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Women and Marriage in Corneille's Theater

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Marriage is ubiquitous in Corneille's theater: there is not a single one of his plays in which marriage is not an issue, in which at least one union is not proposed.¹ In part this state of affairs is due to the fact that the vast majority of Corneille's characters are marriageable. While marriageability is hardly unusual among the young, Corneille inevitably takes his characters at precisely the dramatic moment when the choice of life partner is to be made. For Corneille, that moment is not even limited to the young; not infrequently older characters are in need of a spouse as well.

One could argue that marriage is simply a commonplace of seventeenth-century theater.² Indeed, the central role of marriage in the perpetuation of society at all levels makes it a rich choice.³ And while there is nothing inherently theatrical about marriage, *per se*, it is an ideal vehicle for integrating the sentimental and the political, two central concerns in Corneille's work. On the other hand, there is something quite unusual about the omnipresence of marriageability and marriage plans in Corneille's theater. First, Corneille rarely limits himself to a single couple, and frequently moves beyond even a triangle to multiple possible couplings and even multiple marriages. Second, marriage is a preoccupation traditionally asso-

¹ Rathé's important work on the subject, *La Reine se marie*, while limited in scope to ten plays, does touch upon the widespread nature of marriage in Corneille: "Le projet de mariage, *topos* qui, repris avec des nuances toujours nouvelles, révèle la richesse d'invention de l'auteur et la flexibilité de son art" (p. 9).

² Couton views marriage as merely a means of tying up all loose ends: "Une pièce doit se terminer sans qu'il reste d'incertitude sur le sort d'aucun personnage et comme normalement elle comporte au moins un intérêt d'amour, on marie les amants qui ont pu survivre: Cinna avec Emilie et un jour le Cid avec Chimène. Mais l'intérêt de la pièce n'est pas là. Le mariage sanctionne un retour à l'ordre normal des choses, après l'incursion dans une vie passionnée, héroïque et dangereuse. On dirait volontiers qu'il est un *post scriptum* à l'usage des âmes sensibles" (*La Vieillesse de Corneille*, p. 243).

³ In his discussion of marriage in the Middle Ages, Georges Duby says: "C'est par l'institution matrimoniale, par les règles qui président aux alliances, par la manière dont sont appliquées ces règles que les sociétés humaines, celles mêmes qui se veulent les plus libres et qui se donnent l'illusion de l'être, gouvernent leur avenir, tentent de se perpétuer dans le maintien de leurs structures, en fonction d'un système symbolique de l'image que ces sociétés font de leur propre perfection" (p. 23).

ciated with comedy, but marriage plans are as common in Corneille's tragedies as in his comedies. And while comedies customarily end with an impending marriage, here a number of tragedies do as well (e.g. *Cinna*, *Attila*, *Héraclius*). Furthermore, multiplicity is by its very nature comic and yet multiple couplings are by no means limited to comedy. Thus marriage is surprising in Corneille's theater because of its ubiquity, its multiplicity, and because it makes no distinction between comedy and tragedy.

What does this have to do with women? In the simplest terms, marriage inevitably entails women. While political concerns often exclude women to a greater or lesser degree, the act of marriage provides absolute parity on a purely mathematical level, requiring as it does both a man and a woman. Women characters, often mere names in the sources upon which Corneille has drawn, are developed (and even created) for the role of possible bride. A perfect example is *Othon* where Camille and Plautine take their existence largely from Corneille's imagination but are important to the play's action – the succession to the imperial throne.⁴ Marriage provides a bridge between the public and the private, thus working to bring women into the heart of the dramatic action.

Dealing with a corpus of thirty-two plays, it is logical to begin by providing an overview of the figures concerning marriage and the varieties of combinations that are to be found. First, Corneille's plays offer a number of marriageable individuals ranging from two to seven per play, with *La Mort de Pompée* and *Œdipe* at the lower extreme, and *La Suivante* and *Attila* at the higher.⁵ It is thus rare to find one pair of matched lovers who have but to overcome obstacles in order to marry. Sometimes the configuration of marriageable characters is a simple triangle (e.g. *Nicomède*), or a triangle complicated by a fourth character (e.g. *La Toison d'or*), but configurations are often far more complex. In general terms we find the largest number of marriageable characters in both the early part of Corneille's career (dominated by a series of comedies) and in the last part (the last six plays average five and a half marriageable characters per play). The tetralogy is decidedly not representative of the broad sweep of Corneille's theater in this respect. A few examples will convey the level of complexity for which Corneille

⁴ Others include Emilie in *Cinna*, Dircé in *Œdipe*, Eryxe in *Sophonisbe*, Justine and Irène in *Pulchérie*. For a full discussion of this phenomenon see Boorsch ("L'Invention").

