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Nina Ekstein

Trinity University, nekstein@trinity.edu

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## Staging the Tyrant on the Seventeenth-Century French Stage

by

NINA EKSTEIN

The tyrant is a frequent figure of seventeenth-century theater. While not as ubiquitous as young lovers, fathers, or kings, the tyrant is a persistent subset of this last group throughout the period. Like so many elements of seventeenth-century theater, the tyrant has its origins in antiquity, both in terms of political theory and drama.<sup>1</sup> Tyrants first appeared on the stage of fifth-century Athens,<sup>2</sup> and the legends and histories of the tyrants of antiquity are often repeated on the French stage of the seventeenth century, from Hérode sending Marianne to her death, to Brute assassinating César, to Néron eliminating his rival with poison. "Eternelle peur, la notion de tyrannie a toujours été le vrai centre des tragédies," according to Christian Biet.<sup>3</sup> Politically speaking, tyranny is not an idle abstraction in the seventeenth century. The rise of absolutism strongly marks the period from Richelieu and Louis XIII to the apotheosis of Louis XIV. With the rise of absolutism came the real potential for tyranny. In Jean-Marie Apostolides's terms,

à cause de l'étendue du pouvoir absolu, la hantise de la tyrannie traverse toute la pensée politique et la littérature du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle.<sup>4</sup>

Before going any further, it might be useful to discuss what was meant by the term *tyrant* in the seventeenth century. There are two basic types of tyrants, the *usurper-tyrant*, who has obtained the throne in a non-legal fashion, and the *oppressor-tyrant*, who abuses his legally acquired position

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<sup>1</sup> See A. Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants* (London: Hutchinson, 1956). Tyrants have drawn the attention of political theorists and philosophers dating back to Plato and Aristotle.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca W. Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990): 5.

<sup>3</sup> "Œdipe dans la tragédie du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: mémoire mythologique, mémoire juridique, mémoire généalogique," *PFSC* XXI, 21 (1994): 509.

<sup>4</sup> "Image du père et peur du tyran au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *PFSC* X (1978-1979): 200.

of power.<sup>5</sup> While the issue of usurpation comes up frequently in seventeenth-century plays dealing with tyrants, it is rarely differentiated from the tyrannical exercise of power.<sup>6</sup> Thus the abuse of power is characteristic of almost all seventeenth-century theatrical tyrants. While this abuse of power may take many forms, it centers on the individual placing his private self-interest above the common good and above the law. Tiridate in Georges de Scudéry's *L'Amour tyrannique* sums up the general position:

Les Rois sont au-dessus des crimes (1.1087).<sup>7</sup>

The tyrant, no doubt as a consequence of the abuse of power, is strongly associated with cruelty, violence, and uncontrolled passion.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> I am borrowing the terminology "usurper-tyrant" and "oppressor-tyrant" from Robin Carter ("Fuenteovejuna and tyranny: some problems of linking drama with political theory," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 13 [1977]: 313). The original Latin terms for the two are *a titulo* and *ab exercitio*.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Truchet, in his excellent article on the subject of tyrants in the French theater, notes that usurpation often leads to tyranny in the exercise of royal functions, and gives the examples of Tristan L'Hermite's *La Mort de Sénèque* and Racine's *Britannicus*, both depicting Néron ("La Tyrannie de Garnier à Racine: critères juridiques, psychologiques et dramaturgiques," in *L'Image du souverain dans les lettres françaises*, Ed. Noëmi Hepp and Madeleine Bertaud [Paris: Klincksieck, 1985]: 258).

<sup>7</sup> Georges de Scudéry, *L'Amour tyrannique*, in *Théâtre du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, vol. II, Ed. Jacques Scherer and Jacques Truchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1986). The principal plays dealing with tyrants that are discussed in this paper are the following (in chronological order):

Pierre Du Ryer, *Arétaphile* (1618)  
 Théophile de Viau, *Pyrame et Thisbé* (1621)  
 Georges de Scudéry, *La Mort de César* (1636)  
 Tristan L'Hermite, *La Marianne* (1637)  
 Pierre Du Ryer, *Lucrece* (1638)  
 Georges de Scudéry, *L'Amour tyrannique* (1639)  
 Pierre Corneille, *Cinna* (1643)  
 Tristan L'Hermite, *La Mort de Sénèque* (1644)  
 Pierre Corneille, *Héraclius* (1647)  
 Pierre Corneille, *Pértharite* (1651)  
 Pierre Corneille, *Sertorius* (1662)  
 Villedieu, *Manlius* (1662)  
 Villedieu, *Nitétis* (1663)  
 Pierre Corneille, *Attila* (1667)  
 Jean Racine, *Britannicus* (1669)  
 Jean Racine, *Mithridate* (1673)

<sup>8</sup> Furetière, in his *Dictionnaire universel*, defines a tyrant first as a usurper; his second definition is:

un Prince qui abuse de son pouvoir, qui ne gouverne pas selon les loix, qui use de violence et de cruauté envers ses sujets.

The question of the appropriate reaction to this abuse of power was debated for many years throughout Europe. Tyrannicide was one possibility. Henri II and Henri IV were both felled by assassins convinced they were ridding the land of a tyrant. Charles I of England was accused of being a tyrant and his political difficulties eventually led to his being deposed and, in 1649, decapitated. In theoretical terms, distinctions were made between usurper-tyrants and oppressor-tyrants; it was often felt that the people could legitimately take action only against the former.<sup>9</sup> The sacred status of the king's body made the assassination of any legitimate ruler, however tyrannical, highly problematic. While political theory and the theater hardly approach the problem of tyranny in the same manner, they are not entirely unrelated. In his *Pratique du théâtre*, D'Aubignac counsels against presenting tyrannicide onstage because of respect for the sacred status of the king.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, few tyrants are killed during the course of the plays in this period.<sup>11</sup> D'Aubignac was obviously sensitive to the political ramifications of enacting the death of a tyrant. Such ramifications need to

<sup>9</sup> According to Carter, sixteenth-century Spanish jurist-theologians Soto and Molina make the distinction between the two kinds of tyrants and judge that it is not permissible for private citizens to kill "oppressor-tyrants." Under certain circumstances they might kill "usurper-tyrants" ("Fuenteovejuna," 315). See also Robert S. Miola, "Julius Caesar and the tyrannicide debate," *Renaissance Quarterly* 38 (1985): 284-85, on the right to kill tyrants.

