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French Neoclassical Tragedy: Corneille/Racine

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For a span of just over fifty years (1637–91), two dramatists dominated the stage of French classical tragedy. Pierre Corneille (1606–84) and Jean Racine (1639–99), while espousing radically different views of the tragic genre, appeared to their contemporaries and to succeeding generations intimately locked in artistic rivalry. This competition opposed two widely opposed ethical views of the tragic universe (one open and "political," the other, claustrophobically intimate and "personal"). From La Bruyère's first critically opposite judgments of the two ("Corneille represents mankind as it should be, Racine as it is") to our own day the competition for public validation between France's two greatest tragic playwrights extends beyond the theater into the world of French (Parisian) cultural life, forming an integral part of the ongoing debates about national identity.

Although the Third Republic and its heirs have created for us a rather static, if not to say marmoreal, image of the French seventeenth century, current research presents a rather different picture of this tumultuous period. The France over which Louis XIII and Louis XIV presided was a society in epochal transition. The French social order was undergoing momentous changes in its religious, economic, sexual, and political structures. The gradual but relentless drive of a mercantilist economy was fomenting radical social changes as a waning feudal aristocracy saw its wealth and influence recede before the onrush of the newly empowered third estate. At the same time the very notions of "family" and therefore of the confused imbrication of sexual and political economies were undergoing a radical reformation. In this sense the seventeenth century mediates those changes that will eventuate in the eighteenth as the emergence of a new, "modern" subjectivity. This subjectivity, however, is given its first adumbration in the cauldron of classical France, where elements of a dying order mingled and mixed with those still inchoate forces of the new that were struggling to emerge. It is at this point of mediation that the theater appears as the most enchafed locus of social experimentation. For the theater, more so than any other form of representation, proves to be the most ample space on and through which this new subject is essayed and triumphs.

The new tragic subject of the French seventeenth-century stage emerges at the conflicted juncture of several interrelated forces. For our present purposes, however, and limiting ourselves to the subject of tragedy, we must at least ask, if not answer, several important questions. In this century which has become synonymous with the expansion of Absolutism across Europe, the first question that comes to mind is: why does the theater, and tragedy in particular, become the privileged form of representation of all the emerging Absolutist nation-states (England, France, Spain)? Why is it thar this theater thar produces some of the greatest tragic dramas of the Western tradition is almost exclusively a familial one? And finally, why do the family and the subject formed within the family emerge at this historical juncture in direct relation to, if not reflection of, a political system, Absolutism, that is subtended by and inseparable from a patriarchal ideology whose influence pervades every aspect of social life? For it would be fruitless as well as more than a little naïve to attempt to separate a political system structured around the image/imaginary of the king – an image of unity, integrity, and closure – from an aesthetics and an ethos of tragedy that is at the same time constructing on the stage, and under the gaze of this adulated monarch, the parameters of subjectivity inside of which the subject of seventeenth-century tragedy plays out his or her personal (that is, sexually politicized) fate.

Although Corneille had been an active playwright since the early 1630s, those plays of his that were produced on the Parisian stages were primarily convoluted comedies where plot still ruled over character. It was only in 1634 that Corneille's first tragedy, *Médée*, was performed. It is interesting that Corneille chose to enter the tragic universe through the door of myth, a universe he was to abandon in all his later tragedies. In choosing to center his first tragedy on the matricidal fury of betrayed love, Corneille reveals a penchant for a particular type of the tragic he will later, in his "great" plays, eschew. In the *Discours*, written almost thirty years after *Médée*, Corneiile specifically states that politics, not love, must be the motivating force of tragedy. Tragedy's true nature demands a plot in which major questions of state – the end of a dynasty, the death of a great king, the destruction of an empire – are hanging in the balance. Love can only be allowed into the tragic universe as incidental to these events. It must take an ancillary role and leave the main spotlight on political concerns.[1]

Quite clearly *Médée* does not do this. Although we are aware of a political undercurrent in its plot, the crux of this tragedy is sexual desire, jealousy, and revenge. It is a tragedy of excess, a play of unbridled emotions. It is probably not for nothing that in this, his first tragedy, Corneille chose to follow Seneca (perhaps the leading influence, not just in French but in Elizabethan dramaturgy as well) in his depiction of the passions, fears, and murderous powers of a woman scorned. In this he was most probably following the reigning "baroque" theatrical style that dominated the Parisian stage in the first third of the century. This "baroque" drama was replete with twisted plots, dramatic misprisions, cross-dressing disguises, and last-minute plot reversals, and was dripping with blood and gore. The leading practitioners of the genre (a genre in which "tragedy" was actually almost abandoned in

favor of the more contemporary "tragicomedies") – Garnier, Rorrou, du Ryer, and others – were embroiled in an ethical and aesthetic battle for the redefinition of the role and function of the theater in general and of tragedy in particular. It is from the heated debates, first in Italy, then in France, that the "classical dicta" would emerge and triumph in France in the 1630s, signaling the end of "baroque excess" and the imposition on the theater of classical propriety. With *Médée*, Corneille is still very much writing in a tradition that he will soon abandon. He presents us, however, with an "original" drama, a prototypical "family romance" in which the conflicting tensions are so great, the resolution so utterly traumatic to the political universe, that its violence and more specifically the fear of a particular type of female violence will cast a long shadow over the "classical" tragedies to come.