⁵ There are three marriageable characters in *Horace*, *Cinna*, *Polyeucte*, *La Suite du Menteur*, *Rodogune*, *Andromède*, and *Nicomède*, four in *La Galerie du palais*, *Médée*, *Le Cid*, *Le Menteur*, *Théodore*, *Héraclius*, *La Conquête de la Toison d'or*, *Sophonisbe*, and *Tite et Bérénice*; five in *Mélite*, *Clitandre*, *Pertharite*, *Sertorius*, *Othon*, and *Suréna*; six in *La Veuve*, *La Place royale*, *L'Illusion comique*, *Don Sanche d'Aragon*, *Agésilas*, and *Pulchérie*.

had a marked predilection. *Don Sanche* presents six marriageable characters onstage, four male suitors and two queens in need of husbands. Furthermore, Count Lope and Count Manrique each have a marriageable sister offstage who will be available to wed the loser of their competition for Isabelle's hand. The possible combinations are numerous. Corneille was clearly proud of the marriage complications in *Othon*, where we find two triangles involving a total of four characters as well as an absent but powerful suitor, Pison. In his *Préface* the author says: "on n'a point encore vu de pièce où il se propose tant de mariages pour n'en conclure aucun" (462).⁶ In *Pulchérie* we again find six marriageable characters. Once Pulchérie has decided not to marry the man she loves for political reasons, other mates must be found for them both, as well as for the remaining characters. The high level of multiplicity may be seen as undermining Corneille's serious preoccupations in this *comédie héroïque*. Rathé notes: "Ces multiples noces, improvisées tant bien que mal et accompagnées d'un clin d'œil complice à l'adresse du public, offrent un dénouement digne de la meilleure tradition comique classique" ("Distribution" 99). In *Attila* questions of class and power are central to the marital possibilities. The powerful Attila's own choice of a wife takes precedence over the preferences of the two weak kings and Attila's two supposed fiancées, four characters who have already formed two satisfied potential couples before the play begins. In this play we even find marriageable confidants, rare for Corneille: Attila's captain of the guards and Honorie's *dame d'honneur* seek to marry each other. The terrifying and all-powerful Attila attacks the sacrosanct separation of classes by threatening to give Honorie and Ildione in marriage to any man, regardless of his class, who will kill Valamir and Ardaric for him.

Attila is a perfect example of the rather common situation of an odd number of marriageable individuals (found in 15 of the plays). It is a foregone conclusion in such cases that someone will be left out when marriages are finalized. In this tragedy, three couples have already been tentatively formed before the play begins. Attila is quite literally the *odd man out*, and indeed will be eliminated by the happy coincidence of a massive hemorrhage. Lyons notes the resemblance between this play and Corneille's early comedies, such as *Mélite*, in which there are imbalances in the number of available mates (155), but the same situation occurs as well in later plays

⁶ Couton describes the degree of complication in *Othon* eloquently: "Corneille disposait de deux dames à marier, la nièce de l'empereur et la fille d'un ministre, de trois prétendants; d'un autre candidat à l'empire, Pison; de la possibilité d'accorder ou de refuser à chaque couple la couronne impériale; de la faculté de prévoir, dès avant la conclusion d'un mariage, le divorce qui libérerait les conjoints pour de nouvelles unions. Le nombre de formules devenait presque illimité" (III, p. 1491).

such as *Othon* and *Suréna*. With the exception of this last tragedy, Corneille never places women in the position of being more numerous than men. Everywhere else we find either parity in the number of marriageable women and men (13 cases)⁷ or more marriageable men than women (the 18 remaining plays).

A similar degree of variety is found in the number of marriages settled upon or at least possible by the end of the plays. Once again, it is the extremes that are interesting. In five plays, no union is formed or envisioned: *Médée*, *Horace* (unless one wants to accept a joint tomb as a form of marriage), *Polyeucte*, *Théodore*, and *Suréna*. It is worth noting that this brief list includes both of Corneille's martyr plays. The question of marriage to God is implicit in *Polyeucte* and explicit in *Théodore*. At the other extreme, *Attila*'s dénouement suggests that three weddings will take place, while *Agésilas* is explicit in finalizing three couples. The contrast with Racine's theater is striking: while all but the latter's two final religious tragedies present marriageable characters, the majority end with no possibility of marriage.⁸