<sup>10</sup> Parmi nous le respect et l'amour que nous avons pour nos Princes, ne peut permettre que l'on donne au Public ces Spectacles pleins d'horreur; nous ne voulons point croire que les Rois puissent être mechans, ni souffrir que leurs Sujets, quoiqu'en apparence mal-traitez, touchent leurs Personnes sacrées, ni se rebellent contre leur Puissance, non pas même en peinture; je ne croy pas que l'on puisse faire assassiner un Tyran sur notre Theatre avec applaudissement, sans de très-signalées précautions [...] la seule usurpation contre la volonté des Sujets ne seroit pas assez considerable pour faire mourir sans quelque horreur un Souverain par la main des rebelles. (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1971: 73).

Couton points out that

Les Français du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle sont élevés dans le respect des pouvoirs établis, considérés comme voulus par Dieu du fait même qu'ils sont établis. Un écrivain est donc tenu de légitimer un détronement, même du tyran. (Corneille, *Œuvres complètes* [Paris: Gallimard, 1984], vol. 2, 1371, n. 2)

<sup>11</sup> An exception is Phocas in Corneille's *Héraclius*, a play that is exceptional in a number of regards. Interestingly, A. Robert Lauer reports that in the theater of the Golden Age in Spain, the tyrannical monarch was generally killed during the course of the play:

He is slain, whether he is a usurper, a pretender, a legitimate sovereign, or, in some cases, a negligent and deficient king. He is murdered not only on the basis of natural law, but also on moral and political grounds. (*Tyrannicide and Drama* [Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1987]: 12).

be considered whenever a tyrant appears on stage. Indeed, it is legitimate to speculate about why a given playwright might choose to write about tyrants and tyranny. Perhaps some stage tyrants are to be read as a warning to monarchs to resist the temptations of tyranny. On the other hand, the intentions of playwrights may be more seditious.<sup>12</sup> Madeleine Bertaud argues that Théophile de Viau's representation of the tyrant in *Pyrame et Thisbé* constitutes a condemnation of monarchy.<sup>13</sup> Franco Moretti suggests that by putting the tyrant on stage, English tragedy

disentitled the absolute monarch to all ethical and rational legitimation. Having deconsecrated the king, tragedy made it possible to decapitate him.<sup>14</sup>

French playwrights may have shielded themselves from any potential recriminations growing out of possible similarities between the onstage and the reigning monarch by favoring usurper-tyrants rather than pure oppressor-tyrants. Most of the tyrants on the seventeenth-century stage are in fact usurpers of some sort while the reigning monarchs of the period were not. Although it is not the focus of my project to examine the political intentions of the playwrights in writing tyrants into their plays, it is worth considering that the tyrant is hardly a neutral figure in the political context of the period.

Tyrants are thus in all likelihood depicted on the seventeenth-century stage in part because of their putative ties with political reality.<sup>15</sup> Tyrants are also favored by playwrights for their natural affinities with the stage. The raw display of power and force is eminently theatrical. Monarchy is almost invariably linked to pomp and display, and tyranny is an extreme

<sup>12</sup> According to Bushnell,

In fifth century Athens and Renaissance England, it was recognized that the theater was potentially subversive, especially in its representation of controversial political figures, past, present, and fictional. ("Stage tyrants: The cases of Creon and Caesar," *Classical and Modern Literature* 7.2 [1987]: 71).

<sup>13</sup> "Roi et sujets dans *Les Amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé* de Théophile de Viau," *Travaux de littérature* 6 (1993): 148.

<sup>14</sup> *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, David Miller (London: NLB, 1983): 42.

<sup>15</sup> James D. Matthews, for instance, suggests that the many images of a tyrannical sovereign parallel the concentration of power in the hands of Richelieu and Louis XIII ("The Tyrannical Sovereign in Pre-1640 French Tragicomedy: Political Statement or Dramatic Necessity?" *L'image du souverain dans le théâtre de 1600 à 1650*. Actes de Wake Forest, Ed. Milorad R. Margitic and Byron R. Wells, Biblio 17, Vol. 37, Tübingen, 1987: 155).

form of monarchy.<sup>16</sup> The tyrant as an exceptional being, a figure of excess, commands our attention.<sup>17</sup> Through this excess, the tyrant becomes larger than life, heroic in his stature, albeit not in his morals. He is himself a spectacle, a kind of monster who gives us a *frisson* of pleasure even as he may frighten us.<sup>18</sup> The tyrant is thus a creature of theater, both constituting and using spectacle for his own narrowly focused ends.

Perhaps the most frequent setting for the dramatic tyrant in the seventeenth century is baroque tragicomedy.<sup>19</sup> The baroque appreciation for excess lent itself well to the tyrannical king and his displays of fury and violence. Typical of the tragicomic tyrant plays is unbridled sexual desire and a sudden conversion at the end. The most despicable desires, projects, and acts suddenly evaporate in the last scene and the tyrant is reformed. In Villedieu's *Manlius*, for example, the tyrant, Torquatus, desires the woman his son loves and condemns his son to death so that he might have her. Torquatus changes his mind at the last minute and all live happily ever after. Incestuous desire is a recurring motif in the tragicomic tyrant as well. In Du Ryer's *Arétaphile*, Nicocratte first desires Arétaphile and then later

<sup>16</sup> Truchet puts it well: "Il existait une sorte d'harmonie pré-établie entre le théâtre et la monarchie; rien de plus théâtral que la royauté." (Jacques Truchet, *La Tragédie classique en France* [Paris: PUF, 1975]: 97). Elsewhere, he says that tyranny lends itself to "une dramaturgie merveilleusement spectaculaire" ("La Tyrannie de Garnier à Racine," 263).

