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Over the Top: From the Tragic to the Comic in Corneille

by

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The notions of tragedy and comedy that one can intuit from the theater of Corneille are markedly different from those found in other authors of the period. This is but one aspect of a larger issue concerning Corneille's placement in the hallowed pantheon of literary history. He is one of the major canonical authors and yet he often disconcerts.¹ He was one of the principal theorists of drama in the seventeenth century and yet he took a number of stands in direct and lonely opposition to his peers. Alain Couprie points out that Corneille "a toujours été un auteur suspect,"² and certainly the unusual relationship in his theater between tragedy and comedy as well as that between the tragic and the comic have occasioned some of that suspicion. The generic interpenetration of comedy and tragedy in Corneille's theater has long been recognized and discussed at length.³ Han Verhoeff expressed the central issue succinctly:

Chez Corneille, la distinction entre les genres s'avère malaisée. Les comédies ne sont pas très gaies et les tragédies célèbrent des réussites et non des catastrophes. (p. 17)⁴

¹ Georges Forestier uses the word "décontenancé" in the first sentence of his *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l'œuvre* to describe critical reaction to certain aspects of Corneille's theater (Paris: Klincksieck, 1996), p. 19.

² "Corneille devant l'histoire littéraire," *L'Histoire littéraire: ses méthodes et ses résultats*, ed. Luc Fraisse (Geneva: Droz, 2001), p. 169.

³ See, for example Judd Hubert, "Corneille et le mélange des genres," *PFSCS* 25, no. 48 (1998), p. 231; P.F. Butler, "Sertorius: comédie tragique," *The Classical Tradition in French Literature: Essays Presented to R.C. Knight* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1977), pp. 65-67; Helen Bates McDermott, "Politics and Ambiguity in Corneille's *Suréna*," *French Forum* 2 (1977), p. 211; and Jean Serroy, "Préface," *L'Illusion Comique* (Paris: Folio, 2000), p. 27.

⁴ "Le Don de Corneille," *Corneille Comique*, ed. Milorad R. Margitic (Tubingen: Narr, 1982), p. 17.

That Corneille was consciously interested in the boundaries between tragedy and comedy is evident in *L'illusion comique*, where he juxtaposes different theatrical genres and sub-genres while erasing the borderlines between them. Intimately tied to the issue of genre, but moving beyond it, is that of register: a number of critics have noted, and been disconcerted by, comic elements in Corneille's serious drama, starting with Donneau de Visé who said that the tragedy *Sophonisbe* "fait rire en beaucoup d'endroits."⁵

What I propose to examine is a particular means that Corneille employs, whether intentionally or not, to breach the line between comedy and tragedy, between the tragic and the comic, in a number of his serious plays. I call this phenomenon going *over the top*, referring to moments in Corneille's tragedies or *comédies héroïques* that elicit in me a reaction of such astonishment that I find myself asking, "Is he serious?" Of course, not everyone will have the same reaction, and certainly not in all cases. However, numerous but isolated critical responses pointing to such moments lead me to believe that I am not alone in my reaction and that there may be a larger, more widespread phenomenon at work. Two examples will make clear what I mean by going *over the top*. In *Pertharite*, when Grimoald threatens to kill Rodelinde's son if she refuses to marry him, she responds by saying that she will marry him *only* on the condition that he kill her son first. She compounds our shock by saying that she will help him do it! "Fais, fais venir ce fils, qu'avec toi je l'immole."⁶ While we are meant to understand that Rodelinde seeks to stain Grimoald's hand and mark him as an unpardonable tyrant, many have found Rodelinde's demand to be considerably more outrageous than Grimoald's. The second example is taken from *Rodogune* and involves the moment when the eponymous character offers her hand in marriage and thus the throne to whichever of the two brothers avenges Nicanor's death by killing Cléopâtre. The disproportion between Rodogune's role as the virtuous heroine and her

