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## UNCERTAINTY IN CORNEILLE'S *HÉRACLIUS*

NINA EKSTEIN

Scholars agree that *Héraclius* (1646) occupies the extreme point of plot complication in the Cornelian *oeuvre*.<sup>1</sup> Numerous events have occurred prior to the action of the play, events that are necessary to the spectators' understanding of what transpires onstage. Twenty years before the play opens, Phocas assassinated the emperor Maurice as well as his sons and took his throne. Léontine, the royal governess, switched the youngest of Maurice's sons, Héraclius, with her own son, thus sacrificing the latter's life so that the royal blood of Maurice might survive. Not long after, Léontine made a second substitution, this time switching Héraclius with Phocas's son, Martian. The double switch left the son of the emperor Maurice in the position of the son of the usurper Phocas, while Phocas's son took the place and identity of Léontine's son. The play's action, set in motion by the rumour that Héraclius is alive, involves untangling these confused identities.

The problem of certainty, specifically certainty concerning identity, is thus at the center of *Héraclius*. In this respect, *Héraclius* resembles two other plays by Corneille, *Don Sanche d'Aragon* and *Oedipe*. Unlike those other plays, however, here it is not merely a question of assigning identity, but of the impossibility of establishing identity with certainty. Georges Forestier sums up the issue well:

En inventant cette forme particulière d'incertitude de l'identité, fondée sur l'impossibilité radicale de savoir, Corneille a créé la forme moderne du tragique de l'identité. *Oedipe* reposait, en effet, sur le tragique de la découverte de l'identité. *Héraclius* repose sur le tragique de l'aporie.<sup>2</sup>

The grounds upon which knowledge of identity may be known are all called into question in this play. The principles of heredity and the *cri du sang* are especially significant in this regard. The *cri du sang* is not reliable in *Héraclius*, as both Clifton Cherpach and John Lyons have demonstrated. In Cherpach's terms,

the failure of the *cri du sang* to speak clearly arouses more than superficial interest and curiosity, for it represents the failure of a final struggle to satisfy a basic human need to know oneself and one's relationship to others—the true meaning of *conscientia*. By using it in this way, Corneille evolved, along with the tragedy of Will and the tragedy of Admiration, a tragedy of uncertainty, epitomized by the 'murmure imparfait' of the *cri du sang*.<sup>3</sup>

1. 'La tragédie cornélienne arrive avec *Héraclius* à deux extrêmes : l'extrême de la complication et l'extrême de la violence' (Georges Couton, 'Notice' to Pierre Corneille, *Héraclius* in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp.1357-62, p.1360. Subsequent references to this edition of the play will follow quotations in the text.). According to Doubrovsky, the play has been traditionally dismissed as an 'imbroglio invraisemblable' (Serge Doubrovsky, *Corneille et la dialectique du héros* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p.301).
2. Georges Forestier, *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1996), p.260.
3. Clifton Cherpach, *The Call of Blood in French Classical Tragedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958), p.57.

Even more troubling is the fact that heredity gives no sign of influencing either appearance or moral nature in *Héraclius*. If Martian is not like his father, Phocas, then why does anyone assume that Héraclius will be like Maurice? If nurture is more powerful than nature, and Martian's youth under Léontine's care has made him a *généreux*, then why would Héraclius not be tyrannical like his adoptive father, Phocas? The grounds for determining identity are so uncertain in this play that even Héraclius, who has known his secret identity for four years, is reduced to doubt in V,i. Another more mundane basis for certainty, the long-secret revelatory letter, is itself called into question. While all agree to find Constantine's letter the final bearer of truth and certainty, its position relative to Maurice's letter (which just as authoritatively revealed Martian to be Héraclius) leaves open the possibility of a third letter, just as Léontine's double switch of the babies is sufficiently incredible that the possibility of a third switch does not seem any less plausible. Indeed, Pulchérie alludes to the dizzying possibilities in III,iii by suggesting that perhaps the other four brothers of Héraclius were switched as well and are thus still alive:

Les quatre autres peut-être, à tes yeux abusés,  
 Ont été, comme lui, des Césars supposés.  
 L'Etat qui dans leur mort voyait trop sa ruine  
 Avait des généreux, autres que Léontine,  
 Ils trompaient d'un Barbare aisément la fureur (II.1037-41)

Even marriage, an act presumed to be based on the clear identification and identities of the two individuals involved, is shown to be inadequate. While Phocas avows a desperate faith in the power of marriage to establish identity, telling Pulchérie that she must decide which of the two is Martian and marry him immediately (I.1748), Martian suggests a mock marriage to keep Phocas from marrying Pulchérie himself. A sham marriage might assign an identity to each of the two men, but it can not determine true identity.