<sup>17</sup> Fontenelle explains the draw of tyrants:

Les vices ont aussi leur perfection. Un demi-tiran seroit indigne d'être regardé; mais l'ambition, la cruauté, la perfidie poussées à leur plus haut point, deviennent de grands objets... (*Réflexions sur la poétique*; quoted by Maurice Baudin, *The Profession of King in Seventeenth-Century French Drama* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941]: 33).

H. B. Charlton says:

a favorite character is the tyrannous king, and the reason is obvious. The office of kingship provides a maximum of the *maestà* and *decoro* which the dignity of tragedy demanded, and the prerogative of kingship a maximum of power for the provision of unmitigated cruelty and horror. (*The Senecan Tradition in Renaissance Tragedy*; quoted by James Crapotta, *Kingship and Tyranny in the Theater of Guillen de Castro* [London: Tamesis Books, 1984]: 23).

<sup>18</sup> See Hélène Merlin's discussion of the monster in the seventeenth century, "Où est le monstre? Remarques sur l'esthétique classique" (*Revue des sciences humaines* 59, n. 188 [1982]: 179-93). Indeed, the term "monstre" recurs frequently in these plays. See, for example, *La Marianne* 1.1335, *La Mort de Sénèque* 11.412 and 1743, *Manlius* 1.1477, *Nitétis* 1.157, *L'Amour tyrannique* 11.283 and 1210.

<sup>19</sup> Matthews shows that the tyrannical king was a typical figure of baroque theater ("The Tyrannical Sovereign": 148).

her sister. In Villedieu's *Nitétis*, Cambise seeks a divorce in order to marry his own sister. Sexual deviance is nonetheless followed by a happy ending.

In comedy, the tyrant figure is often reduced to a father opposed to his child's marriage. While the father has some power in the domain of his household and abuses that power frequently, the comic tyrant is no longer a king. Comic tyrants abound in the theater of Molière (e.g., Arnolphe, Harpagon, Orgon, Argan), but the reduction in the scope of their power places them outside the domain of true tyrants.

Not surprisingly, tragedy is the most diverse and rich terrain for tyrants and tyranny. Here, conversions are rare, and sexual desire, while still present, is not a constant feature. Rather, we find far more bloodshed, including murders often committed in conjunction with the establishment of a throne that has been usurped. While all tyrants can be said to have difficulty mastering their passions, here that passion may be political rather than anything resembling love. Tyrants in tragedy are not necessarily themselves tragic. The potential for tragic stature exists, however, in the grandeur of a tyrant's aspirations, the hubris with which he places himself above all others, and his ultimate defeat.<sup>20</sup> Some tyrants such as Corneille's Attila, Tristan L'Hermite's Hérode (*La Marianne*), or Racine's Mithridate can be said to be tragic in this way.

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The central focus of my examination of tyrants in the seventeenth-century theater concerns representation; that is, how the tyrant, a figure of great power and danger, is presented onstage, integrated into the dramatic action, even dispatched. How does a tyrant abet or undermine dramatic conflict? Put in a slightly different way, how is the identity of the dramatic tyrant constructed in the context of the seventeenth-century stage?

The seventeenth-century dramatic tyrant is determined first by the limitations involved in dramatic representation and specifically the constraints inherent in the conventions of the seventeenth-century stage. There are two basic problems. The first involves scope: because of the unities of time and space, as well as the practical realities of a small stage and a troupe made up of a limited number of actors, the grandiose dimensions of the tyrant's world – his subjects, his battles, his public displays – cannot be represented on stage. The pomp and ostentation typical of tyrants cannot be fully represented, but only suggested. Second, because of the *bienséances*, the depic-

<sup>20</sup> See below for an explanation of why the tyrant is by definition a male in the seventeenth century.

tion of the crimes of the tyrant is restricted. There may be no bloodshed on stage, so violence is confined to acts reported in *récits*. In a similar vein, what makes the sexual desire of an actual tyrant so terrifying is the lack of a censoring mechanism in the passage from desire to act; however, because there may be no enactment of sexuality on stage, inhibitions are in fact imposed on the stage tyrant. Thus, ironically, the representation of the onstage tyrant is limited in terms of the attributes and activities strongly associated with tyranny.

Perhaps because of these constraints concerning representation, some playwrights prefer to forgo violent tyrannical acts during the course of the play, whether onstage or off.<sup>21</sup> They do not, however, sacrifice such acts – for one must abuse power to be a dramatic tyrant – but rather place these acts in the past or the future. A listing of past crimes and cruel acts is frequent in tyrant-plays, and constitutes a means of credentialing the tyrant.<sup>22</sup> Tyrannical acts situated in the future are in fact perfectly suited to the theater: the tyrant voices threats, menacing those around him with what he *will* do. Future tyrannical acts exist only in the form of language, of course, and it is precisely in the domain of language that the onstage tyrant cedes nothing to his real counterpart. Threats of future tyrannical acts function very effectively to create an atmosphere of fear and dramatic tension. At times action seems to be on the verge of catching up to language: in *Héraclius*, Phocas three times orders the immediate death of Martian (whom he believes to be Héraclius), and each time Héraclius intervenes and violence is averted.

The role of the tyrant-figure as the motor in a given play may vary from absolute centrality, as in the case of Attila, to relative marginality to the play's action, such as the king in Théophile's *Pyrame et Thisbé*.<sup>23</sup> Most, however, have large speaking roles and occupy the stage for a significant portion of the play.<sup>24</sup> Indeed it seems logical to provide this most powerful individual with the dramatic equivalents of power: speech and presence, both of which connote control on the stage. An interesting exception to this

<sup>21</sup> This is by no means the case in all the plays. See below.

<sup>22</sup> For example, *Attila*, IV, i; *Marianne* I, iii.

