine’s consanguineous mother and father died before he was three. In 1643 he went to live with his grandmother and grandfather, whom he called “mother” and “father.”¹ In 1649 he went to live with Fathers and Mothers, or Brothers and Sisters, at the cloister [*claustrum*] at Port-Royal. Here the spiritual Christian Family, whose kinship rules the Port-Royalists strictly enforced, more or less replaced the orphan’s consanguineous family.

Angélique Arnauld, the Port-Royal abbey’s principal Sister-Mother, had distinguished her Cistercian order by its unusually rigorous principles of spiritual Orphanhood that made all people equally kin and nonkin as members of an “original family.”² Rejecting her own consanguineous family and refusing her father entrance to the house, Angélique argued that all religious human beings likewise should divorce their consanguineous kin and be spiritually reborn as “children of adoption.”³ Racine, in his *History of Port-Royal* (1697)—“a sacred chronicle . . . of holy history rather than of history”⁴—describes Angélique’s praise for her spiritual Sister-Daughters’ diremption, or divorce, of their consanguineous kin; he pays special attention to how “God shears from them fathers, sisters, and children”⁵ in the

solemn rite of “profession,” where a novice becomes both Spouse to Jesus and Sister to all (other) men. And Racine notes Angélique’s emphasis on schools for such foundlings or orphans as himself, who passed most of his childhood at the Port-Royalist School of the Granges.⁶

Spiritual Orphanhood at Port-Royal erased the difference between foundlings or orphans (those who had lost their consanguineous kin) and nonorphans (those who still had them) by rising above the ordinarily crucial difference between kin and nonkin. Both kin and nonkin became Kin: On the one hand, In Port-Royal, Racine called his consanguineous uncle Antoine Sconin, Bishop of Beauvais, “Father”;⁷ he called his consanguineous sister Marie and his grandmother’s sister “Sister,”⁸ and his consanguineous aunt Agnès, or Mère de Sainte-Thècle—later to become Mother Superior—both “Mother” and “Sister.” This “aunt-mother”—we will recall, Hamlet’s term for Gertrude—generally spoke with Racine only through the confessional grill, and according to some biographers, served Racine as something like a “mother.”⁹ On the other hand, Racine called the physician Jean Hamon “Father,” as he did the *solitaire* Antoine Le Maître (one of Racine’s schoolmasters at the Port-Royalist *collège* at Beauvais), in the same way that Le Maître called him “Son.”¹⁰ Thus was Jean Racine’s consanguineous orphanhood universalized in the spiritual Orphanhood at Port-Royal.

In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss the Port-Royalist universalization of consanguineous orphanhood and spiritual Orphanhood. The second section concerns Racine’s *Britannicus* and the actual relationship of the Roman Catholic ideology of adoption to the Roman imperial ideology of adrogation. The third section considers what this relationship might suggest for understanding anew the romantic national ideology that wants—in places as diverse as revolutionary France and contemporary China—to make everyone an equal “child of the nation.”

Port-Royal

Orphanhood and adoption are generally accepted, informing elements of Christian “holy history” (hagiography), but they are usually dismissed by secular anthropology as “figural” and by secular psychoanalysis as “hysterical.” For the last century Racine’s biographers, accepting these secularist views of the family, have helped to bolster an ideology of literal and normative family life. They have treated Sisterly hysteria as a subject only for prurient or pornographic interest. (They follow here in the footsteps of Mirabeau’s *Erotica biblion*.)¹¹ Or they have attacked the Catholic notion of Universal Siblinghood as an occasion for mere parental disobedience. (Mauron’s psychoanalytic critique of Angélique Arnauld is an example.)¹² Psychoanalytic biographers, especially, treat such Siblinghood as that at Racine’s Port-Royal as a sociologically neurotic “substitute” for or imitative “extension” of the nuclear family. Perhaps as psychoanalysts they must. Psychoanalysis, after all, actually grounds its epoch-making considerations of hysteria in critical analyses of

religious celibates.¹³ (Freud says that “the asylum of the cloister is nothing other than the social counterpart to the insulation of illness of individual neurotics.”¹⁴) An exceptional text here is the early biography of the seventeenth-century French “hysteric” Sister Jeanne des Anges, a quasi-orphan who had been seduced by a Catholic Brother—he had written a best-selling book on celibacy and spiritual sexuality—and whose visions had Jesus saying, “I will love you both as my daughter and my spouse.”¹⁵ (Jean Charcot was the biography’s editor.)

