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Nina Ekstein

Rewriting the subjects of tragedies was so common throughout the seventeenth century as to be a defining characteristic of the period. While originality was the rule in comedy, in tragedy it was disdained. The arrangement of the action, the power and beauty of the language, the originality of the articulation of the more or less ancient plot: these were the badges of the tragic virtuoso. Rewriting was both a compliment to the predecessor and an act of appropriation, a theft not so much of the subject as of authority over the subject. The tragic playwright rewrote with a presumption of superiority, and often a desire to rival and best the predecessor.

The subject of Sophonisbe was a popular one for many years.¹ R. C. Knight describes its attraction succinctly: “the heroine “found the time, in the space of twenty-four hours, to be the wife of two different men and to take poison as well” (92). Ricci formulates the appeal of the story in more lofty terms: “Rien de plus tragique en effet qu’un guerrier qui se prend d’amour pour la femme de son rival et qui l’épouse en jurant de la défendre jusqu’à la dernière goutte de son sang et en se révoltant immédiatement par là contre ses maîtres” (18). Popular subjects, however, were not often Corneille’s preference. Rather than rewriting known subjects, he favored the freedom afforded him by the obscure and chose to cultivate a reputation for originality.²

It was commonplace in the seventeenth century, and we might even say de rigueur, to announce one’s sources, whether obscure or well-known. Using and enumerating sources, preferably ancient, were significant means of credentialing oneself as a playwright. Numerous studies have revealed the extent to which playwrights were often not entirely forthcoming in their discussions of their own sources, trumpeting the most ancient and most well-respected and covering up others more recent or less glorious. The distance between the new version and the old of the same subject is obviously crucial to how we may read the choice to rewrite. Corneille’s Sophonisbe has its sources in the histories of Livy and Appian, but its greatest debt is to a version performed and published only twenty-nine years earlier (1634) by Jean Mairet.

The distance between these two versions of Sophonisbe, while the space of a generation, is in fact far shorter than the number of years would suggest. First, Corneille and Mairet were contemporaries, born two years apart. They were rivals for the premier position in the French theater in the 1630s, and each felt himself to have been grievously wounded by the other: Mairet was a leading and especially vicious attacker of Corneille during the Querelle du Cul (Dédéyan xvii. Forester 87), while Corneille’s dazzling success drove Mairet into early retirement from the theater in 1640. Mairet was still alive in 1663 and reportedly distressed by Corneille’s appropriation of the subject of Sophonisbe.³ Second, Mairet’s Sophonisbe was the most successful version of the subject ever produced. As Corneille himself admitted in his preface, Mairet’s version was still being performed in 1663 (381). Corneille’s choice of subject was therefore an extreme example of writing against an earlier version: everyone knew and everyone respected Mairet’s La Sophonisbe.⁴ It was impossible for Corneille to expect to have an audience that was unfamiliar with Mairet’s version, an audience that could judge his play without comparing it to its predecessor. To undertake to better his rival was an act of bravura and hubris in a period where Corneille no doubt felt his popularity and his supremacy on the French stage slipping away.⁵ Corneille’s preface to Sophonisbe, while disingenuous in certain respects, makes abundantly clear that he knew what he was about:

Cette pièce m’a fait connoître qu’il n’y a rien de si pénible que de mettre sur le théâtre un sujet qu’un autre y a déjà fait réussir; mais aussi j’ose dire qu’il n’y a rien de si glorieux, quand on s’en acquitte dignement.” (381)

The challenge Corneille set himself was to rewrite the subject of Sophonisbe while not in any way copying Mairet or reproducing those scenes which his predecessor had carried off most successfully (in particular, Massimini’s discussion with Scipion, and Massimini’s despair at Sophonisbe’s death) (381). While Corneille claims that these very differences will discourage all comparison between the two plays, it seems on the contrary that Corneille’s play exists solely in order to be compared to Mairet’s. Indeed, Corneille’s tragedy has elicited little other than comparisons between the two versions. Most immediately, Corneille’s version gave rise to a series of debates over a period of six months after the play first appeared that is commonly referred to as the Querelle de Sophonisbe (D’Aubignac in Granet 136-37, Ricci 101-8. Knight 92). Numerous studies have since compared the two versions and it is difficult to find a discussion of Corneille’s Sophonisbe that does not make mention of Mairet.

