

Trinity University

## Digital Commons @ Trinity

---

Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty  
Research

Modern Languages and Literatures Department

---

1993

### Language, Power, and Gender in Tristan's *La Marianne* and *La Mort de Sénèque*

Nina Ekstein

Trinity University, nekstein@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/ml\\_l\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/ml_l_faculty)



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

#### Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. (1993). Language, power, and gender in Tristan's *La Marianne* and *La mort de Sénèque*. In *Actes d'Athens* (pp. 9-18). Biblio 17.

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

## Language, Power, and Gender in Tristan's *La Marianne* and *La Mort de Sénèque*

Nina Ekstein  
(Trinity University)

Power is a central issue in both Tristan L'Hermite's *Marianne* (1636) and *La Mort de Sénèque* (1644). I propose to examine the articulations of power in Tristan's theater and the power struggles at the heart of both plays. On the most basic level, Tristan illustrates the power of tyranny. Furetière defines a tyrant as an "usurpateur d'un Etat, oppresseur de la liberté publique, qui s'est emparé par violence ou par adresse de la souveraine puissance"; *tyran* "se dit aussi d'un Prince qui abuse de son pouvoir, qui ne gouverne pas selon les lois, qui use de violence et de cruauté envers ses sujets." Usurpers both,<sup>1</sup> Hérode and Néron are well known for their excessive use of violence. After taking power, Hérode had 45 aristocrats killed, as well as his brother-in-law and his own uncle. Tristan's play shows Hérode condemning his wife Marianne to death. He later does the same with his mother-in-law, and finally his two sons by Marianne. Néron, in a period of ten years, poisoned Britannicus, had his mother killed, as well as his advisor Burrhus (probably) and his first wife Octavie (certainly), to say nothing of his role in the fire that destroyed much of Rome in 64 A.D.<sup>2</sup> In the course of *La Mort de Sénèque*, Néron discovers a conspiracy to assassinate him and exacts punishment, including the forced suicide of his teacher, Sénèque. Both plays show the tyrant ordering multiple deaths. In *La Marianne*, Hérode condemns to death not only his wife but also Soême and the eunuch. Néron has Epicaris tortured and then killed, and orders the death of a number of conspirators as well as Sénèque's. The basic violence of these men extends to the most trivial level: all that the spectator sees of Hérode's first scene with Marianne (II, iv) is Hérode physically chasing her off the stage in anger.

---

<sup>1</sup> It was no doubt politically prudent for Tristan to show tyranny firmly linked to illegitimacy of power.

<sup>2</sup> My source for this information is Jacques Scherer, *Théâtre du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, vol. 2, ed. Jacques Scherer and Jacques Truchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) 1316-7, 1338. The spectator would most likely bring to the play at least some knowledge of the two men's past.

The power of the tyrant, however excessively violent, is shown to be limited in Tristan's dramatic universe. This limitation is embodied by Marianne, Hérode's wife, and by Epicaris, the woman who refuses under torture to betray her co-conspirators. If these two women prefer death to acceding to the tyrant's power, then that power can never be absolute.<sup>3</sup> The seventeenth-century stage, with its rules and conventions, provides a wholly different kind of limitation of the power of the tyrant. By the time *La Marianne* appears in 1636, violence, which is tyranny's primary tool, is considered to be offensive if represented on stage. The spectator does not see the executions or the torture: we may only hear of them. The tyrants, beings of violence and action, are thus limited on stage to language. It is not surprising to note that Hérode and Néron have the largest speaking parts in their respective plays. The tyrant thus may only "speak his power," not directly enact it.<sup>4</sup> There are two aspects of this basic limitation that I propose to examine more closely. The first involves the discourse of power, and the second relates to gender, specifically, how women use language as power.

