

# BETWEEN VERISIMILITUDE AND HISTORY:



## The Case of Jean Racine's *Bajazet*

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*In January of 1672 Jean Racine's tragedy Bajazet premiered at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris. In the wake of its initial success, criticism concerning the historical authenticity of the tragedy began to appear. This article suggests that some of the contemporary criticism towards Bajazet was a consequence of the challenge to neoclassical verisimilitude in La Querelle du Cid. This is followed by a source study of Bajazet in order to understand Racine's own idea of verisimilitude and historical authenticity in 1672 as well as to challenge claims that Racine primarily based Bajazet on undisclosed sources.*

### Introduction

In January of 1672, Jean Racine's five-act tragedy *Bajazet* premiered at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris. Its initial success lasted about two months with approximately 25 performances.<sup>1</sup> Today *Bajazet* is one of Racine's lesser-known plays and opinions about its qualities differ. It has been termed Racine's problem play.<sup>2</sup> Some view it as one of the highlights among Racinian tragedies<sup>3</sup> while others regard it as a second-rate tragedy at best<sup>4</sup> or even as non-Racinian.<sup>5</sup> This discrepancy is partly due to the contemporary oriental theme of *Bajazet*, which Racine primarily based on oral sources. A typical Racinian tragedy has either a classical or a biblical theme and therefore relies on older written sources.

Even though Racine claimed to use mostly oral and thus unobtainable source material to create *Bajazet*, several scholars have chosen to focus on the historical/literary sources of the play.<sup>6</sup> In fact, there is a tendency to reject Racine's claim to historical authenticity in *Bajazet* as mere "tales" and "no more than hearsay presented as historical fact".<sup>7</sup> Others have backed up

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<sup>1</sup> Brereton 1951, 173–74.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell 2005, 87–90.

<sup>3</sup> E.g.: Ubersfeld 1967, 53.

<sup>4</sup> E.g.: Robinson 1926, 110.

<sup>5</sup> Vinaver 1951, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell 2005, 89.

<sup>7</sup> Karam 2010, 51.

similar claims with meticulous comparisons of *Bajazet* and actual events.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, some scholars assert that Racine chose to conceal perhaps his most important source, a *nouvelle* written by the French poet and novelist Jean Regnault de Segrais, and instead pretended to base *Bajazet* solely on historical sources.<sup>9</sup> These claims correspond with the general view of Racine as a playwright who preferred psychological verisimilitude to historical authenticity or as Christopher J. Gossip has formulated it:

[Racine's] claims to historical accuracy [in *Bajazet*], however, should not mislead us. There is next to no local colour in *Bajazet* or indeed in the other tragedies with a contemporary foreign background. Conventional staging did not allow it, and in any case dramatists are more concerned with psychological interest than with topographical accuracy or scenic *vraisemblance*.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Racine's verisimilitude – or the appearance of being true – seems to justify his historical inaccuracy. However, at the premiere of *Bajazet* in 1672 a debate about verisimilitude as opposed to historical authenticity had raged for some time. The debate started in 1637 with *La Querelle du Cid*. This quarrel was a result of Pierre Corneille's tragicomedy *Le Cid* (1637). Despite its immense success, Corneille was heavily criticized for ignoring neoclassical norms of dramatic practice. One of the central critics Georges de Scudéry argued that Corneille in *Le Cid* disregarded the rules of verisimilitude in favour of actual historical events. Hereby, Corneille violated moral ethics by communicating the bad morals of the actual historical persons, *Le Cid* was based upon, to the theatregoing public. Corneille would later respond that in the case of *Le Cid* historical truth mattered more than verisimilitude.<sup>11</sup>

Scudéry's criticism and Corneille's response reveal that it was possible to challenge the neoclassical ideal of verisimilitude by referring to historical accuracy. Thus, the hypotheses of this contribution is that in the case of *Bajazet*, claims of historical inaccuracy justified by verisimilitude becomes problematic. This is because studies of Racine's "problem play" tend to overlook 17<sup>th</sup> century criticism of verisimilitude as a philosophic concept.

In order to either prove or disprove this notion, Racine's claim of historical authenticity in *Bajazet* as well as contemporary reactions to the play are examined in chronological order. This is followed by a source study of the play in order to understand Racine's own conception of historical authenticity

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<sup>8</sup> Akalin 2016, 189–202.

<sup>9</sup> E.g.: May 1948, 152–64; Rohou 1992, 190; Maskell 2004, 103; Carlson 1993, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Gossip 1981, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Lyons 1999, 123–25.

in 1672. The source study also questions the notion that Racine primarily based *Bajazet* on undisclosed sources. We begin however, with a summary of *Bajazet*.

### **The plot of *Bajazet***

*Bajazet* takes place at sultan Amurat's seraglio in Constantinople. The sultan Amurat is not present, but away on a military campaign against the Persians. He has left behind his wife and temporary ruler Roxane along with his grand vizier Acomat and his confined half-brother Bajazet. Acomat sees his absence from the military campaign as clear evidence of Amurat's disapproval of him and plans a coup d'état. Having received information from a confidante by the name of Osmin about fierce Persian resistance and a rebellious atmosphere among Ottoman soldiers, Acomat decides to put his plan into action. The intention is to overthrow Amurat and replace him with his half-brother Bajazet. Acomat has already thwarted an order from Amurat to have Bajazet executed by killing the messenger. Roxane, who is in love with Bajazet, is the key to the success of Acomat's plan, since she can legitimize Bajazet's ascension to the throne.

The challenge is to convince Roxane that Bajazet truly loves her. Here Acomat receives help from a daughter of the Ottoman line by the name of Atalide. Being a confidante of Roxane, she delivers letters of love from Bajazet to Roxane. Acomat plans to marry the self-same Atalide to assert his power. Unbeknown to Acomat, Atalide has no interest in marrying him. She and Bajazet have secretly become lovers. Her efforts to assure Roxane of Bajazet's affections to the sultana is entirely an attempt to save Bajazet from his execution.