Corneille attempted a similar kind of rewriting just four years earlier, in his triumphant return to the stage with Oedipe. There as well he took a play that was well-known to, and admired by, his audience and made significant changes in order both to make it his own and to rival Sophocles and Seneca.⁶ With Oedipe, the rivalry was rather impersonal, in fact the subject of Oedipus had been suggested to him by Fouquet. Corneille vied with a long tradition when he chose to rewrite this Greek tragedy, but he crossed swords with no recent author. It is worth noting that Oedipe was a solid success in 1659: Corneille indeed amazed his audience with his inventive rewriting. Sophonisbe may be seen as an extension of that effort at appropriation and rewriting.
C'est une reine de ma façon, de qui ce poème reçoit un grand
ornement, et qui pourrait toutefois y passer en quelque sorte pour
inutile, n'était qu'elle ajoute des motifs vraisemblables aux
historiques, et sort tout ensemble d'aiguillon à Sophonisbe pour
précipiter son mariage, et de prétexxe aux Romains pour n'y point
consentir (385).8

The addition of Eryxe provided Corneille with two female lead characters, a
convention of the period and perhaps a personal preference as well. Eryxe's presence also
provided complication where Mairêt's version was an exemplar of simplicity.

In terms of the love story, Corneille wrote against Mairêt as well, explicitly
denying the marriage its consummation, making Sophonisbe's feelings for Massinisse
muddled, and adding a new affective preoccupation for his heroine: intense jealousy
of Eryxe. In both versions, Massinisse sends Sophonisbe a letter accompanied by
poison. In Mairêt's version the poison was requested and is accepted as a gift, while in
Corneille's play, Sophonisbe sends it back, suggesting that Massinisse ought to make
use of it himself.

Thus the changes Corneille made to Mairêt's version of the play are all deliberate
consequences of writing against his predecessor. Knowing that he could not write
as though Mairêt's version did not exist, he went to the other extreme, both in his
choices and in his explicit statements in the preface, writing a kind of negation of the
earlier version.9

In discussing how Corneille wrote against Mairêt's Sophonisbe, I would like to
focus on a particular aspect that has escaped careful attention: the question of seduction.
I take the term seduction in a broad sense, including but not limited to the sexual.
The subject of Sophonisbe demands seduction. Without seduction how can Sophonisbe
manage to convince Massinisse who is politically her enemy through his alliance
with the Romans, not only to protect her against the Romans, but to marry her the
very same day? Seduction undergirds the two primary moments of the dramatic act:
when Sophonisbe seduces Massinisse into marrying her and when Massinisse
fails to seduce the Romans into allowing him to keep her. Seduction is mixed in with
marriage and political alliance to define and form the ties between characters in this
dramatic universe. Significantly, in Sophonisbe, these ties are not stable. Syphax
goes from being the ally of the Romans to being their enemy, and then their prisoner.
Sophonisbe had earlier broken her engagement with Massinisse and now divorces
Syphax in order to marry Massinisse: the latter wants to be both a Roman ally and
the husband of the Carthaginian (positions the Romans are quick to identify as incom-patible).
10 The instability of alliances is in part a function of the striking absence of
family ties. Sophonisbe makes reference to her father Asdrubal, but he does not ap-
ppear, in Corneille's version, we hear of a sister of Syphax offered in marriage to
Massinisse but refused. But that is all; there are no blood relatives onstage, and most
tellingly, no children onstage or off. Without the stability of family ties, seduction
takes on a particular power and increased importance. If we consider the balance of
power in this story, regardless of whose version we choose, we find it to be strongly
imbalanced in favor of the Romans. In Corneille's play, Roman might is obvious: the
kingdoms represented by Syphax, Massinisse, and even Eryxe are at the mercy of the
conquerors, while the Carthaginians, who might be strong enough to defeat the Romans,
are emboldened onstage by a sole and militarily powerless woman. Sophonisbe.
Roman power extends to their scenic presence. While the significant roles involve
one representative of each country or kingdom, two Romans appear onstage and a
third and even more powerful Roman, Scipion, is consulted in the wings. In a uni-
verse where almost everyone is overpowered by the Romans, where alliances and
marriages are not stable and dependable, seduction becomes a necessary arm.

Mairêt understood the centrality of seduction, and I believe that the success of
his version of the subject of Sophonisbe is due in no small measure to the fact that he
placed the seductiveness of Sophonisbe as well as her specific seduction of Massinisse at the heart of his play. In Mairé’s *La Sophonisbe*, the heroine debates the possibility of seducing Massinisse with her confidants (II.3 and III.2). The actual scene of seduction is long and developed (Sophonisbe skillfully induces Massinisse to propose marriage), and sexuality is central. Furthermore, sexuality is explicit, from the kiss she grants him in III.4, to the language of the scene in which the couple share an intimate moment after having consummated the marriage (IV.1).

Mairé’s use of seduction posed two problems for Corneille. First, seduction, especially sexual seduction, is not a theme with which Corneille has shown himself to be comfortable. The second problem involves writing against Mairé. Corneille, as we have seen, sought to “respecter sa gloire [Mairet] et ménager la mienne, par une scrupuleuse exactitude à m’écarter de sa route” (381). Thus, while Corneille may well have grasped the basic importance of seduction to the subject of the play, he endeavors to represent it differently, to not follow the footsteps of Mairé. In so doing Corneille at times enslaves himself negatively to his rival.