In contrast, Sainte-Beuve’s biography of Racine has at least the virtue of not ruling out the question of what a conjunction of Racine’s orphanhood with Port-Royal’s theology of orphanhood might imply. “Jean Racine,” writes Sainte-Beuve, “was an orphan from infancy, if one can call orphan a person in the midst of so numerous and saintly a family. . . . Port-Royal developed in Racine all the sentiments of a family; Racine was never an orphan.”¹⁶ The primary issue, though, for understanding Racine—and for understanding siblinghood generally—is not whether Racine was ever an orphan but whether human beings are really ever anything other than orphans. This issue informs the Port-Royalist and Jansenist idea of rebirth into a universal siblinghood. In the same way, we shall see that the question of whether human beings are to be adopted into a national family or *fraternité* informs the French Revolution’s doctrine of *régénération* in a national *Fraternité* (as promulgated by such Jansenist *philosophes* as the foundling d’Alembert, son of an ex-nun, and such Jansenist revolutionaries as the Abbé Grégoire) and also that doctrine’s concern with the question of whether a national fraternity requires either celibacy or incest (as discussed by the revolutionary Marquis de Sade: “And what’s the point of a revolution without general copulation?”).¹⁷

Even as he sojourned with the “original family” at Port-Royal, suspended between religious and secular orphanhood, Racine’s thinking was much concerned with the sect of the Essenes, understood as a proto-Christian familist sect with which sojourned the essentially parentless Jesus, *filius nullius* or “son of no one.” The young Racine, himself “son of no one alive,” reports from Josephus’ *Jewish War* that this sect, whose family organization the Port-Royalists regarded as near ideal, “takes into their group a few outside children . . . and regarding them as their own blood, forms and educates them.”¹⁸ And Racine reports from Josephus’ *De vita contemplativa* that the Essenes admitted to membership in their family “only those young people . . . with a perfect love for the most sublime virtue”¹⁹ and that these adopted children “served the Essene mothers and fathers in the way that well-born children serve their mothers and fathers . . . regarding [their new parents] just as communal fathers [and mothers], and having for them the same tenderness as those who share the same blood.”²⁰

Where most all human beings are siblings—as in Port-Royal or in the world perfectible according to Port-Royalist principles—it is not possible to obey the Old Testament obligation to be fruitful and multiply without violating the Old Testament laws against incest. And so the Port-Royalists, like other orders, called “incest” any act of sexual intercourse among Siblings.²¹ The Port-Royalists

explained the Essenes' aversion to marriage in such terms—as well as in terms of the supposed sexual incontinence of women, which the Essenes emphasized and which could only lead to cuckoldry, bastardy, and hence more incest.²² Port-Royal itself could hardly allow for exogamy or endogamy in the ordinary senses: Where all human beings are members or potential members of one group, marrying inside the group and marrying outside it are equally chaste and unchaste. Port-Royal was a familial cloister where claustrophobia meant incest. If one were to seek an escape from this prison-house without also rejecting its doctrine of essential universal kinship, one could be only a libertine or a practitioner of incest.

Racine left Port-Royal in the early 1660s.²³ Libertinism and incest then informed his life and work. Marie Champmeslé and Thérèse Du Parc were among his mistresses, and Mademoiselle de Beauchâteau and he became both spiritual parents (as godfather and godmother to a child of their friends)²⁴ and consanguineous parents (to an illegitimate child whom Racine, himself an orphan, put out for adoption).²⁵ More important in the present context, libertinism and incest informed Racine's dramatic work where, as Jean Giraudoux claims, "the stage is nothing other than the sanctuary of the family, or the central jail." "All the theater of Racine," writes Giraudoux, "is a theater of incest."²⁶ The plays Racine wrote during his productive period outside Port-Royal (*La Thébaïde*, the first, was written in 1663 and *Phèdre*, the last, in 1676) are rife with incest. In his dramatic work Racine staged both the ordinary incest taboo, where it is incestuous to have sexual intercourse with some people and not incestuous to have intercourse with others, and the extraordinary incest taboo, where there is no difference between chastity and incest since "All ye are brethren." It is incestuous for Phaedra to love her stepson Hippolytus, but it is chaste for her to love her ordinary husband Theseus. *Alexandre*, *Andromaque*, *Les Plaideurs*, *Britannicus*, *Bérénice*, and *Iphigénie* involve a similar, ordinary illicit love. (Other plays track that love even from birth, as in the brother-sister love in *Bajazet*, or from the womb, as in the rivalry between the two brothers in *La Thébaïde* and *Mithridate*.²⁷ In *La Thébaïde* Mademoiselle de Beauchâteau, Racine's co-godparent, played the role of "Antigone," Oedipus' nunlike sister-daughter, whose name means something like "Against generation" or "End of the bloodline.") *Britannicus*, we shall see later, delineates at one and the same time the ordinary and extraordinary structures of incest in Racine's drama.