Despite Atalide's and Acomat's reassurances, Roxane is not convinced and hesitates. Instead, she arranges a secret meeting with the prince. At the rendezvous, she finds no evidence of his affections for her. She then decides to catch him off guard by setting up another meeting, where she without warning demands his hand in marriage. His reaction will reveal his true feelings for her. Bajazet rejects her demand. When she reminds him that she has the power to carry out Amurat's execution he rejects her again. He is arrested but avoids imprisonment. Both Acomat and Atalide urge him to appease Roxane in order to save his life, which he reluctantly agrees to.

Bajazet manages to reconcile with the sultana, but when Atalide receives news of this from her slave Zaire and Acomat, she realizes that the prince and the sultana have become lovers. Fearing that Bajazet no longer loves her, she confronts him and threatens to commit suicide. Bajazet attempts to calm the jealous Atalide by asserting that he made no promises to Roxane. Unknown to the two lovers Roxane overhears the conversation. Once again, she

questions Bajazet's affections towards her and suspects that Atalide has feelings for Bajazet. While Roxane ponders, a second confidante arrives with the news that the Ottoman forces have beaten the Persians and taken Babylon. This time the sultan has sent his most ruthless slave Orcan. Despite what she has heard, Roxane is still unsure about Bajazet's feelings towards her and Atalide's feelings towards Bajazet. Thus, she is undecided on whether to intervene against Orcan, whose actual reason for being in Constantinople is to kill Bajazet.

By tricking Atalide into thinking that Roxane will obey Amurat's orders and execute Bajazet, Roxane intends to reveal Atalide's true affections for Bajazet. When Atalide faints after hearing the lie, her deceit is revealed. Bajazet still has the benefit of the doubt, and Roxane decides to go through with Acomat's original plan. However, Roxane discovers a hidden letter in Atalide's possession, which reveals Bajazet's love for Atalide.

A scorned Roxane now plans to carry out Amurat's execution orders. She is however willing to give the prince one last chance. At a final meeting between the two, she offers him the opportunity to reign with her and escape his death sentence. To earn her trust, he must first prove his loyalty by witnessing the execution of Atalide. When he pleads for Atalide's life, his fate is sealed. Roxane orders him to leave the room. Orcan and a group of eunuchs await his departure and have him killed. Now, Roxane learns that Acomat has taken the capital. Not knowing whether to trust the grand vizier, she runs off stage to confront him. Meanwhile Atalide attempts to discover Bajazet's fate, as Acomat enters the stage also looking for the prince. Atalide convinces herself that Bajazet has survived when her slave Zaire reveals that Orcan has killed Roxane. Hope turns into despair when Osmin enters the stage. He reveals that Orcan acting under orders from Amurat has assassinated Roxane and Bajazet. Orcan himself has lost his life by the hands of a vengeful mob. Realizing that Bajazet is dead Atalide commits suicide. Fearing that his treachery will eventually lead to his execution Acomat flees the country.

### **The Ottomans on the French stage**

*Bajazet* was not the first French play based on recent oriental history. From the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the East and in particular the Ottoman Empire witnessed a sharp increase in interest among European playwrights. There were different reasons for this. Firstly, there was an increase in travel literature and historical accounts about the large neighbour to the East. This made a, albeit culturally biased, source material concerning Ottoman history accessible to the French and European reading public. Secondly, the fact that the Ottoman Empire was the largest contemporary threat to Christianity

evoked both curiosity and fear among Europeans. Under Suleiman I's rule, the Ottoman Empire grew to become a formidable adversary to the Christian Europe after Ottoman forces defeated Hungarian forces in a series of battles in Hungary and forces of the Knights Hospitaller on the Island of Rhodes. Suleiman I's fleet dominated the Mediterranean and his forces even managed to lay siege to Vienna. These achievements earned him a status among Europeans as a feared but also admired warlord, who gave him the epithet "the Magnificent".

Despite the sultan's achievements, events within his seraglio marred Suleiman I's reputation and left a noticeable mark on the cultural history of European and especially French theater. At the center of these events was Suleiman I's consort Hurrem Sultan known to Europeans by different variants of the name Roxolana. This concubine of Ukrainian decent shocked the European and Turkish public when she married Suleiman I in 1533 or 1534. As early as 1552, the French public could read a negative characterization of her in Paolo Giovio's *Histoires de Paolo Jovio*. Her reputation in France deteriorated even further in 1556 when two French translations of Nicholas de Moffan's pamphlet *Soltani Solymanni horrendum facinus on proprium filium* were published. Moffan revealed that Roxolana, who he characterized as a wicked woman, had successfully plotted to have Suleiman I's son Mustafa executed. Mustafa's execution was sensational news in Europe and the events were quickly adapted to the theater. In France Gabriel Bounin's *La Soltane* (1561), Jean de Mairet's *Le Grand et Dernier Soliman ou la mort de Mustapha* (1635), Charles Vion Dalibray's *Le Soliman* (1637) and Jean Desmares' *Roxelane* (1643) were all based on the execution. Others such as George Scudéry in *Ibrahim ou l'illustre Bassa* (1643) and Tristan l'Hermite in *La Mort du Grand Osman* (1646 or 1647) based their plays on other "contemporary" events from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup> Racine must have had at least partial knowledge of these plays when he wrote *Bajazet*. One indication of this is the name of the main female character Roxane, which is a variety of Roxolana.

Still, none of the abovementioned plays came close to the success of *Bajazet*, and while most of the older plays were based on an already published source material,<sup>13</sup> Racine would have us believe that *Bajazet* was not.

