

Trinity University

Digital Commons @ Trinity

Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty
Research

Modern Languages and Literatures Department

2002

Sophonisbe's Seduction: Corneille Writing Against Mairet

Nina Ekstein

Trinity University, nekstein@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/mlf_faculty



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. (2002). Sophonisbe's seduction: Corneille writing against Mairet. In D.L. Rubin (Ed.), *Studies in early modern France, vol. 8: Strategic rewriting* (pp. 104-118). Charlottesville, NC: Rookwood Press.

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

SOPHONISBE'S SEDUCTION: CORNEILLE WRITING AGAINST MAIRET

Nina Ekstein

Rewriting the subjects of tragedies was so common throughout the seventeenth century as to be a defining characteristic of the period. While originality was the rule in comedy, in tragedy it was disdained. The arrangement of the action, the power and beauty of the language, the originality of the articulation of the more or less ancient plot: these were the badges of the tragic virtuoso. Rewriting was both a compliment to the predecessor and an act of appropriation, a theft not so much of the subject as of authority over the subject. The tragic playwright rewrote with a presumption of superiority, and often a desire to rival and best the predecessor.

The subject of *Sophonisbe* was a popular one for many years.¹ R. C. Knight describes its attraction succinctly: the heroine "found the time, in the space of twenty-four hours, to be the wife of two different men and to take poison as well" (92). Ricci formulates the appeal of the story in more lofty terms: "Rien de plus tragique en effet qu'un guerrier qui se prend d'amour pour la femme de son rival et qui l'épouse en jurant de la défendre jusqu'à la dernière goutte de son sang et en se révoltant immédiatement par là contre ses maîtres" (18). Popular subjects, however, were not often Corneille's preference. Rather than rewriting known subjects, he favored the freedom afforded him by the obscure and chose to cultivate a reputation for originality.²

It was commonplace in the seventeenth century, and we might even say *de rigueur*, to announce one's sources, whether obscure or well-known. Using and enumerating sources, preferably ancient, were significant means of credentialing oneself as a playwright. Numerous studies have revealed the extent to which playwrights were often not entirely forthcoming in their discussions of their own sources, trumpeting the most ancient and most well-respected and covering up others more recent or less glorious. The distance between the new version and the old of the same subject is obviously crucial to how we may read the choice to rewrite. Corneille's *Sophonisbe* has its sources in the histories of Livy and Appian, but its greatest debt is to a version performed and published only twenty-nine years earlier (1634) by Jean Mairet.

The distance between these two versions of *Sophonisbe*, while the space of a generation, is in fact far shorter than the number of years would suggest. First, Corneille and Mairet were contemporaries, born two years apart. They were rivals for the pre-

mier position in the French theater in the 1630s, and each felt himself to have been grievously wounded by the other: Mairet was a leading and especially vicious attacker of Corneille during the *Querelle du Cid* (Dédéyan xvii, Forestier 87), while Corneille's dazzling success drove Mairet into early retirement from the theater in 1640. Mairet was still alive in 1663 and reportedly distressed by Corneille's appropriation of the subject of *Sophonisbe*.³ Second, Mairet's *Sophonisbe* was the most successful version of the subject ever produced. As Corneille himself admitted in his preface, Mairet's version was still being performed in 1663 (381). Corneille's choice of subject was therefore an extreme example of writing against an earlier version: everyone knew and everyone respected Mairet's *La Sophonisbe*.⁴ It was impossible for Corneille to expect to have an audience that was unfamiliar with Mairet's version, an audience that could judge his play without comparing it to its predecessor. To undertake to better his rival was an act of bravura and *hubris* in a period where Corneille no doubt felt his popularity and his supremacy on the French stage slipping away.⁵ Corneille's preface to *Sophonisbe*, while disingenuous in certain respects, makes abundantly clear that he knew what he was about:

Cette pièce m'a fait connaître qu'il n'y a rien de si pénible que de mettre sur le théâtre un sujet qu'un autre y a déjà fait réussir; mais aussi j'ose dire qu'il n'y a rien de si glorieux, quand on s'en acquitte dignement." (381)

The challenge Corneille set himself was to rewrite the subject of *Sophonisbe* while not in any way copying Mairet or reproducing those scenes which his predecessor had carried off most successfully (in particular, Massinisse's discussion with Scipion, and Massinisse's despair at *Sophonisbe*'s death) (381). While Corneille claims that these very differences will discourage all comparison between the two plays, it seems on the contrary that Corneille's play exists solely in order to be compared to Mairet's. Indeed, Corneille's tragedy has elicited little other than comparisons between the two versions. Most immediately, Corneille's version gave rise to a series of debates over a period of six months after the play first appeared that is commonly referred to as the *Querelle de Sophonisbe* (D'Aubignac in Granet 136-37, Ricci 101-8, Knight 92). Numerous studies have since compared the two versions and it is difficult to find a discussion of Corneille's *Sophonisbe* that does not make mention of Mairet.

Corneille attempted a similar kind of rewriting just four years earlier, in his triumphant return to the stage with *Oedipe*. There as well he took a play that was well-known to, and admired by, his audience and made significant changes in order both to make it his own and to rival Sophocles and Seneca.⁶ With *Oedipe*, the rivalry was rather impersonal: in fact the subject of *Oedipus* had been suggested to him by Fouquet. Corneille vied with a long tradition when he chose to rewrite this Greek tragedy, but he crossed swords with no recent author. It is worth noting that *Oedipe* was a solid success in 1659: Corneille indeed amazed his audience with his inventive rewriting. *Sophonisbe* may be seen as an extension of that effort at appropriation and rewriting.