Given that Hérode and Néron must speak and not act directly, what kind of discourse might be appropriate to their position? Excess characterizes the tyrant's power and his violence, and is an obvious option for his discourse as well. This is the choice that Tristan makes in the case of Hérode. During the first two acts, and particularly in I, iii, Hérode goes on at length about his youthful exploits and his current unassailableness. His verbal bravado ("mille exploits," 198) is a clear duplication of his political power. The danger of this choice of discourse is that excessive language can easily border on the comic through the simple mechanism of exaggeration or hyperbole. The classic comic embodiment of violence articulated through language is Matamore, a common and highly popular figure at the time these two plays were written (and a character in Tristan's *Le Parasite* [1653]). Matamore is comic because of the disproportion between his language (excessive) and his power (nil). Hérode is not a Matamore, of course, but the similarities of language between the two are at times unsettling. For instance, angered by Marianne, Hérode rails:

---

<sup>3</sup> D. Dalla Valle sees the limitations of Tristan's tyrants' power in larger political terms: "...Tristan che, trovandosi nell'incapacità di indicare il sistema ideale di governo, si limiterà a mostrare i limiti, le insufficenze, le aberrazioni di quelli esistenti." *Il Teatro di Tristan L'Hermite* (Turin: Giapichelli, 1964) 170.

<sup>4</sup> One might well argue that a tyrant has the same problem offstage as well: having achieved his goal of ascending the throne, the tyrant becomes significantly distant from the source of his power, that is, violence. His "dignity" forbids him to commit violent acts himself; he must delegate, and place mediating agents between himself and violence.

Ingrate, mon amour se transforme en furie;  
 Et déjà tous ses traits qui sortent de mon cœur,  
 Se changent en serpents pour punir ta rigueur. (642-4)

Hérode's emotions – his jealousy, his anger, and his remorse – are all delivered through a language steeped in excess and reminiscent of Corneille's Matamore in *L'Illusion comique* (1636). Given Hérode's power to kill, such excess is not comic, but as long as he just speaks and no real action occurs (even offstage) – approximately the first half of the play – Hérode remains an ambiguous character.<sup>5</sup>

Tristan makes a very different choice about the discourse of power when he writes *La Mort de Sénèque* eight years later. Where Hérode articulates his power on stage through language, Néron favors simple onstage presence. While both men have the largest speaking roles in their respective plays, the differences between these roles are great. Hérode is one of the most prolific speakers of the seventeenth-century theater: he says over 49% of the lines of the play! In contrast Néron has only 18% of the lines in *La Mort de Sénèque*. He is on stage, however, for more than half of the play, thus constituting a presence that is almost as pervasive as Hérode's, but in a play that has a broader distribution of roles. Néron, by not blustering about verbally, by not trumpeting his might, suggests greater, rather than lesser, power.<sup>6</sup>

The tyrants have absolute power, and while their power cannot be acted out directly on stage, their words are acted upon: the physical effects of the male tyrant's language (such as orders to kill) reverberate through both of these plays in the multiple deaths outlined above. In this context of tyranny, what power is left to the other characters, specifically, to women?

While the women in these plays are obviously cut off from direct action and may act only through language, they use language quite differently than do the tyrants. For the tyrant, language is a substitute for power, a displacement that sets in motion more concrete manifestations of force. For women, language is an independent means of creating power. While sexual attraction has its part in the power of Marianne and Sabine, these women turn rather to language as a persuasive force. Their access to power through language is indirect, however: the women's wishes must be mediated

---

<sup>5</sup> Dalla Valle reads Hérode's proclivity for the language of excess in a different manner, seeing it as a sign of emotional hunger: "Ma fin dalla prima scena, alla solitudine si accompagna l'ostentazione, il bisogno di parlare, la ricerca di contatto umano". *Il Teatro di Tristan L'Hermite* 228.

<sup>6</sup> Tristan also precludes any Matamore-like ambiguity in Néron by opening the play soon after the death of Octavie. Néron, responsible for her death, must be taken seriously; there is no possibility for even a provisional comic interpretation.

through the will of the tyrant. Women's words may only be efficacious in these dramatic universes if the tyrant is persuaded or somehow moved by them and then acts through his own words. The power that women may have access to is thus parasitic to that of the tyrant.