<sup>23</sup> The latter is marginal in two respects: first he never has any direct contact with either Pyrame or Thisbé. Second, the action of the play is not altered by his presence or his persecution of the young lovers. Madeleine Bertaud notes that the character of the king was Théophile's invention and appeared in none of the sources of the play ("Roi et sujets." 138).

<sup>24</sup> The most extreme examples are Attila, Hérode (*La Marianne*), and Néron (Tristan L'Hermite's *La Mort de Sénèque*), all of whom have the largest speaking role in their respective dramatic universes and who are on stage for over 1000 lines of the play.

general tendency is to be found in Corneille's *Sertorius*. The tyrant, Sylla, never appears on stage at all. His presence is palpable strictly in the discourse of other characters, and the term "tyrant" occurs 13 times in reference to him. In *Sylla*, Corneille thus found a novel solution to the problems of staging a tyrant. He is the absent center of *Sertorius*, for or against whom all the characters identify themselves.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Corneille keeps Auguste offstage in the first act of *Cinna*, thereby defining him as a tyrant in the eyes and the words of other characters.

Corneille consistently chooses to have his tyrants avoid violent acts during the course of the play's action. Thus where Racine's Néron (*Britannicus*) has Britannicus killed, Hérode has Marianne put to death, Tristan's Néron (*La Mort de Sénèque*) has Epicaris tortured and killed and forces Sénèque to take his own life, and Du Ryer's Tarquin rapes Lucrece, albeit off stage, Corneille takes a completely different approach. In his five plays where tyrants are most clearly set out – *Cinna*, *Héraclius*, *Pertharite*, *Sertorius*, and *Attila* – no crime is committed by the tyrant during the course of the plays. While retaining the linguistic dimensions of the tyrant – the threats and the verbal fury – the acts themselves simply do not come to pass. Auguste undergoes a conversion, Phocas is assassinated, Grimoald cedes Rodelinde and the throne to Pertharite, Sylla abdicates, and Attila dies fortuitously. There is another consequence to Corneille's choice: his tyrants are less fearsome and more human because the criminal acts for which they are responsible all belong strictly to the realm of the past. Indeed, Corneille humanizes his tyrants in a variety of manners: from Phocas who is as much a loving father as a cruel tyrant, to Auguste who has sought to atone for his crimes by showering Emilie and Cinna with his generosity, to Attila, who expresses his love for Ildione most fervently.<sup>26</sup> In fact, this last example has provoked criticism, as C. J. Gossip notes:

<sup>25</sup> Monique Bilezikian finds that Pompée's allegiance to Sylla makes it impossible for the former to attain heroic status. Sylla's tyranny constitutes a form of contagion that infects Pompée and is thus brought onstage through him ("Divorce, désordre et légitimité dans *Sertorius* de Corneille," *Cahiers du dix-septième* 3.2 [1989]: 4). In a different vein, it has been noted that Sertorius's heroic acts belong to pre-dramatic time (Helen Bates McDermott, "Heroism and Tragedy: Corneille's *Sertorius*," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 30 [1983]: 119). Heroism in this play is thus confined to pre-dramatic time while tyranny is relegated to extra-scenic space. Neither tyranny nor heroism is represented onstage.

<sup>26</sup> Attila:

Ah! vous me charmez trop, moi de qui l'âme altière  
Cherche à voir sous mes pas trembler la Terre entière,  
Moi qui veux pouvoir tout, sitôt que je vous vois  
Malgré tout cet orgueil je ne puis rien sur moi, (11.817-20).

Critics have had a field-day deriding 'les scènes sentimentales, avec leur jargon de ruelles,' suggesting that 'Attila est autant Céladon que fléau de Dieu;...son tonnerre devient constamment chanson de rossignol et murmures de brise langoureuse.'<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, nuancing the figure of the tyrant on the seventeenth-century stage has its potential difficulties. Attila's tyrannical grandeur, as he revels in the role of "fléau de l'univers," is no doubt less problematic for the spectator than Attila in love. One explanation for this reaction on the part of the spectator is that the tyrant-figure is strongly linked to the inhuman and is traditionally viewed as unidimensional.<sup>28</sup> Thus an ambiguous, nuanced, lover-avenger is hard to accept.

The traditional, monolithic figure of the tyrant entails certain unexpected consequences. He runs the risk of appearing almost comic at times; the mechanical rigidity of the tyrant brings to mind Bergson's essay on laughter.<sup>29</sup> In part the potential for the comic in the tyrant is a function of an important shared characteristic: excess. The excessive nature of the tyrant and that of the comic figure are far closer on the stage than is likely in reality, because of the limitations on the representation of the tyrant that were discussed above. If the tyrant must be staged through language, the excess that characterizes him may at times border on the comic through the simple mechanism of exaggeration or hyperbole. Until the tyrant acts, until his power is felt, he is curiously similar to a Matamore.<sup>30</sup> Hérode opens *La*

Pierre Corneille, *Attila*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Ed. Georges Couton (Gallimard: Paris, 1987), vol. 3.

<sup>27</sup> C.J. Gossip, "Attila and tragedy," *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 9 (1988): 159; he is quoting M. Descotes, *Dix promenades dans le cimetière corneilien* (Paris: Pensée universelle, 1983): 91, and D. Momet, 'Andromaque' de Jean Racine (Paris, 1947): 100.

<sup>28</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the tyrant was often associated with animals. In *Pyrame et Thisbé*, the king is linked with the lion: both scare the young lovers, but do not directly touch them. The tyrannical animal of choice in the seventeenth-century French theater seems to be the tiger: Hérode is called a "Tigre inhumain" (*La Marianne*, 1.1341); Torquatus, a "Tigre affamé du sang" (*Manlius*, 1.1480); and Auguste a "Tigre altéré de tout le sang Romain" (*Cinna*, 1.168).

<sup>29</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le Rire, essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: PUF, 1940).