⁵ Quoted in Granet, *Recueil de dissertations sur plusieurs tragédies de Corneille et Racine*, 1740; (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1975), p. 129. Voltaire as well criticized the intrusion of comic elements in certain plays. See R.C. Knight, "Quand un Héros Soupire: The Sad Case of Sertorius," *Humanitas*, ed. Davis, R. Leslie, et al. (Coleraine: New University of Ulster, 1984), pp. 23 and 28. Hubert points to a number of different moments that occasion laughter in *Pompée* and *Tite et Bérénice* ("Le Mélange des genres," p. 228), as well as in *Nicomède*, *Corneille's Performative Metaphors* (Charlottesville: Rookwood Press, 1997), p. 139. In all fairness, I must point out that de Visé's comment about *Sophonisbe* was made in response to the version he saw staged in 1663. That version may well have undergone changes before publication.

⁶ Corneille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton, 3 vols, (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), v. 907.

demand for matricide may well be perceived as outrageous. Once again the shock is compounded, this time by the daring symmetry between her demand for Cléopâtre's head and Cléopâtre's demand for Rodogune's head an act earlier, demands that are both made of the same unlikely potential assassins.⁷ If we are forced to wonder, as in the case of these examples, whether Corneille could possibly be serious, the tragic tone of the scene has been broken.

While one may argue that there is nothing outlandish about these two moments, and indeed Corneille has had determined apologists on this score and on others, I do not want to focus on justifying my or anyone else's reaction. Rather, I would like to examine how such moments may relate to the comic and the tragic, what their range and nature are in this sizable corpus of plays, and above all, I would like to speculate about why Corneille would incorporate elements which are sufficiently *over the top* to make *anyone* wonder whether he was serious or not.

Corneille himself seems to have been aware of the issue of going *over the top*. He embeds within *Pertharite* what seems to be a reproach by Grimoald to Rodelinde for going too far in demanding her son's death and proposing to help murder him:

Faire la furieuse, et la désespérée,
Paraître avec éclat mère dénaturée,
Sortir hors de vous-même, et montrer à grand bruit
À quelle extrémité mon amour vous réduit,
C'est mettre avec trop d'art la douleur en parade,

.....
Les plus grands déplaisirs sont les moins éclatants,
Et l'on sait qu'un grand cœur se possède en tout temps. (vv. 943-50)

Several years later, Corneille speaks to the issue directly in his *Discours de la tragédie*: "Pour plaire il [the playwright] a besoin quelquefois de rehausser l'éclat des belles actions, et d'exténuer l'horreur des funestes. Ce sont des nécessités d'embellissement, où il peut bien choquer la vraisemblance particulière" (III, p. 171). Going *over the top* was a risk that Corneille appears to have been willing to run in order to realize his dramatic vision, but it had its dangers.

One possible risk, implicit in the question, "Is he serious?" is the reaction of laughter. A moment that was intended to convey high

⁷ In his *Examen* of the play, Corneille spends an entire page discussing and justifying Rodogune's demand, arguing that, unlike Cléopâtre, she did not really expect either of the men to carry out her wishes. His argument is rather unconvincing, however, and all the more so when he then shifts his position to argue: "Il était de son [Rodogune's] devoir de venger cette mort [Nicanor's]" (II, p. 203).

seriousness may topple over into the absurd because it is too extreme. Not all moments of the sort I term *over the top* elicit laughter. Perhaps because both of the examples I mentioned above involve murder, I personally do not find them funny, nor do I think that most spectators would. The question of what triggers a response of laughter in a serious context is a complex one, and one that I will not tackle here. I recognize that there is hardly universal agreement about what might be construed as comic. But the fact remains, as we noted at the outset, that a number of critics have commented on the surprising presence of the comic in Corneille's tragedies. Going *over the top* is a mechanism that explains certain of these instances. I would like to turn now to examining precisely how Corneille topples over from the tragic into the comic.

