

# **Racine at the Girls' School**

**a play by**

**John Spurling**

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“Never was there a face so spiritual, so touching, so expressive, never such innocent freshness, never so many graces, nor so much fire, sparkle and humour, never a creature more seductive.”

*The Duc de Saint-Simon describing Mme de Caylus in the part of Esther.*

“Monsieur Racine, delighted to have an opportunity of winning consideration at the Court and of making his fortune, did not hesitate for a moment to return to his old profession of poet. He saw that now it would prove incomparably more lucrative than it had been in Paris, where he had worked for a long time without becoming very rich.”

*Memoirs of the Curé of Versailles, translated in Geoffrey Brereton's Jean Racine.*

“But now I find that I have a far more terrible affair on my hands, and that the King has been led to believe that I am a Jansenist. I must confess that, when I caused there to be so much singing in Esther about ‘Roi, chassez la calomnie’, I hardly expected that I should myself be attacked by calumny one day.”

*Jean Racine, in a letter to Mme de Maintenon, 1698, translated by Geoffrey Brereton.*

The action takes place in the main hall of Saint-Cyr Girls' School, near Versailles, during rehearsals for Racine's Esther, on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1689.

*Note: The French text for the Chorus's songs can be found in any French edition of Racine's Esther. Jean-Baptiste Moreau's original music is in the British Library in London and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Or the Director of Music at the Cheltenham Ladies' College might be able to help, with the version edited and transcribed by John Wright for the first production of RACINE AT THE GIRLS' SCHOOL.*

*The title of Racine's play and the leading character in it should be pronounced in the French manner: Estair.*

RACINE AT THE GIRLS' SCHOOL was first performed by the Cheltenham Ladies' College in the Princess Hall, as part of the Daily Telegraph Cheltenham Literary Festival, on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1992. The play was directed by Judi Bond, with the following cast:

BRITANNIA.....	Katy Ness
MARIE DE BRINON.....	Coco Berns
Mme DE MAINTENON.....	Laura Townend
Mme DE CAYLUS.....	Justine Levy
JEAN RACINE.....	Madeleine North
MARQUIS DE VILLETTE.....	Sophie Speyer
Mlle DE MARCILLY ('ELISA').....	Suzy Denton
M. HEBERT.....	Justine Redfern
QUEEN MARIA.....	Alex Btsh
KING JAMES II.....	Philippa Yates
KING LOUIS XIV.....	Victoria McAtamney
BISHOP OF CHARTRES.....	Nicola Harrison
JEAN-BAPTISTE MOREAU.....	Kirsten Graham
MOREAU's ASSISTANT (harpsichord).....	Alpha Lau
'AHASUERUS'.....	Kate Bailey
'MORDECAI'.....	Georgina Blackburn
'HAMAN'.....	Alex Lyons
'HYDASPES'.....	Emma Lewis
'ASAPH'.....	Victoria Cartwright
'ZERESH'.....	Amy Perry
'TAMAR'.....	Aviva Bruhl

KING's GUARDS were Linsey Truett and Andrea Sutherland; BRITANNIA'S PAGES were Caroline Ardron, Alex Crouch, Becky Green and Cerian Thomas; the CHORUS was: Penny Orledge, Mel Speight, Georgina Bourne, Meg Hamilton, Helen Gray, Tzara de Piro, Susannah Bancroft, Sophie Solomon, Heather Graham, Amy Morgan, Rebecca Fieldhouse, Victoria Speyer, Jemma Rooker, Freya Rooker, Pascal White, Camilla Bassett-Smith, Jemima Peterken, Charlotte Sullivan, Miranda Gough.



ACT ONEScene 1

*The acting area consists of a platform for staging Esther, with exits at the sides giving access to the dormitory 'green-room' behind, and a lower space in front of the platform, with its own side-entrances/exits, where much of the action of Racine at the Girls' School, as opposed to Esther, takes place. There is some seating off the platform, but none on, and a harpsichord to one side just below the platform. Enter several PRINCIPALS and CHORUS of Saint-Cyr's production of Esther, in their ordinary clothes [see Nancy Mitfords The Sun King, Chapter XIII], chattering excitedly. The members of the CHORUS gather on the platform, ready to sing. The PRINCIPALS, that is the girls playing the parts of Ahasuerus, Mordecai, Haman, Hydaspes, Asaph, Zeresh, Elisa and Tamar, sit together on a bench below the platform on the side opposite the harpsichord.*

AHASUERUS: Is there going to be a performance tonight?

MORDECAI: Of course there is.

AHAS: Somebody said...

HAMAN: Mademoiselle de Fleury's got a sore throat.

AHAS: Does that mean...?

HAMAN: She can't play Esther.

ZERESH: Disaster!

MORDECAI: But Madame de Caylus is going to take the part.

ZERESH: Madame de Caylus!

AHAS: She'll be really good. People said she spoke the Prologue even better than a professional actress.

HAMAN: Better than La Champmeslé, they said, and La Champmeslé is the best actress in Paris.

MORDECAI: In France.

ZERESH: Will the King be coming again?

HAMAN: He can't keep away.

ELISA: He's mad about it.

HAMAN: Did you see him on the first night, pretending to be usher?

ELISA: Not pretending. He held his stick across the door and kept out anyone who hadn't been invited.

HYDASPES: Do you know who else is coming tonight?

ASAPH: Who?

HYDASPES: I don't know. I was asking you.

ASAPH: I heard there were a lot of priests coming.

HYDASPES: Priests! You mean bishops?

ASAPH: Just Jesuits, I think.

HYDASPES: Well, that's not very thrilling.

TAMAR: Surely there'll be a Duke or two?

ASAPH: And any number of Marquises and Counts.

HYDASPES: They all want to come. It's not a question of who gets in so much as who doesn't.

TAMAR: Anyone who doesn't get in might as well leave Versailles and go and live in England.

HYDASPES: Outer darkness, if you haven't been invited to Esther!

*They laugh. Enter Mme de BRINON, the Superior, and claps her hands loudly. She is not angry, but just as pleurably excited as the girls.*

BRINON.: Girls, girls! What a dreadful noise!

*Noise quickly dies down*

Now I have news for you. As most of you will have heard, poor Mademoiselle de Fleury is not able to play the part of Esther this evening. Her place will be taken by Madame de Caylus...

*Buzz of excitement among girls*

Quiet, please! Madame de Caylus is not, of course, strictly a member of the school, but as you know she is our noble patron Madame de Maintenon's niece. She was also fortunate enough to be present on many occasions when Monsieur Racine was showing his freshly-written scenes to Madame de Maintenon. Madame de Caylus read some of the passages aloud and Monsieur Racine was so impressed that he wrote the Prologue specially for her. But, quite apart from her exceptional talent, she already knows the whole play by heart, so she is the only person who could take Mademoiselle de Fleury's place at such short notice.

*Buzz*

Monsieur Racine will be here at any minute to rehearse Madame de Caylus in her exacting new role. And Monsieur Moreau is also coming in to work on some of the choral passages.

*Buzz*

Quiet, please! Though I must admit I find it exciting enough myself. Even more exciting, indeed, than you yet realise. All this extra work is necessary not only because of Madame de Caylus' new role, but also because this evening we are to entertain very special guests. Would you like to guess who they might be?

HAMAN: His Majesty the King.

BRINON: His Majesty, no doubt.

AHAS: And the Dauphin?

BRINON: I daresay Monsieur le Dauphin too.

ZERESH: The Archbishop of Paris.

BRINON: No, he's already been.

ELISA: Monsieur, the King's brother.

HYDASPES: The Prince de Conti.

ASAPH: The Duc de Nevers.

BRINON: No. Our special guests tonight are the King and Queen of England.

*Stunned silence, followed by buzz*

Yes, King James and Queen Maria of England, who are staying at Versailles because they've been forced into exile by the horrible and sacrilegious events in their own country. And it will be your task, girls, to make them feel at home and among friends and to give them the most uplifting experience you possibly can. Now you may talk very quietly – in whispers – until Monsieur Racine and Monsieur Moreau arrive to begin rehearsals.

## Scene 2

*Enter, inconspicuously and almost shyly, in front of the platform, Madame de MAINTENON, dressed as always in black.*

GIRLS: *(spotting her)* Madame de Maintenon!

*Those sitting down stand up*

BRINON: *(hurrying to greet her)* Good morning, Madame! We are just awaiting our author and musician and the girls have been told of the extraordinary honour that awaits them this evening.

MAINTENON: *(bowing slightly, her manner distinctly chilly)* Madame de Brinon!

GIRLS: *(in unison)* Good morning, Madame!

MAINT: *(more warmly)* Good morning, everybody! You may sit down. Is my niece here?

BRINON: *(looking round and asking girls)* Madame de Caylus! Is Madame de Caylus here yet?

*Enter, on the stage, making an entrance, Madame de CAYLUS*

CAYLUS: Here I am! Just on cue.

*GIRLS applaud her. CAYLUS acknowledges them with a theatrical curtsey and a big smile. Then, more soberly and respectfully, she curtseys to Madame de MAINTENON. Then, excitement getting the better of her, she bursts out:*

Have you heard, Madame, that I'm going to take Mademoiselle de Fleury's part this evening?

MAINT: That's exactly what I want to talk to you about.

*She draws her aside in front of the stage, out of earshot of the rest, who talk softly among themselves*

CAYLUS: I know every line already.

MAINT: I'm sure you do. It's not a question of whether you can do it, but whether you should.

CAYLUS: *(her ebullience punctured)* Whether I should?

MAINT: Whether perhaps Mademoiselle de Fleury's illness is a sign to us that the play ought to come to an end now.

CAYLUS: *(appalled)* Come to an end! But everybody adores it. The grandest people are almost fighting to see it.

MAINT: Precisely. That was not quite what I looked for, Marthe-Marguerite, when I asked Monsieur Racine to write a pious and improving piece specially for the school. No doubt I hoped for success of a kind, but it has become too great a success, in a purely worldly sense. I founded Saint-Cyr for altogether different purposes.

CAYLUS: Please, please, dear aunt, don't let it end before tonight! Let me play Esther! It will be too cruel...

- MAINT: You want it so much, you see – too much! That's a bad sign in itself, since you shouldn't be thinking of your own desires but of what is useful and morally instructive to others.
- CAYLUS: But that's just what it is! Such a great play! Monsieur Racine is the greatest dramatic poet that ever lived.
- MAINT: I entirely agree with you. The work itself is sublime. But there are experiences, just as there are certain dishes, which, taken in excess, may be too rich for young digestions.
- CAYLUS: When you were seventeen, dear aunt, wouldn't you have felt like me?
- MAINT: (*melting*) Of course I would, dear child. If such an opportunity had ever come my way at that unhappy time of my life, I would have thought my whole future happiness depended on it. And of course I can't help, in spite of myself, feeling some family pride at the thought of you performing tonight in front of two Kings and a Queen.
- CAYLUS: Two Queens, counting yourself.
- MAINT: Never count me as a Queen!
- CAYLUS: But aren't you, in all but name? The King loves you more than he ever loved the Queen.
- MAINT: God give her the joy in Heaven which she never had on earth! (*Pause*) What shall I say, Marthe-Marguerite? I want you and all my girls to be happy and fulfilled, but I am so anxious that the school should not be led down false paths.
- CAYLUS: Ask Monsieur Racine!
- MAINT: I know his answer.
- CAYLUS: (*indicating BRINON*) Ask the Mother Superior!
- MAINT: She thought there was no harm in the girls performing Andromache – a spectacular victory, as it transpired, for human emotion over moral instruction.
- CAYLUS: But everyone agrees that Esther is quite different from Monsieur Racine's previous plays. It's so innocent and good that it's almost like going to church.
- MAINT: Nothing at all like. Going to church is a real and serious part of life. This play is just a story.
- CAYLUS: But a story from the Bible.
- MAINT: Stories from the Bible are not in themselves sacred. Everything depends on the context and I fear this context is becoming quite shamelessly secular.

CAYLUS: *(taking her arm)* Please, please! *(indicating girls)* Think how wretched everyone would be if you told them there was to be no more Esther!

MAINT: Indeed it's that which weighs most against my better judgment.

CAYLUS: It's 'yes', then? Say it's 'yes'!

MAINT: Here are Messieurs Racine and Moreau.

Scene 3

*Enter RACINE and MOREAU, in front of stage.*

RACINE: *(making a courtly bow to MAINTENON and CAYLUS)* Good morning, Mesdames!

MAINT: Good morning, Monsieur!

CAYLUS: *(rapturously)* Good morning, Maitre!

*MOREAU also bows and is acknowledged*

RACINE: *(to BRINON and girls)* Good morning, ladies all!

BRINON & GIRLS: *(in unison)* Good morning, Monsieur Racine!

*MOREAU bows and waves hand*

BRINON & GIRLS: Good morning, Monsieur Moreau!

*MOREAU sits down at harpsichord*

CAYLUS: Say 'yes'!

MAINT: I'm a weak woman.

CAYLUS: Dearest aunt!

*Exit MAINTENON. MOREAU plays a few runs on the harpsichord to loosen his fingers.*

CAYLUS: Oh, Monsieur Racine, let's begin at once!

RACINE: You must calm down, Madame de Caylus. To negotiate such long speeches, you will need complete control of your breathing.

