Jean Racine by Jules Lemaitre

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tion it may be interesting to observe by the way, that 's'en torcher le nez' (p. 78) was good English seventeenth century slang: 'and the King own a marriage...and so wipe their noses of the Crown' (Pepys, *Diary*, July 17, 1667). The references to folk-lore and proverbs in Ch. iv. are interesting, and a short chapter is devoted to proper names. But it will be for the two able classifications referred to above and for the wealth of examples it gives, that the book will be chiefly valued.

G. A. PARRY.

LONDON.

Jean Racine. Par JULES LEMAITRE. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1908. 8vo. 328 pp.

Some apology is due for the tardy notice in these pages of such an important book as M. Lemaître's *Jean Racine* which last year charmed all Paris. The excuse we would tender is one that the author will surely accept and even commend, since it implies the triumph of his art. M. Lemaître's pages compel you to turn again to the *Théâtre* of Racine, and on that enchanted ground the voice of criticism is hushed. Something of the same witchery is exercised by M. Lemaître's own work. Its beauty and its skill dazzle the reader and conceal the defects of its argumentation. No one of Racine's tragedies can compare in interest, as the critic truly says, with the story of his life. And in handling this theme M. Lemaître employs with consummate mastery all the qualities which it demands—learning, sympathy, style, and a sense of the dramatic.

The result is a book as full of life and interest as any play or novel. The tragedy is held together and its action is controlled by the dominating figure of Port-Royal, which broods over the whole like the Nemesis of Æschylus or Sophocles. The note is struck in the first pages, where we are shewn the four Solitaires passing in silence through the streets of La Festé-Milon, the home of Racine's parents and his birthplace; and it sounds all through the story till his death and burial beside M. Hamon, the best-loved teacher of his childhood. M. Lemaître sees that this influence of Port-Royal, begun before Racine was born and always surrounding him, however fiercely for a time he fought against it, gives unity to that agitated life with its worldly successes and its moral failures, its glory and its baseness. He does not, we venture to think, appreciate Jansenism at its proper theological value nor see how directly it derives from St Paul; but he thoroughly understands its psychology, and his picture of the Jansenist in his cell and before the world is a masterpiece and throws into high relief the figure of the wayward youth who owed so much to Port-Royal and profited so little by the lessons of unworldliness which he learnt there. The influence of the place upon his art (which is quite another matter) was considerable, and is of course duly noted. 'L'opinion de Port-Royal sur la nature humaine se retrouvera dans ses tragédies; elle le fera véridique et hardi dans ses peintures de l'homme. Et, à cause de Port-Royal, jamais (sauf dans l'Alexandre)

il ne donnera dans l'optimisme romanesque des deux Corneille and de Quinault.'

Enough has been said in order to illustrate the skilful construction of M. Lemaitre's study. But among many instances of his extraordinary literary skill, one in particular deserves to be cited, and that is the way in which the reader's mind is prepared for the appearance of Alexander the Great on the Racinian stage. The irresistible appeal of this romantic figure has never been better described, and no one can fail now to understand why in 1665, the year of the execrable War of Devolution and five years after the Spanish marriage, Racine the courtier produced, and Louis the King applauded, the play in which the interest centres on this 'héros amoureux et guerrier.'

It is a thousand pities that M. Lemaitre's enthusiasm for Racine has led him to be less than fair to his great rival, and indeed to anyone that ventured to question, not his genius, but his supremacy. Out of a score of references to Pierre Corneille there are perhaps two which can be twisted into a faint confession of merit; while with regard to Madame de Sévigné, the critic permits himself to use an epithet which can only be termed 'fâcheux' (it is his own word for Racine's action in the matter of his *Alexandre*). He calls that great-hearted lady 'la grosse Sévigné.' Such impertinence tempers with disgust our delight in M. Lemaitre's prose.

There are certain passages which render the book unsuited to—let us say, les demoiselles de St Cyr—for instance the extremely ingenious and probably sound defence of Racine's youthful morality. But after all it was not written for young people, and we trust that it may have many English readers and help to the better understanding of a poet who is little understood by us. To discuss at length the causes of this want of appreciation lies outside our present purpose. The general ground is no doubt that which Mr Tilley has indicated in his recent volume *From Montaigne to Molière*, viz., Racine's lack of imaginative expression. The Elizabethans have created in us an appetite for this which finds satisfaction in the French romantic writers whom M. Lemaitre evidently despises rather than in the delicate and subtle art of Racine. And here it is worth while to point out a strange oversight on the part of this champion of classicism. He makes merry, as many have done before him, over the 'couleur locale' of the Romantics and against it places the 'couleur historique' of Racine, shewing quite truly that Racine manages to give the right setting to his exotic personages without the help of technical terms. But the same might be said with equal truth of the chief of the Romantics. A comparison of *La légende des siècles* with, say, the painful archaeology of Leconte de Lisle shews that Hugo was past master in the very art so greatly praised by M. Lemaitre in Racine, viz., the power of creating an atmosphere and conveying the general truth of a distant period or climate without regard to accuracy of detail.

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