The norm for Corneille's comedies seems to be two marriages settled upon (found in 6 of the 8), but comedy is also a space in which Corneille plays with the concept of marriage. In the original ending of *La Suite du Menteur*, when Cliton complains that only one union has been formed, Dorante immediately suggests three other possible couples. Corneille thus mocks his own proclivity for *invraisemblable* multiple unions. In *Le Menteur*, Dorante invents a shotgun marriage for himself in order to avoid having to marry his father's choice of bride. In *La Suite du Menteur*, Dorante calls into question the finality of the plans for marriage found in most of Corneille's dénouements by running out on the marriage planned at the end of *Le Menteur*, taking with him the dowry of his betrothed.⁹ Maturin's attitude towards marriage is equally skittish. Voluble and eager to discuss his conquests, both military and amorous, he remains oddly silent on the subject of marriage until *after* he cedes Isabelle to Clindor, saying to

⁷ *La Galerie du palais*, *Médée*, *Le Cid*, *La Mort de Pompée*, *Le Menteur*, *Théodore*, *Héraclius*, *Œdipe*, *La Conquête de la Toison d'or*, *Sophonisbe*, *Agésilas*, *Tite et Bérénice*, and *Pulchérie*.

⁸ The exceptions are *Alexandre* with two couples formed, *Mithridate* with Xipharès and Monime united, and Racine's sole comedy, *Les Plaideurs*, at the end of which all obstacles to Léandre and Isabelle's union have been overcome. *Iphigénie* is an interesting case: on the one hand, Achille and Iphigénie are free to marry, but the spectator's knowledge of Achille's fate forecloses that possibility. Marriage in Racine's universe – precisely as an integration of the personal and the political – is a mad, fantastic dream.

⁹ For an interesting discussion of Dorante's deep-seated fear of marriage see Verhoeff (p. 130).

her: "Ne pensez plus, ma reine, à l'honneur que ma flamme / Vous devait faire un jour de vous prendre pour femme" (ll. 961-2). In these albeit limited examples, Corneille shows a willingness to consider marriage in comedy in ways outside of the orthodox lines of respect and seriousness generally associated with the subject.

Between the beginning of a play and its dénouement, the trajectory of a marriageable character is not always neat. While *change* is strongly frowned upon, multiple possible mates are nonetheless frequently considered. Three potential husbands for Angélique are suggested in *La Place Royale*, as are three for Pulchérie in the play of that name. Kaleidoscopic marital possibilities almost overwhelm the action of *Othon* and *Agésilas*. Overall, almost half of the couples about to be married at the dénouements were formed during, rather than before, the action of the plays.

While marriage is the obvious outcome for Corneille's marriageable characters (and occurs in approximately 60% of the cases), it is not the only one. Death is another alternative. Seventeen of the marriageable characters die. The most extreme example is *Théodore*, where the play ends with Flavie, Théodore, and Didyme dead and Placide at death's door.¹⁰ The periodic choice that Corneille made throughout the length of his career to end marriage plans with death is a dramatic one, in the sense that it is surprising. Marriage obviously has strong associations with life, yet by choosing to end his final play with the deaths of two marriageable characters and no possibility for other unions, Corneille suggests a certain ambivalence towards marriage, an ambivalence that echoes Dorante's flight from such a union in *Le Menteur*.

In contrast to the numerous marriageable characters found in Corneille's theater, we find remarkably few married couples.¹¹ And of these fourteen pairings, a number are of an older generation, others suffer severe trauma to their marriage, and two have spouses who do not appear on stage, leaving only Pertharite and Rodelinde, who are reunited as a couple only at the end of the play.¹² The image we find of actual, as opposed to desired,

¹⁰ Also strongly marked by the death of marriageable characters (two apiece) are *Médée*, *Horace*, *Sertorius*, and *Suréna*. The other plays containing one such death each are: *L'illusion comique*, *Rodogune*, *Andromède*, *Sophonisbe*, *Othon*, and *Attila*.

¹¹ Odon notes "le peu d'importance des rôles d'époux et d'épouse. Si dans *Horace*, *Polyeucte*, *Pertharite*, ils renforcent la 'pitié', dans les autres cas, ils traduisent la domination de l'épouse sur l'époux, et sont un symptôme de la dégradation de l'univers mâle" (p. 257).

