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Corneille's Absent Characters

by

NINA EKSTEIN

The relationship between presence and absence in theater is intertwined and complex. For Kibédi Varga, a work of art invariably signifies absence in that it proposes an image, a representation, rather than the thing itself (341-42). This is obviously true of theater. At the same time, theater is essentially about presence. The empty stage is a space that derives its potential for force and meaning from the expectation of live bodies engaged in concrete actions there.¹ Perhaps more to the point, theater is about the dialectical relationship between absence and presence. According to Fuchs, "theatre is ever the presence of the absence and the absence of the presence" (172). This dialectic is of course in no way limited to the theater; it pervades current critical theory.² Kierkegaard provides a visual image that captures well the interplay between the two: he describes a painting depicting the tomb of Napoleon framed by two trees. Staring at the painting, one begins to see the outline of Napoleon himself in the empty space between the two trees (19). The image of Napoleon both is and is not present in the painting.

The interplay of absence and presence may extend to any number of specific features of theater – speech, scenery, props, locale, and so forth – but here I would like to limit my discussion to the subject of characters. Absent characters are universal in theater, if for no other reason than the purely practical: limitations surrounding the number of actors, stage space, time covered, and audience attention. Within a play, absence and presence often alternate as characters enter and leave the stage. These comings and goings allow different combinations of characters on stage and contribute

¹ "The condition of man, says Heidegger, is to be *there*. The theatre probably reproduces this situation more naturally than any of the other ways of representing reality. The essential thing about a character in a play is that he is 'on the scene': *there*" (Robbe-Grillet 108).

² According to Barker, "a truism of contemporary critical theory, indeed of contemporary culture in general [...] is that absence is itself dialectic, that to 'introduce' absence is to 'introduce' presence in a 'play' that transcends both" (181-82).

strongly to a play's rhythm. The vast majority of characters are thus absent and present at different moments of a play. It is fairly unusual for a character to remain on stage throughout or not to appear at all. Omnipresent characters obviously have a powerful effect on a play; one thinks of Œdipus (Sophocles's *Œdipus Rex*) or Hamm (Beckett's *Fin de partie*). In Corneille's case, the only character who can be said to remain on stage throughout is Pridamant in *L'Illusion comique*. Because of the play-within-a-play structure, he is on the stage as a spectator during those (many) scenes in which he has no speaking role, watching the events in his son's life as conjured up by Alcandre.³ Significant completely absent characters are far more frequent in the Western dramatic tradition, from Creusa in Euripides's *Medea* to Godot in *En attendant Godot*.⁴ The seventeenth-century theater is very much a part of this tradition: examples include the king in *Tartuffe*, Amurat in *Bajazet*, and Hector and Astyanax in *Andromaque*, to name only a few. In Corneille's theater, there are numerous absent, invisible characters, although one, Pompée in *La Mort de Pompée*, stands out. Within the enormous variety of his *œuvre*, Corneille repeatedly experiments with the possibility of barring a significant character from the stage. It is this experimentation, as a constituent of his dramaturgical practice, that we will examine here.

Absent characters have a special status in theater, not only because theater involves physical presence, but also because of certain other dualities that are inherent to all dramatic works. First, every onstage character is him- or herself a figure of combined presence and absence because the spectator is aware that the character is played by an actor. An actor is a physical presence, but he both is and is not the character in question. Cole calls "this paradox, the bodied presence of that which is absent ...the very essence of theatre" (9). Furthermore, this onstage presence is based on

³ The most frequently present characters in the rest of Corneille's theater are Dorante in *Le Menteur* (on stage 71% of the play, measured in lines), Dorante and Cliton in *La Suite du Menteur* (75% and 76% respectively), and Justine in *Pulchérie* (72%).

⁴ The origins of the absent character in theater are murky. Byrd believes that "the unseen character was almost certainly a part of the theatre from its beginnings" (2). Prophète, however, points to a curious tendency in the mystery and miracle plays of medieval theater towards universal presence: "Dès l'instant où un rôle s'avérait important, le personnage correspondant était physiquement exhibé sur la scène, même s'il appartenait à un temps révolu ou à un monde de mythes" (9).

nothing more concrete than language, the words of the dramatic text.⁵ Another duality exists because the dramatic text can be read (generally speaking) or performed. Does an absent character function differently when he or she is not embodied by an actor, when there is no stage and both absent and present characters are constituted solely by their words or the words of others about them? Do absent characters seem more present to readers than to spectators? Such questions do not allow for easy answers, but they do serve to underscore the continual and universal interplay between absence and presence in theater.

Absent characters may be understood first and foremost as a function of the essential theatrical dimensions of time and space. Theater is the realm of the here and now – another way of saying presence –, yet absent characters can be associated with either past or present, the close-by or the far-away. Absent characters thus function universally to enlarge the temporally and spatially restrictive borders of the stage. Indeed, the use of absent characters is most frequent in those traditions where such limitations (e.g., unity of time and space) are most rigorous. It stands to reason that the absent character who could appear onstage, who thus belongs to the present and the nearby, will be more potentially dramatic than the dead or the distant.

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Why Corneille? My answer is twofold. First, while his contemporaries certainly employed absent characters at least as widely as he did, Corneille went so far as to choose to construct a play around, and name it after, an absent character (*La Mort de Pompée*). Such foregrounding of a dramaturgical device, even if it is not repeated, is worthy of closer examination. Second, the dramaturgical features of Corneille's theater have, by and large, not received the attention they deserve. By dramaturgical features I mean, for example, his use of time, of space (beyond the issue of simple unity), or of *récits* and monologues.⁶ In part such neglect is a function of the size and variety of his *œuvre*: while Corneille's use of a given dramaturgical device may be quite interesting in one play, it may be hardly noteworthy in another. This is certainly the case for absent characters. Another reason may lie in the fact that Racine almost invariably made greater and

⁵ "L'on sait bien que l'être du héros tragique, sa présence sur la scène, son existence théâtrale ne sont que représentations, c'est-à-dire essence de discours, effet de parole, performance de langage" (136).