After his "secular" years outside Port-Royal, Racine wanted to become a religious celibate or solitary. But "he who does not marry cuts off a large part of life, which is succession," as Racine's Josephus reports the Essenic doctrines. And "if everyone followed [his] example, all the race of men would die out."²⁸ And so, not surprisingly in view of Racine's previous life, his Port-Royalist counselors encouraged him to marry and raise a family. In 1677 he married a woman from far outside his own intellectual group (Catherine de Romanet had never heard a line of his plays). In 1679 he returned to Port-Royal to join his Mother Superior and aunt-mother Agnes ("It is she that God used to bring me back from my wanderings and miseries of fifteen years").²⁹ And he ceased writing for the secular stage, the "seat

of scorners,” which his Port-Royalist master Pierre Nicole had already attacked in 1660. (At that time the young Racine, on the verge of leaving Port-Royal, responded to Nicole’s attack in a public letter mocking Mother Angélique, Le Maître, Nicole, and other members of his family by adoption.) In his last years Racine ordered his son Louis never to set foot in the theater. And emphasizing the privilege of Christian spirit over family blood, he insisted that he be buried not beside his consanguineous father but at the tomb of Jean Hamon, the solitary whom he used to call “father.”

The Siblings Pascal

Once there was a little girl named Jacqueline. . . . She had a mama who was named Mrs. Jacqueline. Her papa was named Mr. Jacqueline. The little Jacqueline had two sisters who were both named Jacqueline, and two boy cousins who were named Jacqueline, and two girl cousins who were named Jacqueline, and an aunt and uncle who were named Jacqueline.

—Ionesco, *Story Number 1*

Ecclesiastical history and literature is rife with brothers and sisters who, barred by the distinction between kin and nonkin from consummating their love, become loving Brothers and Sisters.³⁰ They replace the terms of ordinary consanguineous kinship with the terms of extraordinary spiritual kinship.

Racine was interested in this Sibling love of siblings. His translation of Saint Basil’s *De institutionibus monasticis* attests as much.³¹ (Basil’s sister helped to preside as Sister over a community of nuns that followed an adaptation of her brother’s rules for monks, much as did the sisters of Pachomius and Benedict, who were also founders of cenobitical orders.) And as Racine knew, the community at Port-Royal had its fill of sister/Sister associates. Many Port-Royalist siblings followed Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the founder of the Cistercian order, which provided the early Port-Royalists with basic theological tenets. As mentioned earlier, Bernard loved his sister Scholastica, converting her to Sister, and his sermons on the *Song of Songs* conflate “wife” with “sister” (*soror mea sponsa*). In the Port-Royal family, several members of the Arnauld and Le Maître families had been consanguineous kin before their “conversion” to Kin, for example. And Racine reports of the sister-loving Claude Lancelot that he “was not touched with grace until the taking of the veil by his sister, when, in a torrent of tears, he saw her advancing, feet naked, carrying an enormous black cross.”³²

The most famous sibling relationship at Port-Royal was that of Jacqueline and Blaise Pascal. In 1655, while Racine was a student at Port-Royal,³³ Pascal—mathematician, philosopher, and author of the pro-Port-Royalist *Lettres provinciales* (published that year)—followed his sister Jacqueline when she became a Port-Royal Sister. Blaise’s “knowledge of religion,” says Racine in his *History of Port-Royal*, “was enabled by means of the mademoiselle, his sister, Sister in this nunnery.”³⁴

Pascal followed his sister-turned-Sister to the Siblinghood mindful of the love they had felt for each other since their childhoods. Jacqueline had written:

For though I knew his love who followed,
Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having him, I must have
Nought beside.³⁵

Gilberte Pascal, a sister to Blaise and Jacqueline who had married their cousin Florin Perier, said of the sibling couple that “their hearts were but one heart.”³⁶ Perhaps fearing a forbidden consummation to their love, Jacqueline sought to transcend consanguineous kinship by joining a Sisterhood,³⁷ where her love for Blaise would be no more or less taboo than for any man. Jacqueline thus contrasts the unequal love of a consanguineous brother for his particular sister with the universal love of God for every human being. She tells Blaise, “You know well enough that it is from God alone that all love comes.”³⁸ At first Blaise opposed Jacqueline’s intentions to “die to the world,” citing propertal considerations. But Jacqueline argued successfully that he should join her as Brother. “If you do not have the strength to follow me at least do not hold me back.”³⁹ Finally Blaise gave his sister his blessing for her plan to become his Sister, and renounced intercourse with the outside world. Gilberte said that “not only did Blaise not want to have attachments to other people, but he did not want others to have attachments for him.”⁴⁰ Denouncing marriage (“Il est injuste qu’on s’attache”),⁴¹ he declared it to be “homicide, and almost deicide.” Absolute aloneness or at-oneness, said this solitary, was “the only proper regimen for a Christian.”⁴²

