

Reconsidering the
canon through
jansenist
contradiction in
phaedra



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In *Questioning Racinean Tragedy*, John Campbell takes issue with analyses of Phaedra that simplistically map Jansenist belief onto the play, or make assumptions about authorial intent as, “ an uneasy amalgam of theology, biography, and tragedy” (153). Campbell sees the conventional Jansenist reading of Phaedra, which usually understands the play as unequivocally exhibiting a religious preoccupation with tragic destiny and human fallibility, as producing a Racinean “ corpse” (154), meaning a singular reading foreclosing the possibility of renewed interpretations. Given the limited biographical information that would clarify the extent of Racine’s Jansenist influence, and ongoing debates as to the relationship between such information and artistic production, how are we to situate Racine’s biography and his relationship to Port-Royal? This paper argues that Jansenism can still yield intriguing interpretations of Phaedra if scholars accept the inevitable limitations of religion or biography as explanatory tools. Instead, by using the frameworks and evidence of biography and Jansenism, the contradictions of Phaedra should be explored, rather than obscured in the interest of an authoritative reading. Therefore, where Campbell, in his chapter “ The God Question,” feels the question at hand is whether or not Jansenism is truly an organizing principle of Racinean tragedy, this paper puts aside questions that seek a single historical truth, and reads Phaedra with the concern of what contradictions a Jansenist reading can yield. A clear example of how an examination of the text can yield concurrent support for and rejection of Jansenist belief in Phaedra is found in the conditions and consequences of Phaedra’s sin. Phaedra’s “ crime” is often taken as evidence of Racine’s allegiance to Jansenism, because her tortuous psychological experience reflects the Jansenist emphasis on individual suffering. Phaedra’s dialogue, <https://assignbuster.com/reconsidering-the-canon-through-jansenist-contradiction-in-phaedra/>

and the way in which her lamenting to Oenone, Theseus, and Hippolytus is preoccupied solely with her inner turmoil demonstrate, “ an attitude of indifference to the world and its institutions” (Sedgwick 198). Scholars have argued that Phaedra’s character bears an aloof relation to the action of the play, which other characters initiate (Short 39-40). When Phaedra tells Theseus, “ My sole desire must be for solitude” (Racine 456), along with her threats of suicide to Oenone, the reader is repeatedly reminded that Phaedra’s isolation could remove her from the world (and the play) altogether. This reality speaks to the Jansenist ideal of spiritual investigation and conflict being a highly personal quest, rather than mediated by institutions or communities. While this textual evidence points to a Jansenist disconnect from society, Phaedra’s suffering is simultaneously a connection to society, which undermines a Jansenist reading. Phaedra’s “ bitter secret” (Racine 454) is that she is on the verge of both adultery and incest. In fact, Racine labels her feelings an “ unlawful passion” (446), showing that Phaedra’s crime can only be understood as a product of the law. The pandemonium created in Phaedra’s psyche by the prospect of transgressing social institutions reveals a momentous deference to those institutions. The law emerges as a moral authority in the play, conflicting with the Jansenist priority attributed to divine authority and willingness to prioritize, “ the interests of the individual above the interests of society” (Sedgwick 196). Jansenist followers in the past have prioritized the individual’s well-being even over the good of the religious community at Port-Royal (Sedgwick 197), and have been so, “ preoccupied with their own lives” (Sedgwick 198), as to decline involvement with the state or Church at a time when other religious groups were in bitter conflict with these institutions. However, Phaedra’s