CAYLUS: You'll see, you'll see!

RACINE: Very well! Let us see!

*He lays his script on the harpsichord and taps his stick for silence*

Act One, Scene One. Esther and Elisa!

*MARCILLY as 'ELISA' and CAYLUS as 'ESTHER' take up positions centre stage*

RACINE: Begin, please, with the principal speech! "No doubt you've heard that I now hold the place..."

*He taps his stick and nods to CAYLUS, who tosses her head, draws herself up, takes an ostentatiously deep breath and then addresses 'ELISA':*

CAYLUS: "No doubt you've heard that I now hold the place  
Once held by proud Queen Vasthi. Her disgrace  
Was infamous. The King, infuriated,  
Expelled her at one stroke from throne and bed,  
But could not clear his thoughts of her so soon;  
She tore his heart long after she was gone..."

*RACINE taps stick at "heart" and she dribbles to a stop. Pause, then he speaks loudly enough for everyone to hear:*

RACINE: Who do you think you are, Madame de Caylus?

CAYLUS. *(unnerved by his severe tone)* Queen Esther, of course.

RACINE: The lines are certainly Esther's. But you sound more like Queen Vasthi.

CAYLUS: Too proud, you mean?

RACINE: Too proud, too passionate, too vehement, too flamboyant. Altogether out of character.

*Long pause. CAYLUS is humiliated and crestfallen*

CAYLUS: *(in small voice)* Shall I try it again, Monsieur Racine?

RACINE: Hmm! *(twirls his stick)* Hmm! *(turns towards harpsichord)* Monsieur Moreau, I leave the stage to you for the present.

*Buzz from the girls*

MOREAU: Thank you, Monsieur Racine. *(to girls, silencing them)* The first Chorus, please! "Lamentable Sion, where is your glory now?"

*He plays the introduction and the girls begin to sing the chorus "Déplorable Sion..." RACINE, meanwhile, dismisses 'ELISA' with a nod and beckons CAYLUS to accompany him aside. They find two chairs in front of the platform and sit facing each other. The singing, with stops for repetition and corrections from MOREAU, continues behind*

CAYLUS: *(after pause)* Was it so bad, Monsieur Racine?

RACINE: Not so bad that it couldn't get worse if I left you unchecked, Madame de Caylus.

CAYLUS: You think I'm not right for the part?

RACINE: You are quite wrong for the part.

CAYLUS: Then I'll make a complete mess of it?

RACINE: *(gravely)* It's very possible.

CAYLUS: What shall I do, then? In front of all those people – two Kings and a Queen and Dukes and noblemen – I'll make a fool of myself...

RACINE: And ruin my play.

CAYLUS: *(beginning to cry)* Oh, God, oh, God, what shall I do? Are you going to find someone else for the part?

RACINE: The idea occurred to me.

CAYLUS: But no one else knows all the lines.

RACINE: Quite so. Must we call off the performance?

CAYLUS: Oh, no, no, Monsieur Racine, I beg you... don't call it off!

*Pause. The singing continues*

RACINE: The Chorus is dragging too.

CAYLUS: We've got the whole day... if we work really hard...

*Pause. RACINE swings his foot and looks at his nails*

CAYLUS: No? It's all over, then, all beyond repair? And all my fault?

RACINE: Madame de Caylus, you may work all day and every day for a week or a year, but you might as well dance in seven veils or ride an elephant in a pageant as perform the part of Esther.... unless you understand one simple thing.

CAYLUS: What?

RACINE: Your task is to act Esther, not to be her.

CAYLUS: I don't understand.

RACINE: Consider Esther's character! Is there any person you've ever met – in real life – who is at all like her?

ESTHER: I think she's like my aunt, Madame de Maintenon. At least, everybody says she is and that you meant her to be. And they also say that Queen Vasthi is meant to be wicked Madame de Montespan whom the King loved before he loved my aunt.

RACINE: Supposing that were so, do you think that you, Madame de Caylus, are at all like your aunt?

CAYLUS: No, I'm not. Hardly at all.

RACINE: Then how can you be her?

CAYLUS: I see what you mean. I am quite wrong for the part.

RACINE: So if there is to be a performance tonight and if you are not to spoil my play, there's only one thing to be done. You'll have to act your aunt – your aunt as she must have been when she was very young and beautiful and full of fire. It is in the quality of that fire that we should look for the significant difference. Your flame is warm and open, generous and full of appetite, flickering between orange and red. Hers burns in a confined space, a single white centre of intense heat. Yours is the natural fire of hope, hers the refined fire of faith. We must blow on your flame and contain it, until it resembles Madame de Maintenon's. For that, as you rightly say, is how I imagined Esther.

CAYLUS: You love my aunt, don't you?

RACINE: Who could fail to, once given the privilege of knowing her.

CAYLUS: I mean...

RACINE: His Majesty the King loves Madame de Maintenon and no lesser man could intrude on that relationship.

CAYLUS: But you're not a lesser man, Monsieur Racine. You're one of the great men. I'm sure my aunt thinks so too.

RACINE: I used to think so myself. But there are degrees which we don't discern in our youth and only learn painfully with time. In the theatre I was King – who disputed it? But in the world I am the King's humble servant.

CAYLUS: Well, I shall act Esther before three Kings – the King of France, the King of England and the King of Theatre – but if I please the last I shan't care too much about the others. (*Pause, she is again on the verge of tears*) Do you think I can act the Esther you imagined?

RACINE: I fancy you will have three Kings at your feet, Madame de Caylus. I didn't intend to make you lose your nerve, only your false conceit.

*She blinks and sniffs. RACINE gives her his handkerchief*

We'll resume the scene as soon as you're ready.

*He rises and walks across to the harpsichord, where he stands listening to the CHORUS.*

Scene 4

*MOREAU finishes his work with the CHORUS and looks up at RACINE, who leans down and speaks to him inaudibly. While he is doing so, a NUN appears, somewhat hesitantly, at the side of the stage, then walks firmly in and speaks to the nearest group of girls in the CHORUS.*

NUN: Mademoiselle de Marcilly?

*The girls point to the group of PRINCIPALS, below the platform. The NUN goes down to them and picks out MARCILLY ('ELISA')*

Mademoiselle de Marcilly!

MARCILLY: Yes, Sister?

NUN: I have something to say to you. Will you come outside?

MARCILLY: *(looking towards RACINE, still engaged with MOREAU)* I don't know if...

NUN: It won't take long.

*MARCILLY stands up, makes a little curtsy in RACINE's direction, without his noticing her, and follows the NUN out*

AHAS: Who's that?

HAMAN: I don't know.

ZERESH: A new teacher?

MORDECAI: Is there a new teacher?

HYDASPES: She had a blue upper lip.

TAMAR: A what?

HYDASPES: As if she'd been shaving.

*Giggles*

AHAS: Lots of nuns have moustaches.

*Giggles*

HYDASPES: But they don't often shave them.

*The giggles become too loud and attract the attention of RACINE and MOREAU, who glance across with irritation. The girls immediately become quiet. CAYLUS leaves her chair and crosses to RACINE*

CAYLUS: I'm ready to act now. *(she gives him his handkerchief)*

RACINE: Sit down with the others, please, Madame de Caylus! Your turn will come when Monsieur Moreau has finished with the Chorus.

*Humbly, head bowed, CAYLUS joins the other PRINCIPALS. They move up to make room for her. RACINE sits out of the way, near the harpsichord*

MOREAU: The second Chorus in Act One! "Faithful companions, let us mourn and cry..."

### Scene 5

*As the CHORUS sings "Pleurons et gémissons...", with pauses for correction as before, enter at the front below the platform, without being noticed by anyone on stage, MAINTENON and HEBERT*

HEBERT: You say you have doubts, Madame. You know that from the very beginning I never had any doubts at all. It was and is a mistake.

MAINT: You're too extreme, Monsieur l'Abbé. I have no regrets about the play being performed in the first place. The idea was enthusiastically endorsed not only by His Majesty himself, but by many leading churchmen.

HEBERT: Not by me, the Curé of Versailles. I should have thought my views might have been given more weight in my own parish.

MAINT: They were given weight. They might have been given more weight if you'd ever seen the play. And there was greater weight on the other side. Including, I may say, your own Bishop.

HEBERT: His Excellency's weight was distinctly on my side, Madame. If he gave his provisional assent, it was only because he decided to trust your judgment in a matter affecting the school you had founded. Now that your judgment seems to be wavering, I see no reason whatever for the scandal to continue.

MAINT: Scandal! That's too harsh.

HEBERT: Is it? When night after night men and women of the world, without a thought in their heads beyond sensual pleasure, make their way to this secluded religious house and compete to be admitted!

MAINT: Don't such people also have souls?

HEBERT: They don't come here for the improvement of their souls, but to feast their eyes and ears on the pretty figures and faces and sweet voices of young girls.

MAINT: That's an unpleasant way to express it.

HEBERT: The Devil achieves many successes by obscuring the truth with nice expressions. Those responsible for the protection and education of the innocent have a duty not to be innocent themselves.

MAINT: Innocence has its own strength. I believe that those who come to this play – however worldly they may be – are less likely to corrupt the innocent than to be themselves beneficially affected by innocence.

HEBERT: You suggest this piece of theatre will bring about the religious conversion of the Court?

MAINT: Of course not, but it might contribute to a change in outlook.

HEBERT: You're deceived, Madame. The only change of outlook here is that a school for the daughters of gentlemen has been turned into a stew of the imagination.

MAINT: How dare you say that?

HEBERT: You think it better I should mince my words than you be forced to acknowledge that a serious mistake has been made?

MAINT: I was more than half inclined to think it was a mistake, but your rigid self-certainty reminds me of all the arguments against you.

HEBERT: What arguments?

MAINT: Listen!

*They remain silent while the CHORUS continues and comes to an end. MOREAU and RACINE stand up*

RACINE: That will be all for the Chorus until this afternoon. You may return now to your ordinary lessons.

*MOREAU and CHORUS go out. RACINE beckons the PRINCIPALS to centre stage and begins to talk to them inaudibly*

MAINT: *(to HEBERT)* The Jews, captive in Persia, cry to their God for help against persecution. Queen Esther, herself a Jew, dares to plead with King Ahasuerus and saves her people. The good and the innocent prevail, while their pagan enemy, the wicked minister Haman, is put to death instead. It's a story you might cite in a sermon to illustrate the power of God through the courage of true believers, yet no sermon could tell it or press home its message with the power of Monsieur Racine's play. Why should you wish to ban it, Monsieur Hébert? Could it be because it does your work better than you do it yourself? Could it be out of envy?

HEBERT: You become personal, do you, Madame? I will set that aside as unworthy of you and ask for your other arguments.

MAINT: My other arguments do not concern the audience, which was mainly incidental to my original purpose, but the girls themselves. They have learnt a lot from this experience...

HEBERT: I wonder what you think they have learnt?

MAINT: In the first place, the words themselves. Everyone knows that Monsieur Racine's poetry is of the greatest beauty – fit to stand comparison even with classical authors – but in this particular play, with a sacred subject, it is also poetry of the highest moral tone. The beauty and significance of what they have spoken and sung will remain with these girls all their lives. Isn't that one of the things we mean by education?

HEBERT: A dangerous argument. Education by poetry? By beautiful words? There's something so undisciplined and loose in that idea that it smacks almost of Protestantism...

MAINT: Certainly not!

HEBERT: Shall I be personal too, Madame? You were born and brought up a Protestant, grand-daughter of the notorious Huguenot Agrippa d'Aubigné, who, a century ago, persuaded King Henri the Fourth to allow freedom of worship to Protestants. In our own time we have seen the abysmal error of that course and it is only three years since His Majesty King Louis himself revoked the Edict of Nantes and put an end to all such abominable licence for heretics...

MAINT: What are you accusing me of? I myself have persuaded many members of my own family to rejoin the true Church. Among them, my niece Madame de Caylus...

*CAYLUS now comes and stands alone in the centre of the stage, while RACINE and the PRINCIPALS sit and watch her*

HEBERT: I did not say you were still a Protestant. I do not think you are. I only wished to warn you off an argument which in the ears of a less friendly listener might carry the taint of heresy.

CAYLUS: *(praying, in the role of Esther)*

“O Sovereign King,

Alone I stand before You, shivering.

My father often told me, as a child,

How You had sworn to be our people's shield,

When, seeking one race pleasing in Your sight,

You chose our forebears for Your love and light.

Your Sacred Voice once promised from on high  
That their posterity would never die.  
Alas! This thankless race despised Your law,  
Your chosen nation kept its faith no more,  
Repudiating Husband, Father, God,  
To pay adulterous court to other gods.  
Now we're subjected to a foreign master  
And, slaves already, wait on worse disaster.  
Our conquerors take pleasure in our plight,  
Praising their gods for winning them the fight,  
And mean to bring us all to execution,  
Abolishing Your altar, Name, and nation.  
Will you allow one evil person's hate  
Your previous blessings to obliterate?"

RACINE: *(stepping forward to stop her)* Remember who you're addressing! Your "Sovereign King" is not there *(indicates performers)* or here *(indicates himself)*, but there! *(points to ceiling)* Your appeal is desperate. It must pierce those rafters like a shaft of invisible light and hit its target high in Heaven. And it's your phrasing, your breath that supplies the energy, every fresh breath accumulating power. Try it again!