Determining identity with certainty is a problem that Corneille deliberately extended from his characters to the spectators. The reader, assured by that most reliable source of knowledge, the list of *dramatis personae*, knows the true identities of Héraclius and Martian. Spectators, on the other hand, do not learn that Martian is really Héraclius and that Léonce is Martian until the first scene of the second act, and their certainty is no greater than Héraclius's.

The problem of certainty of identity involves the spectator in more than merely the correct labeling of Héraclius and Martian. Corneille invites us to consider identity in terms of moral character as well, specifically in the cases of Exupère, Phocas, and Léontine. What are their true identities? Where do their allegiances lie? Are they villains or positive characters? In problematizing the possibility of assigning a stable moral identity to these characters, Corneille raises the question of certainty from a completely different angle.

Exupère's case is the most simple. Uncertainty arises concerning him because he is seemingly transformed from being Phocas's enemy to being his ally when he reveals Héraclius's identity with Maurice's letter and then betrays him to the emperor. Later Exupère appears to undergo a second transformation when he assassinates Phocas. Corneille takes pains to make Exupère seem enigmatic: in a brief scene alone with his friend, Amintas, Exupère's motives and intentions remain inscrutable despite the intimate

context. He gives an indication of cupidity ('Ne fuyons pas les biens qu'ils nous font espérer', l.1126), but he also states that he will not long continue to be called *perfide* and *traître* (ll.1120-24). In public, Exupère takes refuge in unresolved binary alternatives: 'Mais qui sait si ce reste est faux, ou véritable?' (l.1292), "Elle [Léontine] a pu les changer [babies], et ne les changer pas' (l.1294), 'Elle [Léontine] a pu l' [Martian] abuser, et ne l'abuser pas' (l.1314). The dénouement, however, dispels all uncertainty related to Exupère. Because of his unambiguous act of assassinating Phocas, spectators and characters alike are equally certain of finally having learned Exupère's true nature and motives.

The same cannot be said of either Phocas or Léontine, and it is on the unresolved and unresolvable uncertainties surrounding them that I would like to focus. Where the younger generation of characters is left grappling with the question of basic identity, the spectator must decide the motives and moral worth of these two rival figures of power. It is perhaps not an accident that they are both problematic figures of parenthood.<sup>4</sup>

Phocas's first words, which open the play, bring the issue of certainty to the fore: 'Crispe, il n'est que trop vrai, la plus belle Couronne / N'a que de faux brillants, dont l'éclat l'environne' (ll.1-2). First the assertion, 'il n'est que trop vrai', retrospectively takes on an ironic shading. Bald declarations of absolute certainty will prove to be difficult for almost everyone, and especially Phocas, as the play progresses. The implicit contrast between *être* and *paraître* in these two lines as well as the explicit opposition between 'vrai' and 'faux' suggests how tenuous claims to certainty may be. In the company of his son-in-law, Crispe, Phocas retraces his bloody ascension to power.<sup>5</sup> In the next scene, he will recast those same events quite differently for Pulchérie, claiming that he was compelled by the army to kill Maurice and his sons, compelled to take the throne. In this particular case, the intimacy of the first scene and the rhetorical ends of the second (convincing Pulchérie to marry his son) ensure that the spectator will have no difficulty deciding which of the two versions is closer to the truth. Nonetheless, opening the play with two conflicting narratives of the events leading up to the dramatic action serves to put the spectator on notice that here the truth does not exist *a priori*; it is all a matter of one's choice of interpretation. Not only does Phocas not deal in the truth, he acknowledges the central role of interpretation by allowing Pulchérie to interpret his own actions as she pleases: 'je consens encor que ta fierté / Impute à mes remords l'effet de ma bonté' (ll.191-2). Despite Phocas's opening words asserting absolute truth, Phocas undermines the possibility that any such certainty can be found.

4. Exupère is linked to the role of parent as well. He carries the letter from Héraclius's true father, Maurice (which in fact Exupère received from his own father, Félix), and the word *père* is tellingly embedded in his name. Unlike Phocas and Léontine, however, Exupère does not actively play the role of parent.