The most basic form of female seduction is tied to appearance. Mairé makes frequent reference to Sophonisbe’s charms and beauty (I counted 38), including references to specific features (eyes, ears, mouth, complexion) and occasionally suggesting a magical quality to her seductiveness. In contrast, Corneille’s version contains only ten such references to Sophonisbe’s appearance. Corneille does not, however, abandon Sophonisbe’s basic physical seductiveness. Euryx’s physical appearance receives no comment whatsoever, suggesting, in contrast to her rival, an absence of physical attractiveness supported by the ease with which Massinisse abandons her. Corneille’s Syphax is explicit about Sophonisbe’s powers of seduction. Bitter at her defection, he tells the Romans: “Vous la trouverez... au lit d’un autre Roi” (II. 1215-16). Specific to Corneille, Sophonisbe’s seductiveness is presented through the testimony of the seduced. Syphax goes on at length in the first act (1,4) about his love for his wife as she convinces him not to accept a truce with the Romans. He had chosen an alliance with the Carthaginians over one with the Romans solely in order to marry her. Massinisse, even more than Syphax, demonstrates how thoroughly Sophonisbe has seduced him. Eager to consummate his marriage, the Numidian tells his confidant to bring Sophonisbe, who is praying at the temple, to him immediately. He later says to the unsympathetic Lélius: “Jene veux ni régnér, ni vivre qu’en ses bras” (I.1327). The Roman upbraids Massinisse for the excess of his amorous sentiments. The seduced male is clearly presented as nonheroic, at best worthy of pity. Lélius rejects love, telling Massinisse what a true monarch should do: “Il repousse l’amour comme un flâche attentat” (I.1375). Both Massinisse and Syphax are rendered inferior to their positions by the powers of seduction of Sophonisbe. As Jean Baudrillard has said, “Être séduit, c’est être détourné de sa vérité. Séduire, c’est détourner l’autre de sa vérité” (112).

While the stature of the male characters suffers, Corneille subtly suggests that Sophonisbe’s seductiveness rather than their own weakness and susceptibility may be more to blame. He does so by having Lélius leave the stage precipitously in IV.4 as Massinisse tries to convince him of her powers:

Voyez-la donc. Seigneur. voyez tout son mérite; 
Voyez s’il est aisé qu’un Héros... Il me quitte.
Et d’un premier éclat le barbare alarmé
N’ose exposer son coeur aux yeux qui m’ont charmé.

(II. 1413-16)

One might argue that Lélius walks off in disgust with Massinisse, but the potential danger of Sophonisbe’s mere presence cannot be dismissed.

In Mairé’s version, Sophonisbe not only seduced those around her, but she herself was reduced to a sexual haze by Massinisse. There is a strong contrast between the two plays in Sophonisbe’s reaction to Massinisse, in the degree to which the heroine herself is seduced. Corneille suggests nothing sexual in Sophonisbe’s past relations with Massinisse; her description to her confidant of being raised alongside Euryx’s physical appearance receives no comment whatsoever, suggesting, in contrast to her rival, an absence of physical attractiveness supported by the ease with which Massinisse abandons her. Corneille’s Syphax is explicit about Sophonisbe’s powers of seduction. Bitter at her defection, he tells the Romans: “Vous la trouverez... au lit d’un autre Roi” (II. 1215-16). Specific to Corneille, Sophonisbe’s seductiveness is presented through the testimony of the seduced. Syphax goes on at length in the first act (1,4) about his love for his wife as she convinces him not to accept a truce with the Romans. He had chosen an alliance with the Carthaginians over one with the Romans solely in order to marry her. Massinisse, even more than Syphax, demonstrates how thoroughly Sophonisbe has seduced him. Eager to consummate his marriage, the Numidian tells his confidant to bring Sophonisbe, who is praying at the temple, to him immediately. He later says to the unsympathetic Lélius: “Jene veux ni régnér, ni vivre qu’en ses bras” (I.1327). The Roman upbraids Massinisse for the excess of his amorous sentiments. The seduced male is clearly presented as nonheroic, at best worthy of pity. Lélius rejects love, telling Massinisse what a true monarch should do: “Il repousse l’amour comme un flâche attentat” (I.1375). Both Massinisse and Syphax are rendered inferior to their positions by the powers of seduction of Sophonisbe. As Jean Baudrillard has said, “Être séduit, c’est être détourné de sa vérité. Séduire, c’est détourner l’autre de sa vérité” (112).