*CAYLUS repeats performance, while MAINTENON and HEBERT resume speaking in front and, unnoticed by the rest, BRINON appears at a side door with MARIA*

MAINT: What have you to say against this, Monsieur Hébert?

HEBERT: It is theatre, Madame. Very charming, very beguiling. But the subject being sacred makes its worse, not better. This is flirtation, not religion. I think when you come to calmer consideration, you will find it hard to forgive yourself for having introduced such a source of confusion into your school curriculum. However, I've been informed that His Excellency the Bishop means to pay us a visit this afternoon and we shall no doubt exchange further words on the subject. In the meantime I take my leave, Madame.

*He bows and goes out.*

*MAINTENON, looking anguished, stands for a moment watching CAYLUS, then turns to go out and sees BRINON and MARIA approaching her. MAINTENON curtsies deeply*

MAINT: Your Majesty!

MARIA: *(speaking with Italian accent)* The Mother Superior said we might find you here, Madame. I know that King James and I are to see the performance tonight and I didn't mean to anticipate that pleasure, but I'm already ravished by this one speech and this wonderful young actress.

MAINT: I will introduce her, Your Majesty.

MARIA: No, please, I mustn't interrupt. But tell me who she is!

MAINT: She is my own niece.

BRINON: Madame de Caylus, Your Majesty.

MARIA: A married woman? Not one of your pupils, then?

BRINON: She's stepping in at short notice for a pupil who is ill.

MARIA: Who is her husband?

MAINT: The Comte de Caylus.

MARIA: The Comte must be a proud man.

*Awkward pause*

She's surely too young to be a widow already?

*BRINON looks at MAINTENON*

MAINT: A kind of widow, I'm afraid, Your Majesty. The Comte is still alive, but makes no attempt to live with his wife. That is more fortunate for her than it may sound, since he's a hopeless alcoholic.

MARIA: Dreadful! But how did she come to marry, so young, such a disastrous husband?

MAINT: I must take the blame for that. She had other offers...

MARIA: I can imagine.

MAINT: They were great noblemen and seemed to me too far beyond our family's standing...

MARIA: But you are the first woman in France.

MAINT: By association, Your Majesty. Neither by birth nor rank nor, I assure you, by inclination. I advised my niece to marry the Comte. She was still only fourteen and was only too ready to be guided by me. It was very soon

obvious what a mistake I had made and I therefore kept my niece with me at Versailles.

BRINON: It must be said, Your Majesty, that Madame de Caylus shows no sign of regretting that. She is very popular with everyone, except perhaps the King. His Majesty finds her manner a shade too ebullient.

MAINT: *(barely restraining her annoyance)* There must be a lot of duties you're neglecting, Madame de Brinon. You may leave it to me to look after Her Majesty the Queen of England.

BRINON: Madame!

*She curtseys to MARIA, bows stiffly to MAINTENON and goes out*

MAINT: It's a very painful subject, as you can imagine.

MARIA: *(putting a hand on her arm)* Don't blame yourself, my dear! There's hardly a man in the world, I should think, drunk or sober, good enough for that girl.

*CAYLUS, who has been conferring with RACINE, now returns to her speech:*

CAYLUS: "Me you preserved among these pagan beasts,  
Knowing how much I loathe their savage feasts,  
How I consider all their celebrations  
Profane – their banquets, festivals, libations;  
That even this pomp to which I must submit,  
This diadem – unseen, I tread on it –  
All these rich clothes and ornaments are dust  
And rubbish – only tears are to my taste.  
I waited for Your moment, Your marked date  
To dare to speak out for Your people's fate.  
The time has come. My prompt obedience  
Sends me to beard the King and brave his presence.  
I go there in Your Name. Go with me, God,  
To this imperious lion who knows You not!  
Grant that the sight of me may do its part

To please him; let my words soften his heart!

Thunder and storms obey You, Yours the skies –

Then turn his rage against our enemies!”

MARIA: *(clapping)* Bravo! Bravo!

*RACINE looks across at her disapprovingly, then recognises her and bows deeply. CAYLUS curtsays, then the other PRINCIPALS*

*(to MAINTENON)* I did interrupt. I'm so sorry, I was quite carried away. *(calls out to RACINE, who seems about to come and greet her)* So sorry, so sorry, Maestro, please take no notice of me! I'm not really here.

*She smiles and waves and turns away, taking MAINTENON's arm*

MARIA: We are disturbing them dreadfully. If tonight's performance is spoilt, I shall take the blame.

MAINT: We are in some doubt, Your Majesty, whether there should be a performance tonight.

MARIA: What do you mean?

MAINT: Many people think it unsuitable for the girls to show themselves off in this way before the Court.

MARIA: But this is not a convent, is it? They're not going to be nuns.

MAINT: Some of them perhaps, but no, it's only a school and the King himself has always been adamant that the girls should be able to marry if they wish to. He's even put money aside to help with their dowries – their family pedigrees are long enough, but their means are short.

MARIA: Well, then, what better way to get husbands than to put on a play?

*They both laugh*

MAINT: Oh dear! *(looks round guiltily)* I hope none of my enemies were close enough to hear you say that, Your Majesty. I only want to do what's right. Ever since – five years ago – I secretly married the King, I've tried to make his new Court at Versailles a more Christian and a more decent place and perhaps I've begun to succeed...

MARIA: You did marry him? Everyone said so, but no one could confirm it.

MAINT: I have never confirmed or denied it. I never speak of it. I've never done so before to anyone but you, Your Majesty. Only a Queen is fit to know a Royal secret. And besides I've never met any woman I found as sympathetic as you.

MARIA: Thank you, Madame. You offer me the greatest gift I've received since I left England. When I scrambled away by night from Portsmouth with my baby son, I knew I'd find courtesy and hospitality here at Versailles, but I never hoped for true kindness, let alone friendship. Will you call me by my first name – Maria. May I call you... forgive me, what is your name, Madame?

MAINT: Françoise.

MARIA: Françoise!

*She takes MAINTENON's hands and kisses her on both cheeks*

There! Now we can tell each other everything. As for the play, it must go on! It must!

MAINT: I'm so prone to make mistakes and the school is a constant worry to me. I already have doubts about my choice of the Superior – Madame de Brinon is becoming altogether too self-important. But if the success of the play grows into a real scandal, there will be strong pressure to close the school itself or at least turn it into something more strict and conventional. I couldn't survive that. The school is what I live for, you see.

MARIA: If a Queen without a throne can do anything to help, dear Françoise, count on me!

*They go out.*

### Scene 7

*RACINE has been talking to his cast. Now he moves away a little*

RACINE: Act Two, Scene Seven. Queen Esther enters the chamber of King Ahasuerus to beg him to spare the Jews. This scene is the hinge of the play. You must remember the extreme risk she runs. The Persian law is inexorable. Anyone – even the Queen – who approaches the King without being invited to do so, is liable to be put to death. Try to imagine what it feels like to defy such a law in a land where the King's power is even more absolute than it is in France!

*He stands back and points to a position on the stage*

King Ahasuerus!

*'AHASUERUS' goes to the position*

RACINE: Esther! You and your two attendants, Elisa and Tamar, enter from there. *(indicates entry point)*

*The girls look at each other in consternation*

What's the matter?

CAYLUS: Mademoiselle de Marcilly isn't here, Monsieur.

RACINE: Where is she?

TAMAR: She went out – with a nun – some time ago.

*Pause*

RACINE: Tiresome! However, she has no lines to speak in this scene. Mademoiselle...  
(to 'ZERESH') You must borrow her part for the present.

ZERESH: Monsieur.

*CAYLUS, 'TAMAR' and 'ZERESH' take up their positions, CAYLUS in the middle, the others walking just behind her. RACINE sits in a chair with his back to the audience, then taps his stick and the three girls advance towards 'AHASUERUS', who is facing away from them*

AHASUERUS: "Who dares, without my order, enter here?

Does any mortal know so little fear?

Guards!

*He swings round to confront CAYLUS ('ESTHER') and her attendants*

AHASUERUS: Esther! You? Without my invitation?

CAYLUS: Ladies, support me! I feel suffocation...

Your Queen must die...

*She faints into the arms of her attendants*

AHASUERUS: O mighty Gods! She's lost

All colour – her face swept with sudden frost!

What is it? Esther, am I not your friend?

No law's too strict or hard for you to bend.

Come back to life! This sceptre I hold out

Seals your forgiveness beyond all doubt.

CAYLUS: Whose soothing voice tells me to live again,

Restoring soul to body without pain?

AHASUERUS: Do you not recognise your husband's voice?

Once more, wake up and be yourself! Rejoice!

CAYLUS: Can I believe this King all earth adores,  
To whom all bow in fear and kiss the floors,  
Should to his slave speak words of such sweet life,  
Giving his heart to her, calling her 'wife'?"

RACINE: *(tapping stick)* Good, good! The forgiveness is touching, but will be more touching if it comes from greater terror. After 'without my invitation' we need a long moment of silence before the Queen falls. We should be made to think we see the colour draining from her cheeks. Ahasuerus, the stress should be on 'husband's', not 'voice': 'Do you not recognise your husband's voice?' Your task is to find the sense. The verse will jog along nicely without any help from you.

### Scene 8

*While RACINE is speaking, enter at the front, unseen by him or the performers, MARCILLY and the NUN. The scene between 'ESTHER' (CAYLUS) and 'AHASUERUS' is re-rehearsed behind the following:*

MARCILLY: *(in urgent whisper)* You must go. I ought to be in this scene. He'll be very angry with me.

NUN: Say the one word I want to hear, Mademoiselle!

MARCILLY: Not now. I must have time to think. Come to the performance tonight!

NUN: How can I? I was here two nights ago, when I first set eyes on you and was driven insane. No one gets in twice to your play except the King and the Dauphin. Say the word now, Mademoiselle!

*NUN kneels down in front of MARCILLY. Unseen by either of them, HEBERT appears in the doorway at the front by which they entered*

MARCILLY: Don't! Don't! They'll see you.

NUN: What do I care? I love you, sweet 'Elisa', adorable Mademoiselle de Marcilly! Being with you makes me completely reckless. Say 'yes', say 'yes'!

*He takes her hand, just as HEBERT rushes forward and pulls back the NUN's cowl, unmasking a young man*

HEBERT: Wretch! Delinquent! Monster! In flagrante....

*MARCILLY screams. RACINE and the performers break off their rehearsal and stand aghast*

CAYLUS: It's my brother!

HEBERT: Your brother, Madame! It appears that you on the stage and he off it have turned this school for innocent young girls into a real theatre: a place of mayhem and corruption where the worst instincts of man are given full licence! A pit of shame and dishonour, fit only for hooligans!

*CAYLUS and MARCILLY are both on the verge of tears*

NUN: This is unfair, Monsieur l'Abbé. I am not a hooligan, but the Marquis de Villette. I had the honour to ask Mademoiselle de Marcilly for her hand in marriage. What shame is there in that?

HEBERT: Disguised as a holy nun? Is this the way gentlemen contract honourable marriages? Entering a school by subterfuge and seducing its guileless pupils? What is your view, Monsieur Racine? You are in charge of proceedings here and you know the theatre only too well. Do you not recognise its moral contamination creeping through Saint-Cyr?

RACINE: This affair has nothing to do with me, Monsieur Hébert. I did not give permission for Mademoiselle de Marcilly to meet the Marquis.

HEBERT: Is it nothing to do with you that he is dressed in this impious costume? Nothing to do with you that he came and saw her on your stage and was provoked to play such games with her? Nothing to do with you that the quiet course of learning and meditation prescribed by the rules of the school has been so shockingly disrupted?

NUN: I'm sorry I dressed up as a nun, Monsieur l'Abbé. I realise that was a bit cheeky...

HEBERT: You, Monsieur de Villette, come of a family which has only recently been received into the true Church. It is hardly a good sign of your sincerity that you treat the most sacred usages of the Church with such levity. An apology – so casually offered – hardly meets the seriousness of your position. This will be taken further. In the meantime, you had better leave these prohibited premises immediately!

NUN: As you wish, Monsieur l'Abbé.

*He bows humbly, then, giving a sly glance at MARCILLY, goes out*

HEBERT: Nothing to do with you, Monsieur Racine?

RACINE: Monsieur Hébert, you accuse me and my play of disrupting Saint-Cyr. I reply that it was far from my intention ever to write a play again. At Madame de Maintenon's urgent request I agreed – most reluctantly – to employ my old skills for the benefit of her pupils. The result has been approved, indeed applauded, by the very highest in the land...

HEBERT: You shelter behind Madame de Maintenon. Perhaps you are not aware that she wishes to cancel further performances.

RACINE: I was not aware, no. But if that is her wish, I shall of course comply.

CAYLUS: No, no, he's not telling the truth.

HEBERT: (*furious*) Do you accuse me of lying, Madame?

CAYLUS: You are lying. I'm not afraid of you.

HEBERT: You begin to see perhaps, Monsieur Racine, what your play-acting has brought us to? All respect, civility, normality, reverence flown to the winds! The brother wears a nun's habit in order to seduce school-girls, the sister accuses the Curé of Versailles of lying! You have sown the seeds of confusion, Monsieur, and the Devil himself is rampant in Saint-Cyr.