Although formally *Médée* belongs to the major current of baroque "blood and gore" tragedies that had so large a role on the French stage in the 1620s and early 1630s, there is no attempt to make the play fit into those neoclassical parameters that are being debated in "avant-garde" literary circles – no unity of time, place, or plot, no respect paid to the *bienséances* of language – it is not for that unworthy of our attention. For although the rather florid "baroque" style of the play will be promptly abandoned (at the same time that Corneille leaves the world of myth for the stage of history), the enigmatic presence of its eponymous heroine – a fantasy, we might suggest, of a feminine power inimical to life in the polis, inimical to all stable political formations (first and foremost the family), inimical to what is perceived to be the masculine domain of reason and restraint – will haunt the universe of Corneille's greatest tragedies. When in the last scene of this tragedy, Medea, the Scythian sorceress admitted into the clear light of Corinth, flies off in her dragon-drawn chariot, she leaves behind her the destruction not only of the political base of the city-state (its king is dead; his daughter and Medea's rival burned to death in her poisoned robes), but also of the family (Medea has murdered her two sons and her husband is left, suicidal), and the future is deemed utterly desolate. Leaving the scene of the carnage her fury and powers have wreaked, Medea disappears back into the fantasies that spawned her, ready to be reincarnated in those proper Corneillean heroines entangled in sexual / political imbroglios that will continue to dominate Corneille's tragic universe.

If *Médée*, despite its all-consuming violence, did not evoke a loud public outcry, such was, as we know, not the case with Corneille's next tragedy (actually, in its first version, a "tragicomedy"), *Le Cid*. The public's reaction to *Le Cid* was in its vehemence, passion, and division unique in the annals of the French stage. No other theatrical debut was to have such a momentous impact on its contemporaries and on successive generations of admirers as Corneille's new play. From its premiere to this day, *Le Cid* is marked as *une pièce à scandale*. Scandalous because of the predicament of its protagonists – will the heroine, whose father has been killed by her "lover," seek his death, or will she give in to her passion and marry him? – scandalous because of its enormous "popular" success which flies in the face of classical dicta regarding the three unities; and, finally, scandalous because of the playwright's haughty refusal to respond to his "learned" critics.

Corneillean tragedy, and in this *Le Cid* is just the first example, is always situated at a moment of historical crisis, at a moment of momentous change where an old order is in its death throes and a new order is struggling to emerge. In *Le Cid*, for example, we are present at the birth of the (Absolute) Castilian monarchy. The king, Don Fernand, is the "first King of Castile"; his position is still shaky and his power is threatened both internally (the potentially rebellious great feudal nobles, of whom Don Gomes, Chimène's father, is the most obvious example) and externally by the ever present threat of the Muslim invaders. It is this historico-political setting that serves as the backdrop for the more "intimate" plot of the play, where the personal situation of the young protagonists (their "passion") is informed and deformed by the ambient social tensions. There is, in other words, no "love" in Corneille that is not also an overly invested political structure. It is perhaps for this reason that in all the great Corneillean tragedies, "marriage" – that strangely convoluted institution where the strands of sexuality, desire, politics, and economy meet and are entangled – is not only the plot device driving each tragedy on to its conclusion, but is also in each (except in *Polyeucte*) always left hanging. Marriage, with its promise of happiness and its constant deferral, becomes the tragic vortex of the plays, uniting politics, history, and sexuality in a downward spiral toward death.

Briefly stated, the plot of *Le Cid* (with Corneille's heavy borrowings from Guillén de Castro's *Las mocedades del Cid*) turns around what we will come to know as the inextricable tragic dilemma in Corneille – the opposition of personal desire and civic (familial, clanic) "duty" (*devoir*): the two young protagonists who love each other and wish to marry, whose love is presented as "unproblematic," are suddenly and irrevocably sundered by a "political" crisis that descends on them and forever changes the course of their life/love. Rodrigue, the young hero and happy "lover" of Chimène, is summoned by his father (the family patriarch and thus the embodiment of all those masculine values – duty, honor, self-sacrifice – that preside over the Corneillean universe) to revenge an insult that sullies his and his family's reputation. The man responsible for the insult is Chimène's father. Rodrigue takes up the defense of his family's honor, challenges the Count to a duel, and slays him. It now becomes Chimène's "duty" to defend her dead father by demanding Rodrigue's death.

By staunchly defending her dead father, Chimène, as a woman, is clearly made a surrogate for all that her father represented, politically and metaphysically, for the sociohistoric battle that the play also adumbrates: Chimène becomes the representative of a regressive, feudal order that refuses the march of history, the progress toward a new absolutist state. Rodrigue, on the other hand, having eliminated the Count, now takes his place as the leading warrior of the Castilian state. In a rather opportune invasion, the Moors are defeated by Rodrigue, who, in the battle and victory, is reborn as an immortal legend – the Cid ("leader" in Arabic). As the new mainstay of the Castilian throne, Rodrigue has become essential for the triumph of the monarchic hegemony. It is against this *raison d'état* that Chimène, always torn between love and duty, must be made to conform.

As we have seen with Medea, the women in Corneille are also sundered – that is their defining mark – and always potentially retrograde. For this reason the love of Chimène and Rodrigue is an overdetermined political scenario where the resistant woman must be appropriated into a patriarchal schema (marriage to the hero) that would contain her and her fantasized erotic/destructive powers. At the denouement of the play, Chimène is tricked by the king into admitting her passion – even as this passion will define her as scandalous to Corneille's contemporaries.[2] Although "history" tells us that Chimène and Rodrigue did marry, the play ends with the marriage deferred, put off for another time and another stage.

Although *Le Cid* was a great success, it was also the target of a heated debate among the leading intellectual and political figures of the day. Corneille seemed, by his silence, impervious to the attacks he and his play were forced to endure. The Académie Française was finally summoned by Cardinal Richelieu to put an end to the quarrel with its own definitive judgment on the merits of the play. The Académie's judgment was rather wishy-washy, both accusing Corneille for not really producing a work that strictly followed the "rules," but excusing him nevertheless for the great pleasure his play had brought the audience. Corneille, as I have said, remained aloof to the attacks and counterattacks. His only response came in 1640 with his new tragedy, *Horace*, which marks an epiphanous moment in the history of the French stage. In this, Corneille's first *tragédie régulière*, classicism, full-blown and triumphant, emerges as the paragon of a new aesthetic. Suddenly, a work captures and perfects those laws of harmony, symmetry, and *bienséances* that, up to this point, the French theater had only stumbled toward blindly. The term *tragédie régulière* that Corneille's contemporaries used to describe this new mode of representation refers both to an ethos and to an aesthetic. In a first sense, *régulière* designates a work which follows the rules. A regular tragedy obeys the Law. This obedience, reproduced as spectacle, continually serves as a new production of the Law's origin, the founding act of society. Second, *régulière* defines the aesthetic parameters of such a representation. By following the rules classicism achieves a wholeness, an integrity of being in which the various parts of the work are subsumed in a unified, total structure. This shining image of perfection is, of course, subtended by an entire ideology which, at the same time that it is espousing the triumph of the unitary Cartesian "ego," is defining this unity as male, along a metaphoric axis that equates unity, masculinity, and power with ideality, and femininity with emotions, dispersion, materiality, and death.