*

The basic story upon which both Mairet and Corneille built their tragedies is as follows: The Carthaginian Sophonisbe, once promised to Massinisse, is married to Syphax (a rival Numidic king) in order to cement an alliance against the Romans. Massinisse meanwhile has become a Roman ally. With Roman support, he defeats Syphax and conquers Cyrthe, Syphax's capital. Sophonisbe, in order to avoid being sent to Rome in chains, marries Massinisse that same day. The Romans, enemies of Carthage, do not approve of the match between their ally and their enemy's daughter. Massinisse is unable to protect Sophonisbe and she takes her own life in order to avoid falling into the hands of the hated Romans.⁷

Mairet, in writing against his most immediate predecessor, the Italian Gian Giorgio Trissino (1478-1550), made several significant changes. First he focused attention on the love story between Sophonisbe and Massinisse. Second, he had Syphax die in battle against Massinisse. This allowed Mairet to avoid the problem of *bienséances* that Sophonisbe's seeming bigamy raised. While Sophonisbe's divorce of Syphax was considered normal in Roman times on the grounds that he was a captive, it was scandalous for the seventeenth-century audience. Finally, Mairet had Massinisse commit suicide in despair at the loss of Sophonisbe, allowing for a fully tragic ending reminiscent of Théophile de Viau's *Pyrame et Thisbé*. Killing off both Syphax and Massinisse was a radical move on Mairet's part, one that he defended in the name of *vraisemblance*.

Corneille's version of *Sophonisbe* brought a new set of changes in reaction to Mairet's dramatic choices. Where Mairet allows the deaths of Syphax and Massinisse, Corneille keeps the two characters alive, defending his own choice on the principle of historical truth. This is not the first time that Corneille was involved in conflicts concerning *vraisemblance* and the *vrai*. It is clear, in the case of *Sophonisbe* at least, that Corneille was far less interested in historical veracity than in opposing or attacking Mairet. Corneille's principles break down when he invents a character not to be found in either history or any earlier version of the play: Eryxe, queen of Gétulie and prisoner at Cyrthe who is betrothed to Massinisse. Ironically, Corneille defends his invention of Eryxe precisely on the grounds of *vraisemblance*, the very territory Mairet had claimed:

C'est une reine de ma façon, de qui ce poème reçoit un grand ornement, et qui pourrait toutefois y passer en quelque sorte pour inutile. n'était qu'elle ajoute des motifs vraisemblables aux historiques, et sert tout ensemble d'aiguillon à Sophonisbe pour précipiter son mariage, et de prétexte aux Romains pour n'y point consentir (385).⁸

The addition of Eryxe provided Corneille with two female lead characters, a convention of the period and perhaps a personal preference as well. Eryxe's presence also provided complication where Mairet's version was an exemplar of simplicity.

In terms of the love story, Corneille wrote against Mairet as well, explicitly

denying the marriage its consummation, making Sophonisbe's feelings for Massinisse muddled, and adding a new affective preoccupation for his heroine: intense jealousy of Eryxe. In both versions, Massinisse sends Sophonisbe a letter accompanied by poison. In Mairet's version the poison was requested and is accepted as a gift, while in Corneille's play, Sophonisbe sends it back, suggesting that Massinisse ought to make use of it himself.

Thus the changes Corneille made to Mairet's version of the play are all deliberate consequences of writing against his predecessor. Knowing that he could not write as though Mairet's version did not exist, he went to the other extreme, both in his choices and in his explicit statements in the preface, writing a kind of negation of the earlier version.⁹

In discussing how Corneille wrote against Mairet's *Sophonisbe*, I would like to focus on a particular aspect that has escaped careful attention: the question of seduction. I take the term seduction in a broad sense, including but not limited to the sexual. The subject of *Sophonisbe* demands seduction. Without seduction how can Sophonisbe manage to convince Massinisse, who is politically her enemy through his alliance with the Romans, not only to protect her against the Romans, but to marry her the very same day? Seduction undergirds the two primary moments of the dramatic action: when Sophonisbe seduces Massinisse into marrying her and when Massinisse fails to seduce the Romans into allowing him to keep her. Seduction is mixed in with marriage and political alliance to define and form the ties between characters in this dramatic universe. Significantly, in *Sophonisbe*, these ties are not stable. Syphax goes from being the ally of the Romans to being their enemy, and then their prisoner. Sophonisbe had earlier broken her engagement with Massinisse and now divorces Syphax in order to marry Massinisse: the latter wants to be both a Roman ally and the husband of the Carthaginian (positions the Romans are quick to identify as incompatible).¹⁰ The instability of alliances is in part a function of the striking absence of family ties. Sophonisbe makes reference to her father Asdrubal, but he does not appear; in Corneille's version, we hear of a sister of Syphax offered in marriage to Massinisse but refused. But that is all: there are no blood relatives onstage, and most tellingly, no children onstage or off. Without the stability of family ties, seduction takes on a particular power and increased importance. If we consider the balance of power in this story, regardless of whose version we choose, we find it to be strongly imbalanced in favor of the Romans. In Corneille's play, Roman might is obvious: the kingdoms represented by Syphax, Massinisse, and even Eryxe are at the mercy of the conquerors, while the Carthaginians, who might be strong enough to defeat the Romans, are embodied onstage by a sole and militarily powerless woman, Sophonisbe. Roman power extends to their scenic presence. While the significant roles involve one representative of each country or kingdom, two Romans appear onstage and a third and even more powerful Roman, Scipion, is consulted in the wings. In a universe where almost everyone is overpowered by the Romans, where alliances and marriages are not stable and dependable, seduction becomes a necessary arm.