CAYLUS: If anyone is the Devil...

RACINE: (*taking her arm and gently deflecting her so as to confront HEBERT himself*) It has always been my practice, Monsieur Hébert, to keep a strict separation between life and theatre. What you complain of and what you accuse my play of fomenting is the natural excitement of young people at being admired for what they do well. You talk of the Devil. Is that not a confusion in your mind, Monsieur Hébert? Are high spirits a sign of rampant evil? These girls have not taken any vow to abstain from their natural, normal emotions. The play itself treats a sacred subject in a wholly innocent and reverent manner. Where is the connection of either with the Devil? It is you who are creating a drama out of this, Monsieur, and a very shoddy one at that.

HEBERT: You flatly contradict me, Monsieur? You deny all responsibility for the depravity which has overtaken this school?

RACINE: I have no desire to be at odds with you, Monsieur. It is the facts that contradict you. In any case, you should address your complaints not to me, the mere artisan, but to the school's proprietor and patron.

HEBERT: Be sure I shall! But I do not expect that when His Excellency the Bishop of Chartres arrives this afternoon to look into this whole matter, he will find you blameless of corrupting and exploiting young and malleable minds. Have a care, Monsieur! Our Lord Himself was not deceived by equivocators and specious arguments. "He that is not with Me is against Me." Ponder that text!

*He goes out*

CAYLUS: Hateful, horrible creature!

HAMAN: It was your brother's fault.

MARCILLY: No, it was my fault. I should never have left the rehearsal...

RACINE: Dear children, you needn't find fault with each other or yourselves. It's a pity that young Monsieur de Villette gave such a good excuse to the Curé for his interference, but he would no doubt have found another. Please go and walk in the garden for a quarter of an hour! I'm not in the mood to resume rehearsals immediately.

*He sits down. The girls go out, very subdued. CAYLUS lingers, then turns at the door:*

Scene 9

CAYLUS: Monsieur Racine?

RACINE: *(looks up, surprised)* Yes?

CAYLUS: May I stay with you?

RACINE: I'm not King Ahasuerus, I hope.

CAYLUS: But even he turned out to be a kind man under his kingly carapace.

RACINE: And I have no such carapace.

CAYLUS: *(sitting near him)* I'm sorry I was rude to the Curé. It only made things worse for you.

RACINE: Hébert has always disliked me.

CAYLUS: Will he be able to stop the performance?

RACINE: That depends on your aunt. Also on the Bishop. But if the Bishop takes the Curé's side, your aunt will give way, since the Bishop is her own spiritual adviser.

CAYLUS: Then I shall throw myself in the Neptune fountain.

RACINE: You wouldn't be so foolish?

CAYLUS: Don't worry! I shan't drown, just make it look as if I meant to.

RACINE: There's no point in being theatrical.

CAYLUS: I should either do it properly or not at all?

RACINE; You shouldn't even consider it. Your part as Esther is not your whole life nor worth more than a few natural tears of disappointment.

CAYLUS: Is that what you think about your play?

RACINE: Hmm. (*he pauses to think*) Twelve years ago my play Phèdre was acted at the Hotel de Bourgogne – I really thought, as I told the Curé, it would be my last.

CAYLUS: Why?

RACINE: Other opportunities offered. In the course of writing ten plays, I had discerned, explored and revealed the machinery of human emotion – at least as far as I could understand it. Only one aspect still intrigued me: altruism – putting another's interests before one's own. I thought of writing one play more – Alcestis – the story of a Greek queen who chooses to die in place of her husband. But as I began to creep gingerly towards it, like a cat towards a bird, I suddenly lost interest. I looked up from my close contemplation of the ancient Greek myth and saw the world I lived in. The bird, the idea flew away and I was glad. I met and married my wife. We began to have children...

CAYLUS: How many have you got?

RACINE: Six, so far. I organised our property and financial affairs. I was appointed Historiographer Royal and immediately followed the King on one of his victorious campaigns against the Dutch and Germans. There I saw instant death and the destruction of cities, courage, cowardice and many other extreme circumstances for the first time. When I returned, I revisited the place of my upbringing and education, the community of Port-Royal, which, as a silly, arrogant boy, I had turned my back on with rudeness and ingratitude. Receiving their forgiveness, I tried to learn all over again to be as good and as altruistic as they are.

CAYLUS: You decided to be altruistic instead of to write about it.

RACINE: Altruism is a philosophy, not a passion. It operates from the head, not the heart, and is therefore an unsuitable subject for tragedy. But in real life, how far can it be acted upon? It conflicts with our very nature – our animal nature – driven, hauled along at reckless speed by our instinctive desires. Can the rider control the bolting horses – to save others, not himself?

CAYLUS; But you have written a play about it. Esther is about altruism. A queen who is in no danger until she puts herself in danger to save her people.

RACINE: I meant it only to be a Bible story – free of any disturbing element of sensuality – which would gracefully reflect your aunt's admirable character and avoid offending people like the Curé of Versailles.

CAYLUS: Then I've told you something you didn't know about your own play.

RACINE: You asked me whether I would shed tears over it. Tears, certainly, for you and the others frustrated of your deserved success. Tears, also, of righteous anger over the triumph of Monsieur Hébert, whom I would prefer to see, like the wicked Minister Haman in the play, torn in pieces at the gates of the palace. But the play itself? I've enjoyed the rehearsals and performances

with the easy, greedy pleasure of an old man returning on holiday to what stirred him when he was young. I don't take it very seriously. I don't take anything very seriously now, except my family.

CAYLUS: Your wife will be glad to have you back, at anyrate. Has she seen the play?

RACINE: No.

CAYLUS: Then she may not see it at all.

RACINE: No.

CAYLUS: Wouldn't she like to?

RACINE: She's never been to a play, nor read one. Plays are not part of her life.

CAYLUS: Wouldn't you like her to see a play of yours? The actors in Paris are always reviving them.

RACINE: Plays have not been part of my life since we married.

CAYLUS: If I were your wife...

RACINE: *(gets up and moves away)* We should be ill-matched. By temperament as well as age. I am hot only on paper, you see. On solid, ordinary ground, my wife and I and our six little children walk very moderately in step. I believe we shall have a seventh before long.

*He walks up and down a little*

Irritating, to be left suspended like this. I think we should go on as if we were performing tonight. Will you fetch the others!

CAYLUS: The Chorus too?

RACINE: Why not? Let's at least sing loudly to the God of Israel to preserve us from Monsieur Hébert's persecution!

CAYLUS: *(stopping and turning on her way out)* I'm sure you will cry, Monsieur Racine, just as much as the rest of us, if your play is taken off.

*RACINE smiles. CAYLUS smiles back and goes out.*

### Scene 10

*Enter at the front, LOUIS XIV and JAMES II. Two or three armed guards follow them discreetly at a short distance. RACINE stands up and bows when he sees them, but the two Kings, deep in conversation, take no notice of him.*

- JAMES: Of course I want my throne back. But I wish it were in any country but England or England without the English. One might as well be King of a street-market. Fat, brawling, foul-mouthed, shouting louts shoving their way in all directions in search of something better for themselves. Never satisfied with what they've got, never respectful towards authority.
- LOUIS: In a word, Protestants. If they were turned back into Catholics they'd soon settle down and do what they were told.
- JAMES: God knows I've tried to make them Catholics and lost my throne for it.
- LOUIS: You were too soft with them. I put up with my own Protestant brutes for years. Suddenly my patience snapped and I cancelled all their privileges and their damned rebellious arrogance with a stroke of the pen. Now I have no further trouble with Protestants in my kingdom.
- JAMES: No. But a good number of yours have gone to swell the ranks of mine in England.
- LOUIS: Well, they'll soon be packing again. My fleet and a substantial part of the best army in Europe are at your disposal.
- JAMES: Your generosity is truly royal.
- LOUIS: It's for my own advantage as much as yours. One damned Dutchman stands stubbornly in the way of a northern European settlement which would give France the whole of Flanders and its natural border on the Rhine. I could then concentrate on Italy. Now this Dutchman has sneaked over to England while my back was turned and stolen your throne. Suddenly this mosquito William, this insignificant princeling from a flat, wet, indefensible sand-spit well named Netherlands, has acquired a whole extra kingdom with formidable natural defences and fresh resources of weapons, men and ships. And he's Protestant and he's my unremitting enemy.
- JAMES: His new fleet is certainly first rate. I built it up myself during my late brother's reign.
- LOUIS: It must be sent to the bottom. Then you can have the pleasure of building it up again. If William is left in possession of your throne, cousin, I shall never sit easy on my own.
- JAMES: The English dislike me. They dislike me personally and they have an absolute horror of Catholics.
- LOUIS: Subjects do not have the option of disliking their Kings.
- JAMES: Mine have an unfortunate precedent. They cut off my father's head and for many years had no King at all.
- LOUIS: Yes, your people are a bad example to the whole of Europe. They must be thoroughly chastised and restored in a properly penitential frame of mind to the true Church.

JAMES: Would that they could be!

LOUIS: You must consider yourself God's instrument for their correction as well as His anointed Viceroy.

JAMES: My father took that line and only succeeded in becoming God's martyr.

LOUIS: With my invincible army at your back, the martyrs will be in the other camp.

*He looks up and sees for the first time that the platform is empty except for RACINE*

Where is everybody?

RACINE: *(coming forward and bowing)* Your Majesties!

LOUIS: You alone, Racine? Have your lovely troops deserted you? Have you too lost your throne?

RACINE: They are on leave of absence, Sire. Taking the air for a few moments before we try to measure up to the honour you do us tonight.

JAMES: I'm told it's a good show, though I've never had much time for plays myself.

RACINE: They are unnecessary things, Your Majesty, and His Majesty the King of France has found me better employment recently. But I think the performers in this instance will touch you with their sincerity.

LOUIS: *(turning away)* Well, it's a pity. We hoped to catch you on manoeuvres.

RACINE: I have sounded the trumpet, Sire, and the regiment will be mustering shortly.

LOUIS: *(to JAMES)* Monsieur Racine went to the wars with me, cousin, to write up my history. When he was asked why he failed to be present at the first siege... What was your reply, Racine?

RACINE: I had ordered the tailor to make me new clothes for the campaign, Sire, but the town was taken before the suit was ready.

*LOUIS laughs. JAMES smiles glumly*

LOUIS: *(turning again to go)* Perhaps we shall look in again this afternoon.

RACINE: *(bowing)* Your Majesty!

*LOUIS and JAMES start to go out. RACINE hesitates, then takes a step or two after them*

Sire?

LOUIS: *(turning, obviously put out at being delayed)* Yes, Monsieur Racine?

RACINE: There are moves afoot to prevent the performance...

LOUIS: Surely not?

RACINE: Monsieur Hébert, the Curé, is very much against it.

LOUIS: That's nothing new. Speak to Madame de Maintenon!

*He turns away quite rudely. RACINE has made a faux pas.*

RACINE: Sire!

*He bows low as the two Kings go out, followed by their guards.*

Scene 11

*RACINE returns disconsolately to the platform, as the girls – PRINCIPALS and CHORUS – begin to drift back. They are all subdued – the news of MARCILLY's transgression and HEBERT's threats has passed round. MOREAU enters and seats himself at the harpsichord. RACINE confers inaudibly with him, consults his script, then taps his stick.*

RACINE: Act Two, Scene Eight. Elisa and Tamar!

*TAMAR takes up position on the stage*

Where is Mademoiselle de Marcilly?

MARCILLY: *(making her way with difficulty from the back)* I'm here, Monsieur Racine.

RACINE: We will have the opening exchange from Elisa and Tamar, please, then the Chorus!

*MARCILLY takes up position on the stage, near 'TAMAR'. RACINE steps aside and nods to MARCILLY to begin*

MARCILLY: "What do you think, my friends? How do we stand?

Shall Esther or shall Haman win the day?

The will of God or that of man?

Which shall prevail? What do you say?

You've seen how anger like a flame can race

Across the King's dark, terrifying face.

TAMAR: The lightning of his eyes dazzled my eyes,

The thunder of his voice appalled my ears.

MARCILLY: Yet hardly did his fury rise

Before it vanished and drew off our fears."

*CHORUS sings 'Dieu d'Israel...'*

CHORUS: "O God of Israel, drive away this cloud!

Have pity on Your saints, who cry to You!

When will You cast aside this sombre shroud

That covers all the world in blackest hue?

O God of Israel, drive away this cloud!

Why do You hide from those who cry to You?"

*While they are singing, MAINTENON enters. She does not interrupt, but looks across at RACINE. He sees her, understands that her news is bad and, when the verse comes to an end, puts his hand on MOREAU's shoulder to prevent him continuing and walks across in front of the stage to meet MAINTENON. She walks across towards him and they meet more or less centre-stage. Everyone remains hushed, craning to hear, but RACINE and MAINTENON speak only to each other.*

RACINE: You've brought bad news, Madame.

MAINT: Bad news was brought to me, Monsieur Racine. My nephew Villette's misbehaviour makes it impossible for us to continue with the play.

RACINE: I know that's Hébert's view. But need it be yours, Madame?

