Blood and Thunder: Spectacle in English Neoclassical Adaptation

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'Spectacle' is nobody's watchword for neoclassicism. This elite form of drama, developed throughout the seventeenth century in France, drew critical acclaim, admiration, and imitation from great minds throughout Europe for many reasons, but being a good show was not among them. In fact, French neoclassicism was renowned for being a more civilized sort of drama, one which followed the precepts of the great Aristotle by banning vulgar exhibitions of death and violence from the stage, expressing action through poetry rather than direct representation.[1] This and other neo-Aristotelian rules, codified and enforced by the elite French Academy, allowed French neoclassicism to cash in on the cultural cache of 'the ancients'—an imaginary group comprised of all authors from Homer through the poets of the late Roman Empire. At a time when all of Western European art was fairly obsessed with recreating the genius of the ancients, the cultural capital this anti-spectacular form of drama generated was nothing to scoff at. Theaters and dramatic critics in many a neighboring nation rushed to import the principles and plays of this new form of French drama, yet these importations could rarely be accomplished wholesale. In particular, the anti-spectacular principles of French neoclassicism ran into trouble when this style made the leap across the channel to England, a nation whose theater made spectacle its guiding principle. In fact, the importation of French neoclassicism to England created a kind of multivalent culture clash, in which the theatrical traditions of four different cultures (England, France, Athens, and Rome), disguised as only three (England,

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[1] For a thorough exploration of this and other 'rules' of neoclassical composition, their derivation from Aristotle and Horace, and the changes of interpretation they underwent as they moved from place to place and critic to critic, see Marvin A. Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

France, and 'the ancients') would meet, merge, wrestle, and change one another in the form of both the plays themselves and works of dramatic criticism.

The route that these four cultures took to all arrive on the English stage at the same time is a fascinating one. While the French were busy creating a national theater based upon the example of the Greeks and the precepts of Aristotle in a 'top-down' model governed by the aristocracy and the French Academy, the English by the seventeenth century had already established a thriving professional theater scene on the basis of a 'bottom-up' economic model in which the tastes of London's urban populace determined who would make money (and therefore keep making plays) and who would fail.[2] The market-driven nature of English drama was, in fact, so ingrained that attempts to create a 'top-down' model by establishing a national theater in the French style were discarded as impossible practically the moment they were raised right through the middle of the twentieth century, when a national theater was finally established in 1949.[3] Though the patronage of the aristocracy was still a financial and political consideration in the London theater scene from the beginning—the names of such famous and successful theater companies as "The King's Men" being a case in point[4]—a far greater percentage of the funding for English theaters came from performance revenue, and aristocrats were far less likely to publicly lambast a play for failure to uphold aesthetic standards set by the elite, as had been the

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[2]On the economics of the early professional theater in England, see, among others, William Ingram, *The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992) and Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[3]See Marion O'Connor, "national theatre movement: Britain," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, ed. Dennis Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[4]On the operations of aristocratic patronage of the theater during this time, see Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne R. Westfall, *Shakespeare and Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For a specific study on the various economic influences on the King's Men over time, see Melissa D. Aaron, *Global Economics: A History of the Theater Business, the Chamberlain's/King's Men, and Their Plays, 1599-1642* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

case in France during the famous dispute over *Le Cid*.[5]

The relative aesthetic freedom and flexibility of this 'bottom-up' model meant that the early professional theaters in England drew heavily on the popular and profitable entertainments which antedated them, many of which were bloodsports. In fact, many of the first professional theaters were housed in buildings that had been used (or were still used) for various entertainments based on animal fighting. The Cockpit Theater—which had been a literal cockpit for betting on rooster fights—and the Hope Theater—which was used as a bearbaiting arena when plays were not being staged—are two examples of this type.[6] The English penchant for animal fights drifted easily into an affinity for a version of tragedy that featured sensational spectacles of violence and death, and this particular form of theater came to be acknowledged as a distinguishing mark of the English national character by observers both at home and abroad. The Englishman Thomas Rymer, for example, in the preface to his popular translation of a French critical text, both repeats and confirms the French charge of bloodiness in the English theater:

> . . . in general he [the French author] confesses, that we have a Genius for Tragedy above all other people; one reason he gives we cannot allow of, viz. *The disposition of our Nation, which*, he saith, *is delighted with cruel things*. 'Tis ordinary to judge of Peoples manners and inclinations, by their publick diversions; and Travellers, who see some of our *Tragedies*, may conclude us

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[5]For an in-depth exploration of the *Querelle du Cid* and its role in establishing the authority of the French Academy, see "Chapter 1: Theater and Study in the Querelle du *Cid*" in Jessica N. Kamin, "Playwrights on the Threshold Between Stage and Study: Paratexts and Polemical Texts in Seventeenth Century French Theater" (dissertation, University of Washington, 2012), http://hdl.handle.net/1773/20540.