Mairet understood the centrality of seduction, and I believe that the success of his version of the subject of Sophonisbe is due in no small measure to the fact that he

placed the seductiveness of Sophonisbe as well as her specific seduction of Massinisse at the heart of his play.¹¹ In Mairet's *La Sophonisbe*, the heroine debates the possibility of seducing Massinisse with her confidants (II,3 and III,2), the actual scene of seduction is long and developed (Sophonisbe skillfully induces Massinisse to propose marriage), and sexuality is central. Furthermore, sexuality is explicit, from the kiss she grants him in III.4. to the language of the scene in which the couple share an intimate moment after having consummated the marriage (IV,1).

Mairet's use of seduction posed two problems for Corneille. First, seduction, especially sexual seduction, is not a theme with which Corneille has shown himself to be comfortable.¹² The second problem involves writing against Mairet. Corneille, as we have seen, sought to "respecter sa gloire [Mairet's] et ménager la mienne, par une scrupuleuse exactitude à m'écarter de sa route" (381). Thus, while Corneille may well have grasped the basic importance of seduction to the subject of the play, he endeavors to represent it differently, to not follow the footsteps of Mairet. In so doing Corneille at times enslaves himself negatively to his rival.

The most basic form of female seduction is tied to appearance. Mairet makes frequent reference to Sophonisbe's charms and beauty (I counted 38), including references to specific features (eyes, ears, mouth, complexion) and occasionally suggesting a magical quality to her seductiveness.¹³ In contrast, Corneille's version contains only ten such references to Sophonisbe's appearance. Corneille does not, however, abandon Sophonisbe's basic physical seductiveness. Eryxe's physical appearance receives no comment whatsoever, suggesting, in contrast to her rival, an absence of physical attractiveness supported by the ease with which Massinisse abandons her. Corneille's Syphax is explicit about Sophonisbe's powers of seduction. Bitter at her defection, he tells the Romans: "Vous la trouverez...au lit d'un autre Roi / Qu'elle saura séduire et perdre comme moi" (II. 1215-16). Specific to Corneille, Sophonisbe's seductiveness is presented through the testimony of the seduced. Syphax goes on at length in the first act (I,4) about his love for his wife as she convinces him not to accept a truce with the Romans. He had chosen an alliance with the Carthaginians over one with the Romans solely in order to marry her. Massinisse, even more than Syphax, demonstrates how thoroughly Sophonisbe has seduced him. Eager to consummate his marriage, the Numidian tells his confidant to bring Sophonisbe, who is praying at the temple, to him immediately. He later says to the unsympathetic Lélius: "Je ne veux ni régner, ni vivre qu'en ses bras" (I. 1327). The Roman upbraids Massinisse for the excess of his amorous sentiments. The seduced male is clearly presented as nonheroic, at best worthy of pity. Lélius rejects love, telling Massinisse what a true monarch should do: "Il repousse l'amour comme un lâche attentat" (I. 1375). Both Massinisse and Syphax are rendered inferior to their positions by the powers of seduction of Sophonisbe. As Jean Baudrillard has said, "Être séduit, c'est être détourné de sa vérité. Séduire, c'est détourner l'autre de sa vérité" (112).

While the stature of the male characters suffers, Corneille subtly suggests that Sophonisbe's seductiveness rather than their own weakness and susceptibility may be more to blame. He does so by having Lélius leave the stage precipitously in IV,4 as Massinisse tries to convince him of her powers:

Voyez-la donc, Seigneur. voyez tout son mérite;
Voyez s'il est aisé qu'un Héros... Il me quitte.
Et d'un premier éclat le barbare alarmé
N'ose exposer son cœur aux yeux qui m'ont charmé.

(II. 1413-16)

One might argue that Lélius walks off in disgust with Massinisse, but the potential danger of Sophonisbe's mere presence cannot be dismissed.

In Mairet's version, Sophonisbe not only seduced those around her, but she herself was reduced to a sexual haze by Massinisse. There is a strong contrast between the two plays in Sophonisbe's reaction to Massinisse, in the degree to which the heroine herself is seduced. Corneille suggests nothing sexual in Sophonisbe's past relations with Massinisse: her description to her confidant of being raised alongside Massinisse with the understanding that they would someday marry conveys a pure, chaste love. In Mairet's version, Sophonisbe and Massinisse did not know each other, but she had seen him and her reaction to first glimpsing his face is highly charged:

Je vis de votre armet la visière haussée
Que pour vous rafraîchir vous levâtes exprès,
Et qu'il me fut permis d'observer d'assez près
Ce visage où l'Amour et le Dieu de la Thrace
Mêlent tant de douceur avecque tant d'audace,
De là je commençai de vendre mon pays,
Et de là dans mon cœur les miens furent trahis:
D'une flèche de feu j'eus l'âme outrepercée.