¹² Older couples: Auguste and Livie in *Cinna*, Valens and Marcelle in *Théodore*, Céphée and Cassiope in *Andromède*, Prusias and Arsinoé in *Nicomède*; couples who suffer trauma: Médée and Jason in *Médée*, Sabine and Horace in *Horace*, Polyeucte and Pauline in *Polyeucte*, Œdipe and Jocaste in *Œdipe*, Pompée and Aristie in *Sertorius*, Sophonisbe and Syphax in *Sophonisbe*, Sophonisbe and Massinisse in *Sophonisbe*;

marriage in Corneille is thus not a particularly positive one. This is surprising, given Corneille's dramatic focus on marrying.

Remarriage is an issue in a few of Corneille's plays, and is sometimes successful, as in *La Veuve* or *Sertorius*, and sometimes a failure (*Médée*). An earlier marriage is generally implied in the case of older men who seek to marry (Martian in *Pulchérie* or Géraste in *La Suivante*). Only rarely is some form of loyalty to the first spouse discussed (in *Polyeucte* and *Rodogune*); generally remarriage is treated in the same fashion as marriage.

Multiplicity and variety dominate with respect to marriage as they do with respect to so many other facets of Corneille's theater. Operating with a kind of mathematical glee, as I argue elsewhere (Ekstein), the playwright revels in the numerous possible combinations he creates. Corneille's variations are not gratuitous nor are they present merely to surprise and dazzle his spectators. Rather, they are anchored thematically in numerous ways.

Marriage invariably entails choice: who chooses who will marry whom and on what basis are such choices made? The two questions are not easy to separate. At base of course, is the traditional conflict between love on the one hand and political considerations on the other. In Corneille's early comedies such conflicts are clear and often arise because the choice of a mate lies not with the individual, but with some outside figure of authority. While it is true that parents play a relatively small role in Corneille's comedies in comparison with those of his contemporaries, nonetheless parental choice or parental ratification is a recurrent issue: in *La Veuve* there is a tug of war between mother and brother over the choice of a husband for Doris; in both *La Galerie du palais* and *La Suivante*, fathers make statements asserting their authority over a daughter's marriage;¹³ in *Le menteur* there are three fathers either whose approval must be won (Alcippe's father) or who make marital plans for their children without consulting them (Lucrèce's father and Géronte); in *L'illusion comique* and in the narrative exposition of *La suite du menteur*, the betrothed revolt against their father's choice and run off. The question of outside authority over marriage is not, however, limited to comedy.¹⁴ In *Sophonisbe*, the Romans adopt

married couples with an absent spouse: the king (and queen) in *Clitandre* and Cornélie (and Pompée) in *Pompée*.

¹³ In *La Galerie du palais*, Pleirante says to his daughter Céliidée, "Il le faut épouser, vite, qu'on s'y dispose" (I. 1385); Géraste describes his power over his daughter in *La Suivante*: "Pour Daphnis, c'est en vain qu'elle fait la rebelle, / J'en viendrai trop à bout" (II. 1525-6).

¹⁴ Rathé notes that "Douze pièces font intervenir le père de la fille au moment de son hymen, à savoir, chronologiquement, *La Galerie du palais*, *La Suivante*, *Médée*, *L'illusion comique*, *Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Polyeucte*, *Andromède*, *La Toison d'or*, *Othon*, *Agésilas et Pulchérie*" (p. 513). I think one might add to that list Prusias and Arsinoé's role in *Nicomède*, Œdipe's in *Œdipe*, and Orode's in *Suréna*.

this role and forbid Massinisse's marriage with Sophonisbe; while in *Tite et Bérénice* and *Pulchérie* the Roman Senate has significant authority over the marriages of its leaders. It is obvious that the vested interests of the authority, whether the authority lies inside or outside of the couple, will play a role. Indeed such interests are often accompanied by threats: Phocas gives Pulchérie the alternative of death or marrying Héraclius (I, 3) and later the choice of marrying Héraclius or Phocas himself (V, 4); Grimoald offers Rodelinde the choice of marrying him or watching her son die (III, 1); Orode tells Eurydice that either she must marry Pacorus or Suréna must marry Mandane immediately in order to avoid violence (V, 1). In *Rodogune* and *Attila* the threat is inverted and marriage becomes the reward offered in exchange for a desired murder.