There are no kisses in Corneille’s play. no scene of intimacy and abandon. and no explicit indication that the marriage between Massinisse and Sophonisbe has been consummated during the entr’acte. On the contrary, Corneille makes it clear that the marriage has not been consummated, and Sophonisbe assures her new husband that it will not be until he has succeeded at protecting her from the Romans, thus conveying a hint of sexual blackmail (III.4).14 Where Mairé created a Sophonisbe completely given over to her own passion at the expense of political loyalties. Corneille sought to create a different heroine. Ricci claims that those playwrights who choose not to create an impassioned Sophonisbe (and Corneille is not alone in this choice) thereby sacrifice the primary source of dramatic interest for the play (206). Similarly, Axelrad observes that the playwright dealing with this subject must choose between the “patriote ardent” and the “amoureuse ardent” in depicting Sophonisbe. If one makes the choice (as indeed Mairé did, opting for the lauer alternative), one loses one of the tragic aspects of the character. If one does not make a choice, but rather attempts a synthesis, “on risque d’aboutir à la plus parfaite incohérence” (118, 120). This clearly is the case in Corneille’s play, as has been often noted by critics (for example, Baker *Harmonies* 106). Corneille may have sensed the problem of the necessary choice, for
he attempted a completely novel solution, opting for synthesis while adding a new dimension to Sophonisbe’s character. His Sophonisbe is not merely the patriote and the amoureuse, she is also a jalousie ardente. Her jealousy is clearly presented as greater than her love:

Et c’est, pour peu qu’on aime, une extrême douceur
De pouvoir accorder sa gloire avec son cœur:
Mais c’en est une ici bien autre, et sans égale,
D’enlever, et sitôt, ce Prince à ma Rivale”

(II. 709-12)

Unfortunately, this synthesis was not successful, and Sophonisbe is rendered even more incoherent by the addition of this third component to her motivation.

Whether one agrees with that judgment or not, it is clear that establishing a different emotional coloring for Sophonisbe posed serious problems for Corneille. First, Corneille’s Sophonisbe is not without signs of sexual susceptibility. Her strongest admission of passion for Massinisse is delivered to Syphax when she refers to her past betrothal to the young warrior: “Je brûlais d’un beau feu” (I. 291), she tells him, “les plus beaux feux” (I. 306). These statements, however, are made in the context of Sophonishe’s attempts to convince her spouse to reject the Roman offer of peace; their potential to arouse his jealousy may seriously compromise Sophonishe’s sincerity. Even to Syphax, she qualifies her own passion: “Je l’aimai, mais ce feu dont je fus la maîtresse / Ne met point dans mon cœur de honteuse tendresse” (II. 1105-6). Elsewhere, both to Massinisse and to her confidential Hermine, Sophonishe makes a number of statements concerning her feelings for Massinisse, but they are all somewhat tepid, or qualified, or not fully expressed. She speaks to Hermine of “l’importune tendresse” of her “feu” (I. 1529). To Massinisse she says, “Mon amour voudrait plus, mais je regne sur lui” (I. 1455). When he begs her to say that she loves him, to show the depth of her feelings in order to inspire him for his meeting with Scipion, Sophonishe responds, “Allez, Seigneur, allez. Je vous aime en époux, / Et serais à mon tour aussi foible que vous” (I. 1503-4). Note the conditional tense of her last statement. In place of Mairé’s passionnée, Corneille places a woman whose feelings are clearly not as strong as those of Massinisse. As a character, Sophonishe is a strange mixture of bravura, pettiness, cruelty, patriotism, regal pride, and unfaithfulness, and she shows only a modicum of love. Shortly after the play was staged, Donneau de Visé commented:

Sophonisbe n’a point de caractère parfait dans cette pièce,...elle explique ses sentiments avec beaucoup de confusion, qu’on ne la sauroit connaître, qu’on ne sait si c’est l’amour, ou l’ambition, ou la crainte du triomphe qui la font agir; ce qui fait que l’Auditeur ne sauroit entrer dans ses intérêts, qu’il ne sauroit prendre son parti, ni se déclarer entièrement contre elle. (Granet 119-20)

Writing against Mairé has thus resulted in a confused presentation of the eponymous character.

Writing against Mairé led Corneille to make other, more carefully orchestrated, changes as well. As we noted earlier, the scene in which Sophonishe seduces Massinisse, in which she obtains his promise of protection and his offer of marriage, is absolutely essential to the subject of play. It is curious that Corneille neglects to identify this scene in Mairé’s version as being one of the high points of the latter’s play. In any event, Corneille clearly felt impelled to handle it differently than Mairé, and he showed considerable creativity in so doing. First, the seduction scene is not shown onstage: it is held at a significant remove by appearing in the form of a récit. And this récit recounting the meeting of Sophonishe and Massinisse, and her seduction of him, is not told by a neutral character, but by Eryxe. Second, Corneille breaks off the offer of marriage from the central scene of seduction, saving it for later.

