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THE ODD MAN OUT: THE KINGS IN CORNEILLE'S MACHINE PLAYS

NINA EKSTEIN

ANDROMÈDE and *La Conquête de la Toison d'or* have a largely unenviable status in Corneille's oeuvre. They are often either dismissed or marginalized, and almost inevitably read as different from, and therefore inferior to, the more canonical Cornelian works.¹ In fact, both plays are richer and more interesting than commonly thought, as I hope to suggest by an examination of the curious and curiously similar role of the king.

Andromède deals with Persée's rescue of Andromède from a man-eating monster and the consequent transfer of her affections and her hand from her fiancé Phinée to Persée, the son of Jupiter. *La Toison d'or* involves a transfer as well, in this case of both the Golden Fleece and Médée's affections, from her family to Jason, the leader of the Argonauts. In both plays there is a king who is faced with a crisis: in the case of Céphée, the devouring monster, and for Aète, the loss of his kingdom if he loses the Golden Fleece. Neither, however, is the typical Cornelian king or even father. Authority, to say nothing of heroism, is curiously lacking in both characters. Most surprising is the fact that in both plays, the kings act in a fashion that can only be considered ill-advised or inappropriate and yet neither is called to account. Despite relatively substantial roles,² these two kings have attracted remarkably little critical atten-

¹ Antoine Adam says of *Andromède*, "Ce n'était dans la carrière de Corneille qu'un intermède" (II: 377); similarly Stegmann calls it "une charmante parenthèse dans la production dramatique de Corneille" (II: 606). Wygant notes that even less critical attention has been paid to *La Toison d'or* than to *Andromède* (538). Dort dismisses *La Toison* by saying that it is "plus un prétexte à spectacle qu'une pièce" (99).

² As far as the size of their roles is concerned, both kings appear coincidentally in ten of the twenty-nine scenes of each play. Aète's role, the third largest in *La Toison*, is, however, more than twice as long as Céphée's (319 lines as opposed to 139).

tion. I propose to examine each of these kings in turn and consider the possible meanings of their disturbing and yet masked lapses.

Céphée in *Andromède* adopts a stance of reason and sound judgment. He neither caused the wrath of the gods that resulted in the virgin-eating monster (his wife Cassiope did) nor does he propose any solution beyond passive obedience. An equitable king, he insists that Andromède's name be included in the group of young women eligible for sacrifice, despite her fiancé Phinée's loud objections. A loving father, he is deeply distressed at the thought of losing his daughter and suffers from the conflict between his public responsibilities and his private affections: "Je vous refuse en Roi, ce que je veux en père," he tells Phinée (l. 293). In these respects, Céphée operates comfortably within the norms of the Cornelian monarch.

Céphée's error is one of absence. The central moment of the play occurs in Act III when Andromède is tied to the rocks to await the approaching monster. It is a fabulous visual spectacle, with Persée flying around on his horse Pegasus as he attacks and defeats the presumably horrific monster. The presence or absence of certain characters may seem insignificant in comparison with the action onstage, but such is not the case: it is Phinée's absence from this scene that constitutes the basis of his rejection as Andromède's fiancé. Everyone interprets Phinée's choice not to come to Andromède's aid against the monster as an unpardonable *lâcheté*, despite his protestation that he could not bear to witness her death. In dramatic terms, Corneille underlines the scandal of Phinée's absence by his decision to place a considerable number of characters onstage. While only Persée, Andromède, and the monster are necessary to the dramatic action, Andromède's mother Cassiope is present, joined by the captain of the guards Timante and a chorus of Céphée's subjects, all lamenting and offering their support. In fact, the only significant characters absent from the scene are Phinée and Céphée. And while everyone considers Phinée's absence blameworthy, Céphée's passes unnoticed. No mention is ever made of the latter's absence. If Céphée is unable to assume the role of the rescuer, either because of advanced age or a sense of royal obligation to obey divine dictates, why does he not at least join his wife onstage? The disjuncture in the play's treatment of the absence of the two men is unsettling.