Certainly this dyadic opposition is the ruling paradigm presiding over the world of *Horace*. The very first lines of the play introduce us into a universe that is split along sexual (male/female) and political (Rome/Alba) lines. The verses themselves are beautifully cadenced counterpoints whose antithetical rhetoric prefigures all the other divisions that inform this universe; male is opposed to female, family to state, passion to reason, Rome to Alba. Once again we are present at a tremulous historic moment: Rome and Alba, although "ethnically" identical, are political antagonists, currently at a hostile standoff to see which will triumph militarily over and subjugate the other. We are, in other words, present at a conflict the results of which will

establish the foundations for Roman hegemony. The political stakes, which are enormous for the course of Western history, are transformed and focused on the personal, familial drama in which the two warring states are reduced to two archetypal families, the Horatii and the Curiae. The drama opposes Horace, the stoically unflinching Roman patriot, with his less dogmatic brother-in-law Curiace. Horace is the husband of Curiace's sister, Sabine, while Curiace is engaged to Camille, Horace's younger sister. Thus the political quarrel becomes inextricably entangled in the amorous/familial ties binding these members of the two emblematic families together. At the center of this imbroglio stands the ever promised and ever deferred marriage of Camille and Curiace, a marriage that would join Rome and Alba in a union that ostensibly would eradicate political divisions.

The tragic space becomes ever more confined as the political confrontation is reduced to this decisive familial conflict. In this, as in all of Corneille's great tragedies, the intimate space of family condenses in itself all the tensions of the greater political sphere and exacerbates them to the point of patricide (in the seventeenth-century sense of the term as a "crime committed against a close family member"). Tragedy in Corneille, although politically motivated, always needs to be anchored in the family, because it is in the family, in the words of the French psychoanalyst and critic, André Green, that "the ties of love and therefore of hate, are the earliest and most important" (Green 1969: 69). The two sets of brothers representing each family are called to fight to the death on the battlefield that separates the two massed armies. This experience of death is, of course, in accordance with the dictates of classical decorum, kept out of representation. We are never allowed to see what was depicted on the frontispiece of the play's first edition – the actual presence of blood and death. What we do see is the reaction of the women who are kept prisoners inside their home. We experience the battle, with its peripeteia and slaughter, in a scene of the distressed wives and sisters.[3] In a sense, we might conclude, therefore, that in Corneille the female characters stand in for, represent, "death" for the tragic audience.

Of the six combatants in this battle, only Horace – thanks to his physical prowess and psychological shrewdness – survives. He thus becomes the hero responsible not only for Rome's victory over its rival, Alba, but also and at the same time the origin of Rome's imperial destiny. From this point forward Rome will, we know, consolidate its hold over the Italian peninsula and go on to colonize the greater part of the known world, establishing, among other things, the language and institutions that will eventually give birth (at least in official royal propaganda) to the French nation.

While Horace's victory is a political and ideological triumph for nascent Roman hegemony it is a familial disaster for the women, most pointedly for his sister, Camille. Just as Chimène can be seen as the mirror image of Rodrigue in sexual reversal, Camille's self-righteous indignation is the direct counterpart of her brother's unquestioning dedication to Rome. In this case, once more, the woman is shown to be, by her passionate indignation and revolt, an obstacle to the unproblematic unfolding of the historical "progress." By her passionate outburst of "anti-Roman"

sentiment with which she greets her brother upon his return from his heroic combat – an outburst that not only undermines her brother's clear-cut, but, we must assume, fragile sense of himself as a Roman and as a man, Camille shows herself situated on the side of passion, of the claims of the body, and by so doing plunges herself into the center of the tragic vortex. Her grief, her taunts, and her invective against Rome prove too much for Horace who, in the heat of passionate indignation, kills her with the same sword he had used in his duel against the Curiae.

Once again, a tragic blood crime of the most overinvested type (parricide) throws the entire political structure into disarray. And once again, it is a political solution that must be found to paper over this rift in the social fabric. The entire last act of the tragedy is devoted to what many see as a verbal jousting that smacks too much of the law courts, for it requires an entire act to move Horace from his new place as a social pariah to a more politically acceptable situation that recognizes his status as initiator of Roman hegemony. Horace has to be cleansed of his sin, in such a way that his homicidal act is, if not forgiven, at least repressed. We are made to understand that the origins of the polis (Rome) are always both a sacrifice and a repression of that sacrifice. As we are reminded by the king, Tulle, of the scandal at the origin of Rome, the murder of Remus by Romulus, a parricidal crime marks and hides the violence of all beginnings. In *Horace*, where the family and the state are complicitous, a new beginning is announced by Tulle, who decrees, as if to reestablish a broken harmony, that Camille and her lover, Curiace, at last be joined in the constantly deferred "marriage" that Camille knew was not to be her lot in life. The king orders, by way of an expiation, but also certainly as an appropriation, that this recalcitrant woman and her slain lover be laid to rest in a common grave. *Horace* ends therefore with a "legal" blurring of the "original sin" of all political foundational acts – the murder/sacrifice of woman to the Law that must contain her excess in order for the new social order confirmed by this sacrifice to triumph.