<sup>30</sup> The braggadocio figure was popular in France during the 1630's and 1640's and appeared in a number of plays, the most popular of which was Corneille's *Illusion comique*. See Françoise Siguret, "Matamore et Fracasse; théâtre et iconographie politique dans la première moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Revue d'histoire du théâtre* 39 (1987): 243-54. Georges Couton notes that in Corneille's *La Mort de Pompée*, César offers his services to Cléopâtre:

s'il est un trône qui lui convienne quelque part, il ira le lui conquérir. En vérité Matamore ne s'exprimait pas autrement [...] C'est une disgrâce qu'un conqué-

*Marianne* with a lengthy description of his own military feats and brags to his sister, Salomé:

Rien n'est assez puissant pour me perdre aujourd'hui. (1.157).

Daniel Gerould notes,

The arbitrary exercise of absolute power by a deranged tyrant can be a source of comic pleasure to an audience – and comic not in spite of the arbitrariness, but precisely because of it. The ridiculous and the terrifying coalesce.<sup>31</sup>

Disproportion itself may be comic: the tyrant is all powerful, yet may be helpless: the king in *Pyrame et Thisbé* sends messengers to Thisbé with offers of love; she refuses even to listen to the king's emissary; later, the king sends two assassins to dispatch Pyrame, but they fail. Furthermore, one of them baldly lies to the king about what happened. This nameless tyrant seems unable to exert his power at all.

The disproportion embodied by the all-powerful yet impotent tyrant is most often linked to the domain of love. It is common for the object of the tyrant's sexual desire to refuse his attentions (with varying degrees of success). Generally speaking, this particular form of disproportion is more ironic than comic: the basic difference in political power between the tyrant and the object of his desire is reversed on the personal level. All of the enamored tyrants are to some extent powerless before the woman they love: Mithridate cannot convince Monime to marry him once he has tricked her; Marianne refuses Hérode's attempts at living in peace; Ildione is in love with Ardaric, not Attila; Rodelinde refuses Grimoald's advances (*Pertharite*); Omphale will not accede to Torquatus (*Manlius*) nor Mandanne to the incestuous desire of her brother Cambise (*Nitétis*). Interestingly, the term "tyrant" is often used in connection with the woman in such situations, particularly by the tyrant himself. In *Pyrame et Thisbé*, the king refers to his love for Thisbé as "Ce tyran implacable" (1.211); Attila refers to Ildione's "tyrans d'appas" (1.896); Cinna tells Emilie,

Auguste est moins Tyran que vous. (1.1062).

The woman can accede to the level of tyrant, that is, she may have absolute power, only in the domain of the private, the personal (i.e., love). In the public domain the term "tyrant" is simply not applied to women. Even Cléopâtre in *Rodogune* is not called a tyrant. Her power can only be exer-

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rant soit toujours Picrochole par quelque côté et que leur langage ne permette pas de distinguer vrai et faux brave. ("Notice" to *La Mort de Pompée*, in Pierre Corneille, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), vol. 1, 1725).

<sup>31</sup> "Tyranny and comedy," *New York Literary Forum* 1 (1978): 4.

cised through a man; a king must sit on the throne of Syrie. Thus, typically, tyranny is balanced onstage between the public domain where the male tyrant is all-powerful and the private domain where women withhold love. The threat of dramatic imbalance which the tyrant represents because of his absolute power is thus mitigated. The frustration of the tyrant is highly ironic: his status as a tyrant comes from his using political power for personal ends, and yet it is precisely in the realm of the personal that he is most ineffectual.

While the tyrant may be ineffectual at obtaining the affections of the desired woman, he doesn't hesitate to act out his desires. Tiridate voices his amorous tyranny thus:

Plus on est violent, plus on est amoureux.  
(*L'Amour tyrannique*, 1.1118).<sup>32</sup>

In *Pyrame et Thisbé*, the king says to an absent Thisbé:

Tu sauras que je regne, et que la tyrannie  
Me peut bien accorder ce que l'Amour me nie (11.665-6).

A number of women propose a fittingly violent solution to their situation as powerless object: they contemplate killing the tyrant themselves during a moment of intimacy.<sup>33</sup> Ildione even speaks of a tradition of such murders:

Assez d'autres Tyrans ont péri par leurs femmes. (1.701).

This reaction speaks to both the desperation of the women and the contagion of lawlessness that the tyrant institutes.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The acting out of one's forbidden desires provides an explanation for the attraction of the figure of the tyrant for audiences. Bushnell states:

In giving in to the unlawful desires that most of us satisfy only in our dreams, the tyrant does, waking, what we all secretly want to do: in Plato's terms, eat forbidden foods, sleep with mother, man, god, or beast, and murder indiscriminately. (*Tragedies of Tyrants*, 13).

<sup>33</sup> Both Ildione and Honorie suggest such a solution at different moments (*Attila*, 11.701 and 1084). In *Sertorius*, Viriate threatens Perpenna in this manner (11.1780-84); in *Cinna*, Emilie imagines herself as Auguste's wife:

Je recevrais de lui la place de Livie  
Comme un moyen plus sûr d'attenter à sa vie (11.81-82).

In *Arétaphile*, Nicocratte's mother rightly accuses Arétaphile of having plans to poison the tyrant (11.489-90, 493-94).

<sup>34</sup> Robin Carter describes how in Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*, the Commendador's tyranny eventually leads to a similar reaction in the people: they murder the tyrant and become "utterly lawless-that is, tyrannical" ("*Fuenteovejuna* and tyranny," 325).