The similarity of the choice made by both Céphée and Phinée in this context is obscured. The two men would seem to have little in common,

one the father and king, the other the lover; the first the voice of reason and acceptance, the second imprudently trumpeting his objections to the decrees of both king and gods. Neither, however, is willing to suffer on Andromède's behalf. On several occasions, the text of the play creates clear parallels between the two men in relation to her. The most obvious example involves an explicit rivalry between the two over who is most injured by Andromède's loss. In words reminiscent of the squabbles between Sabine and Camille in *Horace*, Céphée tells Phinée:

Votre perte n'est rien au prix de ma misère,
 Vous n'êtes qu'amoureux, Phinée, et je suis père,
 Il est d'autres objets dignes de votre foi,
 Mais il n'est point ailleurs d'autres filles pour moi. (ll. 714-17)

More specific is the fact that both men bring up the same example of the twenty lovers who perished coming to the aid of a former victim, Nérée. Céphée uses this model in an attempt to dissuade Persée from trying to save Andromède (ll. 764-67), while Phinée uses it to excuse his own inaction (ll. 1218-19). Finally, both men use the word *épargner* in conjunction with protecting themselves from the pain and suffering involved in the loss of Andromède. When Céphée arrives onstage to hand his daughter over to be sacrificed, he almost immediately says to her: "Épargne ma douleur, juges-en par sa cause, / Et va, sans me forcer à te dire autre chose" (ll. 682-83). Phinée uses the term in a similar fashion when seeking once again to excuse his absence in Act III: "J'épargnais à mes yeux un funeste spectacle" (l. 1250). *Épargner* appears only three times in the entire play. Its last appearance is in the mouth of the third significant male character, Persée, and he, in contrast to the other two, applies it not to himself, but to Andromède ("Je bénirai l'Arrêt [. . .] / Si ma mort vous épargne un peu de déplaisirs," ll. 1088-89). Elsewhere, Céphée's reaction to the pronouncement of Andromède's fate is described as similar to Phinée's; Timante tells the latter: "Le Roi, non plus que vous, ne l'a pas cru d'abord" (l. 609). The family ties between the two men are worth noting as well: Phinée is presented as Céphée's nephew. In Ovid's version, from which Corneille took the subject, the two men are brothers. The strong similarities between Phinée and Céphée are evident, and yet camouflaged by Céphée's compliance with the gods' pronouncements, which contrasts with Phinée's opposition.

Central is the fact that Céphée, like Phinée, is not present when and where he should be.³

Céphée's specific absence from the scene of Andromède's sacrifice seems indicative of a more generalized absence, as the king himself seems to have surprisingly little stature as events unfold. In the very first scene of the play, Cassiope provides a long and rather conventional *récit* of exposition, informing both Persée and the spectators of the circumstances leading up to the play's action (ll. 122-201). Nowhere in this *récit* is there any mention of Céphée. Corneille/Cassiope's choice to omit him, while hardly glaring, is not an innocent one, underscoring as it does Céphée's relative lack of importance. Faced with the monster, Cassiope offers Andromède to Persée as an inducement to save her (III,2); only later does the Queen think to consult Céphée ("Allons [. . .] / [. . .] demander au Roi / L'effet du juste espoir qu'il [Persée] a reçu de moi," ll. 995-97). Indeed, Céphée seems to command respect and obedience only from his daughter. Phinée shows no respect for Céphée's decrees and even Persée dismisses Céphée's decision to accord Andromède's hand to her savior: "c'est aux Amants vulgaires, / À faire agir pour eux l'autorité des pères" (ll. 1074-75).