[6]For an architectural history of these and other theaters, see Richard Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse: An Illustrated Survey of Theatre Building in England from Medieval to Modern Times* (London and New York: Methuen, 1988). On the links between theater and animal bloodsports in the London's early professional theaters, see Heather F. Phillips, "Of Beasts and Men: Animal Bloodsports in Early Modern England" (Doctoral Dissertation, Tufts University, 2013).

certainly the cruellest minded people in Christendom. In another place this Author

sayes of us, *That we are men in an Island, divided from the rest of the world, and*

that we love blood in our sports. And, perhaps, it may be true, that on our Stage

are more Murders than on all the Theatres in Europe. And they who have not time

to learn our Language, or be acquainted with our Conversation, may there in three

hours time behold so much bloodshed as may affright them from the inhospitable

shore, as from the Cyclops Den.[7]

Rymer then uses this discussion to call for reform of the theater, making it clear that when he

says "we cannot allow of" such accusations, it is not a statement that the charge is false but rather

a call to action to make it so.[8] Other English critics were more resigned to this particular aspect

of their national theatrical character, Dryden stating in his influential *An Essay of Dramatic*

Poesy that

. . . whether custom has so insinuated itself into our countrymen, or nature has so

formed them to fierceness, I know not; but they will scarcely suffer combats and

other objects of horror to be taken from them.[9]

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[7]Thomas Rymer, "The Preface of the Translator," in *Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie . . . By R. Rapin* (London: T. N. for H. Herringman, 1674), n.p. In this and the other quotations from seventeenth-century English texts, I retain original spelling, punctuation, and italicization, with one single exception: I have not retained the use of the long "s," which to modern readers looks like an "f" and can distract from the meaning of a passage by making it difficult to read. Consequently, I have replaced them all with the short "s" which is the only one currently in use in my own time's version of English. If a text has come to me by way of a later printing that has already standardized spelling or otherwise altered these things, I give the text as it appears in the version that I cite in the corresponding footnote.

[8]And indeed, this call was one of many at the turn of the eighteenth century as English tragedy began to shift its focus from violent political spectacle to more domestic and sentimental concerns. The most famous and influential of these calls for reform was the anti-theatrical treatise of the Reverend Jeremy Collier, who condemned, among other things, what he saw as the stage's promotion of revenge killings in tragedy. See Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (London: Samuel Birt and Thomas Trye, 1738), 341-43.

[9]Dryden, "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," Dryden, John. "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Writings*, ed. John L. Mahoney, 3-72 (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), 43.

Such a widely acknowledged penchant for violent spectacle marked a sharp difference between the English popular theater and the French aesthetic theater, which, in imitation of Greek models, had banned death from being represented directly on the stage. This difference sparked something of a pamphlet war in the realm of dramatic theory, with the French complaining that gory English plays violated the rules of theatrical decorum[10] while English critics of French neoclassicism countered that the talky deaths of the French stage would never fly among 'beef-eating Englishmen.'[11]

The widely acknowledged English affinity for these two types of public, popular entertainment (bloodsports and theater), combined with their preference for teaching and reading Latin over Greek, meant that the influence of the ancient theater on the modern in England found more resonance when channeled through Rome than through Greece. Like the English, the Romans had valued spectacle and excitement in their theater, performing it alongside and combining it with bloodsport.[12] The Greek tragedies, though often focused on themes of murder and violence, were light on the practice of violence as spectacle, involving mostly talk about violent acts with the occasional display of a dead body after the fact.[13] The Roman adaptations of these tragedies, however—surviving solely in the works of the Latin playwright Seneca—are rife with onstage killings, suicides, mutilations, and sacrifices, showing the audience much of the action that they were only told about in the Greek source texts.[14] Taking their cue from these

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[10]See, for example, Rapin, "Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie," 111.

[11]This amusing term—and references to the consumption of beef in general—is often thrown around by English critics as a shorthand for the supposedly more 'masculine' tastes of the English, which seem to have included having a stomach both for onstage violence and tougher foods like beef.