The first means is probably the most idiosyncratic and involves the character of Matamore. Matamore is a role with a long literary past and was immediately recognizable to the seventeenth-century audience of *L'Illusion comique*. He is a thoroughly comic character, so that the fact that he goes *over the top* in his feats of verbal bravado is hardly noteworthy in comedy. While he may contribute the most bluntly comic note to *L'Illusion comique*, his presence does not clash with his context. Rather Matamore provides a kind of trickle-down effect through a surprising number of Corneille's subsequent plays, contaminating ostensibly serious moments of heroism with the potential for ridicule. Corneille's concept of heroism does not merely run the danger of appearing at times excessive, but his heroes risk the specific resemblance to Matamore. This process of interference between the heroic and the comic begins with Rodrigue in *Le Cid*. Octave Nadal noted long ago:

Matamore, c'est Rodrigue ou Horace sans les actes. Le langage, le ton de ces héros sont communs; leurs élans, leur exaltation, leurs maximes les mêmes.⁸

Don Gomès in *Le Cid* has long been compared to Matamore as well, beginning with Georges de Scudéry's criticism of the play.⁹ Matamore reverberates down through almost the full range of Corneille's theater. César in *La Mort de Pompée* calls Matamore to mind when he offers

⁸ *Le Sentiment de l'amour dans l'œuvre de Pierre Corneille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 119. Mauron concurs: "Matamore est un faux Cid auquel le vrai ressemble parfois un peu trop," *Des métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel* (Paris: Corti, 1962), p. 244.

⁹ Serroy, p. 24. See also P.J. Yarrow, *Corneille*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), p. 160.

Cléopâtre any throne she might fancy.¹⁰ Attila sounds matamoresque when he says: "moi de qui l'âme altière / Cherche à voir sous mes pas trembler la Terre entière" (v. 819), as does Octar's description of the Frankish king Méroüée able to "Bouleverser les murs d'un seul de ses regards" (v. 572).¹¹ Aspar, in *Pulchérie*, sets out his military prowess in terms that echo Matamore's boasts: "Moi, qu'on a vu forcer trois camps, et vingt murailles, / Moi, qui depuis dix ans ai gagné sept batailles" (vv. 317-8). How is one to take seriously a character who sounds like Matamore? Couton indicates the destabilizing consequences:

C'est une disgrâce qu'un conquérant soit toujours Picrochole par quelque côté et que leur langage ne permette pas de distinguer vrai et faux brave" (I, p. 1725).

Indeed, the intertextual reference to Matamore threatens the illusion not merely of mimesis, but of Cornelian heroism as well, through the intrusion of the comic.

There exist many other and more straightforward means of going *over the top*. Within a nexus of repetition, coincidence, and excess, there are numerous examples of moments in Corneille's serious plays that risk eliciting incongruous laughter. Jean Schlumberger pointed to the issue when he said in the context of *Pompée*:

Corneille a parsemé sa pièce de traits et d'images dont la boursoufflure fait des cloques, et cette sorte de variole poétique enlève au texte le teint de la vie. Constamment la mesure est dépassée et la surcharge confine à la parodie.¹²

The reference to the risk posed to the "teint de la vie" goes to heart of this phenomenon. As Bergson said long ago, laughter is often the result of "du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant."¹³ The fact that there are two brothers in *Rodogune*, both in love with the same woman is not in itself funny; that there are two kings in *Attila*, both vassals of the Hun, is considerably more

¹⁰ Rathé, Alice, *La Reine se marie: variations sur un thème dans l'œuvre de Corneille* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), p. 88.

¹¹ The fact that Méroüée was widely understood to be an allegorical representation of Louis XIV makes the echo of Matamore all the more disquieting.

¹² *Plaisir à Corneille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936), p. 102.

¹³ Henri Bergson, *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: PUF, 1940), p. 29.

so, because of the multiplication of what ought to be singular.¹⁴ The same comic mechanism is at work in *Sertorius* where Pompée's possessiveness of the wife he sacrificed is essentially duplicated in Sertorius who finds that, despite having promised Viriate to Perpenna and having urged Viriate to marry Perpenna, he cannot allow any such union because of his own feelings for the Lusitanian queen. A variant of this multiplication of the unique can be found when Jason contemplates killing his children. The infanticide is so deeply associated with Médée that Jason's idea is completely incongruous and, as such, potentially comic.