The authority to decide marriages is not always external to the couple, but the motivations are not much clearer for the apparent simplification in the decision process. One has only to consider Alidor in *La Place Royale* to see how muddled such motivations may be. Only rarely does love alone dictate the choice of mate: apart from the early comedies, Camille in *Horace* wants to marry Curciace for no other reason than love, and *Suréna* marks the return to Corneille's early years: Eurydice and Suréna refuse to allow political reality to impinge on their absolute love. Sometimes it is a sense of obligation to a specific set of values that impedes love from reaching marriage, such as in *Le Cid* or *Polyeucte*; elsewhere, as in *Rodogune* and *Nicomède*, love is not enough: Antiochus or Séleucus can only marry Rodogune if they bring with them the throne; similarly, Laodice is to marry, not Nicomède, but the heir to the throne of Bithynie. It is at times difficult to separate out the motivations within a given character, as in the case of Grimoald (*Perharite*) or Attila. Indeed love and politics become hopelessly entwined (to say nothing of other personal motivations such as jealousy, e.g. *Sophonisbe*), with political considerations playing a progressively larger role, leading to *Tite et Bérénice* and *Pulchérie* wherein marriages are artificial constructions which in the end banish love to a completely extra-marital and non-corporeal realm.

The increasingly sizable role given to political considerations in the choice of marriage partners is perhaps inevitable given that the concept of the royal marriage grows steadily as Corneille's theater progresses, reaching a point where the throne and matrimony become inseparable. In every play from *Rodogune* onward (as well as to a certain degree *Médée* and *La Mort de Pompée*), a royal marriage is a more or less central concern.¹⁵

¹⁵ Knight begins his series of *tragédies matrimoniales* with *Sertorius* (p. 625), while Couton begins with *Othon* (p. 243). Rathé's *La Reine se marie* deals with a subset of these royal marriages. It is perhaps emblematic that the prologue to *La Toison d'or* deals with a royal marriage, that of Louis XIV and Marie-Thérèse of Spain.

Gender is pertinent to the issue of choice, although political motivation is by no means the domain of men, nor is love the exclusive province of women. While the intertwining of love and political considerations is characteristic of the majority of Corneille's characters, the power of choice is not apportioned as evenly. *La Veuve* provides a clear example of the opposing positions women may find themselves in: Clarice as a widow is free to make the choice of a husband on her own; Doris, on the other hand, is promised by her mother to Florange while her brother promises her to Alcidon, neither of whom hold any interest for her.¹⁶ Pauline in *Polyeucte* and Daphnis in *La Suivante*, among others, are mere objects, victims bartered for political or personal advantage. The vast majority of female characters, however, struggle with some degree of power over their own marital fate, reaching or attempting to reach their own decisions: Andromède, Pulchérie (*Héraclius*), Isabelle (*L'illusion comique* and *Don Sanche d'Aragon*), Viriate and Aristie (*Sertorius*), Sophonisbe, Domitie and Bérénice (*Tite et Bérénice*). Even the powerless Elpinice and Aglatide are given some weight by opening the play *Agésilas* with a discussion of their relative dissatisfaction with their father's choice of husbands for them. In *Le Menteur*, Clarice goes on at some length about the problem of knowing someone well enough to decide whether you should accept his marriage proposal (ll. 404-33). The choice to accept or refuse at least remains the woman's in these cases. Both Pulchérie and Eurydice (*Suréna*) exercise the power of refusal, but Pulchérie goes further and makes her own choice of a substitute.

A curious variant of women's choice in marriage, and no doubt a consequence of their very limited power, is the preoccupation with giving the beloved to a spouse of one's choice. Creating a structure of triangulation is a means of exerting control over a situation of loss. In *Le Cid*, l'Infante has given Rodrigue to Chimène because she cannot marry him herself (Boorsch, "Remarques" 122). In the second scene of *Sophonisbe*, the eponymous character tells her confidant that she wants to determine whom Massinisse marries; she rejects Eryxe, of whom she is jealous, and suggests rather her own elderly husband's sister. In *Tite et Bérénice*, Bérénice expresses the desire to pick Tite's spouse on two occasions (III, 5 and IV, 1). In the place of Domitie she wants to install her own "créature" (l. 1132). Again in *Suréna*, Eurydice wants to control Suréna's marriage, proposing some unnamed substitute for Mandane. *Attila* carries the theme to extreme levels of complication.¹⁷ In an inversion of the usual situation, Honorie

doesn't want to be given by Attila to Valamir (ll. 481-3); later Attila contemplates giving Ildione to someone else because he is scared of his own feelings for her (ll. 904-7); finally, Ildione informs Honorie that she is giving Attila to her (ll. 941-2). While we find a male donor here, as we do in *La Place Royale* (Alidor wants to give Angélique to Cléandre) and in *La Suite du Menteur* where Dorante pushes Mélisse to marry Philiste because of his own sense of obligation (ll. 1782-86), seeking to choose the spouse of the beloved is a move associated in Corneille's theater with female characters. Indeed, the only one to actually control the choice of spouse is Pulchérie; she determines the marriage of Léon and Justine, as well as her own marriage to Martian.