Sainte-Beuve, when he considers the conversion of Lancelot thanks to his Port-Royalist sister, evokes Chateaubriand’s romantic story, in *René*, of René’s love for his sister/Sister, Amelia, which centers on a dramatic Sistering like Jacqueline Pascal’s. In Chateaubriand’s novel, Amelia, when she decides to enter a Sisterhood, expresses the hopes that her brother will find a wife in whom “you would feel that you had found a sister again” and, since “many times we used to sleep together . . . we might one day be together again in the same tomb.”⁴³ René, who realizes neither that he is in love with his sister nor that she is in love with him, suspects that Amelia wants to become a Sister in order to escape “a passion for a man that she dare not avow.” He cannot bring himself to acknowledge that he is himself the man Amelia loves—until a moment of peculiarly Christian tragedy. This occurs in the intersection, as it were, between the sister Amelia’s death to the world (her Pascalian “detachment” from it), which is the first part of the ceremony for becoming a nun, and her rebirth as a Sister by spiritual marriage to her Brother Jesus, which is the second part. At that instant—the intersection between repressed consanguineous sibling love and expressed universalist Sibling love, spiritual death and spiritual marriage—the brother René overhears his sister Amelia begging God to forgive her “criminal passion.”⁴⁴ René then expresses his love for his sister: “The horrible truth suddenly grew clear, and I lost control of my senses. Falling across the death sheet I pressed my sister in my arms and cried out: ‘Chaste spouse of Jesus Christ,

receive this last embrace through the chill of death and the depths of eternity which have already parted you from your brother.” “For the most violent passion,” writes Chateaubriand, “[religion] substitutes a kind of burning chastity in which lover and virgin are one.”⁴⁵

The Tragedy of Catholic Profession

René de Chateaubriand, who loved his sister Lucile and contemplated becoming claustrated as a Brother in the Catholic orders,⁴⁶ comments in *René* on the dramatic spectacle of profession, where a kinsperson becomes a Kinsperson: “nothing can ever again be tragic to a man who has witnessed such a spectacle, nor can anything ever again be painful for one who has lived through it.”⁴⁷ In the religious celibate’s profession, the Christian aesthetic more than matches Greek tragedy.

Profession outdoes classical tragedy when it comes to kinship. For a nun’s arrival at a fourfold kinship relation to a single person (God is her Spouse, Parent, Child and Sibling) transcends the situation in Greek tragedy where one person plays more than one kinship role. In the *Iliad*, for example, tragic Andromache speaks thus to Hector, her doomed parent-sibling-spouse: “You are my father and my lady mother, you are my brother and you are my husband.”⁴⁸ And in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Electra speaks similarly to Orestes, her long-lost parent-sibling:

To call you father is constraint of fact, and all the love I could have borne my mother turns your way, while she is loathed as she deserves; my love for a pitilessly slaughtered sister turns to you. And now you were my steadfast brother after all.⁴⁹

The Christian culmination of this tradition of manifold kinship relations erases the Greek standard of consanguinity (as in Shakespeare’s Roman plays)⁵⁰ and raises that standard to a spiritual level (as in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*). In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the Jansenist hero Saint Bernard thus calls the Virgin Mary “the daughter of her own son”—a holy mystery, since the incest involved is beyond the distinction between chastity and its opposite.⁵¹ And Nietzsche, in a christological passage of his *Birth of Tragedy*, writes that “Sophocles with his [variously incestuous] Oedipus strikes up the prelude to a transcendent victory hymn for the saint.”⁵²

The ceremony of Catholic profession marks the transcendent end of ordinary kinship with human beings (where spouse, child, parent, and sibling are different persons) and the beginning of extraordinary kinship with God (where Spouse, Child, Parent, and Sibling are the same Person). In the “profession,” a religious novice enters a coffin, hears the extraordinary “service for the dead” recited over her dead body, is reborn, and marries Jesus in the course of an extraordinary “marriage service.”

Profession as such was Racine’s favorite theater, and his favorite protagonist was the profession’s sacrifice or *victime*—a term meaning “religious novice on the point of being ‘sacrificed’ as a nun in the rite of profession” as well as “tragic heroine.” (It also means “oblate,” or child offered up to the Church, discussed in a

later section.) Racine wept hard at ordinary funerals, as if he were again losing his consanguineous parents,⁵³ but it was the figural “service for the dead” in the rite of profession that really attracted him.⁵⁴ Louis Racine, the playwright’s son, writes of his father that “he never attended such ceremonies without crying, however much he was *indifferent* to the victim”; and, in reference to an upcoming profession, he remarks that “Mme. [Françoise d’Aubigné, marquise] de Maintenon knows that ‘Racine who wants to weep, will come.’”⁵⁵