(II. 1060-67)

There are no kisses in Corneille's play, no scene of intimacy and abandon, and no explicit indication that the marriage between Massinisse and Sophonisbe has been consummated during the entr'acte. On the contrary, Corneille makes it clear that the marriage has not been consummated, and Sophonisbe assures her new husband that it will not be until he has succeeded at protecting her from the Romans, thus conveying a hint of sexual blackmail (III,4).¹⁴ Where Mairet created a Sophonisbe completely given over to her own passion at the expense of political loyalties, Corneille sought to create a different heroine. Ricci claims that those playwrights who choose not to create an impassioned Sophonisbe (and Corneille is not alone in this choice) thereby sacrifice the primary source of dramatic interest for the play (206). Similarly, Axelrad observes that the playwright dealing with this subject must choose between the "patriote ardente" and the "amoureuse ardente" in depicting Sophonisbe. If one makes the choice (as indeed Mairet did, opting for the latter alternative), one loses one of the tragic aspects of the character. If one does not make a choice, but rather attempts a synthesis, "on risque d'aboutir à la plus parfaite incohérence" (118, 120). This clearly is the case in Corneille's play, as has been often noted by critics (for example, Baker *Harmonies* 106). Corneille may have sensed the problem of the necessary choice, for

he attempted a completely novel solution, opting for synthesis while adding a new dimension to Sophonisbe's character. His Sophonisbe is not merely the *patriote* and the *amoureuse*, she is also a *jalouse ardente*. Her jealousy is clearly presented as greater than her love:

Et c'est, pour peu qu'on aime, une extrême douceur
De pouvoir accorder sa gloire avec son coeur:
Mais c'en est une ici bien autre, et sans égale,
D'enlever, et sitôt, ce Prince à ma Rivale"

(II. 709-12)

Unfortunately, this synthesis was not successful, and Sophonisbe is rendered even more incoherent by the addition of this third component to her motivation.

Whether one agrees with that judgment or not, it is clear that establishing a different emotional coloring for Sophonisbe posed serious problems for Corneille. First, Corneille's Sophonisbe is not without signs of sexual susceptibility. Her strongest admission of passion for Massinisse is delivered to Syphax when she refers to her past betrothal to the young warrior: "Je brûlais d'un beau feu" (I. 291), she tells him, "les plus beaux feux" (I. 306). These statements, however, are made in the context of Sophonisbe's attempts to convince her spouse to reject the Roman offer of peace; their potential to arouse his jealousy may seriously compromise Sophonisbe's sincerity. Even to Syphax, she qualifies her own passion: "Je l'aimai, mais ce feu dont je fus la maîtresse / Ne met point dans mon coeur de honteuse tendresse" (II. 1105-6). Elsewhere, both to Massinisse and to her confidant Hermine, Sophonisbe makes a number of statements concerning her feelings for Massinisse, but they are all somewhat tepid, or qualified, or not fully expressed. She speaks to Hermine of "l'importune tendresse" of her "feu" (I. 1529). To Massinisse she says, "Mon amour voudrait plus, mais je règne sur lui" (I. 1455). When he begs her to say that she loves him, to show the depth of her feelings in order to inspire him for his meeting with Scipion, Sophonisbe responds, "Allez, Seigneur, allez, je vous aime en époux, / Et serais à mon tour aussi foible que vous" (II. 1503-4). Note the conditional tense of her last statement. In place of Mairet's *passionnée*, Corneille places a woman whose feelings are clearly not as strong as those of Massinisse. As a character, Sophonisbe is a strange mixture of bravura, pettiness, cruelty, patriotism, regal pride, and unfaithfulness, and she shows only a modicum of love. Shortly after the play was staged, Donneau de Visé commented:

Sophonisbe n'a point de caractère parfait dans cette pièce, ... elle explique ses sentiments avec beaucoup de confusion, qu'on ne la sauroit connaître, qu'on ne sait si c'est l'amour, ou l'ambition, ou la crainte du triomphe qui la font agir; ce qui fait que l'Auditeur ne sauroit entrer dans ses intérêts, qu'il ne sauroit prendre son parti, ni se déclarer entièrement contre elle. (Granet 119-20)

Writing against Mairet has thus resulted in a confused presentation of the eponymous character.

Writing against Mairet led Corneille to make other, more carefully orchestrated, changes as well. As we noted earlier, the scene in which Sophonisbe seduces Massinisse, in which she obtains his promise of protection and his offer of marriage, is absolutely essential to the subject of play. It is curious that Corneille neglects to identify this scene in Mairet's version as being one of the high points of the latter's play. In any event, Corneille clearly felt impelled to handle it differently than Mairet, and he showed considerable creativity in so doing. First, the seduction scene is not shown onstage: it is held at a significant remove by appearing in the form of a *récit*. And this *récit*, recounting the meeting of Sophonisbe and Massinisse, and her seduction of him, is not told by a neutral character, but by Eryxe. Second, Corneille breaks off the offer of marriage from the central scene of seduction, saving it for later.