MAINT: Villette being my relative puts me in a weak position. I cannot take a light view of antics which are at best ridiculous, but at worst disgraceful. The school's reputation would suffer, perhaps fatally, by either ridicule or disgrace. And the school, of course, must come before the play.

RACINE: Wouldn't the King intervene to save tonight's performance?

MAINT: He might, but I cannot ask him to. It's my school, it was my idea to do the play and to allow young men like my nephew to see it. I must be the one to declare that enough is enough and demonstrate that we are not careless of the moral interests of those entrusted to us.

RACINE: His Majesty will be very disappointed.

MAINT: We shall all be disappointed, but disappointment is a small price to pay for doing the right thing.

RACINE: Will you tell the children or shall I?

MAINT: That painful duty too is for me to bear.

*RACINE bows and stands aside. MAINTENON takes a deep breath, bows her head for a moment as if saying a prayer, then addresses the assembled company:*

MAINT: Dear girls, I'm sure you already know what I've come to say. You also know why and I have no need to explain or justify the decision I've most unwillingly come to. I know you will all realise that it's better for the school to go on than the play, if the choice has to be made. Believe me, it does have to be made! Don't hate me for this, dear girls! Remember that if it was I who stopped the play, it was also I who started it! Nor will the play or your wonderful parts in it be forgotten. Its success is already achieved. Tonight's performance would only have been an addition to that success. But it must

be cancelled, it cannot go forward. Thank you, thank you all! Especially you, Monsieur Racine, and you, Monsieur Moreau. I cannot say any more.

*She goes hastily out. Everybody bursts into tears*

RACINE: Give us the Chorus again, Monsieur Moreau. "O God of Israel, drive away this cloud!" Who knows? God may think better of us than His Curé does.

*MOREAU plays introduction. CAYLUS rushes out, weeping bitterly. The rest sing:*

“O God of Israel, drive away this cloud!

Have pity on your saints, who cry to You!

When will You cast aside this sombre shroud

That covers all the world in blackest hue?

O God of Israel, drive away this cloud!

Why do You hide from those who cry to You?”

*Curtain or lights down for the end of ACT ONE.*

INTERVAL

ACT TWO

Scene 1

*Enter CAYLUS, dressed as 'Esther', in a purple robe and wearing a crown. She holds a large dagger with a jewelled hilt and wanders about the stage, distraught, almost tripping several times over her long robe. Finally she takes up a position centre-stage, facing what for her is an empty auditorium and holding up the dagger in both hands in front of her, point down, like a cross.*

CAYLUS:           “‘Esther, I choose you for my Queen,’ he said,  
                          Setting the crown himself upon my head;  
                          And, celebrating his delight and love,  
                          To all his courtiers costly presents gave;  
                          Then, goodwill over his whole empire shedding,  
                          Summoned his people to their sovereigns’ wedding.  
                          Alas! That festival of happiness  
                          Filled me with secret shame and bitterness.  
                          ‘Esther,’ I thought, ‘Esther in purple sits  
                          And to her sceptre half the world submits,  
                          While in Jerusalem grass hides the walls,  
                          Sion to slimy snakes and scorpions falls,  
                          The stones are scattered round her holy temple  
                          And no one celebrates the God of Israel.’”

*Beginning to sob, she tears off her crown and flings it down in front of the platform. Then she holds up the dagger again with both hands, closes her eyes and stabs herself, falling in a heap on the stage and lying quite still, while the dagger falls near her.*

*After a moment, RACINE enters at the front and walks moodily, head bowed, towards the centre. He sees or stumbles over the fallen crown, picks it up and turns it over sadly in his hands. Then he looks up for the first time at the stage and sees CAYLUS, lying still, with the dagger nearby. He leaps on to the stage and takes her in his arms.*

RACINE:    What have you done? What have you done, child?

CAYLUS: *(groans feebly)*

RACINE: You're alive! Where are you hurt? My dear child, my dear sweet child, how could you?

CAYLUS: *(in very weak voice)* I want to die.

RACINE: You must not. I told you not to take the play so seriously. Where is the wound? Show me!

CAYLUS: *(falling back, so that she is lying in his arms)* If I could die now, I would die happy.

RACINE: But where are you hurt?

CAYLUS: *(smiling radiantly)* I'm better now.

RACINE: Don't tell me... !

*He looks suspiciously at the dagger*

CAYLUS: "Whose soothing voice tells me to live again,  
Restoring soul to body without pain?"

*RACINE disentangles himself, laying her down gently but firmly while he picks up the dagger, tests it and finds that the blade retracts. He looks at her with gathering anger*

"Can I believe this King all earth adores,  
To whom all bow in fear and kiss the floors,  
Should to his slave speak words of such sweet life... ?"

RACINE: How dare you play such a trick? It's not a joke to give a shock like that to anyone, let alone a man of my age. And suppose it had been someone else – one of the nuns or Madame de Maintenon? If the play weren't already cancelled, I would have cancelled it myself for this.

CAYLUS: *(sitting up)* But if the play weren't already cancelled, I wouldn't have wanted to kill myself. And how was I to know anyone would come in? The place was empty. I was rehearsing my lines and I thought that the way things have turned out, with the wicked Minister Haman getting his way, it's become a tragedy and Esther can only kill herself. *(Pause)* I'm sorry, Monsieur Racine. I really didn't mean to trick you or anybody else. I did wish I'd really killed myself. I did almost feel as if I was dead. I was only half acting.

RACINE: And normally you're only half not-acting. I should have known better.

CAYLUS: Perhaps it was really Monsieur Hébert I hoped would find me. So that he would know how cruel he's been.

RACINE: He knows very well.

CAYLUS: Then why did he do it?

RACINE: Because he is cruel. People determined to impose their ideas on others are cruel by conviction.

CAYLUS: Is my aunt cruel?

RACINE: Of course not.

CAYLUS: It was she who made me become a Catholic.

RACINE: Against your will?

CAYLUS: No. But she told me she herself was forced to be a Catholic. When her aunt made her go to Mass for the first time, she turned her back on the altar and was severely beaten. Later, she said, she understood that her aunt was right and was grateful to her. I too would be grateful when I was older, she said. So I promised I wouldn't turn my back on the altar if she took me to Mass.

RACINE: Your aunt, who has suffered cruelly herself, is the least cruel person in the world.

CAYLUS: Do you think so? She makes people do what she wants. Me, you, even the King.

RACINE: Not Monsieur Hébert, unfortunately.

CAYLUS: She was already talking about stopping the play before ever Monsieur Hébert interfered.

RACINE: It's simply that she's so scrupulous about the feelings of others. Her own ideas are firm, but she hates to impose them.

CAYLUS: She said we shouldn't hate her for stopping the play, but I do hate her. When I pretended to stab myself I really meant to stab her.

RACINE: Surely you saw how upset she was? Her emotions are as uncomplicated as yours – emotions never grow up. But the way we control them does – or can. Most people can only be good by living out of the world altogether. Your aunt is an extraordinary exception.

CAYLUS: I don't think she's been good about this play. She's been horrid to me, horrid to all the girls, horrid to you and horrid to the King – since I know he wants very much to see it again. She's only been good to Monsieur Hébert.

RACINE: All of us – you and me, the school-girls and His Majesty – are looking to our own immediate gratifications. Madame de Maintenon is more mature and sees further.

CAYLUS: Well, I hope I never mature like her.

RACINE: Nevertheless, I'm not so mature myself as to have quite given up hope.

CAYLUS: What do you mean?

RACINE: I was speaking to the Mother Superior, Madame de Brinon, who is no more mature than you or me and very distressed at what has happened. A little chink of light appeared when Madame de Brinon mentioned how much the Queen of England was looking forward to the play and especially your performance. I've asked Madame de Brinon to ask Queen Maria to intercede with His Majesty.

CAYLUS: (*very excited*) But if she does, he can't refuse. He'll tell my aunt not to be so silly. And if he tells her, she'll obey. You've done it! Brilliant! You're a genius! You're the King of plots!

*She hugs him and puts her crown on his head*

RACINE: Don't get too excited too soon!

CAYLUS: Look, I'm all dressed up! Let's rehearse! Let's go through all my big speeches!

RACINE: That would be premature. We shouldn't tempt fate to cast us down a second time.

CAYLUS: Are you so superstitious?

RACINE: You forget how long I spent in the theatre. People who rely on critics and fickle audiences to make their living can't help paying their dues to the whims of fate.

CAYLUS: I love you, Monsieur Racine. You talk and walk about and wear your wig and your sober face as if you were old and wise. But really you're quite adorably immature.

*She kisses him*

RACINE: (*flustered*) I don't deny it. But I try my best to overcome it.

## Scene 2

*Enter, in front of the stage, MAINTENON. She is taken aback to see CAYLUS dressed as Esther, RACINE wearing her crown and both rather pink and excited*

MAINT: Are you celebrating something?

CAYLUS: That depends.

MAINT: Depends on what? I hope you don't imagine I shall change my mind about the performance.

RACINE: Your niece, Madame, has the heart and instincts, if not the training and discipline, of a great actress. She knows there is to be no performance, but she couldn't control her strong feelings. I found her here in full costume performing to an empty hall. We can hardly blame her, can we?

MAINT: *(indicating crown on RACINE's head)* Are you also performing, Monsieur Racine?

*RACINE snatches off the crown, which he had forgotten.*

RACINE: I was drawn into the performance by sympathy for your niece's feelings. As she pointed out to me herself, I do not always behave as wisely as I would wish to.

MAINT: Go and take off that costume, Marthe-Marguerite! It only makes things harder to bear when we pretend they are otherwise and play with shadows.

RACINE: That's true, of course, and all tragedies tell us so. Nevertheless, in performing tragedies we are playing with shadows. Shadows too may be true as well as false.

MAINT: Go and take off your costume, child!

CAYLUS: Madame!

*She curtseys, looking angry, and is about to go off, then turns and retrieves dagger from floor*

MAINT: Be careful with that!

CAYLUS: Why should I?

MAINT: It looks dangerous.

CAYLUS: Do you think I might hurt someone with it?

MAINT: Of course not intentionally. But accidents happen.

CAYLUS: There are no accidents. When people ruin other people's lives, they do it on purpose.

MAINT: You're too sunk in yourself. You think everything is aimed at you.

CAYLUS: No, I don't. This dagger is aimed at you!

*She points the dagger towards MAINTENON as if she meant to stab her*

MAINT: Don't be foolish!

RACINE: *(going to put his hand on her arm)* Madame de Caylus, stop play-acting!

CAYLUS: *(evading him)* Oh, you're one of the grown-ups now, are you, Monsieur Racine? As soon as she comes on the scene!

MAINT: You're behaving like a three-year-old, Marthe-Marguerite.

CAYLUS: You treat me as one. Telling me I'm not to perform and I'm to take off my party frock.

MAINT: If you must have someone to blame, it should be your brother, not me.

CAYLUS: What's he done that's so unforgivable? Found someone to love and marry? Perhaps you think he should have left the choice to you, Madame? As I did, when you married me to Monsieur le Comte de Caylus.

MAINT: *(after pause, very quietly)* I shall not forgive myself for that as long as I live.

CAYLUS: Well, I forgive you for that. But I shan't forgive you for this as long as I live.

*Pause. CAYLUS goes out, still holding dagger.*

Scene 3

MAINT: Have I made the wrong decision again?

RACINE: You must expect her to be disappointed. But she knows how much you love her. She's more like your daughter than your niece and children speak to their parents in words that have only a temporary meaning. They can be rubbed out afterwards like pencil marks.

MAINT: She's in love with you, Monsieur Racine.

RACINE: Only in pencil.

MAINT: You should be more careful not to be alone with her.

RACINE: I came in and found her lying on the stage. Apparently dead. With the dagger beside her.

MAINT: *(alarmed, moving towards exit)* It must be taken away from her! Somebody should be with her!

RACINE: It's a stage dagger. The blade has a spring. But I didn't realise that immediately. You can imagine my feelings.

MAINT: *(coming back)* Monsieur Racine, it's you I should apologise to. You wrote this beautiful, perfectly judged play at my request. You put all that time and work into coaching the girls to perform it with such energy and sincerity. You made a spectacle fit for Kings and Queens. Yet you've accepted this sudden cutting-off without a single reproach. You're a mirror of moral strength to us all, Monsieur.

RACINE: A mirror reflecting a greater mirror.