⁶ A book on Corneille's monologues by Cuénin-Lieber has just been published.

more consistent use of these dramaturgical devices, feeding off the unities of time and place to build dramatic universes hammered by the past or drastically sequestered in space.⁷ Space and time are not at the core of Corneille's, unlike Racine's, dramaturgy. Forestier makes a convincing case that Corneille's dramaturgy is a function in large measure of the organization of plot on the basis of a desired end-point. Thus, dramaturgical features such as absent characters are unlikely to hold a crucial "key" to Corneille's theater. They do, nonetheless, provide important illumination locally, at the level of the individual play. Globally, considering Corneille's absent characters diachronically, we will find a general movement that begins with an increasing effort to make the absent character's presence felt on stage. After *La Mort de Pompée*, we find a more subtle exploration wherein the focus is less on the absent character him- or herself and more on the play of oppositions and similarities between absent and present characters. The focus moves from making the absent present to a focus on absence itself.

Before undertaking that more detailed examination of several specific absent characters, it is worth briefly considering the full range of types of absent characters to be found in Corneille's theater, for there are many. They may be absent for a portion of the play's action only to become present later (e.g. Pertharite or Sévère in *Polyeucte*) or vice versa, such as Don Gomès in *Le Cid* who is on stage for three scenes at the beginning of the play, only to become a significant absence once Rodrigue has killed him.⁸

Alternatively, the absent character may belong to the realm of the past; while these characters are dead, they remain potent forces. Emilie's father Toranius motivates her desire to see Auguste assassinated (*Cinna*). Nicanor is at the source of Cléopâtre's monstrous *haine*; he is also invoked in a heavy-handed fashion by both Rodogune and Cléopâtre in order to manipulate Antiochus and Séleucus (*Rodogune*). Annibal is of particular interest (*Nicomède*). He is a substitute role model in place of Nicomède's inadequate father (the prince refers to Annibal repeatedly as "maître"). He

⁷ Tobin, discussing Racine's use of absent, invisible characters says: "Racine deploys these 'absent presences' with extraordinary effectiveness to extend the horizon of his drama and enrich its internal resonances, all the while keeping the number of visible characters at a strict minimum. Racine's theater is, therefore, vast in its implications for the world beyond the stage and, at the same time, suffocatingly intimate for the *dramatis personae*" (56). See Defrenne and Prophète for further discussion of absent characters in Racine's theater.

⁸ Dosmond notes that Rodrigue is conscious of having to continue to duel this absent/dead man, saying to Chimène, "Je sais qu'un père mort t'arme contre mon crime" (l. 911) (23).

was both a fabulous warrior and an uncontrollable force to be reckoned with, both characteristics that are now taken on by Nicomède.⁹ Néron, who is mentioned thirteen times in *Othon*, evokes Othon's dissolute past in the emperor's company.¹⁰ In *Tite et Bérénice*, Néron returns, mentioned here by his relative Domitie as an indication of her attachment to power, both in terms of her ambition and her legitimacy.

Within the realm of present time, as opposed to the past evoked by the already dead, the absent character may represent a site of power threatening in some fashion to those on stage. The Queen in *Clitandre*, who has the express authority to approve marriages, never appears in a play in which several characters seek to marry. Roman power is embodied and held just off stage in the absent Scipion (*Sophonisbe*). Massinisse is forced to meet with Scipion in order to plead for permission to be married to Sophonisbe; unsuccessful, Massinisse remains isolated off stage with Scipion until the play's end. Aétius, the Roman general who is Attila's only true rival for power ("le seul que je craignais," I. 740), embodies offstage power as well, but his death, announced at the beginning of act III, underscores Attila's fearsome superiority. Pison in *Othon* represents a kind of hollow power; supported by Galba and his three Machiavellian councilors, he is Othon's rival for both Camille's hand and the throne. In a sense, he is the ideal absent character because of his vacuity: he is nothing but a name.¹¹ His main function is to rehabilitate, through contrast, the dubiously heroic Othon.¹²

⁹ In his *Examen* to the play, Corneille says: "J'ai approché de cette histoire celle de la mort d'Annibal, qui arriva un peu auparavant chez ce même roi, et dont le nom n'est pas un petit ornement à mon ouvrage" (2: 640). The function of ornament thus has its place as well among the functions of absent characters. All citations of Corneille's works come from Couton's edition of his *Œuvres complètes*.

¹⁰ *Othon* is peopled by a greater variety of absent characters than any other of Corneille's plays. Three closely tied absent characters from the past – Poppée, Octavie, and Néron – are mentioned in the first three acts. Their tragic, intertwined stories speak to the impossibility of combining love and marriage with imperial politics, thus providing a somber parallel to Othon's current situation.

¹¹ Lacus, in the most developed description we have of the man, reveals what Baker calls "the very nullity of Pison" (124): "Pison a l'âme simple et l'esprit abattu, / S'il a grande naissance, il a peu de vertu" (II. 635-36).

¹² Knight points out that Othon looks good in comparison with the totally undesirable and unaccomplished Pison ("Othon the Unheroic Hero", 596). Corneille's hand in the strong contrast between the two men is obvious when one considers historical accounts: Tacitus and other historians of the period thought Pison a better candidate for the throne (Knight, "Othon the Unheroic Hero", 596). The historical Pison does not make Othon look good, while Corneille's does.