In Eryxe's telling, Massinisse seems seduced even before he encounters Sophonisbe. Eryxe reports seeing Massinisse, "mais surpris, mais troublé de ma vue, / Il n'était point lui-même alors qu'il m'a reçue" (II. 403-4). He does not listen to Eryxe and falls silent. When Sophonisbe arrives, she requests the honor of being Massinisse's prisoner so that she might thereby avoid being sent to Rome in shame. While blessed with an already favorably disposed auditor (Massinisse), Sophonisbe nonetheless goes to some length to sway him in her favor, using a seemingly contradictory mixture of tears and *orgueil*, as Eryxe reports:

Son orgueil que ses pleurs semblaient vouloir dédire
Trouvait l'art en pleurant d'augmenter son empire,
Et sûre du succès, dont cet art répondait,
Elle prioit bien moins qu'elle ne commandait.

(II. 439-42)

The double appearance of the word *art* underlines the deliberate quality of seduction at play here, at least in Eryxe's opinion. Combining *orgueil* and tears, the role of the dominatrix with that of the helpless victim, allows Sophonisbe to maximize her potential to appeal to Massinisse. Her success is immediate and complete: Massinisse grants her request and appears completely smitten ("Jusqu'au fond du palais des yeux il l'a conduite," [I. 452]). Sophonisbe's seduction is thus distanced from the spectator and at the same time appears almost effortless.

The first onstage encounter between Massinisse and Sophonisbe is mediated by Eryxe as well. The three characters meet onstage in II.3, but Eryxe quickly leaves them alone, graciously assuring Sophonisbe, "je consens à tout" (I. 594). The presence of Eryxe on both occasions serves to underline the triangular nature of relations in the play. This love triangle is singularly muted, however, by Eryxe's lack of passion, lack of manifest jealousy and her self-restraint. The other triangle, between Sophonisbe, Massinisse, and Syphax is far more volatile.

The power of the first private meeting between Sophonisbe and Massinisse (II.4) is thus doubly attenuated, first by the fact that they have already met and the

essential seduction has already transpired, and second by the lingering shadow of Eryxe's presence. Furthermore, it is a curiously tepid scene. Sophonisbe begins by painting herself as a victim, while recalling her earlier ties to Massinisse as well as her own crime toward him (in marrying Syphax) in order to excite his *générosité*. Massinisse replies simply that in order for him to help her she must marry him immediately. A discussion of the problem of divorce ensues. Sophonisbe coyly declares her surprise to think that he could still love her after her unfaithfulness toward him. Massinisse responds with a list of what he will not say to her, admitting only "Je vous aime, Madame, et c'est assez vous dire" (I. 664). He puts the choice before her: marriage to him or the Roman Triumph. Sophonisbe accepts but dilutes any possibility for effusion by admitting that she herself chose to marry Syphax out of love for her country, and that she had not found it difficult to give up Massinisse. In fact the seduction seems to be proceeding in a direction opposite to what we found in Mairet; it is Massinisse who is trying to convince Sophonisbe to marry him, Massinisse who will accept her despite what she has admitted about her past infidelity. Where Mairet's seduction scene was straightforward and saturated in sexuality, Corneille complicates presentation, motivation, and desire. Writing against Mairet, he alters and significantly dilutes his predecessor's pivotal seduction scene, but at the same time he sets up other scenes of seduction as a form of compensation.

The first of these compensatory scenes of seduction occurs in the first act when Sophonisbe must convince Syphax to refuse the Roman offer of peace, an offer that holds nothing but advantages for him. Sophonisbe launches into a complex, multi-faceted assault, beginning with feigned praise for the peace treaty, a request for reassurance of Syphax's love for her, and protestation of her own love for him. She then attacks, reminding her husband that her country gave her to Syphax, despite her earlier engagement to Massinisse. She accuses him of ingratitude and of breaking his word to Carthage, while cruelly dwelling on the sacrifice she herself made of her love for Massinisse. From accusations and an attempt to arouse jealousy, Sophonisbe moves on to political arguments, contending that the Romans cannot be trusted; once they have defeated Carthage they will turn on Syphax. She argues that the present moment is auspicious for an attack on the Romans, giving concrete reasons. Then she presents a specific threat: if Syphax accepts the Roman offer, she will leave him and return to Carthage. She conjures up a sense of foreboding ("Vous préserve le Ciel de ce que je prévois." [I. 366]), and moves into her final tactic of tears, accompanied by the wish to die rather than he witness to Syphax's death. Needless to say, Syphax capitulates. With this seduction scene, Corneille completely deviates from Mairet, in whose play we find no equivalent, and furthermore he establishes very early in the play Sophonisbe's basic seductive strength. In the place of the central seduction scene between Sophonisbe and Massinisse, Corneille places distance and complication, while providing Sophonisbe the compensation of an entirely different seduction scene, complex in its line of argument yet simple in its direct assault, early in the tragedy. Where one might argue that Corneille's Sophonisbe does not seduce Massinisse because he is already in her thrall before she sees him, in the case of Syphax, Sophonisbe clearly induces him to act against his better judgment.

Corneille creates for Sophonisbe yet another compensation for the central, yet attenuated, seduction scene, this time situated at the end of the fourth act. Massinisse suggests that Sophonisbe seduce Scipion:

Allons, allons Madame, essayer aujourd'hui
Sur le grand Scipion ce qu'il a craint pour lui.
Il vient d'entrer au camp, venez-y par vos charmes
Appuyer mes soupirs et secourir mes larmes.

