Jacques Pradon was a facile, popular playwright, the most prolific of his period who, unfortunately, confused popularity with genius. Believing his talent equal to that of Racine’s, he hurriedly put together a tragedy Phèdre et Hippolyte to compete with Racine’s Phèdre then just being staged for the first time in early January 1677. As a result of this direct challenge to Racine, Pradon became embroiled in a verbal brawl among critic and supporters that cost him his budding reputation.

Jacques (not Nicolas) Pradon was from a middle class Norman family. Baptized at Rouen January 21, 1644, he won a poetry prize in 1664, acquired the favor of the Governor of Normandy Montausier, and came to Paris in 1673 with his first play Pirame, et Thisbé. This was successfully performed at Hôtel de Bourgogne, possibly with the assistance of Corneille, who had introduced him to the salons at the Hôtel de Nevers and the Hôtel de Bouillon of Madame Deshoulières.
Pirame, et Thisbé. Pradon’s first play was based on the theme of tragic love. Our first recorded version, early in the 1st century is by Ovid in his Metamorphoses book IV. Popular throughout Europe in the early-modern period, it was staged in France several times in the 17th century: Theophile de Viau in his tragedy Les amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thysbéé, (1622), and again by Puget de la Serre in the tragedy of Pyrame (1633). Pradon’s sources of the tragedy are three: the historical characters found in Ovid, Plutarch, Herodotus, and Diodorus the Sicilian; the sentimental situations in Theophile; and the general romanesque tone in Pradon’s early influences and milieu (Lancaster IV, 103).

Pradon’s Pirame, et Thisbé was popular on the stage for almost forty years, according to the frères Parfaict. According to the Registre of La Grange, the play appears to have passed into the repertory of the troupe of Molière. In the year 1679, it was given on June 30th, July 2nd, and Oct. 3rd; in 1680, on July 9th, Sept. 16th, and Dec. 6th. In 1681, there was one performance of it on May 22nd; in 1682, another of June 1st, and during the years 1683, 1684, 1685, it was given once each year, on June 15th, July 8th, and Aug. 17th respectively. Encouraged by his initial success, Pradon in his preface promises a second tragedy Tamerlan, ou la mort de Bajazet (1676) (ibid, 244).

Although Pradon’s popularity with Phèdre et Hippolyte had some direct effect on Racine’s decision to retire from the popular stage (Racine did later write two religious dramas for Mme de Maitenon’s school for young ladies at Saint-Cyr). Pradon’s own writing never achieved greater recognition than he had at the beginning of his career. Pradon’s reputation might have grown, had he in his eight dramas, expanded his strict adherence to the classical unities, “lightened up” his puritanical view of manners, and delved more into contemporary subjects. Pradon’s reputation was further depreciated with every direct comparison between himself and Racine (who quipped, “The whole difference between me and Pradon is that I know how to write”).

According to Bussom, Pradon’s first two plays Pirame, et Thisbé and Tamerlan ou la mort de Bajazet (1676) show many of the elements that delighted the seventeenth century French theatre goer: an historical figure of forceful character plotting a glorious future who is led hither and thither by the conflicting claims of a carefully analyzed love sentiment, which is either sacrificed to honor or softened to pity for the victim of its wrath (151).

Pirame, et Thisbe is important because it shows all the marks of Pradon's dramatic method. According to Bussom, (152). The later plays are but variants of the same type. A study of the exposition in these tragedies reveals in all but two, Phedre et Hippolyte and Regulus, a similarity of treatment. The action progresses in the later works in much the same manner as it does in Pirame, et Thisbe, which became for Pradon, it seems, a guiding rule in dramatic construction (ibid, 172).

Regarding Pradon’s third play, Phèdre et Hippolyte (1676) brought at the same time as Racine's Phèdre, Philip Hill discusses the querelle with Racine during which Pradon’s cabal filled his theatres with cheering supporters, while Racine’s first performances were not popular. Humiliated and embittered by Pradon’s success, “Racine retired from the theatre and never
wrote for the public stage again” (590). Pradon became involved in an exchange of verses and critiques with the great critic Nicolas Boileau, who vigorously defended Racine. Throughout his life Pradon wrote several attacks on Boileau (the writers Donneau de Visé and Adrien-Thomas Perdou de Subligny both took Pradon's side). The popularity (manufactured or not) of Pradon’s play drove Racine into a despondence that caused him to consider giving up the stage. Racine may well have been disgusted when he saw how successful his opponent was and especially bitter when “leurs Altesses royales’ went to see the rival tragedy acted.” (Lancaster IV, 118).

Pradon’s plays have been largely denigrated by modern critics. Pradon was not a great writer but he hardly deserves the resentment and ridicule which . . . have been heaped upon him (ibid, 169). Pradon seems to have been a talented youth who mastered French classical technique and wrote an unusually successful first play. He damaged his reputation by hastily pasting together his Phèdre et Hippolyte. “He showed, however, enough ability in constructing plots and introducing scenes of passion to keep himself more constantly before the public than most of Racine’s early successors” (ibid 170).

The most balanced comments come from Soleinne: “Of course, the tragedies of Pradon did not deserve the outrageous admiration of the hotel of Rambouillet nor the unjust lies of the supporters of Racine, who had the advantage, thanks to the satires of Boileau and the overwhelming superiority of the author. It is impossible today to rehabilitate poor Pradon; but to judge his case impartially, one is forced to recognize that he was struggling with a cruel cabal, and that he had enough talent not to be killed by the ridicule. Reading these tragedies, one understands that they had to please the crow, and one does not wonder that they were represented in the province until the Revolution. The prefaces of Pradon are interesting, because they show him struggling with modesty against a cabal that crossed all bounds” (1457).

Seven of Pradon’s plays were published during the time in which they were performed:

- **Pirame, et Thisbe**, tragedie (Paris: Henry Loyson, 1647), in-12;
- **Tamerlan**, tragedy (Paris: Jean Ribou, 1676), in-12;
- **Phedre and Hippolyte**, tragedy (Paris: Jean Ribou, 1677), in-12;
- **The Troad**, tragedy (Paris: Jean Ribou, 1679), in-12;
- **Statira**, tragicie (Paris: Jean-Ribou, 1680), in-12;
- **Regulus**, tragedie (Paris: Jean Ribou, 1688), in-12;


Provenance: Marie-Arséne-Paschal-Albert (1811-1882), Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur, banquier at Marseille, born and died in the city.

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