In Eryxe’s telling, Massinisse seems seduced even before he encounters Sophonishe. Eryxe reports seeing Massinisse, “mais surpris, mais trouble de ma vue, / Il n’était point lui-même alors qu’il m’a reçue” (II. 403-4). He does not listen to Eryxe and falls silent. When Sophonishe arrives, she requests the honor of being Massinisse’s prisoner so that she might thereby avoid being sent to Rome in shame. While blessed with an already favorably disposed auditor (Massinisse), Sophonishe nonetheless goes to some length to sway him in her favor, using a seemingly contradictory mixture of tears and orgueil. As Eryxe reports:

Son orgueil que ses pleurs semblaient vouloir dédire
Trouvait l’art en pleurant d’augmenter son empire,
Et sûre du succès, dont cet art répondait,
Elle prit bien moins qu’elle ne commandait.

(II. 439-42)

The double appearance of the word art underlines the deliberate quality of seduction at play here. In at least in Eryxe’s opinion. Combining orgueil and tears. the role of the dom inatrix with that of the helpless victim, allows Sophonishe to maximize her potential to appeal to Massinisse. Her success is immediate and complete: Massinisse grants her request and appears completely smitten (“Jusqu’au fond du puits des yeux il l’a conduite,” II. 452). Sophonishe’s seduction is thus distanced from the spectator and at the same time appears almost effortless.

The first onstage encounter between Massinisse and Sophonishe is mediated by Eryxe as well. The three characters meet onstage in II.3, but Eryxe quickly leaves them alone. graciously assuring Sophonishe, “je consens à tout” (I. 594). The presence of Eryxe on both occasions serves to underline the triangular nature of relations in the play. This love triangle is singularly muted, however. by Eryxe’s lack of passion, lack of manifest jealousy and her self-restraint. The other triangle, between Sophonishe, Massinisse, and Syphax is far more volatile.

The power of the first private meeting between Sophonishe and Massinisse (II.4) is thus doubly attenuated, first by the fact that they have already met and the
essential seduction has already transpired, and second by the lingering shadow of Eryxe’s presence. Furthermore, it is a curiously tepid scene. Sophonisbe begins by painting herself as a victim, while recalling her earlier ties to Massinissa as well as her own crime toward him (in marrying Syphax) in order to excite his générosité. Massinissa replies simply that in order for him to help her she must marry him immediately. A discussion of the problem of divorce ensues. Sophonisbe coyly declares her surprise to think that he could still love her after her unfaithfulness toward him. Massinissa responds with a list of what he will not say to her, admitting only “Je vous aime, Madame, et c’est assez vous dire” (l. 664). He puts the choice before her, marriage to him or the Roman Triumph. Sophonisbe accepts but dilutes any possibility for effusion by admitting that she herself chose to marry Syphax out of love for her country, and that she had not found it difficult to give up Massinissa. In fact the seduction seems to be proceeding in a direction opposite to what we found in Mairét; it is Massinissa who is trying to convince Sophonisbe to marry him, Massinissa who will accept her despite what she has admitted about her past infidelity. Where Mairét’s seduction scene was straightforward and saturated in sexuality, Corneille complicates presentation, motivation, and desire. Writing against Mairét, he alters and significantly dilutes his predecessor’s pivotal seduction scene, but at the same time he sets up other scenes of seduction as a form of compensation.

The first of these compensatory scenes of seduction occurs in the first act when Sophonisbe must convince Syphax to refuse the Roman offer of peace, an offer that holds nothing but advantages for him. Sophonisbe launches into a complex, multifaceted attack, beginning with feigned praise for the peace treaty, a request for reassurance of Syphax’s love for her, and protestation of her own love for him. She then attacks, reminding her husband that her country gave her to Syphax, despite her earlier engagement to Massinissa. She accuses him of ingratitude and of breaking his word to Carthage, while cruelly dwelling on the sacrifice she herself made of her love for Massinissa. From accusations and an attempt to arouse jealousy, Sophonisbe moves on to political arguments, contending that the Romans cannot be trusted; once they have defeated Carthage they will turn on Syphax. She argues that the present moment is auspicious for an attack on the Romans, giving concrete reasons. Then she presents a specific threat: if Syphax accepts the Roman offer, she will leave him and return to Carthage. She conjures up a sense of foreboding (“Vous préserve le Ciel de ce que je prévois.” [l. 366]), and moves into her final tactic of tears, accompanied by the wish to die rather than he witness to Syphax’s death. Needless to say, Syphax capitulates. With this seduction scene, Corneille completely deviates from Mairét, in whose play we find no equivalent, and furthermore he establishes very early in the play Sophonisbe’s basic seductive strength. In the place of the central seduction scene between Sophonisbe and Massinissa, Corneille places distance and complication, while providing Sophonisbe the compensation of an entirely different seduction scene, complex in its line of argument yet simple in its direct assault, early in the tragedy. Where one might argue that Corneille’s Sophonisbe does not seduce Massinissa because he is already in her thrall before she sees him, in the case of Syphax, Sophonisbe clearly induces him to act against his better judgment.