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In a play in which a tyrant appears, it is almost invariably the case that the tyrant can be read as the “problem” of the play. The weight of the tyrant is such that he is the source of disorder and imbalance; his presence disturbs the natural order of things and imposes the reign of the arbitrary.<sup>35</sup> Thus a play containing a tyrant must find a solution for the tyrant in order for the play to reach a satisfying conclusion. The most obvious solution is death. But as we have seen, such a resolution is problematic on the seventeenth-century stage both because of the *bienséances* and because of the respect universally paid the throne. The conspiracy to commit such a murder is nonetheless the focus of several plays (*La Mort de César*, *La Mort de Sénèque*, *Cinna*), but the outcomes of the conspiracies are decidedly mixed.<sup>36</sup> Of the group of tyrant plays that I examined, only three other plays involve assassination (*Arétaphile*, *Lucrèce*, and *Héraclius*) and in each case there are moves to attenuate the murder. In Du Ryer’s *Arétaphile*, the tyrant, Nicocratte, is not killed *qua* tyrant, but while wearing a disguise. The murderer believes him to be someone else and believes that the murder he is committing will win him Nicocratte’s favor. At the same time, it is an assassination, because the murderer’s confusion was carefully planned by the tyrant’s brother. In Du Ryer’s *Lucrèce*, the spectator is given to understand that Lucrece’s father and Brute will kill the criminal Tarquin after the curtain falls; thus the tyrant’s death is implied rather than committed. Comeille’s *Héraclius* provides perhaps the most complex set of deflections. It was Léontine’s project to have Phocas’s own son, Martian, kill his father. The taboo against parricide being even greater than that against tyrannicide, much of the play is taken up by hesitations and confusion on the part of the two young men whose identities are uncertain, one of whom is Phocas’s son and the other of whom has been raised as that son. To have either of them murder Phocas would have been scandalous, all the more so because this particular tyrant also has the heart of a father. The solution is an outside party, Exupère, who strikes offstage, thus protecting both young men from having to act.

<sup>35</sup> Emblematic of the disorder instituted by the tyrant is Cambise’s desire to marry his sister, Mandanne. She says:

Ce monstre au mépris des loix de la nature, . . .  
Veut confondre les noms et d’espousc et de sœur (*Nitétis*, 11.157-160).

<sup>36</sup> The only conspiracy to succeed in this group is the first, in which César is assassinated. See Roger Guichemerre, “A propos de *La Mort de Sénèque*: les tragédies de la conjuration,” *Cahiers Tristan L’Hermite* 4 (1982): 5-14.

The death of the tyrant is far more palatable to the seventeenth-century audience if it is not an assassination. Both Cambise in *Nitétis* and Mithridate act to take their own lives when faced with a military situation in which they believe themselves (mistakenly in both cases) to be cornered. In Rotrou’s *Cosroés*, the eponymous character takes his own life when he sees his wife dying, poisoned. Attila’s death of apoplexy is a *deus ex machina* and a perfect solution for a dramatic impasse in which Attila had all of the power and none of the other characters had any.<sup>37</sup> The other primary dramatic solution to the problem of the tyrant is conversion. If he is not to be killed, he can simply cease to be a tyrant. Conversion is well-suited to the stage because of its spectacular nature: unlike the death of the tyrant, conversion happens before our eyes. It is a standard move in tragi-comedies where sudden shifts are the norm.<sup>38</sup> Thus, in Villedieu’s *Manlius*, Torquatus abandons his own desire at the end and allows his son to both live and marry Mandanne. In the same vein, in Scudéry’s *Amour tyrannique*, Tiridate is suddenly moved by his wife’s generosity and declares:

Tyranniques transports, fureur, haine, courroux,  
Je ne vous suivrai plus; allez, retirez-vous (11.1835-6).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> In Anne Übersfeld’s terms,

La force est tout à l’avantage d’Attila. Les rois sont écrasés, dépouillés, humiliés à mort, et il ne leur reste qu’un pouvoir nominal, tandis que le pouvoir d’Attila est effectif, brutal, sans droit, purement machiavélique et sans aucune prétention à la justice. (“Comeille: du roi au tyran, un itinéraire,” *L’image du souverain dans le théâtre de 1600 à 1650*. Actes de Wake Forest, Ed. Milorad R. Margiñic and Byron R. Wells, Biblio 17, Vol. 37, Tübingen, 1987: 35).

<sup>38</sup> According to Antoine Soare, if in certain tragedies

le malheur n’arrive plus par l’esprit, mais par les passions, la tragi-comédie déjoue à coups de conversions le déterminisme psychologique que postule la tragédie. Le tyran assoiffé de sang redevient subitement le bon roi qu’il est par nature, et la furie retrouve tout à coup sa douceur foncière. (“Parodie et catharsis tragico-comique,” *French Forum* 9 [1984]: 281)

<sup>39</sup> The simplicity of such conversions is underlined by Truchet in discussing this play:

Aucune hésitation, aucun trouble, si ce n’est un fugitif éclair de raison dans les stances du quatrième acte, n’avait donné à penser qu’il pût exister en l’âme de ce personnage une lutte quelconque, ni les germes d’un retour à la vertu; et pourtant, quand ce retour s’accomplit, les autres personnages ne semblent pas s’en étonner, ni mettre en doute sa sincérité. Un dénouement aussi arbitraire fait ressembler *L’Amour tyrannique* aux vieilles tragi-comédies de Hardy. (“Notice,” Georges de Scudéry, *L’Amour tyrannique*, in *Théâtre du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* [Paris: Gallimard, 1986] vol. 2, 1404).

Truchet’s choice of the term “arbitraire” is interesting, because it is precisely the arbitrary which characterizes the tyrant in the first place. See Gerould, above.

But conversion is not limited to tragi-comedy. While Grimoald's status as a tyrant in *Pertharite* is open to debate (see below), it is certain that he abandons all characteristics of a tyrant in the last scene as he gives the throne and Rodelinde back to Pertharite. One is struck by the artificiality of the process of conversion in this play:

Mais c'est trop retenir ma vertu prisonnière.  
Je lui dois comme à toi liberté toute entière,  
Et mon ambition a beau s'en indigner,  
Cette vertu triomphe, et tu t'en vas régner. (II.1819-22)

The most famous of the conversions of tyrants is of course that of Auguste in *Cinna*. Unlike the other examples in which the arbitrary and the artificial seem to dominate, here there is a profound psychological and even political transformation that is prepared and thus less astonishing.<sup>40</sup> Octave the violent usurper becomes César Auguste, emperor.