This Machiavellian importance of *raison d'état* takes on an even more central role in Corneille's next, "bloodless," tragedy, *Cinna*. Perhaps no other of Corneille's major tragedies was greeted with such unanimous praise as this one. It would seem that to Corneille's contemporaries the play's supremacy over his other works was due mostly to its technical perfections. *Cinna* was judged a triumph principally because the laws of verisimilitude are made to function so well that form and content are intimately fused, creating a gleaming, shining mirage of theatrical illusion. Since the end of the eighteenth century *Cinna* has been seen as an essentially political tragedy. Whether or not Napoleon was a good judge of the theater, and whether or not he was correct in interpreting Auguste's inviting Cinna to be his "friend," as the "ruse of a tyrant," his judgment is emblematic of the trend that interprets *Cinna* as a study in totalitarianism. Curiously, for Corneille's contemporaries the political import of the play was its least compelling aspect. For them the heart of *Cinna* was passion. They were moved by the love of Cinna and Emilie and by the threats to that ardor. The play's title, *Cinna, ou la clémence d'Auguste*, seems to reflect, in its own ambivalence, these contradictory visions of the play; either "Cinna," that is the story of a love affair set

against the backdrop of the intrigues of imperial Rome, or "Auguste," the *mise en scène* of the Machiavellian workings of tyranny.

That these two visions of the tragedy are not mutually exclusive, that they are, in fact, reflected in the copula (*ou*) that joins them, should not surprise anyone familiar with the typical imbrication of Corneillean dramaturgy. Neither in his theotetical writings nor in his previous practice had Corneille allowed the political to be separated from the passional, nor for the passions to exist outside the limits of the polis. What is new in *Cinna*, and what is perhaps so unsettling, is the greater subtlety Corneille brings to this, his second "Roman," tragedy. When we considet, for instance, that Cinna was composed at the same time as *Horace*, that both plays were worked on simultaneously, it does seem shocking that the two plays project a glaringly different reptesentation of the tragic. Compared to *Horace*'s white-hot fury, with its descent into the abyssal sacrifice of familial blood, *Cinna* appears as a strikingly "pallid" tragedy. For the first time in Corneille's dramatic *oeuvre* we are spectators at a tragedy that appeats to skirt around the "tragic": there is no blood shed in this play, and no expiatory victim dies so that a new state may rise from this immolation.

It would, however, be an error to judge the tragic of *Cinna* on this basis. For here, in the most conflictual of plays, we witness Corneille's audacious redefinition of tragedy. *Cinna* presents an insidiously clever articulation of a new tragic vortex. It is a vortex of rhetorical illusion which draws into its center the diverse demands of sexuality and politics. It produces a violence so shattering yet so subtle that death can be omitted without diminishing the effect the play exercises on its audience. In *Cinna*, Corneillean tragedy truly becomes *cosa mentale*.

Although there is no physical violence in the play, the entite historical backdrop to the dramatic action, the "origin" of this new play, is bathed in blood. All the main characters are products of the fiercely ttaumatic history of the end of the Roman Republic and the birth of Imperial Rome. In that tumultuous history the new Emperor Auguste (whose name during the civil wars was still "Octave") triumphed over the major families of the Republic. He was directly responsible for the death of Emilie's father, the destruction of Cinna's family, and the destitution of Maxime's. These latter three, despite the generosity they have since received from Auguste, cannot forget their familial/political tragedies. Despite the newly established peace and prosperity that Rome now enjoys, these three lead a plot to overthrow Auguste, who is considered by them and their co-conspirators a "tyrant," and to reestablish the Republic.

These political plans are, as usual, complicated by the amorous imbroglio. Cinna and Emilie are in love and plan to marry. Emilie, however, uses the promise of marriage to keep a wavering Cinna in line. Cinna is torn between his desire for Emilie and his duty and gratitude to the Emperor. He wavers in his determination. Emilie, who is described as a Republican "fury," does not. Her duty, as she sees it, is to revenge het slain father. Despite her feelings for Cinna, she will give herself only to the man who slays Auguste, revenging her father and restoring her family to its

rightful place in the Roman Republican hierarchy. The third conspirator, Maxime, friend of Cinna, is secretly in love with Emilie. When he learns of the weakening of Cinna's resolve, of his wavering in carrying out the assassination plot, he uses this knowledge to betray Cinna in an attempt to convince Emilie to flee Rome with him.

When the plot is revealed to Auguste he summons the three conspirators to him in order to mete out their punishment. Although deeply affected by the betrayal of these young people for whom he has, he thinks, done so much (Auguste has "adopted" Emilie and treated her as his own daughter), he nevertheless wants their punishment to be exemplary. Each of the conspirators in turn admits to his/her betrayal and asks for death. In a moment of supreme self-mastery Auguste – having eradicated the negative passion that was left in him of "Octave" the murderous general – decides to abandon his first impulse of revenge. Instead of punishment, he pardons each of the conspirators, heaps them with gifts and honors, and lets them get on with their lives. It is at this point that, faced with such overwhelming generosity, each of the conspirators, in turn, falls on his knees, acknowledges the indelible debt to the emperor and swears fealty to him and to the new state he embodies.

At the start of the play, Auguste was merely the master of his subjects: he ruled over their bodies but not their minds. At the play's end he has found a way to be master of their hearts. This move, the most totalitarian of gestures, is presented paradoxically, as the most progressive. Auguste breaks out of the system of repetition that had condemned Rome to constantly replay her internal strife in dissension and fragmentation. He has constituted a new order of history where all is sacrificed to the monarch, and where the supreme pleasure of the citizen is to die so that the Law may live. Is it not the ultimate ruse of a tyrant, the ultimate tragedy for his subjects, to give these subjects a sense of their subjectivity that is inseparable from the repressions of his law, and to have them articulate this repression as their supreme pleasure?