(II. 1419-22)

Once again, Corneille is writing against Mairet. Where the latter presented the confrontation between Massinisse and Scipion onstage, Corneille has placed it offstage and creates an alternative by having a similar scene depicted between Massinisse and Lélius. Corneille also goes further than his predecessor in abasing Massinisse, having him go off to meet Scipion armed only with tears, sighs, and his strange plan to have his wife seduce the Roman commander (which Sophonisbe immediately rejects). In the process of degrading Massinisse, Corneille once again underlines Sophonisbe's seductiveness. Massinisse does not succeed at convincing (seducing) either Lélius or Scipion.

Another unsuccessful attempt at seduction in Corneille's play is Lélius's plan to appease Sophonisbe and keep her from committing suicide. He sends Lépidé off to tell her "Que le grand Scipion veut lui servir d'appui, / Que Rome en sa faveur voudra lui faire grâce" (II. 1690-91): "Enfin avec douceur tâchez de la réduire / A venir dans le camp, à s'y laisser conduire" (II. 1695-96). The word *réduire* makes Lélius's motives clear. Interestingly, Sophonisbe admits being seduced by Lépidé's words: "Qu'aisément, reprend-elle, une âme se console! / Je sens vers cet espoir tout mon cœur s'échapper" (II. 1780-81). It is too late however, as she has already consumed the poison; furthermore she knows that Lépidé is trying to seduce her ("se laisser tromper," "votre artifice," [II. 1782, 1784]). While on a larger political scale, Rome can be read as the primary seducer in this dramatic universe, controlling the kingdoms of Massinisse and Eryxe.¹⁵ onstage their record of success is decidedly mixed: Syphax does not accept the Roman offer of peace; Sophonisbe may say she is beguiled by Lépidé's words, but she escapes Roman control through death; and it is far from clear that Lélius will be successful in convincing Eryxe to forgive and marry Massinisse. In contrast, Sophonisbe's seductions, enacted on a personal scale, although at least partially for political motives, all succeed.

There is yet another category of compensatory seduction at work here. Corneille, like all playwrights, seeks to seduce his audience. This case is particular, however, because of the long shadow cast by Mairet's version. As we have seen, writing against Mairet's play has pushed Corneille into some dramatically uncomfortable corners. In his dénouement, as Barnwell notes, Corneille eschews more standard forms of spectator seduction: "No traditional funeral oration is pronounced; no emotional *récit* of the death scene is spoken; no rhetorical lament or final suicide (contrast Mairet's play) takes place" (589). In contrast, Corneille goes to unusual lengths to help the

spectator understand and appreciate his heroine. Corneille's preface provides the spectator with a clearer image of Sophonisbe than we are likely to be able to discover in the play. According to the author, she feels "un peu d'amour" but it is strictly at the service of her twin dominant passions: the good of Carthage and her hatred of Rome (note that no mention is made of her jealousy toward Eryxe). Sophonisbe's pride in the service of these values is "si noble et si élevée" that Lélius is forced to admit that she deserves to have been born a Roman (382). Even within the play itself, Corneille takes care to provide clear, if perhaps implausible, interpretations of Sophonisbe's confusing behavior. In her final scene with Massinisse, Sophonisbe offers him little in terms of the support, love, and encouragement he has asked for in order to confront Scipion. When she leaves the stage, however, Mézétulle turns to Massinisse and says, "Douterez-vous encor, Seigneur, qu'elle vous aime?" (I. 1509). Massinisse replies: "il est vrai, son amour est extrême" (I. 1511). This statement seems directed to convincing the audience, for she has not demonstrated such love. The fact that Corneille finds it necessary to explain and define his heroine in this fashion reflects the incoherence of her character that we noted earlier. Sophonisbe's primary action in the play is to seduce (and finally to commit suicide when her seduction, albeit successful, proves inadequate). How ironic then that she is not successful in seducing the spectator. It is difficult for the spectator to be seduced by an incoherent heroine. Mairet's heroine, although lacking patriotic grandeur, was coherent.

Corneille tries to seduce the spectator in yet another fashion, this time through a kind of hyperconstruction of the dramatic text. The arrangement of scenes and meetings, of echos and repetitions, is masterful. The play is so carefully arranged that the structures cannot possibly be anything but deliberate. Once again it is clear that Corneille has moved in a direction opposed to that of Mairet. In the latter's version, there is a linear movement from the couple Sophonisbe-Syphax to Sophonisbe-Massinisse to Scipion-Massinisse.¹⁶ Corneille's structure is far more complex and even more balanced. There are two queens, two rival kings, and two onstage Romans; the superior weight of the Romans is suggested by the presence of a third, Scipion, offstage. Sophonisbe and Syphax have two major meetings onstage (I,4 and III,6); Sophonisbe and Massinisse have three (II,4, III,4, and IV,5); Eryxe and Massinisse two (II,2, III,2). The case of Sophonisbe and Eryxe is more complex: four meetings carefully spread across the five acts, the first and last of which are major scenes: I,3, II,3, III,3, V,3-4.¹⁷ The meetings between Eryxe and Sophonisbe are marked by oscillation and repetition. The two women alternate in opening their scenes with statements very similar to "Tout a changé de face" (I. 575; see also II. 581, 917, 1643), as political favor oscillates from one to the other and back.¹⁸ If Sophonisbe can be said to have difficulty seducing the audience, the structuring of the play, in its balance and coherence, is on the contrary likely to be highly pleasing to the spectator.