Characters may straddle the line between absent and present. In *L'illusion comique*, Pridamant is both on the stage throughout and yet completely divorced from the action for most scenes, particularly during the middle three acts. His silent presence at those points represents the presence / absence of every spectator. Conversely, Clindor is present insofar as he engages visibly in the action; yet he is also understood to be absent, an apparition conjured up by Alcandre while the "real" Clindor is off somewhere with his troupe. Finally, God is simultaneously present and absent in both *Polyeucte* and *Théodore*, although to very different degrees. He takes a far more active role in *Polyeucte*: Polyeucte, Pauline, and Félix all receive divine inspiration on stage before our eyes. Thus, the potential range open to the playwright in employing an absent character extends to the possibility of conjuring the sacred.¹³

Characters may be absent for rather practical reasons. The limited size of the troupe performing the plays make collectivities difficult to represent on stage.¹⁴ For similar reasons of economy, relatives are at times referred to rather than brought before the audience.¹⁵ The same is occasionally true for romantic rivals, such as Hémon (*Œdipe*) and Pison (*Othon*). Children may be excluded from the stage for practical reasons as well; thus we only hear about Rodelinde's son (*Pertharite*).

The true interest of Corneille's absent characters lies not so much in their range, but, as I suggested earlier, in the global movement in his theater away from an insistence on evoking the presence of absent characters, and locally, on several subtle and original uses for absent characters in specific plays. I propose to consider in detail six absent characters from plays spanning the length of Corneille's career, characters who all belong to the realm of the dramatic present: they could have appeared on stage, but do not. They also each play a role of some significance in their respective plays, although their relative centrality varies considerably. They are

¹³ Byrd makes an important point when he states that "the device [of the absent character] was a valuable part of the theatre's ancient power of manifesting unseen forces" (211).

¹⁴ Examples of absent collectivities include the conspirators in *Cinna*, the soldiers eager to rape Théodore, the crowds awaiting the return of Héraclius, the troops in *Horace*, *Nicomède*, *Sertorius*, or *Sophonisbe*, and the Moors in *Le Cid*. Concerning this last group, Longino notes that the Moors' absence works to prevent audience sympathy for them (97).

¹⁵ These relatives include the two Horace and the two Curiace brothers we never see; the offstage sisters of Lope and Manrique in *Don Sanche d'Aragon*, each available as a marital consolation prize; and the fathers of Alcippe and Clarice in *Le Menteur*, whose approval is necessary for their marriage.

Florange in *La Veuve* (1634), Florise in *La Suivante* (1637), Pompée in *La Mort de Pompée* (1644), Flavie in *Théodore* (1646), Sylla in *Sertorius* (1662), and Mandane in *Suréna* (1674).

Florange's primary role in *La Veuve* is that of a prospective husband for Doris, Philiste's sister. He is mentioned early in the play; indeed I, 3 and I, 4 are almost entirely about him. His name recurs throughout, including the last lines of the play, despite the fact that his suit is definitively dismissed by Philiste in III, 6-7. Corneille is careful to make Florange's "presence" felt. First, he employs a *récit* to describe Florange's actions (ll. 194-225, specifically his interaction with Doris at a ball the previous evening) and goes so far as to permit Florange's voice to arrive onstage through the use of reported direct discourse within Doris's *récit*: "Vous m'attirez à vous ainsi que fait l'Aimant" (l. 208), he announces to her and then goes on to tick off a series of empty clichés and non sequiturs, all reported in direct discourse:

La mode en [of her gloves] est nouvelle
 (Me dit-il) et jamais je n'en vis de si belle,
 Vous portez sur le sein un mouchoir fort carré,
 Votre éventail me plaît d'être ainsi bigarré,
 L'amour, je vous assure, est une belle chose,
 Vraiment vous aimez fort cette couleur de rose,
 La ville est en hiver tout autre que les champs,
 Les charges à présent n'ont que trop de marchands,
 On n'en peut approcher. (ll.217-25)

Second, Corneille provides Florange with an onstage spokesperson, his agent Géron, who makes Florange's offer of marriage on his behalf and later voices his complaints concerning delays. Both of these techniques are effective, albeit conventional and rather heavy-handed, means of bringing an absent character onstage.

Why did Corneille choose an absent character in this case? Above all, Florange is an object of ridicule: his absurd, cliché-ridden description of Doris (ll. 258-68), of the kind so well satirized by Sorel in *Le Berger extravagant* (1627), as well as his disjointed conversational gambits (see above), prevent anyone from taking him seriously. Even Chrysante, Doris's mother, who is eager for the match, reacts by saying: "Il s'en moque en disant de telles niaiseries" (l. 270). Furthermore, Florange as an absent suitor figures the extent to which marriage is a purely financial transaction in the world of *La Veuve*. Presence is not needed to form a couple.

Florange is Corneille's most awkwardly constructed absent character because of Corneille's conspicuous efforts to make his presence felt, and

also because of the inconsistency of his depiction in I, 3. He is first presented as inappropriately silent:

Ce fut paisiblement de vrai qu'il m'entretint.
 [...]
 Il m'épargna si bien que ses plus longs propos
 À grand-peine en une heure étaient de quatre mots.
 Il me mena danser deux fois sans me rien dire.
 [...]
 Mon baladin muet se retire en un coin,
 Content de m'envoyer des oeillades de loin. (ll. 195-204)

Then suddenly he starts talking to excess (see above, ll. 217-25), going from ridiculous silence to ridiculous loquacity, all within the space of thirty lines. Corneille seems to have been more interested in the laughter he could elicit at Florange's expense than in basic character construction.¹⁶

Florise in *La Suivante* has a role that is far more limited and discreet than that of Florange. Confined to the second half of the play, she is allowed neither voice nor personality traits. The basic plot of the comedy involves Florame who wants to marry Daphnis, a young woman who returns his affections. The obstacle to their happy union is, untypically for Corneille, her father Géraste who places an unusual condition on his approval for their marriage: he must be allowed to marry Florame's sister, Florise. Florise is thus an object of barter that Florame can dispose of as he wishes, just as Géraste can dispose of his daughter in order to satisfy his own desire.¹⁷