Polyeucte, Corneille's last canonical play, although cast as a "Christian tragedy," is, like *Cinna*, firmly grounded in political history. *Polyeucte* lies on the threshold of a new world order. As the play begins, at the far corners of the Roman Empire, in Armenia, the Christians are an ever more present menace to the internal stability of the Roman world. On the border of that world, the Persians, although contained for the moment, are a threat to its integrity. The atmosphere in which *Polyeucte* evolves is one of malaise, of instability. A moment of historical becoming is the backdrop, here as in the preceding plays, of the tragic action.

Despite, however, its involvement in a problematic that remains essentially identical in all the great tragedies, *Polyeucte* also differs radically from its predecessors. For however different the plays that preceded *Polyeucte* were from each other, they had in common a central underlying sexual tension that served as the impetus to tragic action. The desire that propelled the protagonists toward each other was forever exacerbated in its own frustration. In them, the marriage that engages the sexuality of Corneille's protagonists in an elaborate sociopolitical network is always forestalled. Desire and politics are shown to be inextricably interwoven, and in this interweave

dramatic tension is maintained. *Polyeucte* fundamentally alters this situation. It is the only major tragedy to be situated on the other side of what was posited as an impossible divide. For the first time in classical tragedy we are given the marriage as a *fait accompli*. The consequences of this radical change in tragic structure are at once subtle and far-reaching.

Like all the major tragedies *Polyeucte* begins on a note of conflict. Here, however, the focus of discord has shifted. Instead of beginning with a woman sundered by the alienating demands of a male-dominated universe, *Polyeucte* presents us with a divided hero. Polyeucte is torn between two irreconcilable claims on him: the exigency of spiritual salvation and the imperious demands of sexual gratification; between Christianity and Pauline. The new creed that Polyeucte ardently desires to embrace is just as ardently held beyond his grasp by his own sexual pleasure. Polyeucte has strayed from his manly role and is ensnared, as his confidant Néarque makes clear, by the Devil in the guise of Pauline.

The difficulty in creating a "Christian" tragedy goes to the very paradox that is at the heart of the theater. Although the *theatrum mundi* topos was an ever present commonplace in seventeenth-century discourse, Corneille uses this commonplace as the pivot of his new tragedy. The problematics of "seeming and being" so essential to both sociability and theatricality are brought to bear on the very heart of *Polyeucte*'s tragic dilemma. What is perceived as illusion (Pauline's dream that prefigures Polyeucte's martyrdom) becomes reality, just as that reality (his death) is shown to be, in Christian terms, true, immortal "life." It is this vision of the truth that functioning as "grace" descends upon the recalcitrant Pauline and her even more retrograde father, Félix, converting them to the path of Christ.

In the play this conversion, of course, radically shifts both the political and amorous position of all the major characters. For, as we learn, and as the plot thickens, Pauline, although recently married to Polyeucte, is a woman with a past. In that past she was passionately in love with and loved by Sévère, a noble but poor Roman soldier. Despite her love for Sévère, she, like all great Corneillean heroines, follows her duty to her father. Seeing in Polyeucte a much better match for his political ambitions, her father insists on her marriage to him. She, therefore, as she says, sacrifices herself to her duty by entering Polyeucte's bed, thus "giving to him by duty what the other had by love." In other words, Pauline's desire is, like Chimène's, like Camille's, like Emilie's, sacrificed on the altar of patriarchal necessity. When, however, Sévère, whom everyone believes killed on the battlefield, returns from the dead, enriched and honored by the emperor, Pauline and her father's world, for very different reasons, is thrown into panic: Pauline because she fears her passion, Félix because he is afraid of Sévère's retribution.

Against this background of worldy *vanitas*, Polyeucte follows his path to the Truth: secretly baptized, he decides to demonstrate his faith by interrupting a public sacrifice in honor of Sévère. Because they have knocked down the Roman deities, Polyeucte and Néarque are imprisoned for sacrilege, Néarque is executed, and Polyeucte is threatened with death if he does not renounce his new faith.

Polyeucte becomes, therefore, the spectacular centet around which swirl the tormented passions, political and amorous, of the other chatacters. Félix, blinded by his life as a courtier in the imperial court, cannot see Sévère's generosity. Sévère cannot understand Pauline's virtuous refusal of the possibility of rekindling their love. Pauline, trapped between all the men, each of whom use her as an object of exchange, passing her metaphorically from father to husband to lover, cannot understand her abandonment by Polyeucte, cannot see the Truth. They are all trapped in the illusion of the material world. It is only through the shattering experience of witnessing Polyeucte's martyrdom and being spattered with his blood that the scales fall from Pauline's eyes ("I see, I know, I believe"). Through the intervention of her martyred husband, she too now receives the grace necessary for her conversion. And at the very end of the play, even Félix, led by his daughter's example, sees the error of his life and becomes a Christian. Invested by the tolerant Sévère with his former administrative duties and power, Félix, with Pauline by his side, now form a new "Christian couple." The tragedy ends with this moment of grace as Pauline and Félix are summoned to go forth and bear witness to the universal Truth of Christianity.

With *Polyeucte*'s epiphany French classicism is transformed into a vision of divine transcendence. This vision is both a mystery and, of course, a mystification. In *Polyeucte* sexuality and politics, individual desire, and *raison d'état* continue their spiraling ascension. After *Polyeucte* something changes in Corneillean dramaturgy. Although Corneille's theatrical career lasted well into the century, never again does he create a tragedy of the overwhelming power and grace of the four canonical plays. One could almost think that the tragedies produced in the latter part of Corneille's dramatic career offer, in negative reversal, a captivating image of the world so minutely elaborated in the "great" plays. These later plays are peopled not with heroes but with the hero's Other, the monsters of classicism's nether side.

Could it be that Corneille was turned away from the classical clarity he had almost single-handedly introduced upon the French stage because he felt challenged by the ever greater success of his young rival Racine? Certainly the rivalry between France's two greatest tragic playwrights divided seventeenth-century society, as that society moved from the values and aspirations of the court of Louis XIII and Richelieu through the more imperial(ist) strivings of Louis XIV's personal reign. Although this reign, especially in its early stages, has often been associated with a thirst for pleasure and an opulent display of royal largesse, Racine's tragedies plunge us into a universe of dark passions, murderous rivalries, and familial obsessions, where even more intimately than in Corneille the personal desires of the protagonists and the ever present demands of politics are shown to be the inextricable nexus from which emerge the seductive monsters of Racinian tragedy.