[12]On bloodsports and entertainment in Rome, see Garrett G. Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[13]On the practice of offstage death in Greek tragedy, see P. E. Easterling, "Form and Performance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[14]There is some debate in modern scholarship over whether the works of Seneca were performed plays or merely 'closet dramas' meant to be read by a literate audience of aristocrats (see, for example, Patrick Kragelund, "Senecan Tragedy: Back on Stage?," in *Seneca*, ed. John G. Fitch, *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* (Oxford

Roman adaptations, the early professional theaters in England revived the genre of tragedy in a significantly different fashion than did their Greek-inspired neighbors in France, creating hundreds—if not thousands—of plays that featured staggering body counts at the end, nearly all of whom had died onstage. Even though the blood and death was all pretend, unlike the animal fighting entertainments the theater rivaled,[15] a trip to the English theater was consequently every bit as exciting as watching a bearbaiting.

Yet despite the heavily Roman mood that dominated references to—and borrowings from—the ancient world in early modern English theater, English critics, like their French neighbors, persisted in referring to 'the ancients' as a whole, and periodically would throw in Homer, Sophocles, or Euripides alongside Virgil, Seneca, or Plautus to illustrate a point.[16] Showing no particular awareness of temporal distinctions between the two, references to Latin and Greek playwrights were mixed together and often even treated in reverse chronological order, with Roman authors as the first go-to for examples and Greeks called in as backup.[17] Disregarding cultural differences between the ancient Romans and the ancient Athenians, notions

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and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)). However, whether or not Seneca's plays were actually performed in ancient Rome did not seem to be a matter of any debate among the seventeenth-century English, who read and treated his plays as plays, and held him up as a model for actual, performed playwrights to imitate (for a thorough exploration of Seneca's portrayal among the seventeenth-century English, see Smith, *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage 1500-1700*). Seneca's influence on the practices of English drama, therefore, is governed more by what his plays indicate happened onstage than by what did or did not actually happen on real Roman stages.

[15]And also unlike some Roman theatrical entertainments, in which convicted criminals were sometimes cast in plays so that they could be executed live onstage during the characters' death scenes. See Hugh Denard, "Lost Theatre and Performance Traditions in Greece and Italy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and also Richard C. Beacham, *The Roman Theatre and Its Audience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

[16]See, for example, Dryden, "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," 50, where the author uses Homer and Virgil side-by-side in order to assess the comparable achievements of English poets.

[17]See, for example, the use of 'the ancients' as examples in the most famous of anti-theatrical treatises from the seventeenth century: Collier, *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*. In this work, Collier regularly calls in the ancients in order to negatively compare the modern playwrights, but he does so in virtually every instance by citing Latin playwrights first, then Greek—demonstrating both the greater emphasis placed by the English on the Roman theater tradition and their relative disregard of the temporal distinction between the two.

about 'ancient' drama were pulled from both Horace and Aristotle in combination, as though they had been co-authors or contemporaries writing with a unified aim.[18] English theater thus managed to preserve the blurry and indistinct category of 'the ancients' in its own version of neoclassicism even as it built a system different in almost every conceivable respect from French neoclassicism. If French neoclassicism could be more accurately termed neo-Aristotelianism, the early English professional theaters might easily be dubbed neo-Roman; both are drawn from 'the ancients,' but the overlap between them in both dramatic theory and performance practices is slight at best. So when French neoclassicism was imported to the English stage, the Greek-inspired French rules banning onstage violence ran up against English popular taste, which made Romanesque violent spectacle a major focus of the action.[19] And, as a brief look at one of these importations will show, when irreconcilable principles collide, national taste will out.

Among French neoclassical playwrights, none was more influential, nor more popular, than Jean Racine.[20] And among Racine's plays, none was more popular at the time than *Iphigénie,* Racine's adaptation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*.[21] Racine's popular adaptation was translated into English several times, but the first version to be performed was Abel Boyer's adapted variant *Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis*, which was acted at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane in the winter of 1699 into 1700. In this play, Boyer adapts Racine's *Iphigénie* so closely as

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[18]For a comprehensive view at the ways in which Aristotle and Horace were entangled in English dramatic criticism over a number of centuries, see Smith, *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage 1500-1700*.

[19]See Rapin, "Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie," 111. For a study of the influence of Seneca on both violent spectacle and language in the English theater, see Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[20] For an informative series of studies on Racine's public and critical reception during his lifetime and shortly after his death, see Nicholas Cronk and Alain Viala, eds., *La réception de Racine à l'âge classique: de la scène au monument: études* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005).