Corneille is operating within a comic tradition that favors parallel and multiple marriages – his first four comedies finish with two marriages

¹⁶ The choice of silence as Florange's first attribute is itself a curious one because Philiste, the romantic hero of the play, has just described to his friend that his technique for wooing Clarice involves *not talking* about his regard for her, that is, at least relative silence. It seems difficult to imagine that Corneille would have had any interest in encouraging any associations between the two rivals in the spectator's mind. McFarlane points to a related problem. The modern reader and even, he suggests, the reader of 1660 would have difficulty distinguishing between, on the one hand, the Petrarchan idiom that Corneille was ridiculing in Florange's description of Doris and, on the other, the precious language used by Philiste and others in their discussion of love, both of which were already completely out-dated (148).

¹⁷ Célie, the neighbor, underlines the centrality of exchange at work: "Géraste a trop d'amour pour n'avoir point de foi, / Et s'il pouvait donner trois Daphnis pour Florise / Il la tiendrait encore heureusement acquise" (ll. 1352-4). Couton finds that Florise "sert de monnaie d'échange assez pitoyable" (I, 1314).

apiece – which serves to make the marriage of the hero's absent sister seem somewhat normal. Nonetheless, Florise's absence functions as a sign of her victimization. The only information we have concerning her feelings for Géraste is Florame's disturbing comment: "Enfin quelque froideur que t'ait montré Florise, / Aux volontés d'un frère elle s'en est remise" (ll. 681-82). Her lack of enthusiasm is all the more understandable because she is to marry a far older man. This is the first of Corneille's older *soupirants* and the only one drawn during his youth, which may explain why Géraste's desire to marry Florise is not presented in a manner likely to elicit audience sympathy.¹⁸ The disproportion of age in this union may be viewed as the primary reason for Florise's absence from the stage: the spectator is thereby sheltered from the unpalatable spectacle of the young woman sacrificed to the *barbon* for her brother's pleasure ("Elle se sacrifie à mes contentements," l. 687).¹⁹ In *La Veuve* the onstage Doris accepts the absent Florange as a husband just as the absent Florise accepts Géraste here. In both cases, Corneille saw fit not to display the unappealing male prospects together on stage with the desirable young women.

Pompée (La Mort de Pompée) represents the high point in what we may call Corneille's experimentation with the absent character. One cannot help but have the impression that Corneille set himself the challenge to see how far he could go with an absent character. Evidence can be found in the *Examen* to the play:

Il y a quelque chose d'extraordinaire dans le titre de ce Poème, qui porte le nom d'un Héros qui n'y parle point; mais il ne laisse pas d'en être en quelque sorte le principal Acteur, puisque sa mort est la cause unique de tout ce qui s'y passe. (l. 1076)

Pompée dies fairly early in the course of the play (between acts I and II), thereby cutting short the possibility that he might come on stage. Despite both his literal absence and his death, the playwright strives to make him an onstage presence. The change of the play's title in 1648 is a re-

¹⁸ When writing the *Examen* to the play over twenty years later, Corneille is decidedly more sympathetic to Géraste, a function no doubt of Corneille's advancing years: "Géraste n'agit pas mal en vieillard amoureux, puisqu'il ne traite l'amour que par tierce personne, qu'il ne prétend être considérable que par son bien, et qu'il ne se produit point aux yeux de sa Maîtresse, de peur de lui donner du dégoût par sa présence" (389).

¹⁹ Along these general lines. Gaines read's Florise's absence from the stage as coinciding with an erotic void (458).

vealing indicator of Pompée's symbolic presence: *La Mort de Pompée* became simply *Pompée*. As Picciola notes,

en substituant le titre de *Pompée* à celui de *La Mort de Pompée* dès la seconde édition de l'oeuvre (1648), Corneille montrait bien que son sujet consistait dans la permanence paradoxale de la présence de Pompée. (102)²⁰

Corneille constructs Pompée's "presence" in several fashions. The first – verbal reference to the absent characters by others on stage – is a common theatrical means of evoking the absent. Pompée's name is uttered sixty-six times in the course of the play; he is mentioned in one form or another in all but two scenes (IV, 5 and V, 3) and by every speaking character. The epithets assigned to him are varied and function to develop characterization (e.g., "ce déplorable Chef", "cette grande victime", "le malheureux", "ce guerrier magnanime", "votre gendre", "un illustre époux").

The second means of bringing the absent Pompée onstage – the *récit* – is not original either; indeed, Corneille already used it with Florange. The playwright goes much further here, however. The three longest *récits* (in a play in which *récits* are a larger presence than in any other in his *œuvre*) all deal with Pompée. The *récit* as a dramaturgical device is similar to the absent character in that they both face the task of making the absent present, of making the character or the events come to life when they have been reduced to language, kept forever at a remove from the onstage realm. The first *récit* presents Pompée's arrival and assassination (ll. 456-567); the second concerns César's reaction to being confronted with Pompée's death (specifically with his head) (ll. 735-99); and the third recounts the funeral rites Philippe undertook for Pompée's headless body (ll. 1485-1536).²¹ Pompée's actual acts are limited in scope: he arrives in Alexandria, he

²⁰ Knight calls the use of Pompée's name in the title "wilful paradox" ("A minimal definition", 300).