- MAINT: Do you mean the King? There's no need to flatter him in his absence. He's as devoid of moral strength as a cat.
- RACINE: I mean you, Madame. If you were pleased, the play and the time and trouble spent on it are of no account. No more are the Kings and Queens – since we are alone and need not flatter. And if the play, by being performed again, distresses you in the smallest degree, it distresses me too. You've nothing to apologise for.
- MAINT: If you were anyone else – anyone less serious – I'd think you were either flattering me or making a declaration of love.
- RACINE: Love is a cloudy word. There is the general, enflaming love of a person; and there is the particular love for what a person is, for what they have made of themselves. That second kind – shall we call it 'admiration'? – I certainly feel for you, Madame.
- MAINT: You can't admire me for what I've done to your play!
- RACINE: The play has admitted me to knowing you better. To your friendship, I'd like to believe. I couldn't have asked more of it.
- MAINT: I'm not sure I know you better. Your manners are so very fine – you're the perfect courtier. Yet any other courtier's manners I would discount as mostly flattery. Yours, I think not. Where others speak flattery as if it were the truth, you speak the truth as if it were flattery. And your plays also speak the plain truth, yet their manner too is so polished that it sounds artificial. You're an enigma to me. Are you very straightforward or very complicated?
- RACINE: I was brought up in a hard school...
- MAINT: You mean the Abbey of Port-Royal?
- RACINE: Yes, Port-Royal. Where every form of cant and hypocrisy is scrubbed away with stiff bristles. Both because the Jansenists themselves are devoted to the utmost plainness and because the authorities of Church and State fear and persecute them and make them live like criminals on parole.
- MAINT: You're surely not still a Jansenist yourself?
- RACINE: No, and never was by conviction. I was orphaned as a small child and taken in by my relatives at Port-Royal, where my aunt, as you know, is now the Abbess. But the rules were too harsh for me, so was the view of this world as only a place for hermits and martyrs. I turned my back on them all, brutally, and went to the other extreme. Theatrical people are also a persecuted minority, but for the opposite reason – for being lax and sensual and wholly of this world. Poetry was my escape from the joyless austerity of Port-Royal. And for my subjects I turned to the Ancient World – more golden, more extravagant, more monumental than our own. But I couldn't altogether shake off my early schooling...
- MAINT: You wrote Jansenist plays?

- RACINE: *(looking round and lowering his voice)* I'd never admit as much – even to you. Why does the King always distrust Jansenists, when they're so harmless?
- MAINT: He became King when he was four years old. You and I were children too at the time and perhaps hardly remember how his kingdom began to break into fragments round him and he nearly lost his throne to faction and anarchy. But he remembers only too vividly. The Jansenists were not harmless then. They sided with his enemies, seemed almost a kind of Catholic Protestants. But it's really nothing to do with their religious beliefs – he's not the least religious himself – it's because he still sees them as political enemies, threats to his power.
- RACINE: *(gloomily)* Then I take my prosperity, if not my life, in my hands, when I try to make things easier for my friends at Port-Royal.
- MAINT: I've often admired your courage and wondered if you knew what you were risking.
- RACINE: I thought if I spoke up for their simple and humble goodness, I might soften the King's attitude to them.
- MAINT: It was set for ever by the terrible weakness of the throne when he first came to power. The new Palace of Versailles itself is only another aspect of the same frame of mind. All the most powerful and potentially dangerous people in France must be under his roof and his eye, so that his power can never be diminished by distance. All competition must be for his favour alone. There must be no light but that of the Sun King. Not even – dare I say it? – of the God who created the sun and light itself.
- RACINE: We are talking treason.
- MAINT: I'm not afraid to say what I think to the King. But only if he asks me. He responds badly to anything which comes at him too directly. He likes to catch at things, not be caught by them.
- RACINE: We are all born Kings and Queens, but most of us learn, as we leave our childhood, to lose our crowns. *(He turns Esther's crown in his hands)* Suppose the King were to ask you to reinstate tonight's performance?
- MAINT: I should tell him my true opinion. That I think it better not to.
- RACINE: And if he insisted?
- MAINT: I would give way.
- RACINE: And make many people happy again, including yourself.
- MAINT: No, I wouldn't be happy. I'd be left with too many anxieties.
- RACINE: Anxieties for what God might think about the effect of the play? Or what men might?

- MAINT: I can't separate them. It's only Protestants who claim direct access to God. We believe He speaks to us through His Church and priests. Don't you believe that?
- RACINE: I'm like you, Madame. Religious questions fill me with anxiety. One treads among traps in a dark wood full of lurking gamekeepers. I prefer political questions, where the dangers are more obvious.
- MAINT: Yet you've written a truly religious play.
- RACINE: And fallen down a hole.
- MAINT: So you do mind? It's only your good manners that keep you from reproaching me.
- RACINE: I've learnt court manners because I live by frequenting the Court. But I should be sorry if you, of all people, thought I lived by manners. My case is perhaps more pitiful. I absorb and imitate other people's feelings. If my play is truly religious, it's because it's constructed out of the imitation of two truly religious people. The character of Esther, as you must know, shadows her great original...
- MAINT: People say she's drawn from life, but I can't recognise it. For me she can only be the Biblical Esther. Her purity and strength of moral purpose belong to an ideal world, not a real one. The other character, I suppose, is Mordecai, Esther's uncle. He seems to me more recognisable, but I wouldn't care to name him.
- RACINE: The great original of Mordecai is in exile in Flanders. When I was a child I feared and respected him. As a young man, I deeply offended him. More recently he's forgiven me – a saint, certainly, but also, unfortunately, a Jansenist...
- MAINT: No need to say more. I understand who you mean, though not why you want to tell me.
- RACINE: Antoine Arnauld is as much an enemy of the theatre as Monsieur Hébert, but he has seen the text of Esther and approves of it.
- MAINT: You're in touch with him? Is that wise?
- RACINE: The King is intelligent and humane. I'm sure he understands that my sympathies are with individuals rather than their doctrines.
- MAINT: People like the man you mention are their doctrines. How did we come to be talking about these unlucky matters?
- RACINE: You told me I was an enigma to you. I wished to throw back my sleeves and show that I concealed nothing from you, that I am not a mountebank.
- MAINT: I never thought you were.

RACINE: But I often think I am. In the presence of people like you and the great Arnauld, I'm certain of it.

MAINT: You think too highly of me. The man you mention may be a saint as you believe, or a heretic as the King and the Church hierarchy believe. I'm not to be compared to him either way. I walk a middle road, where the worship of God, the teaching of the Church and the demands of the world converge. I'm not a courageous person, Monsieur Racine. You should admire me less.

Scene 4

*Enter BRINON at the front, below the platform*

BRINON: Madame, we've been searching for you everywhere. This is the last place I thought we'd find you.

MAINT: *(irritated)* Why the last, Madame?

BRINON: We thought it would be too sad a reminder...

MAINT: I'm not sad, Madame de Brinon. Sadness is a form of self-indulgence and we must look forward, not back. This hall is no longer a theatre, just an ordinary part of the school.

*Enter QUEEN MARIA*

MARIA: Dear Madame de Maintenon, we have something to ask you.

MAINT: *(going down off platform and curtseying)* Your Majesty!

*RACINE bows deeply, but stays where he is. MARIA steps forward to meet MAINTENON, takes her by both hands and kisses her*

MARIA: Françoise! I may call you that? I heard the dreadful news about the play. I felt sick. Truly. It was as if a cold cloud passed over the garden where I was walking and chilled my stomach.

MAINT: It's surely not such a serious matter, Your Majesty?

MARIA: Maria, please! It is serious – to me. I haven't so many reasons to be happy these days, have I? My baby, of course, and my new friendship with you – and then the prospect of being moved to the depths of my soul by your niece in the part of Esther. That was what I was looking forward to. For I knew the moment I heard her rehearsing that she was born to play such a part.

MAINT: I'm sorry, then, I'm very sorry indeed to be the cause...

MARIA: But you were not. It was that Curé. And, of course, I heard too about the young man dressed as a nun. *(she stifles a giggle)* What a scandal! What a

bone for the Curé to get his teeth into! Your hard decision was inevitable. Black night must follow for all of us.

MAINT: It was hard. But I think we are all reconciled to it now.

MARIA: I'm sure you're not, Françoise. And certainly I am not. I am a Queen, you know, not used to disappointments and denials. I have had one black night – at Portsmouth – and the English will pay for that when I go back in triumph beside my husband and my little son. Meanwhile, I will not put up with any more black nights. *(she stamps her foot elegantly)* Black nights are out!

MAINT: I do understand, Your Majesty, but to reverse my decision now...

BRINON: It's all taken care of, Madame. Her Majesty has already spoken to...

*She is silenced by a withering glance from MARIA and, receiving a second from MAINTENON, falls back several steps*

MARIA: From whom does a Queen faced with such a dismal set-back to her hopes seek remedy? Naturally from a King. And if her own King is for the time being powerless, then from a greater King. I hurried at once, of course, to the Sun King and in a flash he dispelled my black night. No question, he said, no question at all! The play cannot be cancelled, is not cancelled. The cancellation is cancelled.

*RACINE, who has kept an expressionless face so far, cannot help a small smile*

MAINT: *(very taken aback)* But... has the King heard what happened between my nephew and Mademoiselle de Marcilly?

MARIA: *(gravely)* He has heard.

MAINT: And thinks it so little serious?

MARIA: He thinks it very serious. He has himself interviewed each of the guilty parties separately. *(She beckons to someone off-stage)*

### Scene 5

*Enter VILLETTE ('NUN'), now dressed as a young courtier, and MARCILLY, hand in hand, smiling nervously*

MARIA: The King has promised to attend their wedding himself and to pay all expenses, including Mademoiselle de Marcilly's dowry.

MAINT: *(sternly, not altogether pleased)* You are very fortunate young people.

VILLETTE: His Majesty said so himself, Madame, and promised me an invitation for tonight's performance.

MARIA: I am so happy, Françoise. Aren't you? But do you know, the King is even happier. He called for the Curé, reminded him that marriages are made in Heaven and said that this one proved that God Himself smiles on Saint-Cyr and the play. The Curé, I must say, was nonplussed.

*Pause*

MAINT: I'm quite astonished myself. His Majesty overrules my decision without even consulting me?

MARIA: Oh no! Not overrules it. I am his messenger, you see. He sends me to ask you to reconsider your decision. I simply assumed there would be no doubt of your reply. There is none, is there?

MAINT: Of course not. I'm delighted. I've hardly had time to take it in yet. But I do wonder if there's still time to prepare a performance for tonight. After all, it was to be my niece's first appearance in the leading role and the special rehearsals have been broken off. *(she looks round at RACINE)*

RACINE: We shall be ready, Madame.

BRINON: I can call all the girls immediately.

*MAINTENON looks at her bleakly*

RACINE: Do you agree, Madame?

MAINT: *(suddenly relaxing and smiling for the first time)* I agree with all my heart.

MARIA: Bravo! Bravo!

*She claps her hands and all the others, except MAINTENON, do the same.*

MARIA: Call the girls, then, Madame de Brinon!

BRINON: Your Majesty!

RACINE: We'll run through the whole play, Madame.

BRINON: I'll tell them so, Monsieur.

*BRINON goes out*

MARIA: And will you come with me to the King, Françoise, to say how pleased you are? *(taking her by the arm and starting to lead her out)* He was just a little anxious, you know, in case you might think he was interfering. I told him, no, you'd particularly asked me to help keep the spoil-sports at bay.

*MARIA and MAINTENON go out*

MARCILLY: *(breaking away from VILLETTEZ)* I must go, Monsieur. Till tonight!

VILLETTE: *(kissing her hand)* Tonight, Mademoiselle! I shall be at your feet again.

*MARCILLY goes out via the stage, VILLETTE at the front. RACINE, left alone, smiles, then sits down with a sigh. He rediscovers Esther's crown, which he is still holding, puts it on his head and says, imitating the King:*

RACINE: 'We are told that marriages are made in Heaven, Monsieur Hébert. Surely this one proves that God smiles on Monsieur Racine's play?'

*He smiles again, removes the crown, gets up and goes out at the side of the stage, spinning the crown on his finger.*

### Scene 6

*The moment RACINE has gone, enter at the front HEBERT and the BISHOP OF CHARTRES*

BISHOP: Why is no one here?

HEBERT: I imagine, your Excellency, that they've received news of His Majesty's intervention and all disappeared somewhere to resume their preparations. The fact that there is not even one of the school authorities here to receive you is some indication of the madness that has overtaken this benighted institution.

BISHOP: Is that a script on the harpsichord?

*HEBERT fetches script and gives it to him*

I glanced at it, of course, at the time the author first completed it and found it innocent enough, but texts do not always give up their secrets at one reading. Several people whose opinions I respect have told me they found puzzling aspects to this one and I would like to refresh my memory. I will study it in the garden.

HEBERT: Your Excellency!

*BISHOP goes out, followed by HEBERT with the script.*

### Scene 7

*As they leave, girls begin to come on to the stage, wearing their costumes for Esther. The PRINCIPALS sit on the bench below the stage as before, while the CHORUS mills about on the stage*

HYDASPES: Where's Marcilly?

ZERESH: Still putting on her costume.

HYDASPES: I wouldn't mind going outside with a nun like that.

TAMAR: A nun with a blue lip.

*Giggles*

AHASUERUS: Did you see the Bishop?

HAMAN: Here in the school?

MORDECAI: He must be coming to the performance tonight.

ASAPH: He's a good friend of Madame de Maintenon.

AHASUERUS: He was with Monsieur Hébert.

HAMAN: That's a bad sign.

MORDECAI: What does it matter when the King's made everything all right again?

HAMAN: Priests are always looking for trouble.

ASAPH: *(looking round)* Sssh!

HAMAN: It's true. They think all women are naturally wicked.

MORDECAI: Well, they could be right.

TAMAR: Some people even say we don't have souls like men.

HYDASPES: That's ridiculous! Just because we haven't got a... you know what.

*Giggles*

MORDECAI: Exactly. If you haven't got a you-know-what, you haven't got a soul either.

TAMAR: So that's where they keep their souls!