The speaking presence of the women in these two plays is substantial: Marianne and Salomé have the second and third largest speaking roles respectively in *La Marianne*, and Sabine and Epicaris the third and fourth in *La Mort de Sénèque*. All are relatively similar in amplitude, ranging from 12.4% to 15.5% of the lines spoken. Two plays, two tyrants, and two fairly substantial women's roles in each: the similarities are obvious. The organization of these roles is parallel as well: while all four women have specific goals that are clearly independent of the wishes of the tyrant, one woman in each play adopts the role of the tyrant's ally (Salomé, Hérode's sister, and Sabine, Néron's wife) while the other opposes him directly (Marianne and Epicaris). In each play, there is unequivocal enmity between the two women (Salomé and Marianne exchange strong words in II, ii, as do Epicaris and Sabine in V, iii).<sup>7</sup> What I find noteworthy is that all four women, despite their own oppositions, obtain and exercise power, influencing Hérode and Néron, and pushing them into positions of violent excess.

The tyrant's two allies, Salomé and Sabine, both seek to use Hérode's and Néron's power for their own violent ends, specifically to oppose Marianne and Sénèque. Salomé manipulates Hérode in a variety of ways. She invents charges against her sister-in-law, and convinces a lackey to stage an accusatory scene. As well as staging another's language, she plays a role of her own, manufacturing tears to move her brother (IV, i). Salomé goes beyond language in her efforts to exert her own will. She also uses her presence onstage as a marker of power, not unlike Néron in *La Mort de Sénèque*. In the first three acts of *La Marianne*, she is on stage for eight of the fourteen scenes, six of them with Hérode. Marianne, in contrast, only shares the stage with her husband twice during the entire play. Salomé's influence over Hérode is thus based on the weighty combination of acting, language, and presence.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Nicole Mallet has noted this basic oppositional structure between the women: "Il est frappant que dans les deux cas examinés ce soit une femme l'instigatrice des deux formes de vengeance; à Marianne et Epicaris justicières s'opposent Salomé et Sabine Poppée qui travaillent à les détruire." "Tristan dramaturge face aux Elizabéthains," *Cahiers Tristan L'Hermitte* 10 (1988): 35.

<sup>8</sup> Neither Francesco Orlando nor Dalla Valle see Salomé's role as central in Marianne's death; both leave full power with Hérode. Orlando considers Marianne's death as far more a result of Hérode's jealousy than "dalla calunnia architettata da Salome." "Il Sogno di Erode e i motivi della *Marianne*," *Saggi e ricerche di letteratura francese* 2

Sabine is a more persistently aggressive double of Salomé. Her techniques for manipulating Néron are as varied and imaginative as those of Hérode's sister. She too shares the stage with the tyrant far more frequently than her opponent Epicaris.<sup>9</sup> Sabine differs from Salomé in one important respect: she is the tyrant's wife, not his sister. Her position has the advantage of Néron's desire for her. This particular power is well-expressed in the first line of the play, when Néron states: "Enfin selon mes vœux Sabine est sans Rivale." He desires her power in her place, for her. She is not yet, however, in her own estimation, "sans Rivale." She spends the play seeking the death of Sénèque in a kind of personal crusade, and uses language in a highly creative fashion in order to persuade Néron. At one point she adopts the male voice of the foetus she is carrying:

C'est un petit César qui parle dans mon sein,  
Et qui te donne avis que cet homme perfide [Sénèque]  
Si tu ne le préviens, sera ton parricide. (124-6)

In another similar move, Sabine later claims to have had "un songe divin" (923), adopting now the superior (and presumably male) vision of the gods:

On a fait contre nous une grande partie,  
Dont tout soudainement les Dieux m'ont avertie. (915-6)

These two male voices lend weight to and echo her own attacks on Sénèque.