Whar makes Racinian tragedy particularly compelling is perhaps the ease with which Racine functioned within the confines of classicism's aesthetic patameters. Unlike Corneille, Racine seems to have used those unities of time, place, and action to his advantage, seems to have been able with no trouble at all to fit his dramatic vision into the vety straitened limits of neoclassical conventions. The resulting plays

inhabit a tragic locus novel in its intensity and narrowness of focus. This tightly organized, compressed tragic arena is always represented in Racine as the space of the family. Racinian tragedy is always a family affair. In the world of classical dramaturgy, this tightening represents one more suffocating twist of the tragic knot that condemns the subject of this tragedy to ever more violent efforts to escape his/her fate, a fate that seems to close ever more forcefully around him/her with harrowing consequences.

The narrowing of the tragic familial locus allows us to speculate on the very major differences between Racinian and Corneillean dramaturgy and on the subjectivity this dramaturgy inscribes. Corneillean tragedy would seem to correspond to that historical passage that Michel Foucault has hypothesized as "the moment of the great enclosure": that is, that moment when those structures defining self and other gradually but inexorably shift European civilization out of the order of the analogous and into the world of classical representation (1966: "Introduction"). Corneille would represent this moment of passage by figuring it in the clearly delineated sexual/political divisions that legislate his dramatic universe: the importance of symmetry – sexual, political, and aesthetic – is worked out in his plays against the larger canvas of a social conflict that pits the individual against the family/state. Nevertheless there is still, in the Corneille of the great tragedies, a separation, if only the separation of the mirror, between family and state: the one reflects and stands in a homologous relation to the other. In Racine, however, we have moved to a world already on the other side of that great divide, a world that is firmly entrenched in the episteme of classical representation. On the one hand, what this means for Racinian tragedy is that there is no longer any separation between family and state; dramatically from the beginning in *La Thébaïde* the family *is* the state. There is no longer any division possible between the political dimension of the tragic and the private/sexual world of the protagonists. The "origin" of tragedy, the "origin" of family are one. On the other hand, what this also means is that once reduced to its most intimate dynamic, once there is no longer any outside at all; once we are trapped in the suffocating space of this family/state the clear boundaries of sexual symmetry are blurred. As the exacerbation between characters and desires is turned inward, it becomes internalized as conflict and doubling, contradiction and bad faith. As Roland Barthes has remarked, this new dynamic signals a profound change in seventeenth-century sexuality, for what happens in Racine, as opposed to Corneille, is that sexuality, as a supposed "natural," biological distinction, is confounded: "nature" is shown to be a play of forces, a play that determines, by pitting the strong against the weak, the executioners against the victims, a redistribution of sexual roles (1963: 25). Sexuality now becomes a production, the production of political forces rather than the unmediated fiat of biology. The essentialization of masculinity and femininity, so firmly articulated in the Corneillean canon, is no longer operative in Racine.

In Racine's internalization of difference the remarkably stable "sexual essentiality" of Corneille's great plays is inverted, confounded, and confused. While in Corneille difference is imposed from the outside – the hero's dilemma is conventionally an

impossible option between his/her sexual desire and the correct political choice that is antithetical to it – that dilemma is external to those desires. In Racine, however, the difference is already a "difference within." The characters suffer first and foremost because they struggle with an internal division that they seem incapable of suturing, that refuses a compromise with the omnipresent social gaze that envelops them and increases their sense of always being somehow lacking, guilty.

Significantly, Racine's step forward in tragic complexity is manifested as a backward movement in representation. Racine retreats from the stage of history and returns to the more archaic cosmology of myth for his greatest creations – *Andromaque. Iphigénie. Phèdre*. All of these different scenarios are affiliated in their genealogy, as Phillip Lewis has demonstrated, to the overriding myth of Oedipus, his family, his descendants, and the consequences of his fate (1986: 58–9). Even those historically based tragedies, *Britannicus. Bajazet*, and *Mithridate*, or the biblical tragedy of *Athalie*, can be seen, conjuring up as they do forces of an "unconscious" familial–sexual terror, to supersede the merely picturesque qualities of the historical and to plunge back into the mysterious, sacred world of Oedipal fantasies. Could we offer as a hypothesis that the entire Racinian endeavor apppears to rescript, in an obsessive return of the past, the story of Oedipus as it intersects with a newly emerging subjectivity in seventeenth-century France?[4]

We know that of all the major writers of the classical age, Racine had the most thorough knowledge of ancient Greek literature. Schooled at Port-Royal, he benefited enormously from the radical reforms in education offered in this Jansenist environment. Although his direct and intimate knowledge of the Greek classics allowed Racine to range broadly over the major authors of the Greek tradition, his major influence, the writer to whom he returned the most often, was Euripides. Even if we learn of his interest in following in the footsteps of Sophocles and writing his own version of *Oedipus Rex*, the closest Racine came to the Oedipus legend itself was in his first tragedy, *La Thébaïde. ou les frères ennemis*, where, of course, Oedipus is not present among the cast of characters, but where his fate presides over the unfolding tragedy of his children.