²¹ It is noteworthy that Corneille seems to have deliberately reduced the dramatic potential of the three *récits* dealing with Pompée by his choice of narrator and in one case, addressee. The narrators, Achorée and Philippe, are simple *comparses*, with no developed character and certainly no specific persuasive agenda in telling the narratives. That Achorée addresses one of his *récits* to Charmion, Cléopâtre's confidant, thereby creating the most awkwardly non-dramatic of all onstage narrative situations – a secondary character addressing a narrative to another secondary character – is a clear indication that Corneille wanted his audience to focus completely on the content of the *récit* (dealing with Pompée) and not on the situation between the characters onstage. Furthermore, because the narrators of these three *récits* are secondary characters, their objectivity is assured; the audience thus has faith that it is receiving an accurate account.

chooses to come ashore despite misgivings, and he dies. His death seems itself to model absence: he covers his face and makes no sound as he is being murdered.²²

These three *récits* all contain particular devices that contribute to make Pompée scenically present. The first – reported direct discourse – is commonplace. Before leaving his boat, Pompée instructs his wife Cornélie about what to do if he does not return.²³ His words reveal a calm, realistic, and careful man. The other two means of dramatizing Pompée within the *récit* are anything but commonplace. Corneille goes to considerable lengths to make Pompée seem not quite dead. When Pompée's head is revealed to César, Achorée informs us that it appears to want to speak:

A ces mots Achillas découvre cette tête.
 Il semble qu'à parler encore elle s'apprête,
 Qu'à ce nouvel affront un reste de chaleur
 En sanglots mal formés exhale sa douleur.
 Sa bouche encore ouverte et sa vue égarée
 Rappellent sa grande âme à peine séparée,
 Et son courroux mourant fait un dernier effort
 Pour reprocher aux Dieux sa défaite et sa mort. (ll. 761-68)

Later, César suggests further agency on the part of the dead general when he credits the latter with an active role in Cornélie's decision to warn César of Ptolomée's plot against him: "Il [Pompée] parle par sa bouche [Cornélie's], il agit dans son âme, / Il la pousse, et l'oppose à cette indignité" (ll. 1370-71). The truth value of either of these cases is open to question, but they serve to make Pompée an unusually active dead (absent) character.

Corneille also dramatizes the absent Pompée by including his thoughts within Achorée's *récit* as the former is assailed ("Il croyait..." l. 458, "Il soupçonne..." l. 463, "Il condamne en son coeur..." l. 466) and then dies

²² "In covering his face and remaining silent, he removes himself, verbally and visually, from the play that bears his name and even from the narrative that chronicles his death" (Hubert, "Performative Narratives", 120).

²³ «N'exposons, lui dit-il, que cette seule tête,
 À la réception que l'Egypte m'apprête,
 Et tandis que moi seul j'en courrai le danger,
 Songe à prendre la fuite afin de me venger.
 Le Roi Juba nous garde une foi plus sincère,
 Chez lui tu trouveras, et mes fils, et ton père,
 Mais quand tu les verrais descendre chez Pluton,
 Ne désespère point du vivant de Caton.» (ll. 469-76)

("en lui-même il rappelle..." l. 521). Corneille attempts rather awkwardly to camouflage this breach of *vraisemblance* by having Achorée take pains to justify the source of the information he presents in his *récit*: "C'est de lui [Philippe] que j'ai su ce que je viens de dire, / Mes yeux ont vu le reste (ll. 493-4). Obviously, however, neither Philippe nor Achorée could have witnessed Pompée's thoughts. At the risk of leaving himself open to criticism from the *doctes*, Corneille makes Pompée an unusually vivid absent character.

The final means that Corneille employs to make the absent Pompée present is the most unusual: repeated references to concretely physical body parts. In the *récit* which includes Pompée's death, Achorée describes his decapitation and the fate of both the body ("le tronc sous les flots roule dorénavant," l. 535) and the head ("sa tête [...] / Passe au bout d'une lance en la main d'Achillas," ll. 529-31). The body and the head have considerable symbolic resonance – Jaouën speaks of "la simple allégorie de l'Etat sans tête à travers la décapitation de Pompée" (256)²⁴ – and yet it is their insistent physicality that dominates. In the first of the three *récits* mentioned above, Pompée's head is separated from his body. In the second, the head is presented to César in all of its gruesome physicality ("Sa bouche encore ouverte et sa vue égarée," l. 765), its visual presence underlined by careful reference to its unveiling and its concealment.²⁵ The third *récit* focuses on Pompée's headless body: Philippe recounts that he searched for it, found it, and burned it on a funeral pyre. Pompée's body and head, separated at the end of the first act, will not be reunited until the play ends.

In the fifth act, Pompée physically comes onstage in the form of his body's ashes contained in an urn (thus still hidden, much like Medusa's head in *Andromède*), presented by the loyal Philippe to Cornélie. Cornélie speaks directly to the urn at length on stage (ll. 1458-80), as does César in direct discourse reported within Philippe's *récit* (ll. 1527-34); the emperor is reported to have even kissed the receptacle. In Hubert's words, "the defeated leader has at last taken possession of the stage, as though his ashes had finally made his ideal presence tangible and operative" ("Performative Narratives" 128).

²⁴ Hubert discusses the symbolic weight of the beheading as well: "Great Pompey must undergo reduction to a fragment of matter. The severance of Pompey's head merely repeats his separation from the world of men and gods; and thus his beheading provides one among many signifiers that over-determine the idea of division, a dominant theme in a play dealing with a fatal rift in history." ("Performative Narratives", 121).

²⁵ "À ces mots Achillas découvre cette tête" (l. 761) and "Ensuite il [César] fait ôter ce présent de ses yeux" (l. 787).