[21] On the status of *Iphigénie* as Racine's most popular work during his lifetime, see Phillippo, Susanna, *Hellenic Whispers: Modes of Greek Literary Influence in Seventeenth-Century French Drama*, Medieval and Early Modern French Studies (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2013), 304; and John Cairncross, "Introduction to *Iphigenia*," in *Jean Racine: Iphigenia; Phaedra; Athaliah*, ed. John Cairncross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 33.

to blur the distinction between translation and adaptation. Indeed, the second printed edition of

the play describes *Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis* as Racine's play "translated into *English*, with

considerable *Additions*, by Mr. Boyer."[22] As paradoxical as such a statement may sound to

twenty-first-century ears,[23] Boyer's text proves it to be a remarkably accurate description. From

Act I, scene i through Act V, scene iv,[24] Boyer's text reproduces Racine's dramatic structure

exactly, with the same characters appearing in the exact same order to deliver the same plot

points. There is no information in Racine's text that is not revealed to the same characters and in

the same manner, nor any additional information in Boyer's that creates new plot twists. Instead,

we get an English version of the plot of *Iphigénie* in a rendering so faithful that the temptation to

call this a performed translation—as opposed to a new adaptation—is considerable.

      Yet this context of literary fidelity makes the knowing alterations that Boyer *did* make all

the more significant, because they provide a precise picture of those elements of French

neoclassicism that simply could not make it onto the stage in an English public theater. Racine's

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[22]Abel Boyer, "Advertisement," in *The Victim: Or, Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis* (London: James Knapton, William Taylor, J. Baker, and W. Lewis, 1714), n.p.

[23]While most current scholarship agrees that translation and adaptation exist along a continuum with no possibility of drawing a clear demarcating line between them, there are certain standards in common parlance for deciding which of the two labels to use for any given work. Among them is the belief, current in our own century, that while a translator obviously must *change* words, to *add* or *subtract* words (especially in the case of whole sentences that have no equivalent in the original or are dropped entirely from the translation) is to tip the balance from translation into adaptation. In the seventeenth century, however, definitional standards for distinguishing translation from adaptation, and also adaptation from plagiarism, were still relatively new and very much in flux, with the use of any one of these given terms determined more by the personal preference of the speaker than by any kind of commonly understood definition. On the difficulty of distinguishing between translation and adaptation in both scholarly discussion and common usage, see Laurence Raw, ed. *Translation, Adaptation and Transformation* (London and New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2012). On the definitional fuzziness in seventeenth-century England between adaptation and plagiarism, see Kewes, Paulina, *Authorship and Appropriation: Writing for the Stage in England, 1660-1710* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

[24]The act and scene numbers given here are drawn from the equivalent act and scene divisions in Racine, which Boyer follows so precisely that they serve to indicate the proper locations in his text, as well. However, the printed edition of Boyer's play follows the English convention of declaring a new scene when there is a change in location, rather than the French convention of declaring a new scene whenever a character enters or exits the stage. Because by this English method of accounting there is only one long scene per act in this play, Boyer's text has no scene divisions at all, making an analysis of his dramatic structure needlessly difficult. Consequently, I use Racine's scene numbers to analyze both his and Boyer's texts, as there is a precise one-to-one correspondence between them in function, if not in name.

play, though popular all over Western Europe, took more than two decades to reach the English

stage. Although *Iphigénie* had entered the European theater scene in 1674, Boyer's 1699/1700

'tradaptation'[25] was the first version of it to see public performance in England, and consequently

may be viewed as the first version considered sufficiently likely to please an English audience

(and therefore financially viable to mount). This financial viability was due, at least in part, to

Boyer's significant—and spectacular—rewriting of the finale. This finale represents the biggest

departure from his otherwise tame and faithful anglicization of this script, demonstrating that

total concordance between the French and English versions of neoclassicism is simply

impossible. In Act V, scene v, Boyer radically breaks with simple translation.[26] At this point in

Racine's play, the characters of Arcas and Ulysses enter to give the inconsolable Clytemnestra a

summary of what has happened to her daughter at the altar in a scene that closely resembles the

equivalent messenger speech in Euripides—at least in form, if not in content.[27] Boyer, aware that

English theatrical tastes would never permit the tragic denouement to be simply related to the

audience in a speech, takes us to the site of the sacrifice. Pulling out all the stops, Boyer indulges

the English taste for spectacle with the onstage raising of an altar "*near the Sea-Shore*," a singing

chorus of priests, a weeping Agamemnon, a trembling Eriphyle, a resigned and grim Iphigenia,

and the inclusion, for the first time, of several characters who do not even appear in Racine's

play, including Calchas, Menelaus, and Nestor—a nod to the more expanded casts of English

dramas, which were often written for larger companies than neoclassical French plays.[28] Only

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[25]This term, coined by Michel Garneau, has entered scholarly discussion in both translation studies and adaptation studies as a designation for texts occupying that nebulous area on the translation-adaptation spectrum where traditional definitions of the two terms fail. See Susan Knutson, "'Tradaptation' *dans le sens Québécois*: A Word for the Future," in *Translation, Adaptation and Transformation*, ed. Laurence Raw (London and New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2012).