In a final move that may be construed as an attempted seduction of the spectator, Corneille lets it be known that he considers *Sophonisbe* to be one of his best plays.¹⁹ It is not clear, of course, how many he has convinced in that fashion. Seduction as a theme belongs to all theater: dramatic action is often predicated upon various forms of seduction—much theatrical dialogue can be reduced to characters attempt-

ing to convince other characters to do as they want them to do—, and all playwrights, directors, and actors seek nothing more than to seduce their audience. In Corneille's *Sophonisbe*, seduction is at the heart of the play: a specific and sexual seduction of a man by a woman. As we have seen, Corneille deflects that central seduction offstage and complicates it, giving it multiple onstage resonances.

Susan Read Baker discusses "Corneille's...endeavor in *Sophonisbe* to supplant Jean Mairet by incorporating and destroying his rival's own text" ("Equivocation" 147). Perhaps in order to destroy Mairet's text, Corneille had to necessarily, tragically even, produce a destroyed text himself. And this self-destruction would come not from incorporation of Mairet's text, as Baker posits, but rather from the hole left by not incorporating Mairet's text, by writing around and against it. For there is a hole at the center of Corneille's play. The hole has two aspects: the first is the absent central scene of seduction and the second is Sophonisbe's inadequacy as a heroic and cohesive center to the play. Both are consequences of writing against Mairet. The point at which the two meet, in their lack, is sexuality. Sexuality, like the seduction scene and like Sophonisbe herself, is unavoidable in a play where the heroine has two husbands, and where, unlike any other of Corneille's plays, a marriage takes place in the middle of the action, not after the curtain rings down. All potential for sexual fever has been excised from Corneille's *Sophonisbe* and from her seduction of Massinisse. Corneille seems to sense this lack and seeks, in ever more elaborate constructions, compensations, and complexities, to put something in its place, to fill the hole.

NOTES

¹Charles Ricci patiently traces and examines in depth the numerous versions of the Sophonisbe story in France and Italy; A. José Axelrad, more superficial in his treatment of individual versions, is more broad in his coverage, encompassing England and Germany as well as France and Italy, and dealing with 24 different tragedies; Christian Delmas discusses how various versions of *Sophonisbe* contributed to and reflected the development of tragedy on the French stage ("Les Sophonisbe").

²Georges Forestier notes, "à moins d'une circonstance exceptionnelle, commande (*Médée*) ou défi (*Oedipe*), il lui répugnait de paraître manquer d'invention en se contentant de reprendre des sujets déjà traités" (317). Another significant example of Corneille rewriting is *La Mort de Pompée*. Chaulmer had written, performed, and published a play dealing with the same subject and with the identical title a mere four years before Corneille's 1642 tragedy. Georges May comments: "Corneille s'empare donc d'un sujet, non seulement existant déjà sur la scène française, mais,—chose exceptionnelle dans sa carrière—d'un sujet dont la dernière réalisation scénique datait à peine de quelques années" (35).

³This information comes to us from Donneau de Visé, whose own eagerness to enter the fray in the *Querelle de Sophonisbe*, taking positions both against and for Corneille's version in the span of only a few months, makes his testimony less than absolutely reliable (Mongrédien 179).

⁴Ricci, among others, points to Corneille's deliberate intention "de faire autrement que Mairet" (108).

⁵According to Georges May, Corneille "n'aurait eu que le désir de jouer avec le feu et d'éprouver un plaisir de virtuose et d'esthète comparable à celui de Jean Giraudoux mettant en scène

Amphitryon pour la 38^e fois... Une telle fantaisie impliquerait de la part de Corneille une sûreté de soi et une certitude de réussir qu'il ne pouvait guère avoir en 1663. *Sophonisbe* n'était que sa troisième tragédie depuis le "four" de *Pertharite*" (48). On another note, it is ironic that Racine would not make his appearance until the following year, providing a rival who would not retire from the stage, as Mairet had done long before, but who would compete with Corneille at every opportunity.

⁶Corneille in his *Au lecteur* to *Oedipe* states, "Comme j'ai pris une autre route que la leur, il m'a été impossible de me rencontrer avec eux" (19).

⁷In Livy's version of events, Sophonisbe was never the fiancée of Massinisse. That romantic element was contributed by Appian.

⁸Corneille's reasons are weak, however. The Romans do not refer to Eryxe as a reason for forbidding the marriage between Sophonisbe and Massinisse: they forbid it because she is a Roman enemy. And the first reason is hardly more convincing: Sophonisbe precipitates the marriage to Massinisse because it is a way to protect herself against the Romans. If the issue were truly Eryxe, we would see Sophonisbe at the beginning of the play plotting to assassinate Syphax, so that she could take Eryxe's place. For a discussion of some of the widely varying opinions concerning Eryxe, see Barnwell (584).

⁹The relationship between the plays is further complicated in two directions. First, Susan Read Baker has pointed out that Corneille had already written *Médée* (1639) to vie with Mairet's *La Sophonisbe* (*Harmonies* 114). Second, the vendetta-like situation of writing against a predecessor is prolonged by Voltaire who in 1774 staged his own *Sophonisbe*. Ricci reads Voltaire's play as an attack on Corneille's and a desire to outdo Mairet (115-16).

¹⁰"Notre ami tout ensemble et genre d'Asdrubal. / Croyez-moi, ces deux noms s'accordent assez mal" (II, 1291-92).