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suffering in part results from her recognizing the suffering and dissolution submitting to her passion will bring to the society and family if she transgresses the taboos of incest and adultery. We see that Phaedra, particularly in this problem of what the tragic heroine's suffering means and how it is experienced, at once contains the seeds for readings for and against Jansenist interpretation. Racinian scholarship that replicates the canonical consensus of Phaedra as a recitation of Jansenist morality must elude contradiction in order to preserve such a reading. Short's analysis of Phaedra, which is a conventional interpretation granting Phaedra the most importance of any character and rendering her struggle an almost entirely internal one, contains two moments of recognition of the ways the play actually may not entirely adhere to this canonical explanation. First, he notes that there is a conspicuous lack of, "true monologue in which a character explores a state of mind" (Short 33). Second, Short contextualizes Phaedra's passion, recognizing it is incestuous because, "the world in which the events of the play take place" (36) define it as such. Here, there is potential for Short to examine how the conventions of the play (the absence of monologue) contradict the well-received idea that Phaedra is an isolated character, and at how social conventions (the law) precipitate Phaedra's understanding of her own transgression. However, in both these instances, the analysis opts to overlook the potential for alternative readings these observations pose. Short only "wonders" (33) at Racine's choice not to use monologue and ultimately sees Phaedra's crime as entirely "within herself" (37), choosing to gloss over contradictions in order to preserve the standard exegesis. This omission of incongruity seems to be the culprit in Campbell's frustration with the way Racine has been rendered a lifeless "corpse" (154). <https://assignbuster.com/reconsidering-the-canon-through-jansenist-contradiction-in-phaedra/>

The denial of contradiction in favor of a cohesive vision of Phaedra as demonstrating a Jansenist world-view has been legitimated primarily by invoking biographical evidence from Racine's association with the religious sect. The Worthen introduction to Phaedra states confidently that "Racine's education at Port-Royal played a decisive role in his intellectual life and in the course of his career as a dramatist" (444), and primes new readers to interpret Phaedra through, "the philosophical themes of Jansenist belief" (444). When the textual evidence seems to contain incongruities (as Short observes), sparse biographical facts are usually used as additional evidence that allows the idea that Racine wrote a Jansenist play to win out. But, do these bits of biography really confirm a Jansenist reading? While the historical support is limited, there is a more troubling assumption that a, "pervasive influence" (Worthen 444) from a religion means only that the beliefs of that religion are then transmitted through the author's artistic expression. Using this model, scholars assume that if Racine was at one point a Jansenist, then his tragedies unmistakably convey Jansenist standards. Convincingly, Campbell casts considerable doubt on past readings of Phaedra that label it solely a product of Jansenism, and take for granted that Racine's relationship to Port-Royal would without question lead to plays that unproblematically espouse Jansenist action and belief. Yet, this paper parts with Campbell in finding the question of whether one should categorically be for or against a Jansenist reading to inadequately contest how Racine becomes a "dead body" (154). Though we have little biographical information detailing Racine's Jansenism, we are able to assume that Racine's relationship to that theology would not be so simplistic as to be either a whole hearted embrace-producing works that unequivocally and (in <https://assignbuster.com/reconsidering-the-canon-through-jansenist-contradiction-in-phaedra/>)

every aspect) without contradiction expose Jansenism; or a complete break, rejection-yielding texts where Jansenism has no presence at all. If Phaedra can be read both in favor of, and against the beliefs of Jansenism, perhaps it is productive to embrace both readings in order to generate new questions about the text. Understanding a singular reading as only that, and the impossibility of full biographical accounts or the excavation of authorial intent, keeps the text “ open,” with out the fixed meanings that would render it lifeless. Works Cited Campbell, John. *Questioning Racinian Tragedy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. “ Jean Racine.” *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*. 4th Ed. Worthen, W. B., ed. Cambridge: Heinle and Heinle, 2003. 444. Racine, Jean. *Phaedra*. In *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*. 4th Ed. Worthen, W. B., ed. Cambridge: Heinle and Heinle, 2003. 444-463. Short, J. P. “ Moral Issues.” *Racine: Phaedre*. Valencia: Grant & cutler Ltd, 1983. 32-41.—-. “ Phaedre.” *Racine: Phaedre*. Valencia: Grant & cutler Ltd, 1983. 48-73. Sedgwick, Alexander. “ The Nature of Jansenism.” *Jansenism in Seventeenth-Century France*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia. 1977. 193-207.