### **The first preface and Racine's sources**

Racine presented his theoretical framework in the prefaces of his tragedies. Here he justified his plays and defended himself – sometimes arrogantly –

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<sup>12</sup> Yermolenko 2010, 23–35.

<sup>13</sup> One exception is l'Hermite's *Osman* or *La Mort du Grand Osman*.

against critics. Another recurring theme was Racine's seemingly thorough assessment of his source material. He provided references to historians even if the subject of the tragedy was mythological or biblical. At the same time, he firmly proclaimed his right as a dramatist to reinterpret and rewrite the historical facts or ancient models.<sup>14</sup>

The preface in *Bajazet* fits this description partially. On the one hand, Racine revealed a number of sources and reserved the right to make artistic changes. On the other, his source material was notably different from that of his other tragedies, which he disclosed in the first two lines of the preface: "Quoy que le sujet de cette Tragédie ne soit encore dans aucune Histoire imprimée, il est pourtant tres-veritable. C'est une aventure arrivée dans le Serrail, il n'y a pas plus de trente ans".<sup>15</sup> (Although the subject of this tragedy has not yet appeared in any printed history, it is nevertheless very true. It is an incident that took place in the seraglio not more than thirty years ago). In other words, the 17<sup>th</sup> century reader was about to read a tragedy based on a historical authentic, contemporary and unpublished incident.

Racine then went on to introduce his actual sources. Most important was the French ambassador to Constantinople from 1619 to 1639 Count de Cézzy, whose actual name was Philippe de Harlay. He had been: "fut instruit de toutes les particularitez de la mort de Bajazet"<sup>16</sup> (informed of all the particulars concerning Bajazet's death). After Harlay's return to France in 1640, he entertained courtiers with the story. Racine became aware of the story through one of these courtiers named: "Monsieur le Chevalier de Nantoüillet", who: "je suis redevable de cette histoire, & mesme du dessein que j'ay pris d'en faire une Tragédie"<sup>17</sup> (I am indebted for this story and even for the project of turning it into a tragedy). Thus, Racine's source was second hand if not third, since Harlay himself heard about Bajazet's executions from others. The man behind Monsieur le Chevalier de Nantoüillet was a cavalry captain of the Régiment de la Reine (Queen's regiment) by the name François Duprat. The level of influence Duprat may have had on the design of the tragedy is difficult to determine, but it is curious that Racine acknowledged a relatively unknown cavalry captain's artistic influence of turning an Ottoman execution into an actual tragedy.

This transformation also required alterations to the historical account:

Mais comme ce changement n'est pas fort considerable, je ne pense pas aussi qu'il soit necessaire de le marquer au Lecteur. La principale chose à quoy je me suis attaché, ç'a esté de ne rien changer ny aux mœurs, ny

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<sup>14</sup> Sidnell 1999, I p. 257.

<sup>15</sup> Racine 1672, [3].

<sup>16</sup> Racine 1672, [3].

<sup>17</sup> Racine 1672, [3].

aux coutumes de la Nation. Et j'ay pris soin de ne rien avancer qui ne fust conforme à l'Histoire des Turcs, & à la nouvelle Relation de l'Empire Ottoman.<sup>18</sup>

However, since these changes are inconsiderable, I do not think it necessary to point them out to the reader. The main principle [...] was not to change anything relating to the morals and customs of the nation. And I took care not to suggest anything which did not conform with [*Histoire de l'État Present de l'Empire Ottoman*]

*Histoire de l'État Present de l'Empire Ottoman* was a French translation from 1670 of the English ambassador and historian Paul Rycaut's *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*. The work consists of three books. The first focuses on the politics, the second on the religion and the third on the military of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>19</sup> It contains no particularities regarding the execution of the historical equivalent to Bajazet, Bayazid. Instead, Racine used *Histoire de l'État Present de l'Empire Ottoman* as a sort of fact-checker to assess whether the tragedy accorded with Ottoman customs. Racine also sought the help of Harlay's successor as ambassador to Constantinople de la Haye:<sup>20</sup> "qui a eû la bonté de m'éclaircir sur toutes les difficultez que je luy ay proposées"<sup>21</sup> (who was kind enough to enlighten me on all the problems that I proposed to him).

Thus, Racine provided just enough information to give the reader an overall presentation of his sources, without divulging details about artistic alterations. Compared to the level of detail in Racine's other prefaces this short summary was uncharacteristic. Usually Racine would discuss discrepancies between historians or in detail justify his own take on a story. This made Racine vulnerable to criticism, especially criticism that focused on the historical accuracy of *Bajazet*.

### Contemporary reactions

Racine's contemporaries had different opinions about the quality of *Bajazet*. At the French court, the tragedy was well received and the abovementioned 25 performances within the first two months verifies that *Bajazet* enjoyed some initial success. The success on stage was however, followed by criticism from Racine's opponents.<sup>22</sup> One of the harshest critics was Marie de Rabutin-Chantal de Sévigné, better known as Madame de Sévigné, who in her

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<sup>18</sup> Racine 1672, [3].

<sup>19</sup> Rycaut 1670.

<sup>20</sup> Racine may also have meant Jean de la Haye's son and successor as ambassador to Constantinople Denis de La Haye.

<sup>21</sup> Racine 1672, [3].