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The norm in Corneille's theater as far as marriage is concerned is the presence of a number of marriageable characters who seek to marry and who share a common understanding of the obligations of marriage. A number of deviations from these norms occur. The most important concern is the issue of *change*. On the one hand, *change* is considered reprehensible. Fidelity is a basic value of Cornelian marriage; its abandonment beyond the threshold of marriage is the sin of adultery. At the same time, however, *change* is precisely what allows these marriage plots to be dramatic, and it is thus found in a number of Corneille's plays, both comedies and tragedies. Jason in both *Médée* and *La Toison d'or* is a perfect figure of *change*; Massinisse abandons Eryxe for Sophonisbe; Andromède moves from Phinée to Persée; Othon trades Plautine for Camille. The comedies are rife with figures of *change*, from Philandre who abandons Cloris for Mélite, to Dorante who switches his affections from Clarice to Lucrece (*Le Menteur*). One variant of *change* is the desire to marry too many women: Pompée wants to be married to Aristie but does not want to anger Sylla by divorcing the latter's daughter (*Sertorius*); neither Sertorius nor Attila are able to choose between two possible wives; Don Sanche is accused of not being willing to choose between his loyalty to Elvire and to Isabelle. Sometimes these issues spill over into the territory of marriage itself. In both *Pertharite* and *Sophonisbe* the issue of bigamy is raised as Grimoald tries to coerce Rodelinde to marry him (admittedly, Grimoald drops his courtship when Pertharite reappears), and Sophonisbe marries Massinisse while Syphax still believes her to be his wife. In another deviation from the norm, incest is a concern in *Héraclius* and *Œdipe*. Finally, divorce, unthinkable to the seventeenth-century audience, is enacted without difficulty, although not without consequences, in both *Médée* and *Sophonisbe*.

¹⁶ See Biet for a discussion of the status of the widow in *La Veuve*.

¹⁷ Couton notes: "Le thème de l'amante qui donne à une autre le cœur de son amant, pour marquer, jusque dans la séparation même, son pouvoir est familier à Corneille. Mais son utilisation ici [*Attila*] est extraordinaire" (Corneille III, p. 1550).

Another area of deviation concerns the age of the marriageable characters. Corneille begins his theatrical career making fun of older newlyweds. In *La Galerie du palais*, Florice's suggestion that Pleirante and Chrysante should marry is met with the response which closes the play: "Outre que l'âge en tous deux un peu trop refroidie, / Cela sentirait trop sa fin de comédie" (ll. 1825-6). The mockery takes on a decidedly negative cast when we find the mixing of generations in *La Suivante*: Géraste's marriage to Florise is presented as a selfish move on the older man's part, one that involves the sacrifice not only of Florise but of his own daughter as well. Even more pathetic is the marriage between Géronte and Lucrèce, reported in *La Suite du Menteur*: after Dorante runs off with Lucrèce's dowry, Géronte feels obligated to marry the young woman himself and dies two months later. Disparity in age between marriage partners continues throughout Corneille's *œuvre*, including Syphax and Sophonisbe, Sertorius and either Viriate or Aricie, Attila and either Honorie or Ildione, Martian and Pulchérie. Ironically, *Pulchérie* is the only play to present an older marriageable woman: while Pulchérie is considerably younger than Martian, she is decidedly older than Léon, whether her age is understood to be 30 or 51.¹⁸ Marriage is not even an issue for the few older female characters presented as unmarried (Cléopâtre in *Rodogune*, Léontine in *Héraclius*, Léonor in *Don Sanche*); interestingly, they are grouped closely in Corneille's middle period. The presentation of the disparity in age as a problem varies from *Héraclius*, where the suggestion of forcing Pulchérie to marry Phocas is monstrous, to *Sertorius*, where the eponymous character, like Martian in *Pulchérie*, feels merely uncomfortable with his amorous feelings.

A final area of deviation from the Cornelian norm concerns when the wedding takes place. Typically, the marriage is understood to occur some time after the curtain falls, whether more or less immediately, as in the case of several of the comedies, or at least a year later, as in *Le Cid*. *Polyeucte* places the wedding of Pauline and the title character two weeks before the play begins; the action of play thus occurs just beyond the marriageable moment. In *Sophonisbe*, the wedding takes place during the course of the action, between acts II and III, while in *Rodogune* the wedding takes place on stage, but is transformed, before it can reach the moment of the exchange of vows, into a funeral for Cléopâtre.