Any instance of repetition where such replication is unexpected has the potential for being comic, and the more it is unexpected or repeated, the greater the capacity to elicit laughter. In *Attila*, Ardaric and Valamir take turns duplicitously suggesting to the other that the woman each loves would be the proper candidate for refusing to marry Attila (I.iii). In the last act of *Rodogune*, the queen and the princess sound parrot-like as they both deny responsibility for Séleucus's death: Cléopâtre: "Quoi, vous me soupçonnez!" Rodogune: "Quoi, je vous suis suspecte!" (v. 1671). And how do we not laugh when in *Nicomède* Araspe repeatedly undermines his own defense of Nicomède's unbidden return to Bithynie (II.i)? He moves five times between assertions of Nicomède's innocence and strong condemnations of his behavior were it to be found in anyone else. Like a jack-in-the-box, or rather more like Antony repeating "Brutus is an honourable man," Araspe says "tout autre" four times as a leitmotif to his excessively oscillating argument.¹⁵ Probably the most controversial example of the repetition of the unexpected involves Sabine in *Horace*. In a highly charged and serious context she offers to die on three separate occasions (to serve as a pretext for the enmity between the two families, as a punishment for her sin of lamenting the loss of three brothers, and to expiate the sins of Horace). Whether she herself is serious or ironic in making these offers is a different and equally contentious question. What is under consideration here is Corneille's choice as a playwright, not Sabine's. I confess that, by the third offer, I find myself chuckling, because I think that Corneille has gone too far, and also because I no longer believe that it is a matter of life and death. She brings to mind the boy who cried 'Wolf!'. In a related fashion, a simple suggestion of excessive repetition in *Héraclius* may strike one as comic, while at the same time calling attention

¹⁴ One vassal-king is merely unusual; two is ridiculous. As Pascal points out, "Deux visages semblables, dont aucun ne fait rire en particulier, font rire ensemble par leur ressemblance" (*Pensées*, ed. Philippe Sellier, Paris: Livre de Poche, 2000), p. 58.

¹⁵ The jack-in-the-box image is borrowed from Bergson (p. 53), while the statement concerning Brutus comes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

to the *invraisemblance* of the play's premise. Pulchérie threatens Phocas with the possibility that Héraclius's four brothers were saved from death at Phocas's hand in the same fashion that Héraclius was, by a woman's switch of infants and the sacrifice of her own son. The mere suggestion of such outrageous repetitions of switch and sacrifice reminds us that Héraclius was himself switched twice, itself rather unlikely.

Incongruous coincidence may register as comic. One example is the simultaneous scheduling of Cléopâtre's coronation and Pompée's funeral at the play's dénouement.¹⁶ Sometimes such coincidences are related to characters' entrance on stage. At the end of act five, scene two, Agésilas has been reduced to imploring Mandane's brother, Spitridate: "Sauvez-moi du chagrin de montrer que je l' [Mandane] aime" (v. 1799). At that very moment, Mandane appears, as though it were normal to pop into the king's chamber unannounced. Similarly in *Tite et Bérénice*, just as Flavian tells Tite that he must, above all, avoid speaking with Bérénice, she arrives on stage (vv. 1594-5). The most extreme example of potentially comic coincidence comes from *Œdipe*. By going too far in underscoring what should, by its very nature, be the tragic coincidence of the son killing his father, Corneille tips it over into the realm of the comic. Describing the man that he killed many years earlier, Œdipe calls attention to their physical resemblance: "On en peut voir en moi la taille, et quelques traits" (v. 1464). Furthermore, he compounds the dramatic irony by suggesting a *cri du sang* at Laiüs's death: "tout mon cœur s'émeut de le voir aux abois" (v. 1468). Coupled with Œdipe's obliviousness, these coincidences completely undermine the tragic tone of the scene.