5. Crispe is a curious character. In order to be Phocas's son-in-law, he must be married to the latter's daughter. But no mention is made of any such daughter in the play. This is all the more odd because both Léonce and Héraclius have sisters. We are baffled by the presence of this son-in-law in tandem with the absence of a sister for Martian to whom Crispe might be married. Corneille never makes it entirely clear why he gave this small role of advisor to Phocas the specific designation of son-in-law. Rathé explains the role by saying, 'puisque la tragédie veut que le personnage soit abattu par un membre de sa famille, Exupère utilise Crispe' (Alice Rathé, 'Une prise de pouvoir originale: le cas de Léontine dans *Héraclius*', *Actes de Davis* ed. by Claude Abraham, (Tübingen: PFSCCL, 1988), 213-20, p.219). Indeed, Crispe inadvertently sends Phocas to his death by announcing that Exupère has brought the *mutins* under control.

The basic uncertainty surrounding Phocas concerns violence and kindness. Is he a cruel tyrant or a loving, devoted father? The two characteristics are hardly congruent: in my examination of seventeenth-century dramatic tyrants, I found no other examples of loving fathers.<sup>6</sup> The closest we might come would be Corneille's Auguste. He has loved and cherished both Emilie and Cinna much as Phocas has done Héraclius, but Auguste is hailed as a hero at the denouement, not slaughtered as a tyrant. And Auguste's *générosité*, although long rejected by Emilie, can be seen to explain and even justify Auguste's elevation to full legitimacy. Phocas receives no such elevation, but remains ambiguous until he is dispatched by Exupère.

The relationship between Phocas and Pulchérie provides an illustration of the impossibility of arriving at any degree of certainty concerning Phocas. In one of the main dramatic axes of opposition in the play, they face off against each other in five scenes (I,ii, I,iii, III,iii, V,iii, V,iv).<sup>7</sup> Phocas needs Pulchérie to help him attain the legitimacy that has eluded him for twenty years by marrying his son. Within that context, all means (threats, cajoling, generosity), are understandable, but also unlikely to help the spectator gain insight into Phocas's true nature. It is Pulchérie's reactions to Phocas that are more revealing, if finally equally inconclusive. Pulchérie is a not uncommon Cornelian heroine, forceful and almost barricaded behind her own sense of *gloire* and obligation; like Sophonsibe, Domitie, or the other Pulchérie, to name only a few, she is both admirable and thoroughly rigid. She suffers no uncertainty in judging Phocas; for her he is an evil tyrant incapable of any positive traits or actions. She summarizes Phocas's kindness and generosity as 'feinte douceur' (l.135), claiming that 'Sa douceur n'a jamais qu'un mouvement contraint' (l.1765). Phocas's offer to spare Héraclius's life if Pulchérie will marry Phocas's son is dismissed as 'fausses promesses' (l.1027), although we have no other indication that he might be lying. While the spectator sympathizes with Pulchérie's plight as a marriage pawn and powerless victim, the unbending rigidity of her attitude towards Phocas, even in the face of clear evidence that he is not as cruel and heartless as she claims he is, works to distance the spectator from her on this crucial point. Whatever Phocas does or says that might reasonably be interpreted in a positive light is immediately recast in black by Pulchérie: 'Tu parles de donner, quand tu ne fais que rendre' (l.126); 'Cette feinte douceur, cette ombre d'amitié, / Vint de ta politique, et non de ta pitié' (ll.135-6). The extreme nature of her stance prevents the spectator from following her in her interpretation of Phocas; we do not and can not share her certainty.<sup>8</sup>

Instead, like Héraclius himself, we, the spectators, are not comfortable in our judgments of Phocas. There is much evidence that he is a tyrant. The emperor often conducts himself in a classically tyrannical fashion with Pulchérie, setting deadlines by which she must make up her mind to marry his son, threatening her first with death and

6. Nina Ekstein, 'Staging the Tyrant on the Seventeenth-Century French Stage', *PFSCS*, vol. 26, no.50, (1999), 111-29.

7. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the two characters have an almost identical number of lines: Phocas has 360 ½ and Pulchérie 367.