The two plays that lie furthest outside the Cornelian norms for marriage are *Sophonisbe* and *Polyeucte*. *Sophonisbe* figures an extreme point not merely because it is the only play to enact remarriage and one of the very

¹⁸ The problem of Pulchérie's age is discussed intelligently by Couton (*Corneille III*, 1665) and Sweetser (p. 237).

few to present divorce. Rather *Sophonisbe* acts out a kind of marital exuberance, a fantastic impossible dream of marriage beyond the constraints of ordinary life. The constraints here include a husband and a fiancée, both of whom are brushed aside in Sophonisbe and Massinisse's headlong rush to matrimony. Another curious feature of this play is that although Sophonisbe and Massinisse are married between acts II and III, it is made explicit that the marriage has not been consummated (ll. 1119-20). Sophonisbe in fact makes it clear that consummation depends on her being protected from the Romans (ll. 968-76). Needless to say, this is the only one of Corneille's plays to discuss a marriage's consummation. Indeed, what is an unconsummated marriage? It is as chimerical as the idea that husband and fiancée can be discarded effortlessly and immediately. Marriage has lost its solid social moorings, as is made even more clear when Massinisse, as part of his attempt to convince Sophonisbe to beg Scipion's indulgence herself, imagines yet another marriage for Sophonisbe, this time to Scipion: "Que pour prendre ma place il [Scipion] m'ordonne un divorce, / Qu'il veuille conserver mon bien en me l'ôtant" (ll. 1426-7). In sum, *Sophonisbe* enacts the scandal of promiscuous marriage.

Polyeucte lies outside of Cornelian norms for marriage because of the role of God. While *Polyeucte* contains the only example of a wedding having taken place shortly before the play begins, the structure of amorous rivalries is nonetheless quite similar to that of *Le Cid*, where all characters are marriageable.¹⁹ In the latter play, Chimène is courted by Don Sanche and Rodrigue is loved by l'Infante; here Sévère is in love with Pauline and Polyeucte has a relationship with God that bears comparison to that between Sévère and Pauline. Pauline resists Sévère, even when Polyeucte openly offers her to him; Polyeucte on the other hand, yields to God. Pauline explicitly sets up an equivalence between the effort she made to overcome her feelings for Sévère in order to love Polyeucte and the effort Polyeucte should now make to overcome his religious feelings in order to love her: parallel noble sacrifices (ll. 1592-1604). Yet Polyeucte abandons Pauline for God. What does it mean for Polyeucte to be in love with his wife and yet gratuitously, freely, choose martyrdom? How are we to under-

¹⁹ Fumaroli would agree that the level of commitment between the couples found in the tetralogy is the same whether they have been legally married or not. His vision of the Cornelian couple, which does not extend beyond the tetralogy, differs from my own in most other respects. He concludes: "Corneille attribue au couple laïc, mais élevé à une sorte de dignité sacerdotale par le sacrement, *in petto* ou officiellement dispensé, du mariage indissoluble, la fonction motrice et créatrice de l'histoire des sociétés humaines et de leur salut" (p. 413).

stand the relationship of marriage to Christian belief? *Polyeucte* enacts the scandal of human marriage and a jealous God.²⁰

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To conclude, I would like to bring up two subjects that are vitally associated with marriage and yet are almost never discussed or alluded to in Corneille's theater, namely sex and children. Given the *bienséances* of the period, it is of course not surprising that little mention is made of sex. Indeed, the subject of marriage itself serves as a convenient mediator for sex and sexual desire. With a few exceptions early in Corneille's career, his characters are far more comfortable on the terrain of marriage than that of sexuality. Indeed, the heat of passion can be said to breathe its last with Camille in *Horace*. Corneille's consciousness of the association between sex and marriage, besides being obvious, is inscribed in his theater in two ways. First, as discussed above, we find in *Sophonisbe* the curious gap between wedding and consummation. Second, and more frequent, is the subject of the *mariage blanc*, a permanently unconsummated marriage, found in three plays. In *Théodore*, Placide offers the eponymous character such an arrangement if she will consent to marry him (ll. 851-54); Héraclius, Martian, and Pulchérie, compelled by Phocas to decide whom Pulchérie is to marry, momentarily seize upon the solution of a *mariage blanc* in order to avoid incest (l. 1784). Finally, in *Pulchérie*, the *mariage blanc* moves from suggestion to reality, as Pulchérie organizes two such couples, herself and Martian, and Léon and Justine.²¹ Obviously, children are not to be expected in marriages from which sexual relations are banished. In *Pulchérie*, Corneille's penultimate dramatic work, marriage has been reduced to pure charade: no sex, no children.