Other solutions to the problem of the tyrant are possible as well. Tristan L'Hermite seems to have preferred madness. Hérode, after having had his beloved Marianne put to death, completely loses touch with reality: he forgets that she is dead, blames others for her death, wants to die himself, and is overcome by hallucinations. Néron, as well, in *La Mort de Sénèque*, has horrifying visions after Epicaris and Sénèque have died. In *Manlius* and *Nitèus*, the people rise up against the tyrant. In *Sertorius*, the tyrant is eliminated in a non-violent fashion: he simply resigns. Sylla's absence on-stage is simply converted to complete absence as the tyrant removes himself from the political arena. Occasionally, the problem of the tyrant is not resolved at all. In *Pyrame et Thisbé*, while the king has had little effect on events, he remains in power at the close of the play. Even more unsettling is the dénouement of *Britannicus*. Despite Agrippine's prophecies of his eventual death, Néron's tyranny is just beginning at the close of the play. In some sense, the tyrant is a problem that is never resolved. New plays appear to consider different tyrants and different tyrannies.

<sup>40</sup> Even here, however, credibility is an issue. Matthew Wikander reports an anecdote concerning Napoleon and *Cinna*. The emperor said he was unable to understand the ending of the play until he saw Monvel playing the role of Auguste. Then he saw not only Monvel's consummate acting but Auguste's own talent as an actor:

Mais une fois, Monvel, jouant devant moi, m'a dévoilé le mystère de cette grand [sic] conception. Il prononça le *Soyons amis, Cinna* d'un ton si habile et si rusé que je compris que cette action n'était que la feinte d'un tyran. J'ai approuvé comme calcul ce qui me semblait puéril comme sentiment. (*Princes to Act; Royal Audience and Royal Performance 1578-792* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993]: 155).

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Tyrants raise important issues of identity and identification for the theater. How can we determine who is and who is not a tyrant? The fact that the words *rex* and *tyrannos* were until the fourth century B.C.E. used interchangeably reflects the reality that kings at times slipped easily into the role of tyrant.<sup>41</sup> Where is the line between the two? Pompée points out resemblances between Sertorius's situation of power and that of Sylla:

Ne vit-on pas ici sous les ordres d'un homme,  
N'y commandez-vous pas comme Sylla dans Rome?  
(*Sertorius*, II.893-94).

Julius Caesar furnishes the classic example of indeterminacy: whether in Scudéry's *La Mort de César* or Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the assassinated emperor epitomizes the difficulties involved in trying to label someone a tyrant.<sup>42</sup> *Cinna*, highly conscious of this particular antecedent, understands that the line will be drawn for him:

Demain, j'attends la haine, ou la faveur des hommes,  
Le nom de parricide, ou de libérateur. (II.250-1).

Many of the plays examined establish the status of tyrant through the violent crimes committed, whether before or during the action of the play. Another dramatic means of establishing identity, and one that is virtually universal in theater, is linguistic: a tyrant is constituted by the application of the term "tyrant." Naming a thing makes it so. Bushnell notes that "the term tyrant itself was a political weapon," and that if one could define one's enemy as a tyrant, one could depose him.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the term is hurled

<sup>41</sup> Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants*, 10 and 42. For a detailed discussions of the word *tyrant*, see Andrewes, 20-30.

<sup>42</sup> Robert S. Miola provides a solid discussion of this issue in Shakespeare's play ("*Julius Caesar* and the tyrannicide debate," 271-289). Bushnell notes that Sophocles' *Antigone* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* "ask the hardest questions about tyranny: What is a tyrant? How do we name him? How do we fashion him as the enemy?" ("*Stage Tyrants*," 71). Both Creon and Caesar are called tyrants, yet they are morally upright men in their exercise of power (72).

<sup>43</sup> *Tragedies of Tyrants*, 78-79. M. L. Clarke reports that Thomas Hobbes thought that rebellion against monarchs was encouraged by the study of classical authors:

From the reading of such books, men have undertaken to kill their Kings, because the Greek and Latin writers, in their books and discourses of Policy, make it lawful and laudable for any man to do so; provided before he do it he call him a tyrant. (*The Noblest Roman: Marcus Brutus and his Reputation* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981]: 91-2).

about a great deal in these plays. Corneille provides several extreme cases of the frequency of the term: *Héraclius* contains 62 uses of *tyran* or *tyrannique*; *Pertharite*, 55.<sup>44</sup> The term “tyrant” both provides an identification of the character for the audience and a justification for all opposition, particularly conspiracy. It even serves as a means to identify the speaker: in Racine’s *Alexandre*, Porus’s opposition to the great conqueror is marked by his use of the term “tyran;” Alexandre himself is not made into a tyrant by it. The hollowness of the term is sometimes emphasized by its very fluidity. In *Pertharite*, Grimoald complains to Edüige that she used to call him a hero, but now

Je ne suis qu’un Tyran parce que j’aime ailleurs (1.290).

Thus the term cannot be counted on as invariably denoting a real-world object, and must be judged within the context of the speaker and the situation of speech.

Several of the tyrant plays deal with other issues pertaining to the limits of one’s identity as a tyrant. In *Britannicus*, Racine depicts Néron becoming a tyrant, crossing the line from law-abiding ruler to a lust-driven murderer. In *Cinna*, Corneille tackles the opposite problem: how may one cease to be a tyrant and become a king, or in this case, an emperor? Here, the question is complicated by the issue of legitimacy. Usurpation being one of the defining characteristics of the tyrant, it must be overcome.<sup>45</sup> And this can be accomplished, as Cinna instructs Auguste, by “gouvernant justement” (1.426). Auguste legitimizes himself and sheds his tyrannical past through heroic self-mastery. But as we saw in the anecdote concerning Napoleon’s reaction to *Cinna*, it is far easier to depict convincingly the beginnings of a tyrant than to represent the point at which a tyrant becomes a legitimate ruler.