<sup>22</sup> Sayer 2006, 189.

correspondence with her daughter, Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné, made it clear that *Bajazet* was no masterpiece:

Le personnage de Bajazet est glacé; les mœurs des Turcs y sont mal observées; ils ne font point tant de façons pour se marier; le dénouement n'est point bien préparé; on n'entre point dans les raisons de cette grande tuerie<sup>23</sup>

The character of Bajazet is glacial, the customs of the Turks are ill observed, they do not care much about ways of being married, the end of the play is badly managed, [and] there are no reasons for such a great slaughter

There can be no doubt that *Bajazet* is the most violent of Racine's tragedies and therefore Sévigné's criticism holds some merit. Still, it is a well-known fact that her disapproval of *Bajazet* was biased because of her friendship with Racine's rival Corneille. Sévigné became acquainted with Corneille at an early age and they formed an unbreakable friendship. When the rivalry between the two dramatists began, Sévigné stood firmly by her old friend.<sup>24</sup> It is in this light we must read Sévigné's judgement. She also revealed her support of Corneille in the letter as she ended her criticism with a comparison of the mediocre qualities of *Bajazet* to those of Corneille's impressive œuvre.<sup>25</sup>

Corneille himself had nothing positive to say about *Bajazet*. Having witnessed a performance of the tragedy, he informed his disapproval to Jean Regnault de Segrais:

Je me garderois bien de le dire à d'autres qu'à vous, parce qu'on diroit que j'en parle par jalousie; mais prenez garde, il n'y a pas un seul personnage, dans le *Bajazet*, qui ait les sentiments qu'il doit avoir, et que l'on a à Constantinople; ils ont tous, sous un habit turc, les sentiments que l'on a au milieu de la France.<sup>26</sup>

I should be careful not to say it to any other than to you, because it would be said that I speak of it out of jealousy; but beware, not a single character in *Bajazet* feels as it should and as people have in Constantinople; they all have below their Turkish habits, the feelings we all have in the middle of France.

As the quotations reveal both Sévigné and Corneille took issue to the staging of Ottoman character, which of course was the one thing Racine assured his readers would be consistent with the truth. Corneille felt that the tragedy

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<sup>23</sup> Sévigné 1756, II 98.

<sup>24</sup> Tilley 1936/2016, 120–22.

<sup>25</sup> Sévigné 1756, II 98–99.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in: Guizot 1854, 228.



lacked a proper description of the barbaric and morally corrupt Ottoman. Instead, the Bajazet-character made it possible for the Ottomans to possess moral qualities usually reserved for Europeans. Corneille's criticism seems to echo his defence of historical accuracy from *La Querelle du Cid* although this time he was the critic. Positive characterizations of the Ottoman did exist, but these were few and far between, and the most common opinion of the Ottoman was negative. An example of this can be found in one of Racine's own sources, Rycaut's *Histoire de l'État Present de l'Empire Ottoman*. Racine undoubtedly used Rycaut's account when he wrote *Bajazet*.<sup>27</sup> Still, he replaced Rycaut's overall unfavourable portrayal of the Ottomans with a far less critical description,<sup>28</sup> thus abandoning his own promise from the preface of changing nothing of the morals and customs of the Ottoman by taking: "care not to suggest anything which did not conform" with *Histoire de l'État Present de l'Empire Ottoman*.

Another to address the issue of the Ottoman character was Jean Donneau de Visé, who shortly after the publication of *Bajazet* wrote a review of the play in his own literary magazine *Mercure Galant*. Unlike other critics, Donneau de Visé acknowledged Racine's portrayal of the gallant Ottoman character. As evidence, he referred to a letter from a certain Monsieur Du Loir (Nicolas Du Loir) to the French man of letters François Charpentier, which he had read in Du Loir's *Les Voyages dv Sievr dv Loir* from 1654.<sup>29</sup>

Donneau de Visé's compliment seems somewhat hollow since the rest of the review is one long rejection of the historical authenticity of *Bajazet*. Using *Les Voyages dv Sievr dv Loi* and perhaps other historical accounts of The Ottoman Empire Donneau de Visé dismissed central circumstances in the tragedy. He concurred that Amurat IV under his campaign against Babylon had two of his brothers executed. A third was spared because the sultan had no children to succeed him. However, of the two executed siblings, none of them had the name Bajazet. This led Donneau de Visé to conclude that the name was fictional. In addition to a missing name, two of the main characters could not have been present in the seraglio at the time of Amurat IV's campaign against the Persians. The first of these was Roxane, since the sultana accompanied him on his campaign. The second was Tabaniyassi Mehmed Pasha (called Mahament Pasha by Donneau de Visé), whose name might not be recognizable to the reader. Mehmed Pasha was the grand vizier of The Ottoman Empire. Therefore, Mehmed Pasha became Acomat in Racine's tragedy. Furthermore, the character of Acomat did not coincide with the historical Mehmed Pasha, because the grand vizier was not disgracefully

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<sup>27</sup> May 1948, 156–59.

<sup>28</sup> Maskell 2004, 101–03.

<sup>29</sup> Donneau de Visé 1672, 70–72.

left behind in the Ottoman capital contemplating his revenge. Like Amurat IV's favourite sultana, Mehmed Pasha participated in the campaign and even led a successful attack on the city of Erivan (Yerevan). Upon his return to Constantinople, he was celebrated for the victory.<sup>30</sup>

In short, Donneau de Visé attempted to question the historical accuracy of *Bajazet*, while its artistic qualities or lack thereof had little interest to him. To a great degree, Racine's own preface was the reason for Donneau de Visé's criticism. Racine's claim that only small changes had been made to the original story tempted critics like Donneau de Visé, who like Sévigné was one of Corneille's supporters,<sup>31</sup> to haul Racine over the coals if historical inaccuracies were discovered.

### **The second preface**

It took four years before Racine responded to his critics. He did so by adding a new and extended but also noticeably different preface to *Bajazet* in his *Œuvres de Racine* (1676).