*Loud giggles. Enter MOREAU, smiling all round and receiving smiles. He sits at the harpsichord and the girls' noise lessens as he loosens his fingers over the keyboard. Enter BRINON. She claps her hands for silence*

BRINON: Is everybody present and correct?

AHASUERUS: *(standing up)* Mademoiselle de Marcilly isn't here yet, Madame.

HAMAN: *(also standing up)* Nor is Madame de Caylus, Madame.

*CAYLUS sweeps in, wearing her full costume and crown*

CAYLUS: Here I am. *(curtseys to BRINON)*

*MARCILLY ('ELISA') enters more inconspicuously and goes to join PRINCIPALS on the bench at the front. The girls applaud her decorously. She curtseys shyly to them all*

BRINON: Well then, we await Monsieur Racine.

*She goes to the side of the stage and peers out.*

### Scene 8

*Enter, below the stage at the front, KING LOUIS, accompanied by KING JAMES, QUEEN MARIA and MAINTENON*

LOUIS: What a charming spectacle, eh, cousin? Did you ever see anything to match it?

*BRINON turns in confusion and immediately drops a deep curtsey, as do all the girls. MOREAU stands up at the harpsichord and bows*

BRINON: Your Majesty! Your Majesties!

LOUIS: No ceremony, please, Madame de Brinon!

BRINON: But we are deeply grateful for your intervention, Your Majesty. Allow us to show our gratitude!

*She hurries over to MOREAU and speaks in a stage whisper*

Monsieur Moreau, be so good as to play the anthem!

*MOREAU looks confused*

LOUIS: We've only dropped in to see that you're all happy and working again.

BRINON: Oh, Your Majesty, we are! We couldn't be more happy if we were all going to be married with your blessing.

*General hilarity, but very suppressed, except on the part of LOUIS and MARIA. JAMES keeps his usual glum expression and MAINTENON looks embarrassed*

BRINON: *(stage whisper)* The loyal anthem to Monsieur Lully's music, Monsieur Moreau. Play it, please!

*MOREAU sits down and plays short introduction. BRINON turns to the girls and raises her arms to conduct them*

Now, girls!

*MOREAU plays the accompaniment and all the girls sing with great vigour:*

"Great God, preserve the King!

Great God, avenge the King!

Long live the King!

May Louis be glorious,

Ever victorious

Over his enemies!

Long live the King!"

*LOUIS smiles, BRINON and all the girls curtsey again and MOREAU bows again*

JAMES: That's a good sturdy song.

LOUIS: Not bad, is it?

MAINT: *(to MARIA)* It was composed specially for the King's first visit to Saint-Cyr five years ago. The late Monsieur Lully wrote the music. The words are Madame de Brinon's own.

LOUIS: *(impatiently)* Now what's happening, Madame de Brinon?

BRINON: We are lacking Monsieur Racine, Your Majesty, but I'm sure Monsieur Moreau will direct the girls in one of the Choruses for you.

LOUIS: No. No special treatment for us, Madame! The last thing we want is to inconvenience Monsieur Racine's schedule any further. Perhaps we might show our visitors behind scenes while we're awaiting the Master of Ceremonies.

BRINON: With the utmost pleasure, Your Majesty.

*The Royal party mounts the stage*

MARIA: We shall not embarrass any of your actresses, I hope, Madame?

BRINON: Oh, no, Your Majesty, they are all on stage. No one is still undressed.

*LOUIS and JAMES, followed by MARIA and MAINTENON, progress across the stage, smiling at the girls, occasionally stopping to inspect a costume or a piece of decoration*

LOUIS: All these girls are of the best families, cousin.

JAMES: Is that so?

LOUIS: No one is admitted unless her pedigree of nobility goes back at least four generations.

JAMES: Well, we have nothing like this in England.

LOUIS: *(loftily)* Have you not?

JAMES: Not for girls. Only for horses.

*They go out at the side of the stage. MARIA, who has stopped to talk to one of the girls, rejoins MAINTENON and puts her arm round her*

MARIA: I'm so happy, Françoise, so happy.

*MARIA and MAINTENON follow the KINGS off stage at the side. BRINON, following too, turns as she goes*

BRINON: Quiet and good, girls! Not a murmur till we return!

*She goes out.*

### Scene 9

*Everyone remains completely still and quiet. Enter at the front, RACINE. He is astonished at the sight of all his cast apparently turned to stone and stands looking at them quizzically for a moment until CAYLUS, seated with the other PRINCIPALS at the front, notices him*

CAYLUS: *(in a low voice)* The King's here, Monsieur Racine. *(points back-stage)* with the other King and Queen and my aunt. But they don't want to inconvenience you at all.

RACINE: I see. Then we can begin. *(crossing to harpsichord)* Where's my script, Monsieur Moreau?

*MOREAU searches through his own scores and shrugs his shoulders*

RACINE: It doesn't matter. I hope I can remember most of it. *(to girls)* From the beginning, then! Chorus off-stage, please!

*Girls begin to murmur*

Chorus off, I said!

*More murmurs*

CAYLUS: *(in low voice)* They don't want to go off, because of who's in there. *(points back-stage)*

RACINE: I understand. *(to CHORUS)* Sit down where you are for the present!

*Everyone sits down. RACINE taps stick*

Entrance of Esther and Elisa!

*CAYLUS and MARCILLY 'enter' from opposite sides of the stage, meeting centre*

CAYLUS: *(in role of 'Esther')*

“You, dear Elisa! What a happy day!  
Blessed by Heav’n that sends you when I pray!  
Born of the tribe of Benjamin like me,  
My friend of earliest years and memory,  
Bearing with me the yoke of our oppression,  
You shared with me the sorrows of sweet Sion.  
How clearly I remember those past times!  
You’ve heard how high your Esther’s glory climbs?”

Scene 10

*During this speech, enter BISHOP, still holding script, and HEBERT, below the stage at the front. As CAYLUS touches her crown at “Esther’s glory climbs”, the BISHOP interrupts:*

BISHOP: Monsieur Racine!

*CAYLUS stops abruptly. RACINE comes forward and kisses the BISHOP’s ring*

RACINE: Your Excellency!

*He gestures to the girls and they all stand up and curtsy*

BISHOP: A word with you, Monsieur!

*He takes RACINE a little aside, more or less out of earshot of the girls*

RACINE: I’m at your service, of course, but will you not see the scene through? A Chorus follows and I can leave that to Monsieur Moreau to rehearse. You know perhaps that we are somewhat pressed. Also...

BISHOP: I doubt if you are as pressed as you suppose, Monsieur Racine. The word I wish to speak to you is a word of warning.

RACINE: I should also warn your Excellency that His Majesty the King, with the King and Queen of England and Madame de Maintenon, are behind scenes...  
*(gestures towards back-stage)*

BISHOP: *(taken aback and not entirely convinced)* Behind there?

RACINE: Their Majesties are inspecting the green-room, as we call it. In normal times, one of the girls’ dormitories.

- BISHOP: *(looking significantly at HEBERT)* We are not in normal times.
- HEBERT: Shockingly abnormal, Your Excellency.
- BISHOP: This is unfortunate, Monsieur Racine. I meant to give you fair warning before I spoke to His Majesty. You will not now have that opportunity.
- RACINE: Fair warning of what?
- BISHOP: Of the impossibility of continuing with your play.
- RACINE: On what grounds, when His Majesty has himself directed us to continue?
- BISHOP: I have just been re-reading your text....

Scene 11

*The girls at the back of the stage suddenly move aside and start curtsying again, as LOUIS enters, followed by JAMES, MARIA, MAINTENON and BRINON. BISHOP, HEBERT and RACINE bow. MOREAU stands up and bows.*

- LOUIS: An interruption to your rehearsal, Monsieur Racine? We heard Madame de Caylus in fine voice, suddenly broken off.
- BISHOP: The interruption was mine, Your Majesty, and I fear it is a serious one...
- LOUIS: Is that Hébert with you, Monsieur des Marais? In our opinion we have had enough interruptions, serious or otherwise, and we're glad to be able to tell you so ourself.
- BISHOP: I am also glad of that, Sire, because I meant, having questioned Monsieur Racine, to seek an audience of Your Majesty.
- LOUIS: *(irritated)* Haven't you pestered us all enough with your incessant accusations of immorality?
- BISHOP: Immorality is one thing, Sire, and if you are satisfied, then we must be content. But a text which subtly disseminates heresy is quite another matter.

*All, especially RACINE and MAINTENON, look queasy*

- LOUIS: Heresy! What are you talking about? Any number of leading churchmen, including the Archbishop of Paris, have seen this play. I've seen it myself many times. How can it be heresy?
- BISHOP: It is a very cunning piece of work, Sire, crafted with all the skill of a master poet. Innocence shines out of it.
- LOUIS: It certainly does.

BISHOP: Alas, Your Majesty, that innocence is a cloak! Or better say, it is innocence in a false cause. This play... (*holding up script*)... is nothing but an apology for Jansenism.

*Stunned silence. RACINE and MAINTENON look sicker still. LOUIS glances round for a chair, which, at a signal from BRINON, is immediately brought for him by two girls. Other girls bring chairs for JAMES and MARIA. LOUIS sits down, then JAMES, then MARIA. MAINTENON stands*

LOUIS: Explain yourself!

BISHOP: The author was brought up at Port-Royal. To this day he is well known to be in sympathy with the members of that community. His own aunt is their Abbess. Rumours reached me that the former leader of that community, the man they all revere, who is now in exile in Brussels, had received a copy of this play. How he received it I am at a loss to say... (*he looks significantly at RACINE*)... but he signified his approval. My suspicions were aroused and I came here to verify them. I have now studied the text with some care. No doubt remains in my mind. The play's subject may appear to be the persecution of the Jews by the Ancient Persians. It is really the supposed persecution of the community of Port-Royal by the true Church.

LOUIS: What have you to say to this, Monsieur Racine?

RACINE: Everything His Excellency says about my background and my connections with Port-Royal is true and well-known. I could no more hide it than if I had been born with a hunched back or crippled legs. If it was a disadvantage to me, Your Majesty has been so understanding as to overlook it. Perhaps out of humanity and kindness, perhaps because you never saw in me any trace of doctrinal infection. And there is none. I am not and have never been a Jansenist. Why, then, at the behest of this noble lady... (*indicates MAINTENON*)... whose dedicated activity on behalf of true religion is an example to us all, should I write a text secretly advocating a Cause that is neither mine nor hers? Just in order to get myself into trouble and arouse annoyance and indignation in my distinguished patron... (*bowing to MAINTENON*)... and that great person to whom I am most indebted? (*bows to LOUIS*)

LOUIS: You had better go into more detail, Monsieur des Marais.

BISHOP: I was waiting to do so, Sire, until Monsieur Racine's oratory had run its course. I will begin with the character of Mordecai, this ostensible Jew...

RACINE: He is a Jew in the original story, which I took from the Bible.

BISHOP: I don't need you to teach me the Holy Scriptures, Monsieur. This Mordecai, of austere habits, much revered by the Jews in the play, living in a kind of exile outside the Persian King's palace-gates, much hated by the King's Minister and plotting his overthrow - who can he be but that saint of the Jansenist heresy, exiled in Brussels, Antoine Arnauld? And who can the Minister be - the villain of this piece - but Your Majesty's own Minister,

Monsieur Louvois, who very properly saw to it that this dangerous Arnauld was sent into exile?

LOUIS: What do you say, Monsieur Racine?

RACINE: Monsieur Louvois himself attended a performance of the play and did not recognise himself in the wicked Persian Minister, Haman. Nor should he have done so, since I had no intention of depicting him. Again I ask, what could have induced me to do so, except a desire to destroy myself?

LOUIS: And the exile Arnauld? Are you an admirer of this man?

*RACINE hesitates, looks at MAINTENON, who avoids his gaze*

RACINE: I have admired him, Your Majesty.

*LOUIS looks very stern. Everyone else holds their breath*

I was taught as a boy to admire him. When I began to write plays I became his enemy and only when I abandoned the theatre did he forgive me. That was the time, Sire, when you honoured me with the post of Historiographer Royal and Monsieur Arnauld was then still living at liberty in your kingdom. I saw no reason therefore not to be reconciled with him. I did not hide my reconciliation. I cannot pretend I think him wicked, but I am not qualified to judge what offences he may have committed against the Church or State, being myself neither a theologian nor a politician. I try to act and think, Sire, as the Church instructs me. I really could not tell you exactly what heresies Monsieur Arnauld and his fellow-Jansenists embrace. Only that, like Monsieur Hébert and His Excellency the Bishop of Chartres, they utterly abhor the theatre.

*LOUIS looks at BISHOP*

BISHOP: Monsieur Racine resorts to a cheap jibe, Sire. But smoking it over as he may with equivocation, he has essentially admitted that he does admire Antoine Arnauld.

LOUIS: How do the other characters in the play fit with this interpretation, Monsieur des Marais? King Ahasuerus, for example?

BISHOP: The Persian King in the play, Your Majesty, is persuaded to condemn his Minister to death and lift the persecution of the Jews. This I see as a veiled hint to Your Majesty to dispense with your own Minister, Monsieur Louvois, and to smile upon the Jansenists.

LOUIS: *(venomous)* Racine?