Despite Corneille's numerous efforts to make the absent Pompée present, Pompée's force as a character is quite simply his absence. According to Marin, Pompée's tragic image is a function of his "absence violente" (136). The play is permeated with Pompée's death in all of its horror. Kibédi Varga finds, in more general terms, that absence from the French classical stage functions to elicit admiration (343). This observation seems particularly apt here, although it does not apply to Corneille's other absent characters. At the same time, this tragic image, this object of admiration never really solidifies as a full character. In large measure this may be because Pompée does not do anything concrete. He dies well and nothing more. Even his past actions mentioned within the play are limited to his defeat at Pharsale and the aid he provided for Ptolomée and Cléopâtre's father at César's bidding. He receives many positive epithets from almost all the characters and some form of the word "hero" is used to refer to him, and to him alone, ten times; but such appellations do not coalesce to create a heroic character, but merely parade by as so much rhetorical inflation. Despite all the tactics Corneille employs to make him present onstage, Pompée remains a static shadow.²⁶

With Marcelle's daughter, Flavie, in *Théodore*, Corneille moves in a very different direction by developing the metaphorical resonance of the absent character. From the extreme centrality accorded to Pompée, the absent character moves once again to the periphery where it will remain for the balance of Corneille's career. Despite such marginalization, Flavie is mentioned frequently and throughout the play. We find a concentration of such references in the first two scenes, a build-up which both suggests her importance to the action and arouses the expectation that she will appear onstage. In contrast to Pompée, the references to Flavie throughout are simple and unvaried: the vast majority are either her name or *fille*. She comes on stage solely through such references: there are no *récits* involving her, nor are her words ever reported. She is as absent from the stage as is Placide's love for her.²⁷

Her actions are extremely limited: she suffers, she receives Placide's visit, and like Pompée, although not until the fifth act, she dies. Flavie is

²⁶ In another article, entitled "Pompée's Absence in Corneille's *La Mort de Pompée* (forthcoming in the *Rivista di letteratura moderna e comparata*), I examine in detail the extensive consequences of, and compensations for, Corneille's choice to bar Pompée from the stage.

²⁷ Picciola ties Flavie's absence to alienation, saying she is "totalement aliénée par la passion" (506).

nonetheless essential to the plot of the play because she serves, both dead and alive, to motivate Marcelle. It is Marcelle's plans for a marriage between Flavie and Placide that make the latter's love for Théodore criminal, and it is Flavie's death that unleashes Marcelle's despair and fury. Structurally, as Forestier notes, Flavie serves to complete the pastoral chain of A loves B who loves C, who loves D (238).

Flavie's real interest, however, lies in the play of similarity and difference. She most closely resembles Théodore, although the two never have any direct contact. Baker states that "Théodore's passivity makes her strangely akin to the unseen Flavie who is letting herself perish of unrequited passion and jealousy" (56). Even more significant, they are both defined by their absolute love: Flavie's for Placide and Théodore's for God, a love for which both will die. It is worth noting that Placide dies (if indeed he does die; his fate at the end of the play is not certain) of despair and in violent reaction to Théodore's death, much as Marcelle kills herself after Flavie dies. Flavie and Théodore are subtly linked within the action as well. Flavie's death would appear to be precipitated by Théodore's escape from captivity: "Flavie est aux abois, Théodore échappé / D'un mortel désespoir jusqu'au coeur l'a frappée" (ll. 1527-28);²⁸ and it is Théodore who announces Flavie's death on stage (l. 1613).²⁹ On the other hand, in contrast to Théodore who disdains both Placide's and Didyme's affections, Flavie is literally overcome by her love for Placide.

The ties and similarities between the two women work to suggest sometimes disturbing echoes between the spiritual and profane realms. Théodore in her absolute devotion to the Christian God seems to be an elevated reflection of Flavie and her love for Placide. One could argue that Flavie's love, precisely because it is profane, is futile and sterile, while Théodore's will be rewarded by God in the afterlife. However, because we see no greater sign of responsiveness on God's part than we do on Placide's to the absolute devotion of the women, one might conclude that both loves are unrequited. Sacrilegious as such a stance may be, Corneille creates parallels and contrasts that make it a plausible conclusion. God's only action is to reveal secretly to Théodore what she is to do in her difficult

²⁸ Yarrow points out that "the death of Flavie which sets off the *dénouement* has been carefully prepared throughout the play (ll. 63, 303-304, 1527-1529) and is not fortuitous, since Théodore's escape is the final blow to which Flavie succumbs (ll. 1527-1528)" (156-57).

²⁹ Physically the two are placed in proximity to each other: the door to the room where Théodore is being held is very close to that of Flavie's apartment, as is made clear in IV, 1.

circumstances (commit suicide, ll. 911-12; exchange clothes with Didyme, l. 1451). The play of absence and presence within the couple Théodore-God mirrors that of Flavie and Placide. In both, only one member is present on stage while the other remains absent. In the case of Placide and Flavie, it seems clear that never sharing the stage is a sign of the impossibility of a successful union between them (one could make the same point about Florange and Doris as well as Gérante and Florise). What are we then to conclude about God's absence? It would, of course, be ridiculous to suggest that God should have been an onstage character. However, in both *Polyeucte* (1643) and Rotrou's *Saint Genest* (1645 or 1646, essentially at the same moment that *Théodore* appeared), there is manifest evidence of God's existence. In *Saint Genest*, God speaks on stage to Genest as the latter rehearses his part (ll. 421-24), while in *Polyeucte*, the dead martyr's intercession with God clearly brings about the miraculous conversions of Pauline and Félix. Picciola notes that theatrical adaptations of the lives of saints during this period often involve "une dramaturgie du spectacle: apparitions célestes, voix extérieures, pour le commerce de la sainte avec l'au-delà, grondements de tonnerre, éclairs du dénouement" (497).

Corneille, however, wanting to avoid repeating himself by presenting onstage conversions in the denouement of *Théodore*,³⁰ reduces God's presence to advice that Théodore merely reports receiving. The absence of any manifest, positive result of Théodore's and Didyme's martyrdom, however, inevitably casts some doubt on how their deaths are to be interpreted.³¹ There doesn't seem to be a simple answer: everything we know about the man Corneille suggests that he was a devout believer, yet this play presents Christian martyrdom as far less emotionally and dramatically satisfying than was the case in *Polyeucte*. In the absent Flavie, Corneille created a complex and problematic reflection for his heroine and her religious devotion.