8. Prigent goes even further, suggesting that Pulchérie's arrogance is responsible for leading Phocas into 'la démesure tyrannique' (Michel Prigent, *Le Héros et l'état dans la tragédie de Pierre Corneille* (Paris: PUF, 1986) p.233). Indeed, when Pulchérie refuses Phocas's offer to save Héraclius by marriage to his son, Phocas rightly points out: 'il va périr, ta haine en est complice' (l.1031).

later with the even worse fate of marriage to himself. He also threatens violence against Martian, three times ordering his immediate death in a single scene (V,iii). And like a tyrant, Phocas has come to the throne through force and murder. Finally, the happy ending of the play based on Phocas's assassination implies that he must have been a tyrant. However, virtually all other indicators suggest otherwise. Phocas has treated Léontine with generosity for the past twenty years. The strength of Phocas's love for his son is brought up time and again, an insistence that can serve only to make the emperor sympathetic. Many of the indications of that love come not from Phocas, whose motives might render them suspect, but from Héraclius: 'Son amitié paraît si pure, / Que je ne saurais présumer / Si c'est par instinct de Nature, / Ou par coutume de m'aimer' (ll.1531-4); 'je trouve un amour de père / En celui qui m'ôta le mien' (ll.1541-2).<sup>9</sup> In the scenes of conflict between Phocas and the two young men who both refuse the identity of his son, Phocas's paternal suffering is palpable. He tells Héraclius, 'Laisse-moi mon erreur, puisqu'elle m'est si chère, / Je t'adopte pour fils, accepte-moi pour père' (ll.1675-6). When Héraclius momentarily accepts whatever identity will save Martian, Phocas immediately cries, 'Mon coeur pâme de joie' (l.1723), and he promises to 'associer l'un et l'autre [Héraclius and Martian] à l'Empire' (l.1724).

Phocas himself at times embodies our uncertainty about him, both benevolent and cruel at once: 'Et je saurai punir, comme récompenser' (l.966) he tells Martian. Even in Phocas's last scene on stage, where Corneille takes pains to make him almost stereotypically tyrannical in preparation for his assassination (it is here that he threatens to marry Pulchérie himself if she will not choose either Héraclius or Martian), he remains enigmatic. Having learned that Exupère has supposedly taken prisoner the heads of the revolt, Phocas dismisses Héraclius, Martian, and Pulchérie: 'En l'état où je suis, je n'ai plus lieu de feindre, / Les mutins sont domptés, et je cesse de craindre. / Je vous laisse tous trois' (ll.1743-5), leaving the spectators to wonder whether he has not been acting all along. However, he also says to Héraclius: 'Toi, cependant, ingrat, sois mon fils, si tu veux' (l.1742). While the 'si tu veux' signals indifference, the 'ingrat' indicates pain and suggests that none of the love he displayed was fake. Phocas remains an unsettling character to the end. In part, his undecidability is a function of his lack of action: he threatens, he pleads, he expresses his affection, but finally, trapped himself by his own uncertainty concerning the identity of his son, he does nothing.

Léontine presents an entirely different and yet equally undecidable case. Our uncertainty concerning her character and her motives cannot be reduced to a neat set of alternatives, as is the case with Phocas (cruel tyrant/kind father). Any number of different possibilities suggest themselves. Is she a martyr to imperial legitimacy, deserving of respect and support, as Maurice's letter tells us?<sup>10</sup> Is she a monster, one who was willing to hand her own son over to the executioner and who now avidly plots another death, this time of either Phocas or Martian, one at the hand of the other?<sup>11</sup> Is she a magician of some sort? She seems to claim special powers, contending that can protect Pulchérie from

9. See also ll.1575-80, 1583-6.

10. 'Honorez son grand zèle, appuyez ses projets' (l.599).

11. To quote Antoine Soare, 'Léontine est bien de la race des monstres' (Antoine Soare, 'Antiochus, Héraclius, *Britannicus*', *Actes de Columbus*, ed. by Charles G.S. Williams (Tübingen: PFSCS, 1990), pp.109-20, p.115).