Children were not standard fare in the classical theater, so their absence here, both literal and as an object of discussion, is not in itself surprising. Corneille, however, makes children an issue, both implicitly, and in his last

²⁰ Again, Fumaroli reads the play quite differently, arguing that in order for the union between Polyeucte and Pauline to be a perfect one, it must overcome its originary "fêlure" of the preexisting "vraie amitié" between Pauline and Sévère. "Pour que cette fêlure disparaisse, pour que le couple soit totalement soudé, il faut que Polyeucte quitte Pauline, se donne au Dieu chrétien, subisse le martyre, et que Pauline le rejoigne en Dieu. Ce que le mariage païen n'avait pas réussi, les noces de sang du martyre chrétien vont l'accomplir" (p. 411). While I do not agree with his interpretation, it is coherent and disposes of the problem of scandal.

²¹ Just how little Justine will get out of this arrangement is made explicit when Léon objects: "Et [que je] lui promette tout, pour ne lui donner rien?" (l. 1708).

three plays, explicitly. We mentioned earlier that the subject of royal marriage is found virtually everywhere in the second half of Corneille's *œuvre*. One of the basic preoccupations of any such union is inevitably dynastic: heirs must be created to carry on the royal line. Certainly Corneille was aware of the many years Anne of Austria and Louis XIII took to produce an heir to the French throne. Yet no reference is made until *Tite et Bérénice* to such a function of marriage. What are we to make of Corneille's silence on the subject? Are we prepared to read the dissociation of children and marriage as an ironic commentary on the quasi-miraculous birth of Louis XIV after 23 years of marriage without offspring? *Pulchérie* provides the most peculiar case: Pulchérie must marry for dynastic reasons, yet she constructs a complex situation that is guaranteed to produce no heirs at all.²² The political necessity of offspring is acknowledged both in *Tite et Bérénice* (Bérénice: "Vous vous devez des fils", l. 1751) and in *Suréna* (Orode: "Il nous faut un hymen, pour nous donner des Princes / Qui soient l'appui du sceptre, et l'espoir des provinces," ll. 1029-30), but that necessity is not acted upon. Furthermore, Corneille discusses explicitly the futility and even the danger of offspring in each of the last three plays.²³ Tite observes, "Pour revivre en des fils, nous n'en mourons pas moins" (l. 1753); Pulchérie says, "Qu'ai-je affaire de race à me déshonorer" (l. 1535); Suréna tells Eurydice, "Que tout meure avec moi, madame" (l. 301), continuing in terms very close to Pulchérie's: "Ces neveux, qui peut-être auront peine à les [*ces illustres Aïeux*] suivre, / Peut-être ne feront que les déshonorer" (ll. 306-7).

Perhaps we need to consider marriage in Corneille's theater as a primarily dramatic vehicle, less vitally connected to either amorous or practical considerations than might be expected. Almost infinitely adaptable in Corneille's hands, marriage becomes a locus for heroism in such plays as *Agésilas* or *Pulchérie*, for revolt in *L'illusion comique* and *Sophonisbe*, for imprisonment in *Le menteur*, for coercion in *Héraclius* and any number of others. For women characters, often subject to such coercion, marriage is

²² By marrying Martian and insisting that they not have marital relations, she insures that her line will end with her. It is an open question, as we saw above, whether she is still of childbearing age. She goes to considerable lengths to ensure that Léon will inherit her throne. We may thus consider Léon as a child-substitute. She forbids Léon to have children himself, however, by imposing a sexless marriage on him. Thus there will be no future heirs.

²³ Couton notes that this theme appears for the first time in *Tite et Bérénice*. He terms it: "vanité d'avoir des descendants, qui bientôt deviendra: danger d'avoir des descendants," observing that "Ce thème se trouve de façon remarquable dans ses trois dernières pièces" (Corneille III, p. 1628; see also Couton, *La Vieillesse de Corneille*, p. 221).

frequently an arena for their power of choice. In Corneille's final three plays, marriage becomes almost perversely associated with female freedom. Bérénice goes to great lengths to be able to marry Tite, and then exercises her freedom to say no, deciding it would not be right. Similarly, Pulchérie exercises her freedom by saying no to the love match between herself and Léon, voluntarily obeying standards that she herself has set. Finally, the freest of them all is Eurydice, who refuses all political restraint in choosing whom to marry. She chooses not to compromise, and opts willingly for death if she cannot have Suréna on her own terms. In the final analysis, marriage becomes the palette with which Corneille constructs his dramatic universe, a palette that serves to allow women their considerable space in his *œuvre*.

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