Sylla (*Sertorius*) differs from the other absent characters in Corneille's theater by his distance from the action, which takes place in Spain while Sylla remains in Rome. Indeed, the absent space of Rome rivals in impor-

³⁰ That Corneille was completely aware of the problem and its implications is evident in his statement in the *Examen*: "j'eusse été ridicule, si j'eusse fait faire au sang de ces martyrs le même effet sur les coeurs de Marcelle et de Placide, que fait celui de Polyeucte sur ceux de Félix et de Pauline" (2: 272).

³¹ Indeed, *Saint Genest* has occasioned such doubts for precisely the same reason. See Lyons ("Saint Genest and Uncertainty").

tance the absent character Sylla.³² This distance from Rome has serious consequences because of the time required to communicate any decision Sylla might make to the onstage characters. As it happens, Sylla makes the decision to resign his position as Rome's dictator long before the action of the play begins, but the news does not arrive in Spain and on stage until the fifth act.³³

Like Flavie, Sylla is mentioned frequently and throughout the play; his role is linked to his position; he matters because of who he is: a tyrant. Sertorius and his men are in Spain in revolt against the tyrannical Sylla, having set up a kind of Roman Republic in exile. If Sylla were no longer dictator, they would return home to Rome. Thus Sertorius's situation is very much predicated on Sylla's.³⁴ Sylla's major act during (actually before) the action of the play is to abdicate his position as dictator, but the announcement of his decision comes after Sertorius has been murdered. This abdication is in fact a perfect reflection of Sylla's literal absence from the stage: he chooses to absent himself politically.

As in the case of Flavie, no effort is made to make Sylla present on stage. His interest lies primarily in his relationship to other characters, specifically Pompée and Sertorius. Sylla's relationship to Pompée is simple, albeit disturbing: the dictator controls him. Pompée describes a Faustian bargain whereby he has sacrificed his wife and possibly his soul to remain close to the center of Roman power with the hope of inheriting that power and restoring the Roman Republic. Pompée balances and rationalizes loyalty to Sylla with opposition to the dictatorship, but in the final analysis the young general is contaminated by his association with the tyrant.³⁵ Sertorius's relationship with Sylla would seem to be even simpler, but the opposition and enmity between the two leaders conceals curious similarities.

³² *Rome* or some form of *romain* appears 87 times in the course of the play. Lyons makes the connection between absent character and absent space here (*The Tragedy of Origins*, 147).

³³ Ten years later Racine would create a similar situation by having the absent Amurat order both Bajazet and Roxane's deaths well before *Bajazet's* action begins (1672).

³⁴ Sylla differs from other seventeenth-century dramatic tyrants in his absence from the stage. In general one of the primary means of dramatically conveying the dramatic tyrant's power is through both speech and presence; here we find neither. Sylla is not even accorded reported direct discourse. For a discussion of the issues surrounding dramatic tyrants, see Ekstein.

³⁵ 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 on stage through him (4).

First, they belong to the same generation; they are the elders in a play where everyone else is fairly young. While Sylla embraces old age by his abdication of power, Sertorius takes a younger man's stance in contemplating love and marriage. Sertorius is not blind, however, to how poorly love suits his years ("A mon âge il sied si mal d'aimer" l. 179). Second, they are both indecisive: Sertorius cannot make up his mind whether to marry Viriate or Aristie, while the tyrant seemingly vacillates about whether to abdicate or not.³⁶ Finally, their similar positions of absolute power leave Sertorius open to the accusation that he is a tyrant just like Sylla. Pompée readily points out the resemblance: "Ne vit-on pas ici sous les ordres d'un homme, / N'y commandez-vous pas comme Sylla dans Rome?" (ll. 893-94). When Sertorius tells Pompée that he is going to marry Aristie, Pompée responds: "N'imitiez point Sylla par cette violence" (l. 982). It is through his absence that Sylla plays most effectively against Pompée and Sertorius. They both find uncomfortable reflections of themselves in the despised tyrant, reflections that in turn complicate the relationship between the two men.

Mandane offers a final variation of the absent character (*Suréna*). Like Florange, Pison, and especially Flavie, she is slated to marry an onstage character, but she is not desired. Like Sylla's absent daughter Emilie, or Florise in *La Suivante*, Mandane is to be married off to suit the ends of the male family member who controls her. Mandane, the daughter of power, figures her powerlessness through her absence. Corneille's innovation in this play concerns movement: Mandane is fast approaching: "Ce soir la Reine arrive, et *Mandane* avec elle" (l. 1374); "ce soir *Mandane* arrive" (l. 1470). As in the case of Racine's Iphigénie and her mother, the impending arrival of the woman promises disaster.³⁷ While Iphigénie and Clytemnestra do reach the stage (*Iphigénie* II, 2 and II, 4 respectively), Mandane never does. The explosion that she would likely have triggered occurs without her: Orode has *Suréna* killed.

It is a convention of classical tragedy that *demain*, whether it refers to some deadline or promised event, will never come; because of the unity of time, the tragedy will be over before then. References to *demain* can serve

³⁶ Pompée announces the possibility of an abdication to Sertorius in III, I (l. 958), but does not present it as by any means certain.

³⁷ Both *Suréna* and *Iphigénie* appeared in 1674; the questions of originality and influence cannot simply be resolved by noting that Racine's play was first performed four months before Corneille's.

to exert temporal pressure on a given play's characters,³⁸ but the knowledgeable spectator understands that tomorrow is irrelevant. Corneille makes Mandane all the more potentially present by referring not to *demain* when discussing her arrival, but to *ce soir*.

