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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 it origins in antiquity, both in terms of political theory and drama. Tyrants first appeared on the stage of fifth-century Athens, 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 tyrannic a toujours été le vrai centre des tragédies," according to Christian Biet. 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 Apostolidès's terms,

à cause de l'étendue du pouvoir absolu, la hantise de la tyrannie traverse toute la pensée politique et la littérature du XVIIe siècle.

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

1 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.


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of power. 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. 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).

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

5 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.

6 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 Neron (“La Tyrannie de Garnier à Racine: critères juridiques, psychologiques et dramaturgiques,” in L’Image du souverain dans les lettres françaises, Ed. Nodmi Hepp and Madeleine Beraud (Paris: Klinckseck, 1985): 258).

7 Georges de Scudéry, L’Amour tyrannique, in Théâtre du XVIIe 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 Thésbé (1621)
Georges de Scudéry, La Mort de César (1636)
Tristan L’Hermite, La Marianne (1637)
Pierre Du Ryer, Lucrèce (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, Perharítie (1651)
Pierre Corneille, Sertorius (1662)
Villedieu, Manlius (1662)
Villedieu, Niétis (1663)
Pierre Corneille, Attilia (1667)
Jean Racine, Britannicus (1669)
Jean Racine, Mithridate (1672)

8 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 lois, 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 setting 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. 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. Consequently, few tyrants are killed during the course of the plays in this period. D’Aubignac was obviously sensitive to the political ramifications of enacting the death of a tyrant. Such ramifications need to
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. Madeleine Bertaud argues that Théophile de Viau’s representation of the tyrant in Pyrame et Thisbé constitutes a condemnation of monarchy. 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.

French playwrights may have shielded themselves from any potential retributions 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. 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 form of monarchy. The tyrant as an exceptional being, a figure of excess, commands our attention. 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. 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. 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 Ruyer’s Arétaphile, Nicocrate first desires Arétaphile and then later

12 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).


17 Fontenelle explains the draw of tyrants:
Les vices ont aussi leur perfection. Un demi-tirann solide digne 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 maesta 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 Guillem de Castro [London: Tamesis Books, 1984]: 23).

18 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 Sénéque 1.412 and 1743, Manlius 1.1477, Niétés 1.157, L’Amour tyrannique 1.283 and 1210.

19 Matthews shows that the tyrannical king was a typical figure of baroque theater ("The Tyrannical Sovereign": 148).
her sister. In Villedieu’s Nitéis, 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., Armande, Harpagone, 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.20 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.

* * *

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 drama 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-

20 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.21 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.22 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.23 Most, however, have large speaking roles and occupy the stage for a significant portion of the play.24 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

21 This is by no means the case in all the plays. See below.

22 For example, Attila, IV; i; Marianne I, iii.

23 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 Bertaudeau 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).

24 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. 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, Titian's Néron (La Mort de Sénéque) has Epicaris tortured and killed and forces Sénéque to take his own life, and Du Ryer's Tarquin rapes Lucrèce, albeit off stage, Corneille takes a completely different approach. In his five plays where tyrants are most clearly set out — Cinna, Héraclius, Perharite, 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. In fact, this last example has provoked criticism, as C. J. Gossip notes:

25 Monique Bilezikian finds that Pompee's allegiance to Sylla makes it impossible for the former to attain heroic status. Sylla's tyranny constitutes a form of conflagration that infects Pompee and is thus brought on stage 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 Senorius' 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 presented onstage.