Racine wept all the more at the ritual professions of people with whom he was not wholly *indifferent* in terms of consanguinity,⁵⁶ including especially the professions of his daughters Anne, Elisabeth, and Marie-Catherine.⁵⁷ Here the fear- and pity-provoking aspect of the profession elicited an especially powerful response from Racine. (Aristotle argues that men, in seeing their own families threatened with sacrifice or victimization, are able to fear only for themselves, only for those who are homogeneous with them in danger; and in this case fear drives out pity.⁵⁸ In specifically Christian religious “victimization,” however, the repulsion from death is balanced by the attraction of rebirth.) Concerning the effect on him of his daughter Anne becoming his Sister by the rite of profession, Racine thus wrote to Louis: “Without flattering your sister, you know she is an angel; your mother and your eldest sister cried a great deal, and as for me, I did not cease weeping, and I think that it even contributed to deranging my feeble health.”⁵⁹

The “Father” Pasquier Quesnel, who presided at the “sacrificial” quasi-profession of Marie-Catherine, suggests that Racine—who had sent his illegitimate child by Thérèse Du Parc to the Foundling Hospital—educated his legitimate children precisely to become victims of this adoption by God into universal siblinghood:

The good education that Racine gave her and the sentiments for religion with which he inspired her have led her to the altar of sacrifice. She has believed what he said: that within every human being there are two beings:

L’un tout esprit et tout céleste
 Veut qu’au ciel sans cesse attache
 Et des biens éternels touche
 Je compte pour rien tout le *reste*.

Please assure Jean Racine that I have offered his victim on the altar.⁶⁰

ROME AND CHRISTENDOM; OR, *BRITANNICUS*

Roman Adrogation and Christian Adoption

Arrogation they saie is, when he which is his own man, and at libertie, is receiued in steede of a sonne. But *Adoption* is, when hee which is receiued, is vnder an other man’s power.

—Marbeck, *Book of Notes*

Mindful of the twice-orphaned Racine’s interest in adoption and the claustrophobic aspect of universal kinship, and with a view toward interpreting his *Britannicus*

as the pivot in an *oeuvre* about both consanguineous and spiritual incest, I shall here begin to explore the ways that the kinship structure of “secular” Rome’s imperial family—the apparent focus of *Britannicus*—is in certain respects identical to the kinship system of “spiritual” Rome’s Holy Christian family—the subject of all Racine’s work. The kinship structure of Rome—which we will consider here in terms of Roman adrogation and Christian adoption, Roman empress and Christian Virgin Mother, Roman vestals and Christian nuns, and Roman sublation and Christian Oblation—expresses the political incarnation of Christianity’s Holy Family (God and Mary) and hence Racine’s Port-Royalist “original family.”

In imperial Rome succession to the throne often depended upon adrogation by the divine emperor as God, just as in Roman Catholicism success meant spiritual adoption by the divine Jesus. Nonconsanguineous adrogated sons like Tiberius and Nero were heirs to the throne, and even the consanguineous son of the Emperor had to be adopted by him if he were to succeed. Emperor Augustus—whom Seneca, in *The Pumpkinification of Claudius*, presents as the patriarchal archetype of Rome⁶¹—adopted Tiberius and willed him the throne, after rejecting as heir his consanguineous grandson Agrippa Postumus. Similarly, Emperor Claudius did exactly the same for Nero after rejecting Britannicus—his consanguineous offspring by his third wife Messalina.⁶² The emperors thus replaced consanguinity—or at least patrilineal consanguinity—as the standard for inheritance with such legal affiliations as adrogation and marriage.

Men like Tiberius and Nero, who were the sons of the emperor both by adrogation and by marriage (as they were the consanguineous sons of the emperor’s wife), generally could lay claim to the throne only if the ruler had no consanguineous sons.⁶³ Ambitious adrogated sons or their mothers therefore chose either to kill the emperor’s consanguineous sons (as Nero killed Britannicus)⁶⁴ or become the sons-in-law to their imperial stepfathers, thus circumventing the need to kill. Tiberius thus married his stepsister Junia (the namesake for the character in *Britannicus*) and Nero married his stepsister Octavia. Since Roman law generally did not allow for sexual relations between adopted and consanguineous children, these liaisons of Tiberius and Nero were “incestuous” in much the same way that the famous liaison between Caligula and his consanguineous sisters was incestuous (see fig. 8).⁶⁵ Marriages like those linking Tiberius with Junia and Nero with Octavia were therefore regarded as sacred. (The term *taboo* means both “sacred, consecrated” and “dangerous, forbidden.”)⁶⁶ And these marriages—including that of Nero and Octavia, described in *Britannicus*—were frequently sexless and barren.⁶⁷