From the beginning, then, and as if creating his own tragic origins, Racine's first drama plunges us into a world predetermined by the unspeakable crimes of one's ancestors, the results of which doom his protagonists in the present, to incest, fraternal hatred, and political chaos. Although *La Thébaïde* is generally considered both the most Corneillean of Racine's tragedies and also the least successful dramatically speaking, it is interesting for delineating some of the major dramatic themes and conventions that will become ever more present in Racinian tragedy. The sins of the parents are visited, here in Racine's adaptation of *Seven Against Thebes*, on the children. But since these children are also the embodiment of the state, the entire political edifice risks being thrown into total disarray. The twin brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, are monstrous in their visceral hatred for each other, a hatred, we are told, that begins in the incestuous womb of their mother, Jocasta. It is this hatred, the result of a family taint, a sexual crime that goes back through the generations and that

can never be expiated, that always condemns its carriers to a tragic death. Furthermore, although the monstrosity that wreaks havoc on Theban society is the result of transgressive parental sexuality, this excessive, unnatural sexuality is – because of the text's insistent focus on the pathetic expiatory rhetoric of the mother, Jocasta, and by echoing the hollow absence of the father – coded as feminine. In Racine, Jocasta remains onstage as a constant reminder of the reality of the flesh, of its dangerous potential constantly to exceed any of the bounds with which society would constrain it. Oedipus, on the other hand, has vanished from the world. The father is gone; he has become an immaterial abstraction. It is only (the myth tells us, not Racine) at the end of his wanderings when he is welcomed at last by Theseus, King of Athens, that Oedipus is freed of his sacred suffering. The sovereignty of his fate is transferred to Theseus. In return for Athens' hospitality Oedipus' secret, the secret of "kingship," remains with the kings of that city. It is a secret passed from king to king, forming an Oedipal legacy of sovereignty.

Metaphysically, that is, "politically" speaking, the entire movement of Racinian tragedy will be to flee the sinful flesh of the mother and come into the place of Oedipus the King. Racine's task will be to concretize, through the tragic narration, precisely the absence the father has become, the father no longer condemned to the passions of the body, but freed from physicality, become pure "essence," finally the Law (the God of *Athalie*). But, of course, the only way tragedy can move us toward this absolute moment of the Law is by embodying this movement as a turn away from the material, from the flesh, that is, by constantly reinscribing the passions of the body, in each of the succeeding plays, as the major dramatic vehicle propelling tragic action.

Although Racine's next play, *Alexandre le Grand*, had considerably more success than *La Thébaïde*, it was the triumph of *Andromaque* that catapulted Racine into the same empyrean as Corneille. At the same time it announced that a new form of tragedy had emerged, a tragedy where, contrary to the Corneillean, amorous passion, no longer relegated to the secondary role, took center stage. From *Andromaque* onward, through all of his great creations, it is the combination of the protean thematics of desire with the incantatory seduction of his verse that makes Racine the unequaled master of the French stage.

Andromaque presents us with what will be, *mutatis mutandis*, the principal dynamics of Racinian tragedy: the impossibility of reciprocal love among a cast of characters divided into masters and slaves, victims and executioners. All the characters in *Andromaque* live in the shadow of that greatest of all epics – the Trojan War, and of the larger-than-life heroes – their own parents – who played so large a role in the destruction of Troy. They are all the products of a traumatic past which clings to them and inhibits any of their attempts to lead noncontingent, independent existences. All are condemned to love precisely that person who, because of history, can never love them in return. In the classic Racinian paradigm: Oreste loves Hermione, who loves Pyrrhus, who loves Andromaque, who loves Hector, who is dead. This first great tragedy posits, first of all, the impossibility of desire ever being satisfied, at the same

time that it presents as a structural necessity the particular pleasure that locks the Racinian protagonists in a sadomasochistic dialectic between the (usually young) defenseless victim (here Andromaque, but later, Junie, Bajazet, Britannicus, Monime, Hippolyte, Joas, and so on) in a struggle to the death with a powerfully aggressive suitor/rival (Hermione, Agrippine, Roxane, Mithridate, Phèdre, Athalie). The love/lust of the master is precisely enflamed through its frustration: the victim's refusal to offer any reciprocation. In other words, the essential dynamic of the Racinian tragic is a spiraling whirlwind of desire and aggression that reaches its climax in the destruction of what we can only define as the expiatory victim of this theater of beauty and cruelty.

While Racine's dramatic plots focus on the tragic predicament of his protagonist, this predicament is always brought to the foreground by a political crisis. All the tragedies are situated on the fault line separating the death of an old political regime and the birth of another, as yet unfocused, order. This crisis, internalized in the Racinian hero as a passionate, guilt-ridden rift in his/her own emotional world, is exacerbated by being presented against a background of impending political chaos. What we hear echoing across the Racinian world, at the beginning of each play, is that something in the order of that world has been irrevocably changed. Racine constructs his tragedies so that we are plunged from the very beginning into a familial crisis that is also a political turning point threatening the entire world order of the play.[5]

Quickly, however, Racine moves from the political instability of the outer world into the psychological turmoil of the play's protagonist. In an extremely subtle play of inversions, the tragic plot will work itself out, resolving the political crisis by and through the sacrifice of the tragic hero (Pyrrhus, Britannicus, Bajazet, Phèdre, and so on). In a sense, therefore, Racine moves from the larger political stage of an empire in crisis to the narrower, but analogous, ferment of the tragic hero who, becoming the victim of that world's crisis, is immolated to expiate the sins of society, and, by so doing, restore order to it.

Although space does not permit even a cursory analysis of each of the nine tragedies (Racine was also the author of one comedy, *Les Plaideurs*), following the lead of Roland Barthes, who studied the Racinian tragic world as one large, multifaceted canvas, we can draw some general conclusions regarding Racine's tragic vision. Among the innovations he brought to the seventeenth-century theater, Racine was the first to place a child on the stage. This novelty transforms the world of classical dramaturgy into a compelling scenario of sacrifice and horror; for this child, led out into the public's embrace, is brought forth upon the scene of classicism as its victim. Racine puts children on his stage to immolate them, or at least to keep the threat of immolation suspended over their heads. From his first triumphant tragedy *Andromaque* to his last, *Athalie*, the tragic dilemma turns around the figure of the child who is to be sacrificed (Astyanax, Britannicus, Hippolyte, Joas). The central importance of the child corresponds to the conflicted familial scenarios that form the frame inside of which Racinian tragedy plays out one of the most conflicted dilemmas of

seventeenth-century subjectivity as it is informed by the ideological parameters of absolutism. For this society, what is unacceptable is precisely what makes Racine's characters so compelling – heterogeneity. The sign of the other, of the "monstrous," is precisely to be a heterogeneous being. In a world that aspires to an integrity of being, all that represents division, a splitting of the subject will be termed "monstrous."