¹¹Henry Carrington Lancaster notes, "The subject was, indeed, primarily one of passion rather than patriotism. It is, perhaps, the perception of this fact that made Mairet's play stand the test of time better than the tragedies of his more illustrious successors, Corneille and Voltaire" (708).

¹²While Corneille certainly employs other kinds of seductions (e.g. Cinna's report of arousing the enthusiasm of his fellow conspirators), the only example of a sexual seduction that I can find is in *L'Illusion comique*, where Lyse seduces the jailer (offstage) in order to free Clindor. Furthermore, by 1637, when Mairet's *Marc-Antoine* appeared onstage, Richelieu's influence had made itself felt in the French theater and explicit sexuality had gone out of favor. Philip Tomlinson notes that Mairet's Cléopâtre is not a sensual character: her love for Antoine "ne ressemble nullement à la brûlante passion animale à laquelle Sophonisbe n'avait su résister. Mairet neutralise même les attraits physiques traditionnels du personnage, en réduisant au minimum les références à sa beauté. Sa Cléopâtre n'a donc rien de la séductrice coquette aux allures irrésistibles" (70).

¹³Delmas notes that it is Mairet's *Sophonisbe* "qui ordonne le mieux la figure complexe de sa séductrice autour de l'image de l'ensorceleuse, capable, telle une Circé, d'attirer à elle le temps d'une simple entrevue celui qui était son ennemi" ("Autour" 13).

¹⁴It is worth noting that the original version of Corneille's *Sophonisbe*, which appeared onstage in 1663, may have presented a more passionate heroine. According to Donneau de Visé, "dès l'ouverture de la pièce, l'on connoît l'ardent amour qu'elle a pour Massinisse, et que sa passion est assez violente pour lui faire abandonner Syphax et épouser Massinisse" (Granet 122). It is clear from this and other statements by both de Visé and by d'Aubignac that changes were made before *Sophonisbe* was published.

¹⁵Baker states, "Rome has even taken exclusive control of the power of seduction, subsuming it in the guise of *friendship* under its own dominant authority" (*Harmonies* 112).

¹⁶Roland Simon notes that "l'amour de Massinisse et Sophonisbe form[ent] une sorte de pont fragile et temporaire entre les deux pôles de l'autorité et du devoir [Syphax and Scipion] qui les maudissent et les condamnent respectivement" (71).

¹⁷There is even a sense of balance conveyed by the total number of lines in the scenes referred to: Sophonisbe and Syphax: 258 lines, Sophonisbe and Massinisse: 260; Sophonisbe and Eryxe: 208 lines, and finally Eryxe and Massinisse: 171 lines.

¹⁸It is not difficult to imagine that Racine found some inspiration for his own famous "Tout a changé de face" in *Phèdre* here, or even for the back and forth movement of fortune for Hermione in *Andromaque*.

¹⁹In a letter to Saint-Evremond, Corneille writes, "ma *Sophonisbe*, pour qui vous montrez tant de tendresse, a la meilleure part de la mienne" (725).

WORKS CITED

- Axelrad, A. José. *Le Thème de Sophonisbe*. Lille: Bibliothèque universitaire, 1956.
- Baker, Susan Read. *Dissonant Harmonies*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1990.
- . "The Equivocation of Massinisse in Corneille's *Sophonisbe* (1663)." *Cahiers du dix-septième* 4.1 (1990): 141-49.
- Barnwell, H. T. "Corneille in 1663, the Tragedy of *Sophonisbe*." *PF-SCL* 11.21 (1984): 575-92.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *De la séduction*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1979.
- Corneille, Pierre. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Ed. Georges Couton. Paris: Gallimard, 1987.
- Dédéyan, Charles. "Introduction." *La Sophonisbe*. By Jean Mairet. Paris: Nizet, 1969. vii-xxxvi.
- Delmas, Christian. "Autour de la *Sophonisbe* de Mairet (1634): mythologie et histoire dans la tragédie classique." *L'Information littéraire* 41.2 (1988): 3-14.
- . "Les *Sophonisbe* et le renouveau de la tragédie en France." *XVII^e siècle* 208 (2000): 443-63.
- Forestier, Georges. *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l'oeuvre*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1996.
- Granet, François. *Recueil de dissertations sur plusieurs tragédies de Corneille et Racine*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1975. 1740.
- Knight, R. C. *Corneille's Tragedies; The Role of the Unexpected*. Savage, Md.: Barnes and Noble, 1991.
- Lancaster, Henry Carrington. *French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century*. New York: Gordian Press, 1966.
- Mairet, Jean. "La *Sophonisbe*." *Théâtre du XVII^e siècle*. Ed. Jacques Scherer. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
- May, Georges. *Tragédie cornélienne, tragédie racinienne; Etude sur les sources de l'intérêt dramatique*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1948.
- Mongrédien, Georges. *Recueil des textes et des documents du XVII^e siècle relatifs à Corneille*. Paris: CNRS, 1972.

- Ricci, Charles. *Sophonisbe dans la tragédie classique italienne et française*. Geneva: Slatkine, 1970. 1904.
- Simon, Roland. "A propos de classicisme: *La Sophonisbe* de Mairet." *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 19 (1972): 65-81.
- Tomlinson, Philip. "Le Personnage de Cléopâtre chez Mairet et Corneille." *XVII^e siècle* 190 (1996): 67-76.