Both women are powerful theatrically in their manipulations, but onstage presence is not a significant source of Sabine's power. While she shares the stage with Néron for almost as many scenes as Salomé does with Hérode, if her presence is measured in number of lines, Sabine is on stage with the tyrant little more than half as much as her counterpart. On one occasion, Sabine exploits non-presence to manipulate Néron: she refuses Néron's request to remain onstage to witness his forceful dealings with Sénèque, thereby metaphorically silencing Sénèque (= killing him) and rejecting Néron's attempt to placate her.

In contrast to the relatively subtle machinations of Salomé and Sabine, Marianne and Epicaris are starkly dramatic in their direct opposition to the

---

(1961): 78. Similarly, Dalla Valle says, "la macchinazione di Salomé ai danni di Mariane, per esempio, non ha che una funzione secondaria nella decisione di Hérode di uccidere la moglie" (123). I believe that these readings underestimate the role of the women in *La Marianne*.

<sup>9</sup> Sabine is on stage with Néron for six scenes of the play, while Epicaris has only two such scenes.

tyrants. They are also most purely creatures of language. Marianne, through her own resentment, defiance and hatred, goads Hérode into killing her.<sup>10</sup> While she does not wish to die, she prefers death to her husband. Epicaris does not wish to die either: she denies any knowledge of a conspiracy to assassinate the emperor during her first confrontation with him (III, i). But she is not afraid of death or torture, and pushes Néron to greater and greater violence by refusing to betray her confederates. Her defiance, like Marianne's, forces Néron's hand, so that he must have her brutally killed. Both of these women essentially refuse to acknowledge the superiority of the tyrant's power. They are consequently condemned to death, but the tyrant's power is thereby diminished.

The two plays are not identical, of course. Marianne is the object of Hérode's love, and her death is itself punishment for his violence. The same is not true of Epicaris who has no affective link to Néron and is of an inferior social class. Perhaps to partially compensate for this deficiency, Epicaris is endowed with great verbal skill and intelligence. When she first speaks to Néron, he reacts with: "Ah! qu'elle est assurée en tenant ce langage" (755). Epicaris bests Procule, her accuser, at every turn when he tries to present her to Néron as a traitor; and he admits: "Si tu parles toujours tu gagneras ta cause" (856).

Unlike the variety of manipulative techniques that Salomé and Sabine use, Marianne and Epicaris are limited to the verbal articulation of pure opposition: denial, defiance, bile. The ease with which Marianne could avoid her death by manipulating Hérode is obvious when she begins to cry at the thought of her children's fate once she is dead. Hérode immediately relents, forgiving all. But Marianne is not interested in her own life at the price of acceding to her husband, and she immediately attacks him again, so that her condemnation is soon reinstated. Both Marianne and Epicaris deny their guilt, one rightly and the other not,<sup>11</sup> and they both remain absolutely steadfast in their opposition to the tyrant.

The examination of the power structure in *La Marianne* is essentially complete once the tyrant and the two women have been considered. The same cannot be said for *La Mort de Sénèque*.<sup>12</sup> The second play is far more

<sup>10</sup> F.K. Dawson states that Marianne "through her defiance, her pertinacity and her taunts, does impose upon Hérode a certain pattern of action: «Poursuis, poursuis, barbare, et sois inexorable...» (III, ii)." "An Idea of Tragedy, *Marianne* and *La Mort de Sénèque*," *Nottingham French Studies* 2.2 (1963): 3.

<sup>11</sup> Marianne is accused first of plotting Hérode's death and then of adultery. She denies both and indeed is innocent. Epicaris denies participation in the assassination conspiracy when accused, but she, on the other hand, is guilty.