The issue of tone and its disruption provides another dimension to the intrusion of the comic. *Œdipe* contains several examples of moments where we seem to have left the realm of the tragic altogether, quite apart from the love story between Dirce and Thésée. The king begins the process of recognition—of who he is and what he has done—with an informal, bantering tone suitable to a cocktail party. After essentially asking Phorbas, 'Haven't I seen you somewhere before?', he exclaims: "Ah! je te reconnais, ou je suis fort trompé. / C'est un de mes brigands à la mort échappé" (vv. 1431-2). The tone communicated by the word "mes" is inappropriate to the circumstances. Tone is also a problem in *Pertharite* when Édouige and Rodelinde engage in petty squabbling, going so far as to argue about who is

¹⁶ Soare says of the situation: "Il faut s'imaginer la liesse populaire bousculer le deuil aristocratique, des fêtards éméchés se tromper de cortège, César enfin, tantôt en larmes et tantôt radieux, courir d'une cérémonie à l'autre." "*Pompée* ou le machiavélisme de l'innocence," *French Forum* 13 (1988), p. 197.

more attractive.¹⁷ Also *over the top* is Grimoald's refusal to recognize Pertharite. The theme of recognition is deeply tied to traditional dénouements of both tragedies and comedies. Where Corneille differs in *Pertharite* is that Grimoald's insistence on not recognizing Pertharite until the final scenes is based not on honest ignorance, as in the cases of *Œdipe* or *Don Sanche*, but on willful dissembling. While Corneille seeks thereby to create an atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty, in fact, because Rodelinde acknowledges Pertharite's identity and because we are told that Grimoald had occasion to meet Pertharite, Grimoald merely seems unreasonably obdurate. It becomes difficult to take him seriously. The most widespread problems of discordant tone are found in *Agésilas*. In part the problem stems from Corneille's choice to call the play a *tragédie*.¹⁸ The first scene offers preoccupations that are breathtakingly distant from the realm of the serious, let alone the tragic. It is not so much that the discussion between Aglatide and Elpinice centers on marriage (which is a constant in all of Corneille's theater), but that they move from a pretense of being satisfied with their newly assigned fiancés to a suggestion that they might want to switch the two men. Furthermore, throughout the entire play, Aglatide maintains the comically rigid stance that she wants a king for a husband. She reduces the complex courtship dances of this play to an equation in which mathematical parity is the basic consideration and feeling plays no role:

Elle [Mandane] a trop d'un Amant, et si sa flamme heureuse
Me renvoyait celui dont elle ne veut plus,
Je ne suis pas d'humeur fâcheuse,
Et m'accommoderais bientôt de ses refus. (vv. 1515-18)

Given that both of Mandane's suitors are kings, Aglatide is utterly amenable to accepting either one. Even the tone of the political elements of *Agésilas* is awkward and jarring, particularly in the final scenes. In what seems like a parody of Auguste's pardon in *Cinna*, Agésilas makes peace with Lysander (whom the former had slighted and who consequently was conspiring against the king), but Lysander doesn't seem very repentant (he asserts: "ce qu'on va nommer forfait / N'a rien qu'un plein succès n'eût rendu légitime," v. 2016-7 and Agésilas is inexplicably accommodating ("Non, non, j'aurais plus fait peut-être en votre place," v. 2020). It is hard

¹⁷ Édüige says, "Vous avez toutefois de si puissants appas..." (v. 809) and Rodelinde counters: "Et si j'ai moins que vous d'attraits" (v. 811).

¹⁸ A choice made more curious by Corneille's own invention of term *comédie héroïque* which he used both before and after *Agésilas* and which would have been far more apt than *tragédie*.

to know what to take seriously here if the characters themselves make light of marriage, disloyalty, and treason.

