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# Pompée's Absence in Corneille's 'La Mort de Pompée'

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## POMPÉE'S ABSENCE IN CORNEILLE'S 'LA MORT DE POMPÉE'

Corneille's *La Mort de Pompée* (1643) occupies a curious position in the playwright's *oeuvre*, coming as it does immediately after the tetralogy. Faced with the never-ending artistic challenge of what to do next, what features to keep from earlier works, how to innovate and thereby captivate his audience, how to outdo his latest success, Corneille made some daring choices in this play. Indeed, this play is commonly viewed as a significant point in Corneille's *oeuvre*, one at which the playwright moves off in a radically new direction <sup>1</sup>. It is my contention that the basic choice to keep Pompée off the stage determines a complex pattern of consequences and compensations, both dramaturgical and thematic, that marks *La Mort de Pompée* as a fundamental departure for Corneille.

The complete onstage absence of the eponymous Pompée is a significant *gageure*, all the more interesting when we consider that Corneille had the option of bringing him onstage in the first act, before his assassination. Unlike Sylla, the only other absent Cornelian character whom we might call a protagonist, Pompée is not far away, but approaches the Alexandrian shore as the play opens <sup>2</sup>. The absence of Pompée in the play that bears his name constitutes a hole at the center of the tragedy, one that demands to be filled. Corneille goes about filling that hole in a number of ways, the first of which involves a series of sometimes paradoxical strategies to make the absent Pompée present onstage. Indeed, Pompée is excessively present for a character who is no longer alive. The name Pompée appears 66 times in the play and is spoken in all but two scenes. Furthermore, there are 50 additional references to Pompée in the form of various substantives (not simple pronouns) such as "grand homme", "héros", and "illustre époux". Corneille himself seems to revel in the paradox of Pompée's absence and presence when he says in his *Examen*:

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. (1076) <sup>3</sup>

Beyond simple reference, Corneille employs three interrelated means to compensate for Pompée's absence and bring him on stage.

The first is through the numerous *récits*. Several critics have noted that *La Mort de Pompée* as a whole has the largest amount of narrative discourse of any of Corneille's plays (Hubert 116; Herland 12). Of the five lengthy *récits* in *La Mort de Pompée*, the three longest ones deal with Pompée. The first, told by Achorée to Cléopâtre, presents Pompée's arrival and assassination (ll.456-567); the second, told by Achorée to Charmion, concerns César's reaction to being confronted with Pompée's death (specifically with his head) (ll.735-99); and the third (Philippe to Cornélie) recounts the funeral rites the former undertook for Pompée's headless body (ll.1485-1536). These three passages represent a significant portion of the entire play (12%) and constitute a narrative block unparalleled in Corneille's theater<sup>4</sup>. What accounts for their outsize presence is their particular function of bringing the absent Pompée onstage.

It is noteworthy that Corneille seems deliberately to have 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, creating the most awkwardly nondramatic 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<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, because the narrators of these three *récits* are secondary characters, their objectivity is assured; the audience has faith that it is receiving an accurate account. Thus, while the dramatic force of all three *récits* is compromised by the awkward narrative situations, their power to convey Pompée to the stage neutrally and objectively is enhanced. Another curious feature of these three lengthy *récits* is that they all involve events that occur during, rather than before, the action of the play. They function therefore not as the vehicle of a rich past, but of the almost immediate present, with the result, whether desired or not, of distancing significant constituent events of the play<sup>6</sup>. In other words, we do not see much of what occurs during the course of the play. *Récits*, compensating for the major absence of Pompée from the stage, simultaneously contribute to another kind of absence, that of onstage action.

The second means that Corneille employs to bring Pompée on stage is through reported direct discourse. Pompée's exact words are

cited in one of the *récits*: he instructs Cornélie about what to do if he does not return (ll.469-76). Hearing Pompée's words evokes his presence and reduces the distance between him and the spectator. While not limited to Pompée – we also find the words of Septime (ll.482-84), Ptolomé (ll. 756-60), Cordus (ll.1503-13) and César (ll.1527-34), all but one whom also appear on stage during the course of the play<sup>7</sup> – the general is given a voice, however brief, as he goes off to what he suspects will be his death. The evocative potential of reported speech to make the absent present is particularly potent in the theater: in the playscript upon which a staging is based, characters are constructed purely out of their own speech and that of others about them. Only later is a character embodied by an actor. Thus the Pompée who is talked about by others and whose words we find in this passage shares the status of all dramatic characters when a play is read rather than performed.