<sup>12</sup> This is obvious on the most basic level of number of lines spoken: in *La*

complex in structure, and includes a number of other important figures engaged in the struggles for power. One such group is the male conspirators. Epicaris's power is all the more evident when she is contrasted with them. In the scene before she first arrives on stage, the conspirators have great difficulty in deciding how and where the actual assassination will take place (II, i). Epicaris's eloquent hatred of tyranny enflames them into making concrete plans.<sup>13</sup> When the conspiracy is discovered, Pison, the leader, cowers in fear for himself and for his family, unable to take any action (IV, ii). Sévinus, the senator, capitulates easily and betrays his fellow conspirators, motivated by fear for his own person and by monetary greed. Epicaris, in contrast, undergoes torture without losing courage, appearing again onstage in V, iii, as fearless and defiant as ever despite her physical suffering. When the conspiracy lies in shambles at the end of the play, and most of the conspirators are dead or imprisoned, Epicaris once more opposes and antagonizes Néron. He calls her "cet animal farouche / Qui n'a que du poison et du fiel dans la bouche" (1655-56). The power of her language is implicitly acknowledged by Sabine: "Ta langue pour ce mot sera bientôt coupée" (1719).<sup>14</sup>

For all of her strength, Epicaris is nonetheless limited. Unlike the male conspirators who, despite being fairly ineffectual, nonetheless conceive of their (potential) power in terms of violence, Epicaris never imagines direct physical action for herself. When it comes to such direct action – assassinating Néron – she remains subservient to men, in this case Pison:

Brave et noble Pison, c'est sous ton seul auspice  
Que l'on doit entreprendre un si grand sacrifice. (409-10)

Epicaris has access to only language and silence: she may persuade, curse, and suffer stoically. This last is certainly a factor in her power, but exists only as an absence: the lack of reaction to being tortured.

The link in this play between women's language and power extends to Octavie, the wife Néron has had killed. In Tacitus's version of these events (Tristan's primary source), her crime is her inability to bear children. In *La Mort de Sénèque* she is punished for what she has *said* against Néron, for her "langue envenimée" (5).

---

*Marianne*, these three characters account of 77% of the lines, while in *La Mort de Sénèque*, Néron, Epicaris, and Sabine constitute slightly under 45%.

<sup>13</sup> The image is Roger Guichemerre's; "A Propos de *La Mort de Sénèque*: les tragédies de la conjuration," *Cahiers Tristan L'Hermitte* 4 (1982): 6.

<sup>14</sup> Like Epicaris, Marianne can only be silenced by the violent act of cutting; describing Marianne's death, Narbal says: "Puis elle offrit sa gorge et cessa de parler" (1550).

One important variable has been omitted from this discussion of oppositions and parallels, and that is Sénèque. He fits comfortably in none of these categories, just as he seems uncomfortable both in Néron's court and even in the play itself.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the other males in both plays, Sénèque is totally divorced from violence. He wants nothing to do with the assassination and requests only to give over his fortune to Néron and retire. The issue of power and money presents itself, but here money is not power. Sénèque's money attracts the covetousness of Sabine and Néron, and motivates in part their desire to see him dead. Like all four of the women, Sénèque is above all a creature of language. In fact, his skill at oratory is well known, and demonstrated on several occasions. He speaks more than the women in either play, but less than the tyrants. Sabine situates his influence over Néron, and thus his power, in his verbal skill:

Il ne lui faut qu'un trait de sa vaine éloquence  
 Pour te faire excuser des maux de conséquence.  
 Sa parole attrayante a des inventions  
 Pour te faire approuver ses noires actions. (57-60)

Ironically, Sénèque is *not* successful at convincing Néron in the first act: Néron will neither take back the money that he bestowed on Sénèque nor allow him to leave court. Sénèque fails, as Néron says,

Puisque tu m'as instruit en l'art de me défendre  
 De tous les arguments qui me pourraient surprendre. (249-50)

Rhetoric, a male institution and a male form of language, is well-known to Néron. The language used by the women is different, and Néron is far more vulnerable to this unfamiliar discourse. Sénèque's rhetoric is unsuccessful again when he attempts to convince his wife to live on after him. Pauline is not moved by his arguments and prefers to follow him in death. He only barely convinces her to die after him and in another room, as he would prefer. This last success is not due to his rhetorical skill, but rather is a result of losing his temper. In a world where male power is based on violence, male language is generally ineffectual. Indeed, Sénèque fails, both at preserving a life of peace for himself (a clearly defined goal in the first act) and in his role as Néron's teacher. A second reason for his failure is scenic. While he speaks more than the two women in the play, he is on stage far less, appearing in only three scenes. After the first act, he never