Phocas and assure that Héraclius will take the throne.<sup>12</sup> Is she an egomaniac ruled by *orgueil* and defined by the recurring term *zèle*?<sup>13</sup> Léontine's reasons for switching the babies twenty years earlier are equally open to multiple explanations. Ostensibly, she had her own son die in Héraclius's place so as to later reestablish the legitimate heir on the throne. While one could hardly claim that this is not so, other more or less explicit motivations litter the landscape. As Martian, believing himself to be Héraclius, says to Léontine, 'Outre mes intérêts, vous en avez trop d'autres' (I.740). Most important is Léontine's stated goal of inciting either Martian to unknowingly kill his father, Phocas, or to have Phocas unknowingly kill his son.<sup>14</sup> We might consider that each of the two switches (Léonce for Héraclius and then Martian for Héraclius) corresponds to each of these two motives (return to legitimate rule and revenge), although Corneille is careful never to suggest such a correspondence. One significant problem in determining Léontine's motives, even with such a division, is that these two goals are not compatible. If Phocas kills Martian, Héraclius is no closer to the throne. Even if Martian kills Phocas, Héraclius's return to the throne of his father is not likely, simply because Martian would have no reason to kill Phocas, or Phocas to kill Martian, unless they both believed that Martian was Héraclius. And the play provides a clear illustration of the problems occasioned by two Héraclius's.<sup>15</sup> As if Léontine's motives were not sufficiently unclear at this point, Corneille adds a third possibility: it is suggested that Léontine seeks to place Eudoxe on the throne through marriage to the future emperor.<sup>16</sup> While Léontine is forthcoming about the first two motives, she never admits any such ambition for Eudoxe. A rather perverse comment she makes about her own son's sacrifice, however, lends credence to this third possibility: 'Mon fils fut pour mourir le fils de l'Empereur' (I.613). He died in the exalted role of heir to the throne. The motive of personal ambition is not incompatible, at least, with the goal of returning Héraclius to his father's throne. We remain uncertain about Léontine's true motives at the denouement, however, in part because, ironically, Léontine's goals have almost all been realized: Héraclius has been returned to his rightful place on the throne, Phocas has been murdered (albeit not by the hand of his son), and Héraclius has asked Eudoxe to marry him.

12. Concerning Pulchérie, Léontine states: 'De quoi que ce Tyran menace Pulchérie, / J'aurai trop de moyens d'arrêter sa furie, / De rompre cet Hymen, ou de le retarder' (II.461-3). To Héraclius, she says, 'Vous régnerez par moi, si par moi vous vivez. / Laissez entre mes mains mûrir vos Destinées' (II.496-7). One is reminded of Alcandre in Corneille's *L'illusion comique*. Prigent goes even further in his estimation of Léontine's powers, crediting her with having pushed Exupère to assassinate Phocas in order to prove to her his loyalty to Maurice's family (Prigent, op. cit., p.262).

13. Alice Rathé notes in her excellent article on Léontine, 'Au moment où l'action s'ouvre on constate, en effet, que son sacrifice initial, suivi de cette incubation prolongée, l'a raidie dans une exaltation d'orgueil poussé à l'extrême. Son projet est devenu un monument érigé à sa clairvoyance et à sa toute-puissance' (Rathé, op. cit., p.215).

14. 'Et nous immolerons au sang de votre frère / Le père par le fils, ou le fils par le père. / L'ordre est digne de nous, le crime est digne d'eux' (II.565-7).

15. Furthermore, as Prigent points out, another consequence of Léontine's plan for revenge is that Martian, when he believes himself to be Héraclius, naturally pushes Héraclius toward incest (III,I) (Prigent, op. cit., p.260).

16. Martian says to Léontine: 'D'autres soupçonneraient qu'un peu d'ambition, / Du prince Martian voyant la passion, / Pour lui voir sur le Trône élever votre fille, / Aurait voulu laisser l'Empire en sa famille [the family of Phocas]' (II.693-6).

Maternity is another aspect of Léontine's character that gives rise to uncertainty. Our unease has at least part of its roots in this woman's capacity to hand her own son over to be killed. As Saskia Brown notes, this act calls into question the very possibility of distinguishing sacrifice from murder.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the spectator's unease is compounded by Léontine's attitude toward her substitute son, Martian. In a scene alone with her daughter, in which presumably she would have little reason to be anything but perfectly honest, Léontine baldly states that she has raised Martian as her own solely as an instrument of revenge for her son's death.