A curious variant of reported direct discourse that serves to dramatize Pompée involves omniscient narration in the *récit* that Achorée tells about Pompée's death. Achorée allows the audience access to Pompée's thoughts as he is assailed (ll.456-567) and then dies ("en lui-même il rappelle..." 1.521). Corneille attempts 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<sup>8</sup>. Thus while Pompée's direct discourse is both brief and rather dry, Corneille developed other means of bringing the dead man's thoughts and state of mind to the stage.

The third tactic that Corneille employs to bring Pompée on stage is entirely specific to this play: the concrete physicality of his body parts. No other absent character is the object of such a large number of references to his or her body. Such references are all the more striking in the context of a classical theater in which concrete physical references are uncommon. In the *récit* which recounts Pompée's death, Corneille describes his decapitation and the fate of both the body ("le tronc sous les flots roule dorénavant", 1.535) and the head ("sa tête... / Passe au bout d'une lance en la main d'Achillas", 1.531). 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)<sup>9</sup> – and yet it is their insistent physi-

cality that dominates. The very first lines of the play describe the remains of the battle of Pharsale, including “troncs pourris” (I.11), referring not to trees but to soldiers. These headless bodies are a clear and concrete foreshadowing of Pompée’s fate. Perhaps ironically, the audience next comes into contact with Pompée as a *bodiless head* described in Achorée’s account of César’s arrival (III,1), a gruesome prop whose physicality (“Sa bouche encore ouverte et sa vue égarée” I.765) and brutal effect on César (“César à cet aspect comme frappé de foudre,” I.769) work to counteract the distance attendant upon any *récit*. The visual presence of the head is evoked by careful reference to its unveiling and its concealment<sup>10</sup>. Two acts later the headless body appears, again couched in a *récit*, although in a less spectacular fashion than the head: Philippe recounts that he searched for the body, found it, and burned it on a simple funeral pyre (II.1485-1536).

The final and most physical step in bringing Pompée on stage occurs in the fifth act when Philippe presents the urn containing the ashes of Pompée’s body to Cornélie. Pompée leaves the realm of narrative to appear, albeit in an altered form, on the stage<sup>11</sup>. Cornélie speaks directly to the urn at length on stage (II.1458-80), as Philippe reports César did (in fact, Philippe reports that César went so far as to kiss the urn). Speaking to Pompée’s ashes implies the possibility of dialogue; even reduced to ashes, Pompée suggests presence by fulfilling the role of interlocutor.

Pompée’s absence is circumvented in a different fashion when he takes on what one might call an active role. When Pompée’s head is revealed to César, it seems 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 grand âme à peine séparée,  
Et son courroux mourant fait un dernier effort  
Pour reprocher aux Dieux sa défaite et sa mort. (II.761-68)

Not only is this described scene excessive in its morbid physicality (Sweetser 128-29), but it clearly suggests agency on Pompée’s part. In a second example, César credits the dead Pompée with an active part in Cornélie’s decision to warn César of Ptolomée’s plot against him:

Ses Mânes [Pompée’s], qui du Ciel ont vu de quel courage  
Je préparais la mienne à venger son outrage,  
Mettant leur haine bas, me sauvent aujourd’hui  
Par la moitié qu’en Terre il nous laisse de lui [Cornélie].  
Il vit, il vit encore en l’objet de sa flamme,  
Il parle par sa bouche, il agit dans son âme,  
Il la pousse, et l’oppose à cette indignité,  
Pour me vaincre par elle en générosité. (II.1365-72)

Here the physical body of Pompée has disappeared in favor of a spiritual presence beyond death. The absence of Pompée’s physicality in César’s claim is perhaps precisely what makes it open to suspicion, given how physically present the absent Pompée is throughout the rest of the play.

Pompée’s body is literally scattered throughout *La Mort de Pompée*. His head and body are separated soon after the first act ends and the conclusion of the play offers the promise that the head will be reunited with the body and that Cornélie will be allowed to leave with her whole, if transformed, husband<sup>12</sup>. While such a reunion of body parts may seem grotesque, it is apparently more successful than that between Cléopâtre and César whose union, while hoped for, is politically impossible<sup>13</sup>.

One final indicator of the paradoxical interplay of Pompée’s absence and presence is the play’s title. Published first as *La Mort de Pompée*, the title was later abbreviated in the second edition (1648) to *Pompée*. The first title suggests the eponymous character’s absence and the second his presence<sup>14</sup>. Corneille does not explain the reasons for the change, but leaves us to wonder. The suggestion of a transcendence of absence and death is further affirmed in the choice of the final word of the play: *immortels* (I.1812). That the play is now generally referred to as *La Mort de Pompée* implies, however, that such transcendence has not been successful and that the hole left by the absence of Pompée from this play has not been filled.