Corneille creates for Sophonisbe yet another compensation for the central, yet attenuated, seduction scene, this time situated at the end of the fourth act. Massinissa suggests that Sophonisbe seduce Scipion:

Allons, allons Madame, essayer aujourd’hui
Sur le grand Scipion cc qu’il a craint pour lui,
Il vient d’entrer au camp, venez-y par vos charmes
Appuyer mes soupirs et secourrir mes larmes.

(II. 1419-22)

Once again, Corneille is writing against Mairét. Where the latter presented the confrontation between Massinissa and Scipion onstage, Corneille has placed it offstage and creates an alternative by having a similar scene depicted between Massinissa and Lélius. Corneille also goes further than his predecessor in abasing Massinissa, having him go off to meet Scipion armed only with tears, sighs, and his strange plan to have his wife seduce the Roman commander (which Sophonisbe immediately rejects). In the process of degrading Massinissa, Corneille once again underlines Sophonisbe’s seductiveness. Massinissa does not succeed at convincing (seducing) either Lélius or Scipion.

Another unsuccessful attempt at seduction in Corneille’s play is Lélius’s plan to appease Sophonisbe and keep her from committing suicide. He sends Lépidus off to tell her “Que le grand Scipion veut lui servir d’appui./ Que Rome en sa faveur voudra lui faire grâce” (II. 1690-91): “Enlin avec douceur tâcher de la réduire / A venir dans le camp, à s’y laisser conduire” (II. 1695-96). The word réduire makes Lépidus’s motives clear. Interestingly, Sophonisbe admits being seduced by Lépidus’s words: “Qu’aïsément, reprend-elle, unc âme se console! / Je sens vers cet espoir tout mon cœur s’échauffer” (II. 1780-81). It is too late however, as she has already consumed the poison; furthermore she knows that Lépidus is trying to seduce her (“se laisser tromper, ‘voire artifice.’” [II. 1782, 1784]). While on a larger political scale, Rome can be read as the primary seducer in this dramatic universe, controlling the kingdoms of Massinissa and Eryxe.15 onstage their record of success is decidedly mixed: Syphax does not accept the Roman offer of peace; Sophonisbe may say she is beguiled by Lépidus’s words, but she escapes Roman control through death; and it is far from clear that Lélius will be successful in convincing Eryxe to forgive and marry Massinissa. In contrast, Sophonisbe’s seductions, enacted on a personal scale, although at least partially for political motives, all succeed.

There is yet another category of compensatory seduction at work here. Corneille, like all playwrights, seeks to seduce his audience. This case is particular, however, because of the long shadow cast by Mairét’s version. As we have seen, writing against Mairét’s play has pushed Corneille into some dramatically uncomfortable corners. In his dénouement, as Barnwell notes, Corneille eschews most standard forms of spectator seduction: “No traditional funeral oration is pronounced; no emotional récit of the death scene is spoken; no rhetorical lament or final suicide (contrast Mairét’s play) takes place” (589). In contrast, Corneille goes to unusual lengths to help the
spectrum understand and appreciate his heroine. Corneille’s preface provides the spectator with a clearer image of Sophonisbe than we are likely to be able to discover in the play. According to the author, she feels “un peu d’amour” but it is strictly at the service of her twin dominant passions: the good of Carthage and her hatred of Rome (note that no mention is made of her jealousy toward Eryx). Sophonisbe’s pride in the service of these values is “si noble et si élevée” that Lélius is forced to admit that she deserves to have been born a Roman.

In her final scene with Massinisse, Sophonisbe offers him little in terms of the support, love, and encouragement he has asked for in order to confront Scipion. When she leaves the stage, however, Mézelulle turns to Massinisse and says, “Douterez-vous encore, Seigneur, qu’elle vous aime?” (I. 1509). Massinisse replies: “Il est vrai, son amour est extrême” (I. 1511). This statement seems directed to convincing the audience, for she has not demonstrated such love. The fact that Corneille finds it necessary to explain and define his heroine in this fashion reflects the incompleteness of her character that we noted earlier. Sophonisbe’s primary action in the play is to seduce (and finally to commit suicide when her seduction, albeit successful, proves inadequate). How ironic then that she is not successful in seducing the spectator. It is difficult for the spectator to be seduced by an incocherent heroine. Mairet’s heroine, although lacking patriotic grandeur, was coherent.