RACINE: Is it likely, Your Majesty, that, knowing your aversion to Jansenism and that my own worst fault in your eyes is likely to be my own family connection with its followers, I should meddle with such explosive topics? And if they are so veiled that only His Excellency has been able to discern their meaning, t o w h a t p u r p o s e ?

Does he seriously accuse me of writing this play to convert you, Sire, to Jansenism?

LOUIS: What of the character of Esther, Monsieur des Marais? By your reading she must be a Jansenist too.

BISHOP: Here we penetrate, Your Majesty, to the very core of the play's clever wickedness.  
Everyone thinks he knows who Queen Esther in this play stands for. But if Esther's uncle, the Jew Mordecai, stands for the Jansenist leader Arnauld; the wicked Minister Haman for your own Minister, Monsieur Louvois; and Esther's husband King Ahasuerus for Your Majesty; then how should Esther be interpreted? Surely there is no lady close to you, Sire, whom we could accuse of Jansenism? No. But are not Jansenists a kind of crypto-Protestants? And was not a certain lady once a fervent Protestant, with a grandfather famous for his austere apostasy – notorious in very much the same vein as Antoine Arnauld? I believe that Monsieur Racine has, in his character of Queen Esther, made a most mischievous and deliberate correspondence and coalescence of Arnauld the Jansenist with that notorious old Protestant Agrippa d'Aubigné, and laid both these unwelcome ghosts most dangerously close to your door, Your Majesty.

*Not everybody has followed all the details of the argument, but they all know what he means and all eyes turn to MAINTENON, who is dreadfully perturbed. She leans on MARIA*

LOUIS: You begin to convince us, Monsieur des Marais. If the play is as poisonous and subversive as you suggest, it must certainly be stopped. What is your opinion, Madame de Maintenon?

MAINT: I am quite unfit to judge.

LOUIS: *(irritated)* Do you think there is any substance in the Bishop's interpretation?

MAINT: There is substance, of course. Monsieur Racine does admire Antoine Arnauld – he's never denied it. He is closely connected with the Abbey of Port-Royal – he's never concealed it. As for Agrippa d'Aubigné, everyone knows he was my grandfather and that I was a fervent Protestant in my extreme youth. These are undeniable, if unpalatable facts. But may it not be that if Monsieur Racine has portrayed the Jansenists or the Protestants under the name of Jews, he has done so accidentally, unconsciously, without meaning any harm? However, if His Excellency is right – and he is certainly a most skilled interpreter of texts – then whatever Monsieur Racine's motives – good or bad – the play, once seen in this light, ought to be stopped.

*Long pause. Everyone is appalled at her weakness. RACINE, especially, looks at her with horror and disillusionment*

LOUIS: *(fiercely)* Racine!

RACINE: I have nothing more to say, Sire. If Madame de Maintenon even suspects that my motives were not good, if there is any question in her mind that I might have written about Jansenists or Protestants in Your Majesty's France, when I thought I wrote about exiled Jews in Ancient Persia, then the play is extinguished.

MARIA: No, it mustn't be! Are your guests to have no say in the matter, Your Majesty? Are we to be cheated of our pleasure by all this abstruse argument?

*She nudges JAMES*

JAMES: Not having seen the piece, cousin, I find it difficult to follow the Bishop's exegesis. In fact, it sounds to me like a lot of nit-picking nonsense. Never having come across any Jansenists, I have to take his word for it that they're virtually the same as Protestants. Well, then, could I ask one practical question of Monsieur Racine?

LOUIS: Please do so, cousin!

JAMES: Are you a good Catholic, Racine, or are you a damned Protestant?

RACINE: I am a devoted Catholic, Your Majesty. Whether a good one is not for me to judge.

JAMES: Then why the devil have you written a play against the persecution of Protestants?

RACINE: I did not think I had, Your Majesty.

JAMES: Precisely. The answer seems to me extremely simple, cousin. The Bishop has got his garters crossed. This play is about the persecution of Catholics. It's about England, not France. The King must be us, the Queen must be our dearest Maria and the wicked Minister is that damned turncoat John Churchill, my best and most trusted general, who went over to William of Orange and will have his head on the nearest block as soon as we return to our kingdom.

LOUIS: But you've not seen the play, cousin.

JAMES: No, I haven't. And it looks as if nobody wants me to. Yet the very idea of it stirs my blood and makes me impatient to drive those impious persecuting Protestants out of my country. Besides, I never heard of a Bishop telling a King he couldn't see a play. Beware of such democratic inclinations, cousin! They have brought England to the verge of the abyss, from which – God willing and with the help of your army – I shall shortly save it.

LOUIS: *(standing up)* Amen!

HEBERT: And the play, Your Majesty?

LOUIS: The play, Hébert? You've heard His Majesty of England's opinion. *(suddenly becoming ferociously angry)* How dare you raise your miserable

voice in the company of so many of your betters? Go and pray, you snivelling little man! Pray to be relieved of your envy and spite! And if you can't pray for that, then pray not to be relieved of your benefice! (*he calms down just as suddenly*) Monsieur des Marais, my royal guest considers you have been over-ingenuous in your interpretation of this play. Will you dispute it?

BISHOP: No, Sire. I will see the play myself tonight and hope to agree with His Majesty of England's more robust interpretation.

LOUIS: Tonight, then, Monsieur Racine! Tonight you must astonish us all! The power of innocence, the triumph of God's people and the overthrow of his enemies!

*He stalks off the stage and out at the front, followed by JAMES and MARIA, MAINTENON somewhat trailing. All bow and curtsy low, the BISHOP and HEBERT also. But MAINTENON will not look at RACINE as she passes him and he too lowers his eyes. As soon as the Royal party has left, the BISHOP and HEBERT go quickly out the other side at the front, the BISHOP tossing RACINE's script on to the harpsichord as he goes.*

### Scene 12

*RACINE leans against the harpsichord and mops his face with a handkerchief. BRINON crosses to him*

BRINON: Monsieur Racine, you stood like a hero for the truth and vindicated the integrity of poetry.

RACINE: I'm not sure that either was much at issue, Madame. But we saw several cornered creatures fighting desperately for their survival. Except the King of England. I never heard a good word said for him before, but I shall be his loyal admirer to my dying day.

BRINON: And Queen Maria's too, I hope. She nudged him into it, you know.

RACINE: As for Queen Maria, she's a lady of real spirit and I'm happy to acknowledge her my Esther, if King James will have it so.

*He taps his stick to quell the rising babble from the girls*

Shall we take the final Chorus, Monsieur Moreau, to bring us back to reality?  
Esther, cue for the final Chorus!

CAYLUS: (*taking up position centre-stage*)

“O God, by what ways measureless to man

Your wisdom traces its eternal plan!”

*MOREAU plays the accompaniment and they all sing “Dieu fait triompher l'innocence...”*

CHORUS:            “The innocent we celebrate,  
                          God’s triumph and the power of fate.  
                          He saw our wicked enemies unite,  
                          Eager and armed to cut and smite  
                          And spill our blood like water on the ground.  
                          From high in Heav’n His mighty Voice doth sound:  
                          The man of pride is overthrown,  
                          Pierc’d with the shafts that were his own.”

*And “Que Son Nom soit beny...”*

CHORUS:            Your Name be prais’d, Blessed Divinity!  
                          We celebrate Your works and ways  
                          Through every age and all the days,  
                          Through time and all eternity!”

*RACINE taps his stick*

RACINE:    Clear the stage!

*Everyone goes off at the side of the stage. RACINE comes forward alone, pauses, smiles with satisfaction, then calls out:*

                  Beginners, please!

*He taps his stick three times. Lights or curtain down.*

The End

AFTERWORD

RACINE AT THE GIRLS' SCHOOL was the first play commissioned for the Schools Drama Festival at the 1992 Cheltenham Festival of Literature. This festival within a festival was an immediate success and became a regular event.

Since the play was intended for the Cheltenham Ladies' College, the subject that immediately suggested itself was one that had lain at the back of my mind for many years. Racine's last two plays – Esther and Athalie – were partly operatic Biblical stories written for Madame de Maintenon's new girls' school at St Cyr and performed entirely by teenage girls. Why, after his masterpiece Phèdre, did he write no more plays for ten years and never again for the professional theatre?

My research provided the answer, which this play incorporates. But I soon became still more intrigued by the circumstances of the actual production of Esther in 1689.

Although the subject was deliberately 'improving' – the school had previously mounted an alarmingly passionate version of Racine's early play Andromache and Madame de Maintenon had asked for something very different – there was powerful opposition from some quarters to the whole project and especially its popularity with the Versailles courtiers.

At the fourth performance, on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1689, Madame de Maintenon's niece, Madame de Caylus, took over the name-part and sent the audience into raptures. Among the audience on this occasion were the exiled King James II of England and his Queen. The following day, February 6<sup>th</sup>, back in their lost kingdom, the English Parliament confirmed the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 and inaugurated the British system of constitutional monarchy by bestowing the throne on James's daughter Mary and her Dutch husband, William. They are known to history as our only joint monarchs: William III and Mary II. The "turncoat" general John Churchill, who helped bring William and Mary to power because he feared that James would make England Catholic again, later became Duke of Marlborough and won many decisive victories against Louis XIV's armies, frustrating his attempts to dominate Western Europe. John Churchill's most famous descendant was, of course, Winston Churchill, who did so much to frustrate Hitler's attempt to dominate Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

As if all this weren't enough, I discovered that the schoolgirl playing the part of Elisa in the play – her name was Marie Clara des Champs de Marcilly – went on to marry the Marquis de Villette, one of the eager courtiers who saw her perform and was himself a cousin of Madame de Maintenon. I'm not sure of his exact relationship to Madame de Caylus and, for simplicity's sake, have called him her brother. However, since I'd tied myself down – emulating Racine's own classically-structured plays – to Aristotle's 'dramatic unities' of place, time and action, I was unable to use the even stranger ending to this particular story. After the death of her husband in 1707, the Marquise de Villette (formerly Mademoiselle de Marcilly) married again.

Her second husband was the exiled British politician, Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, and the couple eventually retired to Bolingbroke's family home in London. They died in 1750 and 1751, are buried together in the crypt of Battersea Parish Church in South London, and commemorated on the wall of the church in a marble relief by the

famous sculptor Roubiliac. I suspect that Mademoiselle de Marcilly's first husband, the Marquis de Villette, was somewhat older than I've made him, but felt that, in a play intended to be performed by 17-year-old girls, I already had enough middle-aged gentlemen in the cast.

I have also taken some dramatic licence with the Jansenist heresy issue that emerges in the latter part of the play. Everything here about Racine's connection with the Jansenists – and Madame de Maintenon's with the Protestants – is historically accurate. But Racine did not fall foul of the King's prejudice against Jansenists until several years after Esther.

The Bishop of Chartres' interpretation of Esther is mostly my own – as is that of Madame de Caylus – but whether there really is some hidden political/religious meaning in the play is still an open question and people at the time certainly read real persons into the characters, as Racine's enemies do in my play. The Curé of Versailles' fierce opposition to the girls' performance of Esther is entirely historical, though I have provided him with his arguments.

The translations from the spoken text of Esther are my own, but in the first production we left the sung parts in French. It fits the music better than a translation could, sounds more ethereal than English and – whatever the language – one can never hear many of the words sung by a chorus anyway.

When we first began work on RACINE AT THE GIRLS' SCHOOL we thought that the music director of Cheltenham Ladies' College, John Wright, would himself have to compose music for the sung parts in the style of the period, since nothing but a small harpsichord piece by the original composer, Jean-Baptiste Moreau, seemed to have survived. Then, alerted by the head of Sotheby's Manuscript Department, we found that the British Library owned a copy of the complete score for Esther. So John Wright edited and transcribed the sections I wanted for my play and Moreau's music received what may well have been its first ever hearing in England. A shortened version of this score was used again for the play's second production, by St Paul's Girls' School in London, in 1993.

There is to this day no evidence that Louis XIV, after the death of his unhappy Queen in 1683, actually married Madame de Maintenon, who had been employed to look after his illegitimate children by a previous royal favourite, Madame de Montespan. But all historians are certain that the marriage did take place, probably in the same year as the Queen's death. Given the strong moral pressure Madame de Maintenon exerted on the King and the moral 'cleansing' that took place at Versailles once she became 'first lady' – including her foundation of the St Cyr school for the daughters of poor noblemen – the historians are surely right.

The words of the 'loyal song' written by the Headmistress of St Cyr, Madame de Brinon – the original music by Lully is lost – may seem oddly familiar. Nancy Mitford's popular biography of Louis XIV – *The Sun King* – prints the French text of this prototype of the British National Anthem as well as illustrating the exact school uniform worn by the girls of St Cyr. Adapted by Judy Langhorn, it looked so good on the Cheltenham Chorus that I began to hope the Ladies' College might think of replacing their own in its favour. The principal characters' costumes were also made specially – by Michelle Walton – and were equally authentic, not just to the period in general, but to the year 1689.

The ex-Queen of England, James II's second wife, is usually called Mary, but this is confusing, since her step-daughter, the usurping Queen of England, was also called Mary. In any case, the ex-Queen was Italian, daughter of the Duke of Modena, so on both counts she's better called Maria. The baby she refers to was called James and grew up to be 'The Old Pretender', father of 'The Young Pretender', Bonnie Prince Charlie.