The issue of discordant tone is implicit in the figure of the *vieillard amoureux*, who "mérite qu'on en rie," as Corneille in his youth had one of his characters say (*Médée*, v. 538). As the playwright ages, however, such figures (e.g., Sertorius, Syphax, Martian) become more frequent and, not coincidentally, less comic. While Corneille is perhaps successful at making the *vieillard amoureux* sufficiently dignified that he is unlikely to occasion laughter, the same cannot be said for the tyrant in love. Attila is so brutal and crafty that his expressions of love and vulnerability towards Ildione, by their profound discordance, indeed risk going *over the top*.¹⁹

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* *

It is time to consider why Corneille went *over the top*, why he slipped at times from the tragic to the comic. To what extent was he aware of what he was doing and deliberate in carrying it out? This is dangerous territory, and not merely because it deals with the sticky problem of intentionality. Mauron wonders, "Corneille ne se moque-t-il pas de l'idéal qu'il nous propose?" (p. 244). The same disquiet is clear in Desfougères's statement about *Pertharite*: "Corneille ne s'y serait pas pris autrement s'il avait voulu jouer un bon tour à son public."²⁰ The alternatives seem to be an ironic trickster or an incompetent playwright. While I believe there is a little bit of both in Corneille, I think the explanation lies in large measure elsewhere.

One might begin with the influence of the Baroque, with its taste for the outlandish and the extraordinary,²¹ as well as sudden reversals and surprises (Yarrow, p. 155). Indeed, the extraordinary is central to an understanding of Corneille's dramaturgy. Corneille's predilection for moments of dramatic daring goes back at least to the *Le Cid*. That Chimène received the man who killed her father in her own home and admitted that she still loved him shocked and outraged the critics, but more importantly,

¹⁹ In the process of making an argument asserting a tragic Attila, Gossip finds himself in the position of qualifying his own statement with, "if [...] we refrain from laughing at the Hun's love [...]" "*Attila and Tragedy*," *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 9 (1988), p. 162.

²⁰ "L'Échec de *Pertharite*," *Pierre Corneille: Actes du colloque tenu à Rouen (2-6 octobre 1984)*, ed. Alain Niderst (Paris: PUF, 1985), p. 502.

²¹ José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, trans. Terry Cochran (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 229-30.

it delighted audiences. From that moment of his career onward, Corneille sought to surprise and astonish his audience, and thereby to elicit admiration.²² Where Corneille valorizes the extraordinary, his critics attack him for being *invraisemblable*. Undeterred, Corneille defends the importance of the *invraisemblable* in tragedy:

J'irai plus outre, et quoique peut-être on voudra prendre cette proposition pour un paradoxe, je ne craindrai pas d'avancer que le sujet d'une belle tragédie doit n'être pas vraisemblable. (II, p. 357)

Going *over the top* can even be linked to Corneille's notion of heroism. Both Nadal and Serroy note that the discourse of Cornelian heroism is at times problematically excessive.²³

Perhaps most important to understanding both how and why Corneille went *over the top* is the role of the sublime. As Forestier shows convincingly, the concept of the sublime is central to an understanding of Corneille (p. 273). There are, of course, many ways to define the sublime, which is itself tied to the extraordinary, to the *invraisemblable*, and to heroism. For Boileau, the sublime entails simplicity, brilliance, and the *merveilleux*; that which "fait qu'un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte."²⁴ Longinus says that "by true sublimity our soul somehow is both lifted up and [...] filled with delight and great glory, as if our soul itself had created what it just heard,"²⁵ while Forestier, focusing on the concept within Corneille's theater, asserts: "Le sublime est ravissement vers la grandeur par la violence de la beauté" (p. 275). However it is defined, the note of metaphorical ascension seems to be a constant. It is no coincidence that the expression *over the top* shares the same spatial dynamic. In essence what I

²² Susan Read Baker says that "the constant thrust of Corneille's dramaturgy was to seek out the extraordinary subject," "*Théodore, Vierge et Martyre* [1645] a Case of Prostitution," *Degré second* 10 (1986), p. 2. Forestier describes at length Corneille's preference for *le sujet extraordinaire* (p. 112), and Catherine Kintzler notes, "Le forçage n'est pas pour lui une faiblesse, c'est un moyen et un choix." "Pourquoi Corneille est-il compliqué?" *Les Cahiers* 21 (1996), p. 73.