In this way the imperial family of Rome, called divine by the Romans, like the Holy Family of Roman Christianity, transcended the difference between consanguineous kin and nonkin. That is, the Emperors Augustus and Claudius partly erased the standard of consanguinity by disinheriting their sons and, as divine Emperors, they partly raised themselves above that standard by arranging for the empire to pass to adrogated sons who had married the emperors’ daughters. The adrogated sons, Tiberius and Nero, upon becoming emperors, continued this dia-



Fig. 8. Bronze Roman coin. Reign of Emperor Caligula (A.D. 12–A.D. 41). The coin depicts Caligula and his three sisters. (American Numismatic Society, New York)

lectic of kinship. They divorced their sister-wives and killed their adoptive brothers. Tiberius divorced his stepsister Julia when he came to power and arranged for the death of Agrippa Postumus;⁶⁸ Nero divorced Octavia, and raped—according to Roman historians—and killed Britannicus, the once official heir and fiancé to Junia.

Racine times *Britannicus*, his study of Nero's birth as political monster, with the period of Nero's divorce from his stepsibling Britannicus. Then Nero might have completely transcended the distinction between consanguineous and nonconsanguineous kinship. (Christians believed this transcendence had been accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified during the reign of Tiberius.) To Junia, betrothed to Nero's brother-by-adoption Britannicus, Nero says, "The sister touches you less than the brother."⁶⁹

Roman Empress and Virgin Mother

Even animals devoid of reason as they are and accused by us of cruel ferocity spare their own kind: wild beasts respect their own likeness. But the fury of tyrants does not stop short of their own relations: they treat friends and strangers alike.

—Seneca, *De Clementia* (a letter to Nero at the age of twenty-two)

Agrippina's place in *Britannicus*' imperial Rome involves the power that some women, though they could not rule on their own, had as people who ruled, or were feared to rule, through their husbands or sons.⁷⁰ By analogy, Livia, the first Roman empress, came to rule through her son, Tiberius. Livia divorced her husband (Tiberius Claudius Nero), married the divine Emperor Augustus,⁷¹ convinced Augustus both to reject as imperial heir Augustus' own consanguineous grandson (Agrippa Postumus) and to adopt her own consanguineous son by her earlier marriage (Tiberius), and eventually ruled through the son. As did Livia, so did Agrippina. As

Racine tells the story, Agrippina divorced her husband (Domitius Ahenobarbus), incestuously married her uncle, the divine Emperor Claudius,⁷² convinced Claudius to adopt her consanguineous son by her earlier marriage (Nero)—and when Claudius was poisoned (perhaps by Agrippina), seemed to rule through the son. Her voice was imperial: “Ma voix / Ait fait un Empereur.”⁷³

Concerning Agrippina’s power, the Roman political historian and theorist Tacitus remarks: “That a woman should sit before Roman standards [as Agrippina did] was an unprecedented novelty. She was asserting her *partnership* in the empire her ancestors had won.”⁷⁴ Tacitus explains the sacred (taboo) quality of Agrippina’s role as “imperial jointress of the state” (as *Hamlet’s* Claudius calls it) in the mythic kinship structure of Rome: “Agrippina enhanced her status [by entering] the Capitol in a carriage. This distinction, traditionally reserved for *priests* and *sacred* objects, increased the *reverence* felt for a woman who to this day remains *unique* as the *daughter* of a great commander and the *sister, wife, and mother* of emperors.”⁷⁵ Tacitus means that Agrippina is the daughter of the hero Germanicus Caesar, the wife of Emperor Claudius, the sister of Emperor Caligula, and the mother of Emperor Nero. Racine’s Agrippina thus claims she is at once “*filie, femme, soeur, et mère de vos maîtres.*”⁷⁶

Behind Agrippina’s claim in *Britannicus* that she is the “daughter, wife, sister, and mother of your masters,” says one reader, is “the patrician arrogance of . . . seventeenth-century France.”⁷⁷ I would argue, however, that the claim should be understood no more in terms of France than in terms of ancient Rome—the seat both of the “secular” institution (the Empire) and of the “religious” one (Christianity). No one in France besides nuns—who are to some extent, as I will argue, Roman vestal virgins converted to Christian ends—could make a claim of fourfold connection to God like the Christian claim for Jesus’ mother Mary and Tacitus’ claim for Nero’s mother Agrippina.

Rome’s Agrippina in relation to the divine Emperor is like the Virgin Mary in relation to the divine Jesus. She is his/His spouse, daughter, wife, and sister. Chateaubriand saw in Racine’s Iphigenia the “Christian daughter,” in Racine’s Andromache the “Christian mother,” and in Racine’s Phaedra “the Christian spouse.”⁷⁸ But Chateaubriand failed to mark the role of Racine’s Agrippina as a figure with an incestuous fourfold relationship to emperor or god—a role like that of the Virgin Mary in relationship to God. And so, despite Chateaubriand’s focus on religious profession, he missed the full dimensions of Racinian tragedy.