There is another character whose absence, although far more limited than Pompée’s, is nonetheless a factor, and that is César. César’s role is so important to the play that one does not readily associate him with absence, and yet he does not arrive on stage until the third act; in fact, it has been noted that César arrives at the same point as Tartuffe would some twenty years later (III,2). César’s absence is less glaring than Tartuffe’s, largely because he is not the primary focus of attention throughout the first two acts, Pompée being a far more immediate concern. Not only is César absent for

almost the first half of the play, but it is clear that he will soon leave once again. Photin argues that Ptolomée should humor his sister because "Il [César] partira bientôt, et vous serez le maître" (l.682). Cléopâtre herself seems conscious of how fleeting his presence may be when she wishes to be married to him, if only for one day (ll.429-30). Indeed, it seems that César's departure is imminent. He tells Cléopâtre: "Si je veux être à vous, il faut que je vous quitte, / En quelques lieux qu'on fuie, il me faut y courir, / Pour achever de vaincre, et de vous conquérir" (ll.1330-2). Note the paradox of the first line. In sum, César and Pompée, through the interplay of absence and presence, figure the internecine strife of the warring factions of Rome, a Rome that, like them, is both absent from and present in the play, a play whose action takes place far from Rome, in Alexandria.

The central absence of Pompée, as we have seen, leaves an enormous hole that Corneille fills in part through the use of multiple *récits*, through frequent reference to the man and his body parts, through reported speech, and through a change of title. Despite these compensations, Pompée's absence remains a central feature, and it is seconded by the relative absence of César. Before examining two quite different tactics that Corneille employs to compensate for the absence of Pompée, I would like to point to one other absence, not of a character on stage, but of a distinctive feature associated with a character: specifically Cléopâtre's active and seductive sexuality. Corneille makes no references to her sexual conquest of César. While her physical beauty is stressed, albeit more by Marc-Antoine than by César<sup>15</sup>, the absence of manifest sexuality jars with the universally shared image of the historical Cléopâtre. While this absence is different in kind from that of on stage presence, it leaves a lack that is similarly disturbing and disorienting.

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Corneille's second basic strategy of compensation for Pompée's absence involves his widow Cornélie. In contrast to Pompée and César who are associated with a considerable degree of absence, Cornélie's role is considerably larger than might be expected on the basis of Corneille's source material: according to all accounts of the period, she took no part in the events recounted by the tragedy. Quite simply, she functions here as a kind of stand-in for her murdered and absent husband. The compensation that she offers does not merely

take the form of on stage presence, but extends to an unusual degree of rhetorical excess<sup>16</sup>. This is most evident in her use of language, what Schlumberger terms her "ivresse verbale" (99). In her long tirades (IV,4; V,1; V,4), Cornélie's language, to say nothing of her logic<sup>17</sup>, is so convoluted that Couton, as the play's editor, is repeatedly reduced to translating her meaning for the reader. A number of Couton's notes to Cornélie's speeches in the above-mentioned scenes focus on clarification (e.g., "Le raisonnement de Cornélie dans les vers 1390-1422 est celui-ci," 1748), at times involving alternative meanings ("Deux sens entre lesquels on peut hésiter," 1752) or complete uncertainty ("Qu'en vain on veut trahir est obscur," 1753). Her discourse is so grandiose that it slips, at times, beyond meaning. Sellstrom notes that "the role of Cornélie has sometimes been looked on as a tedious exercise in rhetorical inflation" (834).

More significant as a compensation for Pompée's absence, Cornélie attempts to construct a role for herself in the play's action. She inflates her own role as a cause of Pompée's misfortune, saying to César in their first scene together:

César, de ta victoire écoute moins le bruit,  
Elle n'est que l'effet du malheur qui me suit.  
Je l'ai porté pour dot chez Pompée et chez Crasse,  
Deux fois du Monde entier j'ai causé la disgrâce,  
Deux fois de mon Hymen le noeud mal assorti  
A chassé tous les Dieux du plus juste parti. (ll.1011-16)

Not content to be the grieving widow, she demands the larger role of carrier of a matrimonial curse, going so far as to wish to have been César's wife so that: "j'eusse avec moi porté dans ta maison / D'un astre envenimé l'invincible poison" (ll.1019-20).