Here he began with a short introduction of the central male royal Ottoman family members in the time before, under and after the execution of the historical Bayazid. Afterwards, Racine repeated his statement from the first preface that the details of Bayazid's death had yet to appear in any historical account.<sup>32</sup> Racine then introduced his main source of the tragedy, Harlay, who:

fut instruit des amours de Bajazet & des jalousies de la Sultane. Il vit mesme plusieurs fois Bajazet, à qui on permettoit de se promener quelquefois à la pointe du Serrail sur le canal de la Mer noire. Monsieur le Comte de Cézy disoit que c'étoit un Prince de bonne mine. Il a écrit depuis les circonstances de sa mort. Et il y a plusieurs Personnes de qualité, & entre autres Monsieur le Chevalier de Nantoüillet,<sup>33</sup> qui se souviennent de luy en avoir entendu faire le recit lors qu'il fut de retour en France.<sup>34</sup>

was informed of Bajazet's love affair and the sultana's jealousy. On several occasions, he even saw Bajazet, who was sometimes permitted to walk on the cape of the seraglio along the Black Sea channel. Count de Cézy described him as a prince of good looks. He has since written

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<sup>30</sup> Donneau de Visé 1672, 66–69.

<sup>31</sup> Campbell 2005, 92.

<sup>32</sup> Racine 1672, [3].

<sup>33</sup> It should be noticed that several English translations omits the phrase “& entre autres Monsieur le Chevalier de Nantoüillet”, e.g.: Racine 1967, II 3; Racine 2010–12, II 30; Racine 2012, 80. Racine omitted the sentence for the first time in the 1697-version of *Bajazet*. This was probably because Duprat had died two years prior. Racine 1865, II 476.

<sup>34</sup> Racine 1676, II [68].

of the circumstances of his death. And there are several persons of quality, among others Mr. Chevalier de Nantoüillet, who remember having heard him recount the story after he returned to France.

Seemingly, trivial facts like Harlay witnessing the noble Bayazid's strolls outside the physical compounds of harem was Racine's attempt to refute claims from critics like Donneau de Visé who contested the existence of the Ottoman prince. The placing of Bayazid in the genealogy of the royal Ottoman family and the reference to a written account by Harlay about the prince's execution were also attempts by Racine to strengthen the historical authenticity of the play. It is unlikely that Racine ever read or even saw Harlay's account. Nevertheless, he must have had some knowledge of its existence. Thus, he was willing to imply that the death of the tragic figure Bajazet mirrored the death of the historical Bayazid.

What about Racine's other sources? Unlike the first preface, Racine made no mention of de la Haye or *Histoire de l'État Present de l'Empire Ottoman*. Duprat was still credited but not as Racine's main source. Thus, the source behind Racine's main source from the first preface became the centre of attention in the second preface. It has been argued that the omissions in the second preface was Racine's attempt to safeguard himself from his own misleading account of his sources. The assertion is that despite stating the opposite in the first preface Racine probably never received any help from de la Haye nor did Duprat retell Harlay's account to Racine. Instead, he may very well have come across the ambassador's names in *Histoire de l'État Present de l'Empire Ottoman*, and used them as references in the preface to strengthen the historical authenticity of the tragedy.<sup>35</sup> Assumptions like this is based on a recurring discussion of whether Racine refrained from disclosing all of his sources and among these the most important.<sup>36</sup>

### **The question of Racine's main source**

Despite Racine's claims in the prefaces, scholars have been reluctant to accept Duprat's reiteration of Harlay's account as the main source of *Bajazet*. The reason for this is that two older and published writings have noticeable resemblances with the plot in *Bajazet*. One is Jean Regnault de Segrais' *Floridon* (1656–57) the other is Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. Concerning the latter there can be no doubt that plot and certain elements have noticeable similarities, such as the tragic love triangle between two lovers and a queen whose husband is absent because of a war campaign. Although accusations of plagiarism existed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. Scudéry's criticism of *Le Cid*,

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<sup>35</sup> May 1948, 158–59.

<sup>36</sup> May 1948, 152–64.

there was usually nothing dubious about adapting hidden sources in ways, which today would pass for plagiarism. In the case of *Bajazet*, several source studies reveal that *Aethiopica* was a major influence on Racine,<sup>37</sup> and there is no reason to dispute this. It is however debatable that Segrais' *Floridon* was an even more important source of inspiration.

From 1656 to 1657 Segrais published a series of *nouvelles* in his *Les Nouvelles Françaises, ov les Divertissemens de la Princesse Avrelie*. The sixth of these entitled *Floridon* is a 154-page long *nouvelle*, which like *Bajazet* was based on the execution of Bayazid.

Here one of three main characters, a female slave named Floridon, has obtained a high rank within the seraglio through her close relationship with the valide sultan – i.e. the mother of the reigning sultan. Floridon becomes embroiled in a love triangle between herself, the valide sultan and the sultan's brother and close friend Baiazet (Segrais' spelling). While sultan Amurath is away on his military campaign against the Persians, he entrusts his mother – Baiazet's stepmother – with the rule of Constantinople. In the sultan's absence, the valide sultan and Baiazet become lovers. In order to keep the affair secret the valide sultan assigns her trusted servant Floridon with secretly distributing love letters between the two. The correspondence results in occasional meetings between Baiazet and Floridon, who quickly fall in love. For some time, the two young lovers are able to keep their affair a secret. After a while the valide sultan grows suspicious and discovers the romance. Due to her affection towards Baiazet the valide sultan agrees to spare the lovers and even allows them to meet secretly once a week. Meanwhile, after the successful sacking of Babylon Amurath's campaign against the Persians has stagnated. His personal guard, the Janissaries, no longer follows his orders to invade Persia and instead demand to return to their family and loved ones in Constantinople. When the sultan threatens them to obey his command, they in turn threaten him with revolting and placing Baiazet on the Ottoman throne. Fearing for his life Amurath dispatches a trusted messenger to Constantinople to kill his brother. Aware of Amurath's attempt of fratricide and out of love for Baiazet the valide sultan counters the command. She accuses the messenger of being an imposter and has him executed. Unfortunately for Baiazet, the valide sultan's love for him quickly turns into a furious jealousy, when she discovers that the prince and Floridon disregard the rules of their love affair. Despite her anger, the valide sultan cannot persuade herself to kill Baiazet. However, the arrival of a second messenger from Amurath seals Baiazet's fate, since the valide sultan is no longer willing