Corneille tries to seduce the spectator in yet another fashion, this time through a kind of hyperconstruction of the dramatic text. The arrangement of scenes and meetings, of echoes and repetitions, is masterful. The play is so carefully arranged that the structures cannot possibly be anything but deliberate. Once again it is clearest that Corneille has moved in a direction opposed to that of Mairet. In the latter’s version, there is a linear movement from the couple Sophonisbe-Syphax to Sophonisbe-Massinisse to Scipion-Massinis. Corneille’s structure is far more complex and even more balanced. There are two queens, two rival kings, and two onstage Romans; the superior weight of the Romans is suggested by the presence of a third, Scipion, offstage. Sophonisbe and Syphax have two major meetings onstage (I, 4 and III, 6); Sophonisbe and Massinisse have three (II, 4, III, 4, and IV, 5); Eryx and Massinisse two (II, 2, III, 2). The case of Sophonisbe and Eryx is more complex: four meetings carefully spread across the five acts, the first and last of which are major scenes: I, 3, II, 3, III, 3, V, 3-4. The meetings between Eryx and Sophonisbe are marked by oscillation and repetition. The two women alternate in opening their scenes with statements very similar to “Tout a changé de face” (I. 575; see also II, 581, 917, 1643), as political favor oscillates from one to the other and back. If Sophonisbe can be said to have difficulty seducing the audience, the structuring of the play, in balance and coherence, is on the contrary likely to be highly pleasing to the spectator.

In a final move that may be construed as an attempted seduction of the spectator, Corneille lets it be known that he considers Sophonisbe to be one of his best plays. It is not clear, of course, how many he has convinced in that fashion. Seduction as a theme belongs to all theater: dramatic action is often predicated upon various forms of seduction—much theatrical dialogue can be reduced to characters attempting to convince other characters to do as they want them to do—and all playwrights, directors, and actors seek nothing more than to seduce their audience. In Corneille’s Sophonisbe, seduction is at the heart of the play: a specific and sexual seduction of a man by a woman. As we have seen, Corneille deflects that central seduction offstage and complicates it, giving it multiple onstage resonances.

Susan Read Baker discusses “Corneille’s...endeavor in Sophonisbe to supplant Jean Mairet by incorporating and destroying his rival’s own text” (“Equivoque” 147). Perhaps in order to destroy Mairet’s text, Corneille had to necessarily, tragically even, produce a destroyed text himself. And this self-destruction would come not from incorporation of Mairet’s text, as Baker posits, but rather from the hole left by not incorporating Mairet’s text, by writing around and against it. For there is a hole at the center of Corneille’s play. The hole has two aspects: the first is the absent central scene of seduction and the second is Sophonisbe’s inadequacy as a heroic and cohesive center to the play. Both are consequences of writing against Mairet. The point at which the two meet, in their lack, is sexuality. Sexuality, like the seduction scene and like Sophonisbe herself, is unavoidable in a play where the heroine has two husbands, and where, unlike any other of Corneille’s plays, a marriage takes place in the middle of the action, not after the curtain rings down. All potential for sexual fever has been excised from Corneille’s Sophonisbe and from her seduction of Massinisse. Corneille seems to sense this lack and seeks, in ever more elaborate constructions, compensations, and complexities, to put something in its place, to fill the hole.

Notes

1 Charles Ricci patiently traces and examines in depth the numerous versions of the Sophonisbe story in France and Italy; A. José Axelrad, more superficial in his treatment of individual versions, is more broad in his coverage, encompassing England and Germany as well as France and Italy, and dealing with 24 different tragedies. Christian Delmas discusses how various versions of Sophonisbe contributed to and reflected the development of tragedy on the French stage (“Les Sophonisbe”).

2 Georges Forestier notes, “à moins d’une circonstance exceptionnelle, commande (Médiée) ou défi (Oedipe), il lui répugnait de paraître manquer d’invention en se contentant de reprendre des sujets déjà traités” (317). Another significant example of Corneille rewriting is La Mort de Pomée. Chaulmer had written, performed, and published a play dealing with the same subject and with the identical title, a mere four years before Corneille’s 1642 tragedy. Georges May comments: “Corneille s’empare donc d’un sujet, non seulement existant déjà sur la scène française, mais—chose exceptionnelle dans sa carrière—d’un sujet dont la dernière réalisation scénique datait de peine de quelques années” (35).

3 This information comes to us from Donneau de Véré, whose own eagerness to enter the fray in the Querelle de Sophonisbe, taking positions both against and for Corneille’s version in the span of only a few months, makes his testimony less than absolutely reliable (Montrégin 179).