Si j'ai pris soin de lui, si je l'ai laissé vivre,  
 .....  
 Ce fut sur l'espoir seul qu'un jour pour s'agrandir,  
 A ma pleine vengeance il pourrait s'enhardir.  
 Je ne l'ai conservé que pour ce parricide. (II.553-7)

Her maternal ruthlessness is reminiscent of Cléopâtre in *Rodogune*.<sup>18</sup> Léontine has indeed 'dompté la Nature', as she asserts (I.620). While she is happy to take credit for Martian's virtue, claiming, 'C'est du fils d'un Tyran que j'ai fait ce Héros' (I.1434), she is even more eager to see him die at Phocas's hands or sully his own with a parricide. Soare calls her 'la plus affreuse des aventurières de la maternité' (p.115). Yet ambiguity remains. Léontine refers to Martian in a conversation with Eudoxe as 'Notre vrai Martian' (I.549). He is ours, brother and son, yet he is also Martian and therefore the hated tyrant's son. Léontine's problematic maternity extends to her relationship with Eudoxe. She accuses her daughter of having revealed the secret of Héraclius's identity, repeating the allegation even after Eudoxe has convincingly cleared herself (II,iii). When Eudoxe moves to address Exupère in the following scene, Léontine immediately interrupts with a curt 'Taisez-vous' (I.585). Clearly Léontine is at least a problematic figure of motherhood, if not a *mère dénaturée*. As such, she serves as a pendant to Phocas, the ruthless tyrant who is also a loving and devoted father. To a certain degree, our uncertainty concerning these two characters is rooted in their role as parents.

Corneille goes to great lengths with Léontine to create an undecidable character. This includes, paradoxically, framing her in a positive light. Despite the many reasons we have examined to view her with suspicion, Léontine is defined as positive by the noble sacrifice of her son and the felicitous ending of the play, where the letter she finally produces works to place the rightful heir on the throne. The spectator is left in the uncomfortable position of having to struggle to integrate into this positive frame Léontine's cruelty, high-

17. Saskia Brown, 'Sacrifice and Catharsis in Corneille's *Discours* and *Héraclius*', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 17 (1995), 157-67, p.164.

18. Not only do both women kill their own sons, but they both possess secrets concerning a birth. These secrets – who was born first, who is Héraclius – give them significant power. In both cases, however, this power is insufficient to control the situation. See Judd D. Hubert, *Corneille's Performative Metaphors* (Charlottesville: Rookwood Press, 1997), p.123, and, R.C. Knight, *Corneille's Tragedies: the role of the unexpected* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble, 1991), p.48.

handedness, and selfishness, just as we must justify Phocas's love and generosity in the context of his behavior as a tyrant.<sup>19</sup>

Léontine contributes to the uncertainty surrounding her character by her own words; as Héraclius says, 'elle brouille tout notre sort' (l.1521). She lies to Exupère and Martian, saying that Maurice's letter is true and that Martian is indeed Héraclius. She lies about why she kept silent about Martian's identity. She glories in the uncertainty she provokes in Phocas:

Si je parle du reste, oseras-tu m'en croire?  
Et qui t'assurera que pour Héraclius  
Moi, qui t'ai tant trompé, je ne te trompe plus? (II.1400-2)

While Héraclius, Martian, and Exupère appear placated at the denouement by the favorable turn of events, Léontine's flimsy excuse to Martian can satisfy neither him nor us: 'pardonnez, Seigneur, à mon zèle parfait' (l.1899). That 'zèle parfait' included not merely Phocas's death but having Martian kill his own father or die at his hand. Like Phocas, Léontine remains an unsettling character to the end.

Into the vacuum of certainty comes the desire or even the need to convince others. If certainty cannot be attained through normal means, it must be constructed. And these constructions are invariably theatrical in nature. To give a simple example, Phocas seeks to convince the people that Héraclius is dead. In order to do so, he must produce someone who claims to be Héraclius and chop his head off in public. The spectacle of his death will work to convince the audience.<sup>20</sup> When Exupère seeks to convince Léontine that they share a common cause (IV, v), he is unable to do so with words alone. Of course his failure is overdetermined by Corneille: not only has he betrayed the identity of Héraclius to Phocas (incorrectly, but unwittingly so), but he has approached this scene with Léontine with the express intention of extracting the identity of Héraclius from her by any means possible. 'Gêne, flatte, surprends' (l.1458), Phocas had instructed him. Again, it will require a significant theatrical gesture for Léontine to believe that Exupère is not her enemy, one which Exupère produces by assassinating Phocas.