---

<sup>15</sup> Claude Abraham notes: "quoique l'intrigue dépende de Sénèque, son rôle est essentiellement passif et la tension dramatique se trouve ailleurs." Introduction to *Le Théâtre complet de Tristan L'Hermite*, ed. Claude K. Abraham, Jerome W. Schweitzer, and Jacqueline Van Baelen (University, Alabama: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1975) 9.

again sees Néron onstage. Sabine's power, we saw, was in part based on presence; in Sénèque's case his lack of power can be equally attributed to a lack of presence. Furthermore, all three of his scenes are discussions or enactments of evasion. With Néron, Sénèque seeks to avoid the danger he feels approaching by giving Néron his money and by retiring. In his discussion with Lucain, Sénèque refuses any active role in the conspiracy. Finally in his last appearance, he prepares to obey Néron and go to his death. At no juncture does he stand his ground, literally or figuratively. Sénèque, then, finds himself in a kind of no man's land, refusing the dynamics of power which characterize both men and women in this dramatic universe. Naturally enough, he must be eliminated.

In this sense, he is diametrically opposed to Epicaris. She stands her ground to the end. Female, of the lower class, and distant from Néron, in contrast to Sénèque, her role is nonetheless as crucial as Sénèque's. Both are excellent persuasive speakers, both appear on stage at three junctures, but are much talked about when absent and much respected. Finally, both are condemned to death by Néron.

We have examined the clash of different forms of power in these two tragedies. Now let us consider the outcomes. While no one is left unscathed at the end, the women, despite their lack of direct force, seem to fare better than the tyrants. Marianne and Epicaris are dead, of course, but they go to their deaths willingly, fulfilled in their defiance of the tyrant (and comforted, in Marianne's case, by the hope of an afterlife).<sup>16</sup> Salomé's and Sabine's positions are more ambiguous. Salomé has eliminated her brother's wife, but only physically; Hérode calls for Marianne repeatedly and is haunted by her death. Sabine is dismissed by Néron ("Eloigne-toi d'ici" [1863]), and her possible death is suggested ("De peur que ma colère éclate à ta ruine" [1864]), and confirmed by the spectator's knowledge of history. But the fact remains that Salomé and Sabine have attained their goals – the deaths of Marianne and Sénèque respectively – against the better interests of the tyrants and yet through the tyrants' agency. They have successfully pushed Hérode and Néron to violence. Marianne and Epicaris do not get what they want, but they control the tyrants by forcing them into positions of violent excess, and they accept dying as a means to undermine and reject the power of the tyrant.

The denouements of both plays leave the male tyrants profoundly shaken, with blood on their hands that they regret spilling. Hérode and Néron are alive, but their fits of insanity suggest fates worse than death. Hérode spends almost the entire last act railing against his situation, consumed by remorse, longing for death, or overcome by hallucinations.

---

<sup>16</sup> Sénèque too dies imbued with Christian theology, hopeful of a world to come.

Néron too longs for death and imagines horrifying visions. The articulation of power by the two men is destabilized by their insanity: Hérode curses his people for not rising up against him, while Néron defies the "ciel":

Tu prépares pour moi quelque éclat de tonnerre,  
Mais avant, je perdrai la moitié de la Terre. (1867-68)

Power has gone awry. No one finishes well in these two dramatic universes, but the women, unlike the men, have exerted power effectively for their own ends.

*La Marianne* and *La Mort de Sénèque* are plays about the power of the victim and the impotence of the powerful.<sup>17</sup> They are both, in the final analysis, tragedies of power.

---

<sup>17</sup> Abraham points out that on the physical level, Hérode is the torturer, Marianne the victim. On all higher levels, the roles are reversed. *Tristan L'Hermitte* (Boston: Twayne, 1980) 133.