4 Ricci, among others, points to Corneille’s deliberate intention “de faire autrement que Mairet” (108).

5 According to Georges May, Corneille “n’aurait eu que le désir de jouer avec le feu et d’éprouver un plaisir de virtuose et d’esthète comparable à celui de Jean Giraudoux mettant en scène
Amphitryon for the 38th time...Une telle fantaisie impliquerait de la part de Corneille une sûreté de soi et une certitude de réussir qu'il ne pouvait guère avoir en 1663. Sophonisbe n'était que sa troisième tragédie depuis le "louis de Perdharie" (48). On another note, it is ironic that Racine would not make his appearance until the following year, providing a rival who would not retire from the stage, as Mairët had done long before, but who would compete with Corneille at every opportunity.

6Corneille in his Au lecteur à Oedipe states, "Comme j'ai pris une autre route que la leur, il m'a été impossible de me rencontrer avec eux." (19).

7In Livy's version of events, Sophonisbe was never the fiancée of Massinissa. That romantic element was contributed by Appiani.

8Corneille's reasons are weak, however. The Romans do not refer to Eryx as a reason for forbidding the marriage between Sophonisbe and Massinissa; they forbid it because she is a Roman enemy. And the first reason is hardly more convincing: Sophonisbe precipitates the marriage to Massinissa because it is a way to protect herself against the Romans. If the issue were truly Eryx, we would see Sophonisbe at the beginning of the play plotting to assassinate Syphax, so that she could take Eryx's place. For a discussion of some of the widely varying opinions concerning Eryx, see Barnwell (584).

9The relationship between the plays is further complicated in two directions. First, Susan Read Baker has pointed out that Corneille had already written Médée (1659) to vie with Mairët's La Sophonisbe (Harmonies 1:14). Second, the vendetta-like situation of writing against a predecessor is prolonged by Voltaire who in 1774 staged his own Sophonisbe. Ricci reads Voltaire's play as an attack on Corneille's and a desire to outdo Mairët (115-16).

10"Notre ami tout ensemble et guerri d'Asdrubac. / Croyez-moi, ces deux noms s'accordent assez mal." (Il. 1291-92).

11Henry Carrington Lancaster notes, "The subject was, indeed, primarily one of passion rather than patriotism. It is, perhaps, the perception of this fact that made Mairët's play stand the test of time better than the tragédies of his more illustrious successors. Corneille and Voltaire" (708).

12While Corneille certainly employs other kinds of seductions (e.g. Clémence's report of arousing the enthusiasm of his fellow conspirators), the only example of a sexual seduction that I can find is in L'Illusion comique, where Lyse seduces the old youth in order to free Clindor. Furthermore, by 1637, when Mairët's Mâr-Antoine appeared on stage. Richelieu's influence had made itself felt in the French theater and explicit sexuality had gone out of favor. Philip Tomlinson notes that Mairët's Cléopâtre is not a sensual character: her love for Antoine "ne ressemble nullement à la fâcheuse passion animale à laquelle Sophonisbe n'avait qu'à résister. Mairët neutralise même les traits physiques traditionnels du personnage, en réduisant au minimum les références à sa beauté. Sa Cléopâtre n'a donc rien de la séductrice coquette aux allures irresistibles." (70).

13Delmas notes that it is Mairët's Sophonisbe "qui ordonne le mieux la figure complexe de sa séductrice autour de l'image de l'ensorceleuse, capable telle une Circe, d'attirer à elle le temps d'une simple entrevue celui qui était son ennemi" ("Autour" 13).

14It is worth noting that the original version of Corneille's Sophonisbe, which appeared on stage in 1663, may have presented a more passionate heroine. According to Donnou de Visé, "dès l'ouverture de la pièce, l'on connaît l'ardeur amour qu'elle a pour Massinissa, et que sa passion est assez violente pour lui faire abandonner Syphax et épouser Massinissa" (Granet 122). It is clear from this and other statements by both de Visé and by d'Aubignac that changes were made before Sophonisbe was published.

15Baker states, "Rome has even taken exclusive control of the power of seduction, subsuming it in the guise of friendship under its own dominant authority" (Harmonies 112).

16Roland Simon notes that "l'amour de Massinissa et Sophonisbe formulé fut une sorte de pont fragile et temporaire entre deux pôles de l'autorité et du devoir [Syphax et Scipion] qui les inondait et les conduisaient respectivement" (71).

17There is even a sense of balance conveyed by the number of lines in the scenes referred to: Sophonisbe and Syphax: 258 lines, Sophonisbe and Massinissa: 260; Sophonisbe and Eryx: 208 lines, and finally Eryx and Massinissa: 17 lines.

18It is not difficult to imagine that Racine found some inspiration for his own famous "Tout a change de face" in Phèdre here, or even for the back and forth movement of fortune for Hermione in Andromaque.

19In a letter to Saint-Evremond, Corneille writes, "ma Sophonisbe, pour qui vous montrez tant de tendresse, a ta meilleure part de la mienne" (725).

WORKS CITED