Thanks to his mother Agrippina, Nero is caught in the confusion (even conflation) of parent with child. It is Agrippina’s power to withhold political birth from Nero, as well as her role as quadrifold kin to the divine Roman Emperor(s), that makes Agrippina the Volumnia-like imperial linchpin of *Britannicus*. That power explains why Racine says in his second preface to the play that he was concerned with the faithful portrayal of her above all else. Having *delivered* Nero to the world on his first birthday, Agrippina refuses to fully *liberate* him politically. Nero thus lacks

political “advancement,” like Hamlet, and he is driven, like Orestes, to commit a matricide that might gain him what the liberated [*affranchi*] Narcissus calls *liberty* (“Vous serez libre”)⁷⁹ or free filial status. So long as the mother lives, the son lives only in her. Racine’s Agrippina is thus a “symbol of seizure [*agrippement*]”⁸⁰—like, we have seen, the Theban Sphinx, strangling or *gripping* her victims in vaginal sphincter muscles. For upon learning that Nero had formed an attachment to Junia—a woman other than his stepsister Octavia—Agrippina used to her advantage the tension between Nero as her consanguineous son and as *Pater Patriae*, seducing him and keeping him under wraps.⁸¹

Writing in imperial Rome, Nero’s tutor Seneca—unhappily absent from the city, in *Britannicus*—argued in *The Pumpkinification of Claudius* that the ruler is the father of his people.⁸² In *Britannicus*, though, Nero has to vacillate between filial status (*liberty*) and parentarchy. At first he seems more interested in liberation from the tyranny of his uncle-father Claudius than in himself becoming a parental authority. As Suetonius says, he refused the title of imperial *Pater Patriae* or *Parens Patriae*—a term meaning “the ruling father of one’s tribe or people.”⁸³ The position of *Pater Patriae* (which Nero eventually accepted) has incestuous implications, since the father of everyone entails being the father of one’s mother. Only after Nero was really “put on” (as Fortinbras says of Hamlet)⁸⁴ did Nero kill *liberi* like Narcissus and require that all Romans call him “Father.”⁸⁵

According to the Roman historians to whom Racine refers in his preface, Agrippina knows that she must die in order for Nero truly to rule. Tacitus tells how an astrologer announced to Agrippina that her as-yet-unborn son will become emperor, provided that he kill her. Agrippina, more loving of her son Nero than was Laius of his son Oedipus, responds, “Let him kill me provided he becomes Emperor.”⁸⁶ For Agrippina, it was enough to rule from the grave.

Roman Vestal and Christian Nun

What is there to say . . . about Junia’s seeking refuge at the Vestals and being placed under the protection of the people, as if the people protected someone under Nero?

—Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits littéraires*

Junia in *Britannicus* is, like Agrippina, an imperial jointress of the state: she is the last blood ancestor of the man-god emperor Augustus Caesar, and Claudius (Nero’s uncle-father) had once promised her the empire as dowry if she married Britannicus (Claudius’ consanguineous son).⁸⁷ But Nero, adopted son of Claudius, has killed Britannicus, the consanguineous son, and wants to marry Junia. A quintessential tragic hero in the oeuvre of Racine, she must now choose between becoming empress through marriage to Nero and becoming vestal through “death to the world” and spiritual marriage to the man-god.

Like such Racinian tragic heroes and heroines as Titus,⁸⁸ Berenice, and Phaedra, Junia dies, but she dies, like a Catholic victim, or sacrifice, in the rite of profession,

only to the world, on an altar both Roman Catholic and Roman imperial. (Critics of *Britannicus*, without taking into account the role of the vestal virgins in the overall *mythos* of the piece, have complained since 1670 that Junia's joining the virgins is irrelevant to the plot as a whole and belies historical fact.)⁸⁹ Junia's flight to the vestals ends the "liberal" first part of Nero's reign (which had begun well, in much the same way that his adoptive father Claudius' reign had begun well) and marks the start of the second part, when he becomes a Western archetype for monstrous unkindness to kin and nonkin alike (for which his consanguineous father Domitius Ahenobarbus had been notorious). Nero begins to go mad with cruelty after Junia, who might have been the woman to match his lover-mother as imperial jointress of the state, becomes a vestal virgin.⁹⁰ Junia's profession fixes the sadistic Nero's fate and reputation.