In *Pertharite*, Corneille considers identity from a different angle when he presents the issue of feigning to be a tyrant. Grimoald usurped the Lombard throne from Pertharite who himself had usurped power from his brother Gundebert. At the outset of the play, Grimoald is making a strong bid for legitimacy by virtuous rule. He is beloved and respected by all.

<sup>44</sup> Note too *Cinna*: 29; *Sertorius*: 24; *Attila*: 24.

<sup>45</sup> Corneille deals with the issues of legitimation and usurpation in *Œdipe* as well. Anne Ubersfeld points out that

Œdipe est dans la situation paradoxale d’être un usurpateur légitime, ou plus exactement, tant qu’il est usurpateur, il est innocent, et il n’est coupable que quand on s’aperçoit qu’il est légitime. (“Corneille: du roi au tyran, un itinéraire,” 21).

In the case of *Œdipe*, legitimacy is established by a rectified identification.

Even Pertharite’s wife, Rodelinde, is forced to admit his virtues.<sup>46</sup> And he explicitly refuses to use his political power for personal ends, telling his corrupt advisor, Garibalde:

Porte, porte aux Tyrans tes damnables maximes,  
Je hais l’Art de régner qui se permet des crimes (II.563-4).

But faced with Rodelinde’s repeated refusal of his attentions and then with the surprise reappearance of the deposed Pertharite, Grimoald takes refuge in the stance of a tyrant. He threatens to kill Rodelinde’s child and refuses to believe that Pertharite is who he claims to be, again threatening violence. But just as the throne is far from stable in this play, so the identity of the tyrant is impermanent, temporary, and dependent on circumstances. In *Pertharite*, being a tyrant is not a question of essence. As Pertharite points out to Rodelinde:

D’un conquérant si grand, et d’un Héros si rare,  
Vous faites trop longtemps un Tyran, un barbare,  
Il l’est, mais seulement pour vaincre vos refus,  
Soyez à lui, Madame, il ne le sera plus, (II.1455-8)

If Grimoald were not frustrated in his desires, he would not be a tyrant. While such a view can be seen as optimistic insofar as it allows for the transformation of the tyrant into the non-tyrant, it is equally disconcerting when one considers that the virtue of the monarch is therefore equally unstable. In his generous solution to the problem of tyranny, Pertharite neglects one consideration: his own existence calls into question Grimoald’s rule by underlining the latter’s status as a usurper. As Grimoald points out:

Au moment qu’il [Pertharite] paraît, les plus grands conquérants,  
Pour vertueux qu’ils soient, ne sont que des Tyrans (II.1593-4).

The identity of Grimoald as a usurper-tyrant would seem to be less susceptible to easy erasure or transformation than his identity as an oppressor-tyrant. The play suggests, however, that the identity of a usurper-tyrant is equally unstable, along the line of *out of sight, out of mind*. Pertharite usurped the throne from his brother, but once his brother was dead, the usurpation no longer seemed to be an issue. Again, in the case of Grimoald’s usurpation, we find that as long as Pertharite is believed dead, the subject is not raised.

<sup>46</sup> She states:

Je hais dans sa bonté les cœurs qu’elle lui donne,  
Je hais dans sa prudence un grand Peuple charmé,  
Je hais dans sa justice un Tyran trop aimé. (II.168-70)

Not only is being a tyrant a temporary condition, but it is not clear whether Grimoald is a tyrant or only pretends to be a tyrant. Grimoald claims

Des plus cruels Tyrans j'emprunte le courroux (1.1609),

and reiterates later that he had merely taken on "les dehors d'un Tyran furieux" (1.1790). Grimoald's claims, however, do not seem entirely compatible either with the view put forward by Pertharite or with the brutal pressure that Grimoald exerted on Rodelinde, threatening the life of her child. Where in his other tyrant plays Corneille nuanced, complicated, and even humanized the tyrant, in *Pertharite* he destabilizes him.

Grimoald claims to have been playing the role of a tyrant. There is a long tradition dating back to antiquity associating the tyrant with hypocrisy and acting.<sup>47</sup> Usually the case is the reverse of Grimoald's: the tyrant typically feigns virtue. In *Manlius*, Torquatus trumpets self-righteousness in his intentions to punish his son for violating the law, hypocritically not mentioning that his son is his rival. Racine's Néron plays an acquiescent but duplicitous role with both Agrippine and Burrhus. Thus the tyrant is an actor. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Caligula and Nero, and even Louis XIV, were greatly enamored of and/or engaged in theater, acting in public performances.<sup>48</sup>

Bushnell states:

The theatrical tyrant is politically dangerous not only because his theatricality undermines the difference between king and tyrant, but also because it releases desire.<sup>49</sup>

Since ancient times, theater has been periodically accused of inciting immoderate desire in both actors and audience through its representation.<sup>50</sup> Thus we find the exemplary figure of immoderate desire – the tyrant – represented in a context that is itself perceived to elicit such desires in the

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle suggested that a wicked tyrant would do well to practice public relations – political theater – if he wished to retain power and did not want to become virtuous (Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants*, 27). Consider also Gerould's assessment of Shakespeare's *Richard III*: "All is fraudulent, for the tyrant is in essence an actor" ("Tyranny and Comedy," 17-18).

<sup>48</sup> Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants*, 62, n. 78 and 79.

<sup>49</sup> *Tragedies of Tyrants*, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Bushnell notes:

The rejection of drama is inseparable from Plato's argument against tyranny, for the tyrant is described as a kind of actor, and the threat that tyranny poses is also the threat that drama poses (*Tragedies of Tyrants*, 18).

spectators. The tyrant thus both figures desire and conjures it up. The figure of the tyrant is a privileged crossroads between politics and theater for the seventeenth century, a figure in which power and desire meet, creating disorder and imbalance in a dramatic situation which demands resolution and order.