²³ In the context of *L'illusion comique*, Nadal wonders, "l'héroïsme serait-il ce gonflement démesuré, ou du moins commencerait-il par là? par cette exagération, par cette *ubris* verbale?" *Le Sentiment de l'amour dans l'œuvre de Pierre Corneille* (pp. 118-19). Likewise, Serroy speaks of "une outrance non exempte de ridicule. La cuirasse de l'héroïsme a un défaut: elle sonne un peu fort. D'où le sentiment qu'elle pourrait à la limite sonner creux" (p. 11).

²⁴ "Préface au traité du sublime de Longin," *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Françoise Escal (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 338.

²⁵ *On the Sublime*, ed. and trans. James A. Arieti and John M. Crossett (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1985), p. 42.

am suggesting is that Corneille went *over the top*, breached the line between comedy and tragedy, because he sought repeatedly, obsessively even, to attain the sublime, and he sometimes, if one will pardon the expression, overshot. R.C. Knight probably best expressed the mechanism at work when he said, in a slightly different context: "Qu'une telle tactique réussisse, on crie au sublime; qu'elle échoue, c'est une faute de goût. Du 'frisson' au choquant, il n'y a qu'un pas."²⁶ Even Fontenelle, a great defender of his uncle's genius, noticed the problem occasioned by the desire to attain the sublime: "Quelquefois les caractères de *Corneille* ont quelque chose de faux à force d'être nobles et singuliers."²⁷

Corneille sought the sublime at every turn, in the heroism of his characters, in the extraordinary circumstances in which he placed them, in the sudden reversals that they faced or engendered. That Corneille often was on the mark is self-evident; he is indeed almost universally associated with the sublime. The sole modern example that Boileau provides in his introduction to Longinus's *Traité du sublime* is taken from *Horace*. There are many moments when Corneille attains the sublime: when Auguste pardons those who sought to assassinate him, when Pauline converts, even when Œdipe takes responsibility for killing Laïus ("les plus beaux exploits passent pour trahisons, / Alors qu'il faut du sang, et non pas des raisons," vv. 1551-2). However, when Bérénice declaims her triumph over Rome ("J'y tremblais sous sa haine, et la laisse impuissante, / J'y rentrais exilée, et j'en sors triomphante," vv. 1723-4), or when Théodore faces martyrdom, saying: "J'ai donc enfin gagné, Didyme [...] c'est moi dont on fait choix" (vv. 1685-6), to say nothing of certain moments that have already been discussed, such as Rodelinde's offer to help Grimoald murder her son, the sublime has toppled over into the absurd.²⁸

The potential for going *over the top*, for sliding from tragedy into comedy, can thus be understood as a function of Corneille's dramaturgy. I am not comfortable, however, recuperating this phenomenon entirely into the safe confines of the enthusiasms of the dramatist, seeking to soar above

²⁶ "Que devient l'héroïsme dans les tragédies 'matrimoniales'?" *Pierre Corneille: Actes du colloque tenu à Rouen (2-6 octobre 1984)*, ed. Alain Niderst (Paris: PUF, 1985), p. 631.

²⁷ "Vie de M. Corneille," *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), vol. 3, p. 11.

²⁸ It is curious that Forestier, who so thoroughly understands the role of the sublime in Corneille's theater and who provides a magnificent description of exactly how Corneille attains the sublime in the case of Auguste (p. 306), does not admit the possibility that Corneille may at times miss the mark. He even applies the term "sublime" to Rodogune's demand that either Antiochus or Séteucus kill their mother (p. 291).

the mundane into the ethereal reaches. I believe that both a measure of tone deafness and especially an ironic playfulness have their part as well. Logically, ineptitude and ironic playfulness would seem to be mutually exclusive, in that the latter would require a very high degree of control and consciousness, while the former, obviously, would not. But in Corneille's theater, disconcerting paradox is a natural companion to going *over the top*.