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<sup>37</sup> Lange 1916, 145–62; Collinet 1988, 399–415; Forestier 2006, 427–28; Williams 2011, 275.

to protect him. In the end then Baiazet is executed although without the many specifics as in *Bajazet*. Floridon is spared and gives birth to Baiazet's child, who the valide sultan in turn cares for deeply.<sup>38</sup>

It seems quite clear why several scholars would argue that Segrais' *Floridon* was an undisclosed main source.<sup>39</sup> The resemblances are on both structural and thematic levels. On a structural level the sultan, in both *nouvelle* and tragedy, is an absent but central character, who orders the execution of his popular half-brother. At first, powerful and amorous women – in *Floridon* the valide sultan and in *Bajazet* Roxane – counter the order. Their affection for the sultan's half-brother turns into jealousy – a main theme in both stories – when they discover that he does not return their love and instead declares his love for two other women. Consequently, the valide sultan and Roxane transform from guardians to executioners, who eventually carry out the sultan's orders.

Despite structural and thematic similarities, there is no smoking gun, which proves the link between *nouvelle* and tragedy. For example, jealousy might be a central theme for both Segrais and Racine, but for the latter it is a recurring theme both before and after *Bajazet*.<sup>40</sup> In addition, whereas jealousy is the dominant theme in both stories political intrigue is also of some importance in *Bajazet*. Furthermore, even though the plots have structural similarities there are several differences, especially if we compare the character roster in both stories. The most obvious of course is the fact that the valide sultan and the sultana Roxane are not the same person. In addition, the plot of *Floridon* is far less complex than that of *Bajazet* with its larger set of characters. There is also the case of the character Acomat. In *Floridon* he is an old eunuch at the Seraglio, who along with Floridon acts as messenger for the valide sultan and Baiazet. He is a minor character and has no major influence on the actual story. The Racinian Acomat is the grand vizier of The Ottoman Empire at the time of the sultan's campaign in Persia. His character is that of a selfish schemer, who plays a major role in the attempt to forge a relationship between Bajazet and Roxane. Evidently, discrepancies such as these does not prove that Racine was unacquainted with *Floridon* before 1672. Nevertheless, they do prove the point that Racine's use of *Floridon* is disputable, which has made some contemporary scholars hesitant to unreservedly confirm the link between *Floridon* and *Bajazet*.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Segrais 1656–57, II 3,1–3,153.

<sup>39</sup> E.g.: May 1948, 152–64; Sick 2004, 78–80, Maskell 2004, 103; Worth-Stylianou 1999, 189–92.

<sup>40</sup> For example, *Andromaque* (1667), *Britannicus* (1669) and *Phèdre* (1677). Sick 2004, 80.

<sup>41</sup> E.g. Worth-Stylianou 1999, 190; Sayer 2006, 186.

What also makes the link between *Floridon* and *Bajazet* difficult to confirm is the lack of information about Racine's alleged main source François Duprat. Notes of conversations or correspondence between Duprat and Racine that reveal the captain's account of Bayazid's death as well as his artistic influence on *Bajazet* have never been discovered and probably never will. It is equally difficult to establish if and how Duprat and Racine became acquainted. They had a mutual friend in Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, but not until 1674 did Boileau-Despréaux and Racine become friends.<sup>42</sup> Thus, we are left in the dark as to what information Duprat passed on to Racine.

What about Duprat's own source? Harlay's oral accounts about the Ottoman Empire seem to have been a crowd-puller. Apart from entertaining French courtiers, his accounts of the Ottoman court and the intrigues in the seraglio was widely sought after by Parisians. Harlay had many stories to tell. One of these concerned a power struggle between the Ottoman sultan Osman II and the Janissaries, which led to the fall, imprisonment and killing of Osman II.<sup>43</sup> According to some this account – although never authenticated – became a main source of inspiration for a tragedy, which preceded both *Floridon* and *Bajazet*. The tragedy in question is *Osman* or *La Mort du Grand Osman* written by Tristan l'Hermite and first performed between 1646 and 1647.<sup>44</sup> Despite its inferiority compared to the writings of Moliere, Corneille and Racine *Osman* has been called one of the most interesting tragedies by a lesser-known French-classical playwright.<sup>45</sup> One of its qualities was Tristan l'Hermite's close attention to historical detail. Unfortunately, due to Tristan l'Hermite's incompetence as a playwright the historical accuracy of *Osman* does not make up for its poor quality.

As Racine mentioned in the second preface Harlay not only talked about the execution of Bayazid he also wrote it down. The claim is somewhat vague yet not untrue. At the time of Harlay's ambassadorial duties, he had an extensive correspondence with French officials and friends about everything from everyday pursuits to major political intrigues within the Ottoman seraglio including Bayazid's execution. Even though, it is improbable that Racine was thinking of this correspondence when mentioning a written account by Harlay the letters still gives us an idea of what Duprat may have told Racine.

In a letter dated the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1635 to the French king, Harlay gave his official report of the execution.<sup>46</sup> Having captured Erivan (Yerevan) the

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<sup>42</sup> Sayer 2006, 214.

<sup>43</sup> Bernardin 1967, 262.

<sup>44</sup> Bernardin 1967, 261–62.

<sup>45</sup> Lockert 1968, 163–66.