Later, Cornélie takes it upon herself to speak for Rome when she reveals Ptolomée's plot to assassinate César: "Rome le veut ainsi" (1407). The line dividing "Rome" and *je* is uncertain and we again find this tendency toward self-fragmentation and self-aggrandizement when she announces, "La veuve de Pompée y force Cornélie" (l.1734). While the glorious prophecies that marked the end of *Cinna* and *Polyeucte* are not to be found in this play, Cornélie demonstrates a predilection for prophetic discourse. She predicts Ptolomée's death to Cléopâtre before either woman learns of it: "Je sais bien que César se force à l'épargner; / Mais quoi que son amour ait osé vous promettre, / Le Ciel plus juste enfin n'osera le permettre" (ll.1584-86). She predicts that César's desire to marry Cléopâtre will have terrible con-

sequences for him: “de cet Hymen tes amis indignés / Vengeront sur ton sang leurs avis dédaignées” (ll.1751-52). Both prophecies, unlike those of Livie and Pauline, are forecasts of death. Furthermore, in both of these cases Cornélie takes an additional step beyond her prophecy and leaves the world of disinterested foresight to return to very self-centered preoccupations. In the first passage, she enjoins: “Et s’il [le Ciel] peut une fois écouter tous mes vœux, / Par la main l’un de l’autre [Ptolomé and César] ils périront tous deux” (ll.1587-88), a desire which is of course never realized. In the second passage, she immediately wants credit for saving César yet again: “J’empêche ta ruine empêchant tes caresses” (ll.1753), she tells him. Revaz-Zürich makes the connection with the absent Pompée by explaining Cornélie’s prophetic discourse as a kind of channeling of her deceased husband (261). Whether her seemingly oracular pronouncements are in fact prophetic or simple projections of her desire for revenge, she works to occupy the space left absent by Pompée. Her status as a woman who is powerless and virtually a prisoner, as well as her verbal excess, mark her as not entirely equal to the task of compensating for her husband’s disappearance.

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A third and perhaps less obvious strategy for compensating for the central absence of Pompée involves history and *fabulation*. *La Mort de Pompée* differs from all of Corneille’s other plays in the degree to which the historical events and characters presented in it are well-known to the audience<sup>18</sup>. Certainly *Oedipe* (1659) contains events with which all were equally familiar, but *Oedipe* is myth, not history. Auguste may rival César, Cléopâtre, and Pompée in stature; but the events Corneille presents in *Cinna* are relatively obscure. Corneille thus fills the gap left by the absence of the eponymous character with the solid presence of heroic personages and events well known to all.

This compensation comes at a cost: because of the constraints entailed by his choice of subject, Corneille was not free to change the events that his audience knew to have occurred. Much has been written on the numerous liberties Corneille has taken with historical fact in his theater, but such alterations are only possible with relatively obscure events and characters, both of which Corneille favored in all likelihood precisely because of the relative freedom they afforded

him. In *La Mort de Pompée* the main characters and events were not subject to alteration<sup>19</sup>. The greatest liberty Corneille takes here is to bring Cornélie, who merely fled in Lucan’s account, into the dramatic action.

Choosing a well-known subject has a second consequence that provides a completely different kind of compensation for Pompée’s absence: a kind of surfeit or overload. The “episode” Corneille has selected does not fit comfortably within the temporal confines of a classical tragedy. The playwright credibly telescopes the deaths of Pompée and Ptolomé into this brief period, but there is much else that exceeds the boundaries of the play: the battle of Pharsale, Cornélie’s revenge, and Cléopâtre and César’s future together. Indeed, the lack of sufficient closure has been a frequent criticism of *La Mort de Pompée* (Dobrovsky 281). Faced with this excess material, Corneille has recourse to a variety of means of bringing the past and the future to the on stage dramatic universe including *révits*, description, and coy hints. To cover the pre-dramatic events, there is a startlingly vivid description of the blood-soaked aftermath of the battle of Pharsala which opens the play (ll.5-12) and a *récit* in which Cléopâtre tells her brother about her earlier contact with César and its political consequences for their father’s throne (ll.289-316). What is to follow the rather artificial denouement of Cléopâtre’s imminent coronation and Pompée’s funeral honors is presented in a less structured fashion. Photin makes allusion to the battles awaiting César in Africa and Spain (ll.683-696) and Cornélie lists her intended future tactics against César as well as a warning that the youth of Rome will not tolerate a leader who would marry a queen (ll.1735-52), as indeed they will not. Corneille provides two additional coy winks at the audience concerning the future as well, first when he has Cléopâtre comment balefully to her confidant, “Ainsi finit Pompée [stabbed to death], et peut-être qu’un jour / César éprouvera même sort à son tour” (ll.587-8), and second when he brings on stage Marc Antoine, who would later have a fatal passion for Cléopâtre. The historical material of this play seems greater than Corneille’s ability to weave it into the play.