[26]Boyer, *Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis*: 51.

[27]Compare Act V, scenes v-vi in Racine, *Iphigénie*, 76-79 to Euripides *Iphigenia in Aulis* lines 1532-1618.

[28]Boyer, *Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis*: 51. On the size and operation of neoclassical French acting companies, see Peter D. Arnott, *An Introduction to the French Theatre* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977). On the

moments into the scene, we get the following spectacular scene direction: "*As* Iphigenia *is*

leading to be sacrific'd, the Sun is Eclips'd; Screaks in the Air; Subterranian Groans and

Howlings; Thunder."[29] This clearly supernatural set of effects plays specifically to the strengths

of the English theater, which habitually made use of such devices as thunder machines and

trapdoors to represent the subterranean or demonic realm.[30] Following these portents, the kind of

violence scrupulously avoided by the French neoclassicists breaks out onstage, with Achilles

(and Patroclus, another new character unseen in Racine) rushing in with swords drawn, the

attempted sacrifice of Eriphyle by Calchas, and Eriphyle's dramatic onstage suicide, complete

with a dying confession of her love for Achilles.[31] And it doesn't stop there! In a twist that breaks

the conventions of both French neoclassicism and ancient Greek tragedy, Diana appears "*in a*

Machine" but inexplicably *does not speak*, merely passing over the stage and out of the scene in

silence.[32] In a Greek tragedy, the only purpose served by the appearance of a god at the end of a

play is to make the will of the divine known through speech; a silent *dea ex machina* would be

both pointless and absurd. In neoclassical French tragedy, the divine is banned from direct

representation onstage, known only through oracles and the verbal reports of human characters.

In Boyer's English version of Racine's scrupulously neoclassical play, the goddess still speaks

only through oracles; but without the messenger speech where a soldier is reported to have seen

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establishment of comparatively larger English acting companies, see Ingram, *The Business of Playing*.

[29]Boyer, *Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis*: 53.

[30]For a more thorough account of the use of stage machinery in the English theatrical tradition, including its links with classical revival, see Lily Bess Campbell, *Scenes and Machines on the English Stage During the Renaissance: A Classical Revival* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960).

[31]See Boyer, *Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis*: 53-54. The dying confession, a dramatically effective moment full of pathos, was a conventional element of English tragedy. On the links between death and narrative closure in the English tragic tradition, and thus the enmeshing of death with the revelation of secrets, see Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1997).

[32]Boyer, *Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis*: 54.

Diana,[33] there is nothing for it but to show the goddess onstage. In attempting to create a faithful live rendition of events that were only narrated in Racine, Boyer undercuts the purpose for which these things were represented the way they were in his source texts. The appearance of Diana in narration is uncertain, purposefully so; the appearance of Diana onstage is about as certain as it gets, and suddenly begs the question of why the goddess didn't just deliver her instructions clearly in person in the first place. The misinterpretation of oracles—the thing that drives the plot in both *Iphigénie* and *Achilles and Iphigenia in Aulis*—now seems more like divine cruelty than human error. Yet at this price, Boyer has been able to purchase a spectacle of suspense, supernatural events, and death very much in keeping with the Roman-derived values of an action-packed English tragedy.

This ending is probably the best single example of the confused quadricultural knot that can occur when French neoclassicism is imported to the English stage. Conventions originating from Greece (the *dea ex machina*), Rome (staged suicide), France (indirect contact with the divine), and England (supernatural storm effects) can all be observed, yet when mashed together in this way may create confusion and result in elements that are nonsensical when looked at from the perspective of any one component culture—like the silent *dea ex machina*. Moreover, the odd juxtaposition of this mashed-up ending with the otherwise scrupulous fidelity to Racine shows the power of local cultural convention when it comes to publicly staged plays—a straightforward translation of Racine, the thing that Boyer seemed to be attempting to write, is inadmissible on the English stage. In order to transition from merely a read to a performed text, even the neoclassical *Iphigénie* had to undergo an anglicizing process in which its title was far from the only thing altered beyond the demands of mere translation. The example of Boyer's

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[33]Act V, scene vi in Racine, "Iphigénie," 79.

play makes clear that that even the most determined effort to bring neoclassicism to England's

stages in the late seventeenth century had to bow to the national penchant for blood and thunder.

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