Céphée himself is essentially passive and ineffectual. Far from calling Persée to action as Cassiope does, he tries to discourage him. When he draws Andromède's name from the urn, the King's only response is to try again, drawing the same name three times. After Eole and the winds carry off Andromède for sacrifice, Céphée is explicit about his own passivity and his own impotence: "Pour ne voir point courir ce grand coeur [Persée] au trépas, / Je vais faire des vœux, qu'on n'écouterà pas" (ll. 778-79). When Cassiope learns that Phinée is attacking Persée, she wants to call out the troops to defend him; Céphée again counsels inaction and places his confidence in the gods ("Modérez vos frayeurs, et vous, séchez vos larmes. / Le Ciel n'a pas besoin du secours de nos armes," ll. 1659-60). Céphée's passivity, like his absence in Act III, escapes notice. Concealed by the veneer of throne and reason, Céphée seems to resist attack.

³ Indeed, what Doubrovsky says of Phinée applies just as well to Céphée: "le problème [. . .] du Maître [Phinée] qui recule devant la mort et qui a peur, [et] la déchéance toujours possible envers le sang et la race, surgissent inopinément dans *Andromède*" (270).

Céphée's erasure is paradoxically complete as he rises to the firmaments with the other members of his family. Rétat has noted that Céphée's fate is not very different from Phinée's: "Pétrification pour Phinée – immortalité stellaire pour les autres. Les deux fins ne sont peut-être pas aussi différentes qu'il y paraît" (303). Céphée's eternal absence signals a different kind of erasure as well: the monarchical function seemingly disappears as Ethiopia is left without a king or a royal family. While it would be difficult to assign a precise political meaning to Corneille's presentation of Céphée, nonetheless the king, from his first words – "N'en parlons plus, Phinée" (l. 252) – to his final ascension, has little authority and is but a pale presence when he is not entirely absent from crucial events.

* * *

To some extent, one might argue that Céphée has attracted little critical notice because his role is indeed a small one. The same cannot be said of King Aète in *La Conquête de la Toison d'or* whose role is the third only to those of Médée and Jason in size. Like Céphée, Aète makes a significant error, and like Céphée, he becomes a figure of impotence and eventually loses his kingdom.

Aète's error is hardly one of absence, but involves instead a spectacular lapse in judgment. The second scene of the play presents a lengthy discussion of how to reward Jason and his men for their important military service to the kingdom; Jason has even saved the king's life three times in the successful battle to defeat Aète's brother. "Que ne lui dois-je point?" (l. 347), Aète asks. The king would like to entice Jason and his men to remain in Colchos so that he might rely on them further. To this end, he formulates a series of possible offers: Médée's hand in marriage, a foreign throne, even half of the throne of Colchos ("Et c'est toujours prudence, en un péril funeste, / D'offrir une moitié, pour conserver le reste," ll. 425-26). However, when Jason comes on stage in the next scene, Aète's prudent plans of enticements inexplicably evaporate as he simply says, "Je ne vous fais point d'offre" (l. 457), suggesting instead, "Mais si dans mes États, mais si dans mon Palais, / Quelque chose avait pu mériter vos souhaits" (ll. 459-60), it will be his. Furthermore, Aète takes a blind oath to that effect. Jason, of course, demands the Golden Fleece and Aète is trapped by his promise, having committed himself to

relinquish the object upon which his kingdom's existence depends. The Fleece's status as a universal object of desire was already mentioned in the previous scene ("Ce trésor, où les Dieux attachent nos destins, / Et que veulent ravir tant de jaloux voisins," ll. 351-52), making Aète's open offer to Jason all the more scandalous. The disjuncture between the two scenes, one marked by prudence and planning, and the other by blind impulsiveness, is enormous. Even more surprising is the fact that no one blames Aète for his error. Like Céphée, his lapse is perhaps concealed by his royal status.