Junia's death to the world also expresses the tension between the implicit Roman Catholic and the explicit Roman imperial aspects of the familial and political quandaries informing *Britannicus*. Junia's sublation, through the vestal Sisterhood in religious Rome, of Agrippina's part in the Holy Family of imperial Rome—and, incidentally, of the Amazon Sister Antiope's nunlike role⁹¹—thus helps to locate the point of vacillation, in Racine's claustrophobic oeuvre, between a turning toward the spiritual incest figured in the *claustrum* at Port-Royal and a turning away from it.⁹²

Racine's linkage of Roman vestals—and mythic Amazons—with Port-Royalist Sisters has a historical basis. For the Christian nunnery is the Roman community of vestal virgins transformed to Christian ends. During the Roman Emperor Constantine's reign in the fourth century, when the official state religion became Christianity, the Pauline Christian ideology of adoption began to replace the imperial doctrine of adrogation, and the Christian Sisterhood devoted to the adoration of Mary began to replace the cult of the vestals devoted to safeguarding the Palladia—archaic idols symbolic of an older matriarchy that figured in Roman imperial politics in the persons of the linchpin empresses Livia and Agrippina. After all, Livia and Agrippina, are—like the Virgin Mary—daughters, sisters, mothers, and spouses of the ruler/Ruler.⁹³

Christian Sisters thus have many of the same rituals and powers as vestal virgins.⁹⁴ In the Roman ceremony in which a novice becomes a vestal, for example, the priest shears her hair and the *pontifex*, or head priest, calls her *Amata* ("Loved One").⁹⁵ Moreover, a Catholic nun has familial and political privileges like those of a vestal. Nobody human had the *patria potestas* (a paterfamilias' absolute power) over the vestal; only the *pontifex maximus*, the vestal's "religious father," could lord it over her. The virgins are adrogated, not merely adopted, "children." (In Rome adrogation meant the person adopted was under no *potestas* and was "her own person.")⁹⁶ The vestal was above the ordinary law not only insofar as she could free any prisoner she came across on his way to execution, as suggested in *Britannicus*, but also insofar as she could dispose of her property at will. The nunnery in seventeenth-century France had a similar liberating effect, as suggested by the case of

Jacqueline Pascal.⁹⁷ “A convent,” writes one historian, “was . . . the only place a young woman could escape her father’s absolute authority.”⁹⁸

Junia is a Roman imperial or Roman Catholic version of Antigone—a woman at the end of the bloodline⁹⁹ reeling from the deaths of brothers¹⁰⁰—and toward the end of *Britannicus* she is reported to kneel before an idol statue of the divine Emperor Augustus Caesar, who is both her spiritual *pontifex maximus*, insofar as she is vestal, and her consanguineous great grandfather, insofar as she is not. In *Britannicus* it thus becomes ambiguous whether God is the Caesar, to whom Junia bends the knee, or the Christian God, whom the Port-Royalist worshiped. The term *pontifex maximus*, after all, names not only Caesars—as on the inscription PONTIF. MAXIM in the denarius that the scribes and Pharisees presented to Jesus in their attempt to trip him up on the question of taxation—but also the Roman Catholic pontiffs who successfully appropriated Roman imperial terminology and power to Roman Christian ends. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s” said Jesus. But who is God? The Romans held that Caesar was, as suggested by the inscription on the other side of the same denarius: CAESAR. DIVI. AUG. F. AUGUSTUS [Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus].¹⁰¹ If the Caesar is God, then everything should be rendered to the man-God Tiberius. Just so, if Tiberius Caesar’s explicit archrival Jesus is Christ the Lord, as believed by Roman Christians, then everything goes to the man-God Jesus Christ—and nothing goes to Nero Caesar.

The Vestal Daughters of Jesus’ Childhood

What, are they children? . . . Will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players—as it is most like, if their means are no better—their writers do them wrong to make them exclaim against their own succession?

—*Hamlet*, 2.2.343–49

The crowd that saves Junia from Nero’s wrath in *Britannicus*, says Lucien Goldmann, represents the people of God—a people that until *Britannicus* was both silent and invisible in Racine’s work.¹⁰² (“‘Indeed, you are a hidden God.’”)¹⁰³ *Britannicus* in this view represents the critical transition in Racine’s works between the ambiguously secular tragedies up to and including *Phèdre*, which were written before his return to Port-Royal in 1679, and the later quasi-religious tragedies. The community of vestal virgins, whose members are (like Junia in *Britannicus*) bereft of all consanguineous kin, remains unseen in *Britannicus*, but it does appear in *Esther* (1689) and *Athalie* (1691). The orphan Racine wrote these plays about orphans at the request of the influential Mme. de Maintenon—a woman who had been orphaned at an early age (like Racine) and had founded the famous school at Saint-Cyr for foundling and orphan girls, as well as for impoverished aristocratic girls who had thus been “offered up” to the Church.

The orphans, foundlings, parentless and “suppositious children” depicted in