<sup>46</sup> Transcribed in: Jasinski 1958, 10–11.

sultan sent a messenger to Constantinople with orders to give thanks to God for the good fortunes of the war. Harlay recalled how the victory was celebrated for three days. Under the festivities, a captain from the Janissaries by the name of Bachy accompanied by a eunuch arrived at the capitol with orders from Amurat IV to kill his two brothers Bayazid<sup>47</sup> and Soliman. The orders were handed to the deputy of the grand vizier. Accompanied by approximately thirty men the deputy, the captain and the eunuch proceeded to the two brothers' quarters in the seraglio under the pretext of informing the details of the capture of Erivan. While the eldest brother Bayazid chose to believe this, Soliman suspected deceit, grabbed his sword and attempted to gain access to his brother's quarters. After some turmoil where one of the princes was wounded by throwing himself through a window the two brothers were captured and strangled with the customary Ottoman bow string. Harlay noticed in his letter that Amurat IV's mother (Mahpeyker Kösem Sultan) opposed the killing of Soliman, arguing that Bajazet was the only one to be executed, since he was merely the sultan's half-brother.

Harlay then went on to account for the circumstances, which resulted in Bayazid's death. Bayazid, who was one year younger than Amurat IV, had difficulties containing himself within the boundaries of the seraglio. Ignoring several warnings from Kösem Sultan he wished to emancipate himself in a way Ottoman custom did not permit. Worried that Bayazid eventually would take flight Kösem Sultan advised Amurat IV to threaten Bayazid to obey Ottoman customs. Amurat IV acted differently. Instead, he ordered the execution of Bayazid and Soliman. His reasons for this decision was pre-emptive. If one of these two princes disobeyed the wishes of a sultan occupied by a distant war, it could undermine the sultan's power.

Harlay reiterated the story to the French statesman Claude Bouthillier in two letters from the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1635 and the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 1636. Here Harlay repeated the circumstances leading up to the execution as well as Amurat IV's reasons for having his brothers executed:

Sa Hautesse avait été avertie que ces deux princes prenaient un peu plus de liberté dans leurs promenades et dans leurs plaisirs que ne comporte la coutume ottomane. C'est pourquoi, craignant qu'ils ne prissent l'essor, il s'est porté à cette résolution.<sup>48</sup>

His Highness had been warned that these two princes took a little more liberty in their walks and in their pleasures than the Ottoman custom

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<sup>47</sup> Like Racine Harlay spelled Bayazid Bajazet. To distinguish between the fictional character in *Bajazet* and the historical Bayazid, I have used the spelling Bayazid, whenever historical sources are referenced.

<sup>48</sup> Jasinski 1958, 11.

allows. It is for this reason, fearing that they will take the rise, he has taken this resolution.

He also mentioned a peculiar distrust between Amurat IV and his mother, since the former sent another envoy to Constantinople to examine whether the valide sultan indeed had carried out his execution orders. Like the letter from the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1635, we receive little information about the offenses that lead to the execution.

However, in a letter on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1640 addressed to a Mr. de la Barde<sup>49</sup> Harlay would again bring up the death of Bayazid and reveal further details about the prince's life.<sup>50</sup> The occasion was the death of Amurat IV, who Harlay portrayed as a devout and scrupulous ruler. He was also impotent, which led to a general fear of life among the women in the seraglio who could not bear him a child. Officially, the sultan had a six- or seven-year-old son, but it was not his own. Two unnamed yet trustworthy Ottoman sources had informed Harlay that the actual father was Bayazid. Bayazid, who was dearly loved by the sultan's mother, had fallen in love with a beautiful concubine<sup>51</sup> of the seraglio and favourite of the valide sultan. When Kösem Sultan realized that Bayazid had gotten the young woman pregnant she chose not to disclose anything to Amurat IV. Instead, she arranged for the girl to live outside the seraglio under the protection of confidante. The fact that Bayazid and Amurat IV were born only one year apart made it easier for people to believe that the child was indeed the sultan's son.

If we compare Harlay's remarks with *Floridon* and *Bajazet*, it becomes quite clear that Segrais' depiction of historical events was more accurate. The comparison also reveals that some sections from *Floridon* does not occur in Harlay's account but are present in *Bajazet*, e.g. the intercepted letters – although this was a recurring plot twist in almost every *nouvelle*.<sup>52</sup> The context of the four letters must have coincided well with Harlay's accounts at the French court. Still, they are not exact depictions of his account as Harlay himself implied in the letter to de la Barde, who had to wait on the ambassador's return to France to get the complete story.<sup>53</sup>

Scholars who accept Racine's use of *Floridon* present various explanations as to why Segrais remained an uncredited source. Evidently, a historical account was not the same as a *nouvelle* and as Valerie Worth suggests Racine

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<sup>49</sup> Probably the theologian Denis de la Barde.

<sup>50</sup> Harlay mentioned that his description was a repetition of a now missing letter he had written to Mr. de Chavigny – probably Léon Bouthillier – on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 1639. Jasinski 1958, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Harlay referred to her as “une belle fille”. Jasinski 1958, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Sayer 2006, 193.

<sup>53</sup> Jasinski 1958, 12.



in some ways did not need to reference his French counterpart, because *Floridon* was a fictional work and therefore had the “dubious status of prose fiction”.<sup>54</sup> Still, *Floridon* was more than prose fiction. It was a *nouvelle historique*, which Segrain himself stressed in his long introduction to the actual *nouvelles* of *Les Nouvelles Françaises, ou les Divertissemens de la Princesse Aurélie*. Here Segrain created a fictional situation where a group of women discuss the importance of the *roman* and *nouvelle*. One of the women, the Princess Aurélie, who represents Segrain’s own views, states that:

il me semble que c’est la différence qu’il y a entre le Roman, & la Nouvelle, que le Roman écrit ces choses comme la bien-séance le veut & à la manière du Poète; mais que la nouvelle doit un peu davantage tenir de l’histoire & s’attacher plutôt à donner les images des choses comme d’ordinaire nous les voyons arriver, que comme nostre imagination se les figure.<sup>55</sup>

it seems to me that the difference between the *roman* and the *nouvelle* is that the *roman* concerns things dictated by literary decorum and as poets do, but the *nouvelle* must stay closer to history and attempt to show the images of things as we ordinarily see them rather than as we imagine them.