As in *Andromède*, once the error has been committed, signs of the king's powerlessness seem to multiply. First, his children show increasing signs of a lack of respect, in both cases tied to their foreign love interests. Absyrte, trying to win Hypsipyle's affection, offers her his father's kingdom ("Je mettrais à vos pieds le Trône et la Couronne, / Où le Ciel me destine, et que le sang me donne," ll. 968-69). While his words appear to be conventional lover's discourse, they resonate closely with Médée's words and actions as she in effect does what Absyrte only offers.⁴ Médée, initially loyal to her father and sensitive to the importance of the Fleece ("Je ne trahirai point mon pays, et mon père, / Le destin de l'Etat dépend de la Toison," ll. 845-46), in the end completely betrays him by carrying off the Fleece herself and sealing Aète's fate.

Aète's impotence is evident elsewhere as well. He alone of all the major characters in the play neither has any magical powers nor is even suspected of having any. While Médée is the only character to actually possess such powers, Absyrte, with his sister's help, pretends to have the magical ability to rescue Hypsipyle from the *palais d'horreur* in which Médée has placed her (III,6). Aète believes that Hypsipyle has occult powers that allow Jason to defeat the charms protecting the Fleece (V,2). When Hypsipyle protests, Aète and Absyrte consider the possibility that Jason himself has knowledge of the magical arts (V,2). No one associates magical *pouvoirs* with Aète. The king, distressed at the loss of the Fleece and thirsting for the supernatural faculty to exact revenge on the Greeks, begs his father the Sun, "Donne-moi tes chevaux à conduire en ta place" (I. 2156), but to no avail. Aète's sister Circé and his daughter both have strong magical powers, but the males in the family, Aète and

⁴ Alice Rathé notes a reversal of traditional brother and sister roles between Absyrte and Médée (508).

Absyrte, have none. Indeed, there is a strong matrilineal current in this play which functions to make Aète look even more powerless. Not only is sorcery attributed only to women in the family, but the gods reveal a dynastic future that will pass through Médée, not Absyrte.⁵ And while it will be a male, Médée's son, who will reestablish the throne, his name, Médus, evokes another famous female, Méduse (Zanger 126).

The divine decree concerning the Fleece works to make Aète appear weak as well. It is not legitimacy or even force, but rather the possession of an object, that constitutes the basis of Aète's royal power. No explanation is ever offered for why this should be so; Aète is simply a powerless victim of a divine decision. The King's stature is not increased when he mistakenly blames Hypsipyle instead of Médée for the attack on the Fleece. He himself admits "mon oeil mal éclairé / [. . .] et trop peu de lumière / M'ont conduit en aveugle à ma ruine entière" (ll. 1905-07). Indeed, his lapse in judgment in Act I leads to his pathetic, but in no way tragic, end.

At the dénouement Aète suffers an erasure comparable to Céphée's. Even the Sun's intervention with Jupiter on Aète's behalf cannot save his throne. Whereas Céphée ascends to the firmament, Aète must go off in exile to Hypsipyle's kingdom to await the grandson who will win back his kingdom for him. Céphée and Aète are both divested of their thrones, but in both cases there is compensation: Céphée becomes immortal and Aète is given the certainty that he will rule again. Their immediate fate, however, is absence from their kingdoms.

* * *

Absence and impotence mark both kings, although in different proportions. Both kings take a grievous misstep, yet their transgressions are ignored. While there are other Cornelian kings whose power is called into question (for example, Prusias in *Nicomède*, Ardaric and Valamir in *Attila*, Pertharite, even Syphax and Massinisse in *Sophonisbe*), none are characterized by a serious yet unacknowledged lapse. One has to wonder why any king would be subject to such dramatic depiction, and more

⁵ Amy Wygant notes that this future dynastic path is so surprising that Lancaster misread the text, believing that "votre perfide" (l. 2210), who Jupiter announces will be the source of a renewed family line, referred to Absyrte and not Médée (549).