Monsters, as we know, populate the Racinian universe, either mythological monsters – the bull from the sea in *Phèdre* – or actual "psychological" monsters – Neron, Agrippine, Roxane, Athalie. And it is precisely Neron who is paradigmatic of those hybrid Racinian children who are monstrous precisely because they are not one, but two. Phèdre, "daughter of Minos and Pasiphae," is, of course, the most famous, the most pathetic of Racine's heroines. She, like Neron, like the other children (and of course, all the characters are also always "children"), bears the internal duality of the darkness of the underworld and the blinding light of day: granddaughter of the sun, her father, "in Hell, judges the pale shades of mortals." She too is the product of a mixture of bloods, of histories, of old debts that become her internal division, the victim of a curse she inherits in her being, a being that is monstrous because it is not pure, not one but two.

We are beginning to see the pattern of internal contradiction that emerges in Racine's theater and that focuses on the child. For in an obvious sense all Racine's characters are children and therefore all are monstrous. All bear the burden of a heterogeneous past that strives to free itself from its own heterogeneity that strives for the realm of the absolute. It is this impossible denial, a denial that resurfaces in the violence of murder, of incest, of sexuality that makes these children the victims of their secret monstrous origin and coterminously makes this origin always the result of an even more primeval violence.

Of all the children who are actually sacrificed in Racine – Iphigénie/Eriphile, Hippolyte, and Phèdre – the last two in the dyad they form are the most riveting. Although it may first strike us as odd to see Phèdre and Hippolyte as but two differently gendered variations of the same, a figuration of a two-headed "monster" of recalcitrant sexuality because of the very obvious difference in the plot of the tragedy, these differences should not blind us to the structural similarities that ally them to each other as victims of the familial order that destroys them. Each is condemned to the role of the victim by the internal, inalienable difference that they bear as children of a tainted lineage. Phèdre's predisposition to victimization is, as we have already seen, double: daughter of Pasiphaë and Minos, she bears all the weight of the familial curse, the curse of excessive, transgressive sexuality. Hippolyte, likewise, is the tainted product of the cross between "nature and culture," between the world of his father, Theseus, the world of politics and order, and the savage universe of Antiope, his Amazon mother. From his mother comes his aversion to sexuality. But with such an antecedent this aversion can only interpreted as a refusal of the sexuality of the Father, the refusal to assume a sexuality that is inscribed in a patriarchal political network. When Hippolyte falls in love with Aricie he falls outside of the paternal order. His passion is "transgressive," just as is, for different reasons, Phèdre's.

Both Phèdre and Hippolyte represent, therefore, two valences of sexuality that are directly inimical to the (patriarchal) polis. Combined, they form a hybrid sexual being, a monster that must be eradicated despite, and perhaps because of, the pity they inspire in the audience. Thésée, as the representative of civilization, must intervene, must call down the gods' wrath and destroy his family, lest that family, as monstrous sexuality, destroy civilization.

Finally, we should not forget that before Oedipus murdered his father, that father tried to kill him. This initial attack by the father, his turning on his own child to save himself, to save his rule, is the fearsome fantasy of Racine's tragic heroes. They are all the children of Oedipus and bear his heavy debt and blinding insight. And insofar as Racinian tragedy can be seen to inaugurate the reign of the modern, the impossible era of the divided self, our participation in that theater, our pleasure and terror that the sacrifice and reinscription of ambivalence conjures up in us, suspending its awesome power of hatred and passion over our heads, prove that we continue to act out Absolutism's conflicted legacy. On the inner stage of our own desirous fantasies, we remain the victims of Racine: we are all his children.[6]

Notes

1 "[La] dignité [de la tragédie] demande quelque grand intéret d'Etat, ou quelque passion plus noble et plus male que l'amour... il faut qu'il [l'amour] se contente du second rang dans le poème, et laisse [à la politique] le premier" (Tragedy's dignity calls for either an important political crisis where the fate of the nation is at stake, or a more noble and more virile passion than love, which must be happy with secondary role in the play while leaving to politics the primary one) (Corneille 1963: 13).

2 In the French Academy's judgment of the play – caught as it was in an aesthetico-political debate – Chimène is defined as an

> Amante trop sensible et fille trop denaturée. Quelque violence que luiy peust faire sa passion, il est certain qu'elle ne devait point se relâcher dans la vengeance de la mort de son père et moins encore se résoudre à epouser celuy qui l'avoit fait mourir. En cecy il faut avouer que ses moeurs sont du moins scandaleuses, si en effet elles ne sont pas dépravées. (Chapelain 1637: 39).
>
> (Too sensitive for a young lady in love and too "unnatural." For however violent her passion might be, it is certain that she should not slack off in her quest for revenge for the death of her father and even less to decide to marry the man who killed him. In this we must admit that her morals are at the least scandalous if not, in fact, depraved.)

3 Remarkably, in Corneille's canonical familial dramas, there are, at least since Medea's disappearance, no mothers.

4 The preceding paragraphs are borrowed with slight alterations from the chapter "Racine's Children," in my *Subjectivity and Subjugation in Seventeenth-Century Drama and Prose: The Family Romance of French Classicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

5 As Mauron has pointed out (1969: 26–31) in his reading of Racine, in the tragedies leading up to *Mithridate* the political crisis is precipitated because the place of the father is vacant, creating turmoil in the universe of the drama. From *Mithridate* on, the father returns, only to find his place usurped or in danger of being usurped.

6 For a more detailed account of Racine's tragic universe, especially in reference to the dynamics of paternity, sacrifice, and infanticide, see "Racine's Children" (from which much of the above is drawn), 141–73.

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