In other words, the *nouvelle historique* held historical merit. It is important to emphasize that Segrain like Racine and others shared the concept of verisimilitude.<sup>56</sup> However as mentioned above, Segrain was far more devoted to historical accuracy than Racine, and it is plausible that *Floridon* came even closer to Harlay’s oral accounts than what we can deduce from his four letters.

Jean Rohou has presented another argument for Racine to leave out Segrain. He maintains that Racine would not credit an author as well as a genre he found unworthy of his own stature.<sup>57</sup> This is a mere assertion without any evidence presented to suggest that Racine thought lesser of the *nouvelle historique* and Segrain’s writings. First, Segrain and the *nouvelle historique* might not have been as popular as Racine and his tragedies, but in 1672 Segrain was an esteemed author, who ten years before had become a member of the Académie française, an honour Racine did not achieve until ten years later. Second, as John Sayer has pointed out that:

in *Bajazet*, Racine comes closest to the novel and short story writers of his day, particularly to the *nouvelles historiques et galantes*, on which

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<sup>54</sup> Worth-Stylianou 1999, 189.

<sup>55</sup> Segrain 1656–57, I 1,240–41.

<sup>56</sup> Forno 1972, 50.

<sup>57</sup> Rohou 1992, 190.

he may well have drawn, and whose authors he may have consulted in fashioning the most unusual and innovative among his tragedies.<sup>58</sup>

It seems equally plausible to suggest that Racine did not reference Segrais, simply because he was unacquainted with *Floridon* in 1672. To understand this argument we must turn our attention to the accessibility of information in 17<sup>th</sup> century France.

If our sole intention was to make *Bajazet* undergo a critical source study, the conclusion would probably resemble something like the following:

while the play [*Bajazet*] might, given such diplomatic input, constitute something of an “official story,” it is also at best a third-hand account of an event, no doubt modified and embellished through these several tellings, perhaps closer to gossip. One must view then with some suspicion Racine’s claim for the “très véritable” [...] nature of his subject. Further, Racine claims to have authenticated his play through consultations of written histories of the Ottomans. But these, too, are second-hand accounts, produced by European outsiders (not that “insider” history would not have its own bias).<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless assumptions like this, does not consider historical circumstances that might have influenced Racine’s assessment of the authenticity of his alleged main source. First, the idea that Duprat was a third-hand account was likely unimportant to Racine. The fact that Duprat was a man of quality was of higher importance. Second, with today’s easy access to online search engines, public libraries etc. it is difficult to imagine the challenges that faced 17<sup>th</sup> century authors who sought information on a subject such as the Ottoman history. As Paul Mesnard has shown, there were several French publications on Ottoman history from where Racine could have read about Bayazid and his ill fate.<sup>60</sup> Still, it is unclear if Racine knew this literature, which incidentally only gave brief descriptions of the Ottoman prince and his death. In other words, it is impossible to give an accurate depiction of Racine’s knowledge about contemporary Ottoman history outside the mentioned sources in the first preface. In fact, the incorrect contestation of Bayazid’s existence in the *Mercure Galant* reveals that even Donneau de Visé based his criticism on a sparse and insufficient source material – probably only *Voyages de Sievr de Loir* since the majority of other available historical accounts of Ottoman history mentioned Bayazid.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, it is somewhat misleading

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<sup>58</sup> Sayer 2006, 196.

<sup>59</sup> Longino 1998, 50.

<sup>60</sup> Mesnard 1865–90, II 447–72.

<sup>61</sup> Loir 1654, 221–54.

when one scholar states that: “Donneau de Visé displayed a quickly acquired expertise and denounced the play [*Bajazet*] for its inauthenticity”.<sup>62</sup>

### Conclusion

As mentioned above, scholars have pointed out that any claim from Racine about historical authenticity should be taken with a pinch of salt. He may have taken great care to show his tragedies' accordance with historical fact, but like many of his neoclassical contemporaries, he was more concerned with verisimilitude than historical accuracy. A comparison of the plot in *Bajazet* and Harlay's correspondence gives us a good indication of how much he changed to fit the story to the theatre. However, Donneau de Visé's and Corneille's critique of *Bajazet* indicates that after *La Querelle du Cid* historical authenticity had become an important sign of quality within the French theatre. Furthermore, one should be careful to disregard Racine's own interest for historical authenticity. The fact that Racine in the first preface (1672) claimed that he had based the play on a true unpublished account, and the fact that he reinforced this claim in the second preface (1676) seems to suggest that he valued historical authenticity even though psychological verisimilitude was of greater importance.

As to the question of Racine's use of *Floridon* we are none the wiser. The evidence examined cannot entirely refute the link between *Floridon* and *Bajazet*, but it does prove the point that we should be equally cautious to accept it. A definite proof of the link will probably never appear. Despite this, Segrais' *Floridon* is of vital importance, when we attempt to examine Racine's sources in *Bajazet*. Whether or not Racine actually read *Floridon*, the *nouvelle historique* and Harlay's correspondence still comes closest to a recreation of Racine's alleged source material.

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<sup>62</sup> Longino 1998, 51. Later in his career, Donneau de Visé acquired a more extensive knowledge about contemporary Ottoman history. Sixteen years after his review in *Mercure Galant* he published a biography on the Ottoman sultan Mehmed IV, who ruled after Ibrahim and Murad IV as well as a collection of sources regarding Gabriel de Guilleragues and Pierre de Girardin, ambassadors to the Ottoman court at Constantinople under Mehmed IV and Soliman III. In the first, he touches upon Amurat IV, but never the sultan's fratricides. Donneau de Visé 1688a; Donneau de Visé 1688b.

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