specifically, why such kings would appear in the machine plays. The answer may lie, at least in part, with a feature shared by these two plays and which distinguishes them from the rest of Corneille's dramatic output: the presence onstage of the gods. While the importance of the gods to the action of the two plays is arguable,⁶ what is certain is that they constitute a patently higher authority than the king. And just as Mauron argued that the return of the father in Racine's theater brought with it the fault of the son (142), so too the kings in Corneille's theater can be seen to be at fault as a result of the gods' presence. Indeed, from the beginning of both plays, each king is subject to some punishing or potentially punishing divine decree: Céphée must sacrifice a young woman every month to the angered Neptune while Aète knows that the gods have ordained that his throne is dependent upon continued possession of the Golden Fleece. Thus the notion of punishment, which implicitly suggests fault, is present from the beginning in both plays. The fault is explicit in *Andromède*: Andromède's mother Cassiope boasted that her daughter was more beautiful than the Néréides; in *La Toison d'or* the original fault is never made clear, but, as we noted, Aète is indeed responsible for the loss of the Golden Fleece.

In keeping with the relationship of kings and gods, the notion of hierarchy is a recurring concern in both plays. Céphée recognizes his own subservience to the gods, but Phinée, calling Andromède's eyes "mes uniques Dieux" (l. 749), has no respect for these hierarchies. In *La Toison d'or*, Aète begs his divine father, the Sun, for help, thus acknowledging the latter's superiority. The presence of magic complicates hierarchy in this play, however, seemingly establishing an alternate order, one in which Médée is superior to her father because of her power.

The abasement of these two kings is thus plausibly a result of the presence and power of the gods in the machine plays. The concealment of the kings' transgressions is a more complex matter, however, than can be explained simply by the divine presence. I would like to return to the subject of fault. Céphée's absence at the scene of his daughter's sacrifice and Aète's foolishly open offer to Jason constitute specific faults within

⁶ Delmas notes that, "Si les apparitions divines [. . .] sont bien le support manifeste de l'intrigue, la progression dramatique linéaire repose sur l'initiative et le courage de héros finalement seuls devant le danger, monstre de Neptune ou dragon de Médée" (401). Discussing *La Toison d'or*, Gethner states: "nothing would ultimately have changed, had none of the Olympians ever intervened" (627).

the action of the plays. As noted above, the notion of divine punishment present in both plays implies fault as well. Finally, there is a third level of fault: both Céphée and Aète make a gift from which they subsequently retreat. Céphée has promised Andromède to Phinée; indeed when the King then gives her to Persée, Phinée complains bitterly, in precisely the terms of the rules governing gift-giving: “Andromède est à moi, vous me l’avez donnée” (l. 706). Aète promises Jason anything he wants, yet when Jason asks for the Fleece, Aète retreats with qualifications: “La Toison est à vous, si vous pouvez la prendre, / Car ce n’est pas de moi qu’il vous la faut attendre” (ll. 533-34). Making promises that one does not keep is clearly morally problematic. Céphée’s retreat from his promise to Phinée will be retroactively sanctioned by the gods, but the gods will hold Aète accountable for his promise (Juno incites Médée to help Jason capture the Fleece).⁷ In both cases, the kings bear little resemblance to the traditional Cornelian monarch, either in terms of moral superiority or political acumen.

To present a transgression and then not hold the transgressor accountable, echoed by the move within the plays to give and then to take back, seems indicative of a high degree of ambivalence on Corneille’s part. What is the stature of the king when he is no longer a representative of the divine, but must share the world and the stage with the gods? Exalted enough to mask errors that are found blameworthy in others, perhaps, but little more. Both plays present a complex working out of the transgressions of the king through concealment and uncovering, punishment, and finally, curious forms of redemption.

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⁷ In both cases, the revocation of the gift, whether partial or entire, is linked to the notion of *change*, a central preoccupation of both plays (Andromède’s affections move from Phinée to Persée while Jason abandons Hypsipyle for Médée) and an act which is traditionally considered a grievous fault. Andromède’s *change* is legitimized and Jason’s, while morally problematic, is buttressed by his success at obtaining the Fleece. See my “*Le Change* in Corneille and Racine” for a discussion of *change* in these plays and Rétat for an explanation of the links between *change* and the machine play (304).

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