The blood implicit in these two examples is an indication of how profoundly embedded uncertainty is in this dramatic universe. This need for recourse to violence in order to attain certainty also works to create dramatic suspense by implying that Léontine, a woman, and therefore not able to employ force, will be hard pressed to convince anyone

19. Widely divergent critical reactions to Léontine are indicative of how Corneille's positive framing of Léontine works to make her even more undecidable. Prigent, for example, seeks to justify the negative elements, asserting that Léontine provides the necessary solution to the disorder that reigns: 'la solution passera par la cruauté: ce sera la fonction de Léontine' (Prigent, op. cit., p.234). Soare, on the contrary, finds nothing positive to say about her, asserting rather that Héraclius's future with such a controlling mother-in-law will not be bright: 'Corneille ne lui [Héraclius] fera qu'une seule grace, d'achever la pièce avant que ne commence la véritable tragédie' (Antoine Soare, op. cit., p.115).

20. John Lyons notes, 'Because the effect of the name Héraclius is all-important for the people of Phocas's usurped empire, it is not enough to execute Maurice's son. The victim must proclaim his identity publicly before dying in order to destroy forever the place of Héraclius in the minds of the people' (John Lyons, *A Theatre of Disguise: Studies in French Baroque Drama (1630-1660)* (Columbia, SC: French Literature Publications, 1978) p.110).

of Héraclius's true identity. Lies that have persisted for twenty years - the assigned identities of the young men - are difficult to dislodge. Léontine further exacerbates the situation by setting up obstacles to her own credibility. First, she recognizes Martian as Héraclius when confronted with Maurice's letter. As Héraclius notes, her confirmation of Martian works powerfully against the former's ascension to the throne.<sup>21</sup> If she lies about Martian, why will anyone believe her about Héraclius? Second, as we saw above in ll.1400-02, she taunts Phocas by casting her own veracity in doubt. Yet, almost miraculously, Léontine's final proof is sufficient to convince everyone of Héraclius's identity. This is so at least in part because of the theatrical nature of the proof. The dead empress Constantine is brought onstage through her words in the letter she entrusted to Léontine. This is a common technique in the classical theater, one which functions well to expand the limitations placed on time and space. Indeed, Maurice's letter produced by Exupère had the same theatrical presence, although it was two lines shorter. While everyone believes Léontine that Héraclius's true identity has been established and the reader has Corneille's assurance in the list of *dramatis personae*, there remains a residue of unease.

Until this final moment, however, certainty is sorely wanting, and all the characters are busy trying to construct it. Several characters undertake this construction in the form of a dramatic production of which they are the director. Léontine is the most obvious example, writing and directing this drama of infant substitution and hidden identities, assigning roles and trying to control all of her characters.<sup>22</sup> She even goes so far as to have Martian seemingly try out for the role of Héraclius. Exupère stages a rival play which involves revealing Héraclius's identity, tricking Phocas, and placing Héraclius on the throne by assassinating the tyrant.<sup>23</sup> While the plot lines of Léontine's and Exupère's plays are similar, Exupère's is dramatically superior, as Rathé explains, in no small measure because he respects the unity of time, while Léontine's drama has been dragging on for twenty years!<sup>24</sup> Phocas, too, is an aspiring director and has used theatrical techniques to establish the legitimacy of his reign whose uncertain status has been little improved by twenty years of rule. Initially he made Maurice his audience, impressing upon him the complete transfer of power by having his five sons slaughtered before his eyes.<sup>25</sup> As the play opens, Phocas seeks to arrange another spectacle by coercing Pulchérie to marry his son.

21. To Eudoxe, Héraclius says:

M'empêcher d'entreprendre, et par un faux rapport  
 Confondre en Martian et mon nom et mon sort,  
 Abuser d'un billet que le hasard lui donne,  
 Attacher de sa main mes droits à sa personne,  
 Et le mettre en état dessous sa bonne foi,  
 De régner en ma place, ou de périr pour moi,  
 Madame, est-ce en effet me rendre un grand service? (ll.1137-43)

22. Rathé, op. cit., provides a thorough examination of these aspects of Léontine as author-director.

23. According to Hubert, 'Exupère, entrusted with only one hundred and sixty lines and appearing in no more than ten scenes, functions as chief dramatist and, because of his limited stage presence, as the *deus ex machina* of the play' (Hubert, op. cit., p.125).

24. Rathé also discusses other dramatic shortcomings of Léontine's production, including lack of action and an absence of clear plans for reaching the denouement (Rathé, op. cit., pp.218-9).