The only description of Mandane that Corneille provides is to have Eurydice say that she is "belle" (l. 117). We know almost nothing about Mandane's feelings. She is referred to by name or as *princesse* or *fille*, and thus defined strictly in relation to family and power. Corneille allows us but one indication of her personality, tantalizing because it might have provided a solution to the impasse in the action. Her brother Pacorus tells Suréna:

Il fallait tout promettre, et la [Mandane] laisser agir,
Il fallait espérer de son orgueil sévère
Un juste désaveu des volontés d'un père, (ll. 1288-90)

She might have defied her father's wishes and thus saved Suréna.

Mandane is above all a figure of movement, a sign of the fatal mechanism in which Suréna is caught and which he can neither control nor arrest. The three appearances of the word *mander* within the first act, a word which is strikingly similar to the princess's name, used in conjunction with Mandane each time (ll. 9, 117, 277), link her both to her father's will (the subject of the verb *mander*) and to movement.³⁹

Furthermore, absence is thematized in *Suréna* in a manner not yet seen in Corneille's theater. When one thinks of the theme of absence, as opposed to absent characters, a significant number of plays come to mind. *Polyeucte*, *La Mort de Pompée*, *Rodogune*, *Héraclius*, *Don Sanche d'Aragon*, *Nicomède*, *Pertharite*, and *Tite et Bérénice* all contain characters who reappear after a long separation. In *Suréna*, we find a similar reunion after a long absence, that of Eurydice and Suréna who had until now avoided disaster by containing their mutual passion through distance. The crisis in *Suréna* is related both to the end of this (salutary) absence and to the threatened arrival of the absent Mandane. In the interlocking system of absence and presence, as well as that of desire and political marriage, the presence of Eurydice (betrothed to Pacorus) is, in the final analysis, at least as damaging for Suréna as Mandane's might be.

³⁸ For example, Prusias threatens Pulchérie, saying that by *demain* she must choose to marry Héraclius or die (*Héraclius*); Auguste's assassination is scheduled for *demain* (*Cinna*), as is Pacorus's wedding to Eurydice (*Suréna*).

³⁹ Lalande notes that Orode's will is central; Suréna must submit or die. "Orode's daughter Mandane is simply a pretext, and her very absence from the play supports this view" (175).

There is a second absent character approaching the stage in *Suréna*: Orode's other son Phradate, whose presence will cause serious upheaval, although for Orode rather than *Suréna*. Mentioned at five different points in the play, Phradate is described as "cet esprit turbulent, et jaloux du pouvoir" (l. 859) and "violent (l. 1474). While Corneille does not say so explicitly in the play, Plutarch reports that Phradate will murder Orode in order to take the throne (Couton, "Notice" to *Suréna* 1676). Orode announces in his last appearance on stage (V, 1) that Phradate has arrived, thus suggesting both the inevitability of Mandane's arrival and signaling imminent disaster.

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From the overview of functions of Corneille's absent characters as well as the closer examination of six of their number, one can reach several conclusions. First, absent characters appear throughout Corneille's career, both in comedy and tragedy. Second, there seems to be a recurring association between absence and death, one that extends beyond the many long-dead absent characters up to the dramatic present of the play's action: Annibal dies shortly before *Nicomède* opens, Pompée after one act, Aétius is reported dead in act III of *Attila*, as is Emilie in the last act of *Sertorius*, and both Flavie and Pison (*Othon*) die off stage in the fifth act. Corneille in no way limits himself to an association between absent characters and death, however. Overall, breadth seems to be the primary hallmark of absent characters in his theater. They range from threatening force (Aétius, Scipion, Sylla) to sacrificial victim (Pompée, Florise), from the largely ornamental (for example, Thémistocle in *Agésilas*) to the fictional (Orphise in *Le Menteur*), from the absent character as object (Meduse, Pompée, Pison)⁴⁰ to potential marriage partners (Florange, Florise, Flavie, Pison, and Mandane), finally to the divine (God in *Polyeucte* and *Théodore*). For Corneille, the absent character seems to function primarily locally, not globally, whence their enormous breadth of function.

We may, nonetheless, make a few global observations. The absent character Pompée marks the high point in Corneille's experimentation with the device, and with the larger dialectic of absence and presence. He is placed at the center of *La Mort de Pompée* and Corneille goes to great

⁴⁰ In all three cases, these characters' heads are separated from their bodies – off stage, needless to say – and reduced to objects: Meduse's head is Persée's secret weapon while Pompée's and Pison's heads are paraded about as signs of triumph.

lengths to invent ways of making his absence an onstage presence.⁴¹ The experiment was not repeated, and thereafter we no longer find *récits* of the actions of the absent character or reported direct discourse; all description of them, including epithets, are kept to a bare minimum. We may hypothesize that Corneille was not satisfied with the outcome of Pompée's absent presence: the latter remains chillingly distant and undramatic. Whether this is so or not, it is certain that Corneille moves away from giving central importance to the absent character. Instead, he exploits the absence itself, making of such characters an absent "other" who then serve in the development of oppositions and similarities to onstage characters, resonances that enrich and complicate (e.g., Flavie and Sylla). Rather than attempting to make absent characters dramatic, after *La Mort de Pompée* Corneille exploited their non-dramatic nature, their abstraction. In his final tragedy, Corneille took the abstraction of the absent character in a new direction by adding movement as an attribute, thus demonstrating his inclination towards continued experimentation with the device of the absent character.

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⁴¹ In this, we may note a certain similarity to *En attendant Godot*. Discussing Beckett's play, Yuan states that "the vacant center (absence of Godot), rather than the activities on the stage (presence of Estragon and Vladimir), constitutes the central theme of absence and the central scene of the play" (129).

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