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

 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. 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. In part the potential for the comic in the tyrant is a function of 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. Hérode opens La
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. (I.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.31
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
tyrannt 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
tyrannt’s sexual desire to refuse his attentions (with varying degrees of suc­
cess). 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 cannot persuade Hérode’s attempts at living in peace. Ildione is in
love with Ardaric, not Attila; Rodelinde refuses Grimoald’s advances (Per­
tharite); Omphale will not accede to Torquatus (Manlius) nor Mandanne to
the incestuous desire of her brother Cambise (Niétits). Interestingly, the
term “tyrant” is often used in connection with the woman in such situa­
tions, 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 Clé ­
opâtre in Rodogune is not called a tyrant. Her power can only be exer-
ced through a man; a king must sit on the throne of Syrie. Thus, typically,
tyrannt is balanced onstage between the public domain where the male
tyrannt 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 per­
sonal 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 affection of the de­
sired woman, he doesn’t hesitate to act out his desires. Tiridate voices his
amorous tyrant thus:
Plus on est violent, plus on est amoureux.
(L’Amour tyrannique, I.1118).32
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.33 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 con­
tagion of lawlessness that the tyrant institutes.34

32 The acting out of one’s forbidden desires provides an explanation for the at­
traction 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
tyrannt does, waking, what we all secretly want to do: in Plato’s terms, eat for­
bidden foods, sleep with mother, man, god, or beast, and murder indiscriminately. (Tragedies of Tyrants, 13).
33 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).
34 Robin Carter describes how in Lope de Vega’s Fuenteovejuna, the Commanda­
dor’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).
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. 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. 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 Lucrèce’s father and Brute will kill the criminal Tarquin after the curtain falls; thus the tyrant’s death is implied rather than committed. Corneille’s Héraclius provides perhaps the most complex set of deflections. It was Léonte’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 offtage, thus protecting both young men from having to act.

The death of the tyrant is far more palatable to the seventeenth-century audience if it is not an assassination. Both Cambise in Nitès et 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 Cosroès, 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. 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 tragedies where sudden shifts are the norm. 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:

Tyrraniques transports, fureur, haine, courroux,
Je ne vous suivrai plus; allez, retirez-vous (11.1835-6).39

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

Ce monstre au mépris des lois de la nature, . . .
Veu que confondre les noms et d’espousc et de sœur (Nitès, 11.157-160).

36 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.

37 In Anne Ubersfeld’s terms,


38 According to Antoine Soare, if in certain tragedies le malheur n’arrive plus par l’esprit, mais par les passions, the tragi-comédie dé­joue à coups de conversions le déterminisme psychologique que postule la tragé­die. Le tyran assiégé de sang redevenant subitement le bon roi qu’il est par nature, et la fusée retrouve tout à coup sa douceur foncière. (“Parodie et catharsis magi­comique,” French Forum 9 (1984): 281)

39 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 donner 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 poutant, quand ce retour s’accomplit, les autres personnages ne semblent pas s’en étonner, ni mettre en dose sa sincérité. Un dénouement aussi arbitraire faut ressembler L’Amour tyrannique aux vieilles tragi-comédies de Hardy. (“Notice,” Georges de Scudéry, L’Amour tyrannique, in Théâtre du XVIIe 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 Grimuald’s status as a tyrant in Perharitie 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 Perharitie. One is struck by the artificiality of the process of conversion in this play:

Mais c’est trop retenir ma vertu prisonnière,
Je tui dois comme a toi liberté toute entière,
Et mon ambition a beau s’en indigner,
Cette vertu triomph, 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 even seem to dominate, here there is a profound psychological and even political transformation that is prepared and thus less astonishing. 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 Niétés, 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.

40 Even here, however, credibility is an issue. Matthew Wikander reports an anec-
dote 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).

41 Bushnell, Tragedies of Tyrants, 10 and 42. For a detailed discussions of the word tyrant, see Andrews, 20-30.

42 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).

43 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. 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 Edulige 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. 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.

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

Pore, 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.

44Note to Cinna: 29; Sertorius: 24; Artile: 24.
45Corneille deals with the issues of legitimation and usurpation in OEdipe as well. Anne Ubersfeld points out that

OEdipe 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 OEdipe, legitimacy is established by a rectified identification.

46She states:

Je hais dans sa bonne 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. 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.

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.

Since ancient times, theater has been periodically accused of inciting immoderate desire in both actors and audience through its representation. 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 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.

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47 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).

48 Bushnell, Tragedies of Tyrants, 62, n. 78 and 79.

49 Tragedies of Tyrants, 61.

50 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).