25. Hubert, op. cit., p.123.

Other characters, although hardly staging dramatic productions, do try to impose roles on others. Pulchérie casts Phocas in the role of evil tyrant, and helps him understand his role by interpreting his lines for him, as we saw above. Héraclius himself, at the very end of the play, makes a serious stab at casting when he suggests that Martian keep the role of Léonce. The role of Léonce that Héraclius offers Martian differs in no significant way from the role of Martian that Phocas offered Héraclius only a few scenes earlier.<sup>26</sup>

Not surprisingly in this context, virtually all the characters are involved in acting some kind of role. Phocas has been playing the role of emperor for twenty years, but as his opening lines suggest, he is not entirely at home in the part. Léontine has been playing the part of the loyal governess for at least as long; Héraclius has been acting the role of Martian for four years, ever since he learned his true identity. Exupère plays the role of loyal subject to Phocas in order to disguise his true intentions. Pulchérie does not so much play a part as she simply overacts her true role as deposed princess.<sup>27</sup> Martian, faced with three different identities in the space of one day, does not know when he is acting a part and when not, or whether he is Pulchérie's lover or brother. He valiantly takes on the role of Héraclius, but expects it to be a short-lived role in which it falls to him to die bravely (III,ii and IV,iii). The construction of reality through role-playing is universal in this play and is even seen in a positive light. When the rumor that Héraclius is still alive first surfaces, Pulchérie tells Phocas that she prefers an imposter - someone acting the part of Héraclius - to Phocas.<sup>28</sup>

Héraclius's suggestion that Martian continue playing the role of Léonce is a gesture of healing and conciliation, not a cynical expediency. When Phocas offers Héraclius the part of Martian, it is in the same spirit. It is no small irony that a play centered on the discovery of identity (presumably true identity) should be so comfortable with role-playing. Indeed, the construction of a self-serving, plausible reality seems at times preferable to the truth. It is therefore not surprising that we find a spirit of competition for the most desirable roles. Léontine and Exupère both want to be the director of the action that will overthrow the tyrant, and the two young men who have lived their youth as Léonce and Martian, both pursue the heroic role of Héraclius. Neither wants the role of Pulchérie's husband because of the possibility of incest. But even when the threat of incest is removed by completely theatricalizing the marriage (*a mariage blanc*), neither wants the role. No doubt this latter reluctance is due to the fact that the role of Pulchérie's husband, however artificial, is incompatible with the role of Héraclius: accepting the first role eliminates one from competition for the other.

26. Phocas says, 'Laisse-moi mon erreur, puisqu'elle m'est si chère, / Je t'adopte pour fils, accepte-moi pour père' (II.1675-6).

27. For example, she begins a long tirade in reaction to Phocas's threats to kill Héraclius with 'Moi pleurer! Moi gémir, Tyran! J'aurais pleuré, / Si quelques lâchetés l'avaient déshonoré' (II.1005-6).

28. Je sais qu'il est faux, pour t'assurer ce rang

Ta rage eut trop de soin de verser tout mon sang :

Mais la soif de ta perte en cette conjoncture

Me fait aimer l'auteur d'une belle imposture.

Au seul nom de Maurice il te fera trembler,

Puisqu'il se dit son fils, il veut lui ressembler,

Et cette ressemblance, où son courage aspire

Mérite mieux que toi de gouverner l'Empire. (II.244-6).

It is curious that at the moment of greatest certainty, the end of the final scene, we find that role-playing persists. First, as we noted earlier, Héraclius offers Martian the role of Léonce. The rejection of Martian's true identity in favor of a more comfortable role indicates that true certainty has not been attained but must be fabricated. Prigent emphasizes the degree to which the exorcism of all traces of Phocas comes at a price: 'Le nom du tyran est enfoui dans les sables du mensonge d'Etat. Le dénouement n'est plus la manifestation triomphale et totale de la vérité'.<sup>29</sup> Second, the last lines of the play, 'Allons ... / Montrer Héraclius au Peuple qui l'attend' (ll.1915-6), spoken by Héraclius, indicate a consciousness that Héraclius is a role. Whether he is the true Héraclius or not, he knows that he has to go on stage before the people. Furthermore, he indicates by his use of the third person that he is playing the part of Héraclius. Uncertainty thus persists to the very end of *Héraclius* - in the form of theatricality as well as in the persistent questions concerning the true nature of Phocas and Léontine. While *Héraclius* is reputed to be Corneille's most complex play, its complexity is not limited to multiple identity switches, but rather extends to the very substance of identity and the grounds upon which we may base our judgment of another and arrive at the truth.

29. Prigent, op. cit., p.237.