Curiously, despite the overabundance of well-known historical material, we find an unusually high degree of what might be called myth-making or *fabulation* in this play. The characters seem peculiarly concerned with constructing grandiose stories about their own or others’ actions. I have already noted how Cornélie rewrites the

causes of Pompée's assassination so as to carve out a significant role for herself. Elsewhere, Ptoloméc accuses Cléopâtre of assigning herself an unmerited starring role. After listening to her account of how she was the motivating force behind the Roman aid accorded to their father (ll.289-316), Ptolomée refers to her speech as a "conte ... fait avec adresse" (l.321). While the essential truth of the events Cléopâtre recounts is attested to by César's attentions to her, her interest in self-aggrandizement is still clear. César indulges in a similar act of *fabulation* when he transforms Cornélie's revelation that Ptoloméc is conspiring against him into the stuff of legend, involving Pompée acting from beyond the grave and exalting the profound brotherhood between César and Pompéc (ll.1365-72; see above p. 6). Such creativity vis-à-vis events is unusual in Corneille's theater. It is more than a coincidence that *Le menteur*, which appeared in the same year as *La Mort de Pompée*, probably comes closest. The creative spirit found in Dorante as he verbally constructs a military past, a nocturnal feast, and a forced marriage is closely tied to the impulse of *fabulation* common to virtually all of the characters of this play.

Two questions arise. First, why did Corneille chose to incorporate such a high degree of fiction, or *fabulation*, in this, the most historical of his plays? Any answer is only speculation of course, but it seems that there are two possible explanations. The first involves using this technique as part of a larger effort to attain the sublime. Having chosen to represent the most well-known figures of Roman times, Corneille sought to make his characters equal to their historical status. Such a reading is supported by Corneille's own statement in the *Examen* about the language of *La Mort de Pompée*: "Pour le style, il est plus élevé en ce Poème qu'en aucun des miens, et ce sont sans contredit les Vers les plus pompeux que j'aie faits" (1077). The other possibility involves a more ironic reading: by juxtaposing his highest degree of fictional creativity with his most historically well-known characters, Corneille may be making a wry commentary on the heroic status of any historical figure, in effect showing how such a status is constructed.

The second, and more central, question is: how does such *fabulation* relate to the question of Pompée's absence and Corneille's attendant gestures of compensation? I think the *fabulation* can be read in tandem with the overabundance of historical material in this play. History and *fabulation* each function independently as supplements to compensate for the central absence of Pompée. The fact

that history and *fabulation* seem to stand in opposition to each other works to underline how inadequate such efforts at compensation are.

The abundance of historical material in this play brings to mind another kind of history, Corneille's personal dramatic history. The series of four plays preceding *La Mort de Pompée* (*Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Cinna*, *Polyeucte*), with the controversy and acclaim that they brought to the playwright, had to loom as large as the historical César, Cléopâtre, and Pompée for both Corneille and his audience. After the tetralogy and the startling and inspirational spectrum of heroism that it offered, it is very difficult for Corneille's audience to confront one of his plays, especially the very next play, without the expectation that it will offer yet another kind of hero. It is striking how many of the more recent analyses of *La Mort de Pompée* seem to share that expectation. Typically, each critic saves one character or another to hold out as heroic, virtuous, a redeeming site of opposition to the others. In Gérard's case it is Cornélie who is held aloft<sup>20</sup>; Soare, after a blistering attack on César and Cléopâtre, holds Cornélie out as the positive figure of the play as well (201); Hubert, on the other hand, presents Pompée as heroic; Sellstrom finds significant virtue in all but Ptolomée, and wants to believe in César's noble righteousness (840); Forstier finds César to be the hero (250), as does Picciola who says that Pompée's death provokes the emergence of another hero to take his place, specifically César (102)<sup>21</sup>. It is as though there is a universal need for a heroic character. Couton comments on this search for a hero in *La Mort de Pompée* by saying, "On a donc cherché un autre héros [other than Pompée], à grand peine, sans vrai profit" (*Corneille* 102)<sup>22</sup>. One is left to speculate to what degree Corneille was teasing his audience with this parade of famous characters, none of whom quite manages to sustain their assumed grandeur. Yet such speculation may go off in an entirely different direction: to what extent is the need for a hero Corneille's as much as the audience's? The excessive number of characters with some claim on heroic status is a function of Corneille's dramaturgical choices. It is not an accident that no one character dominates in terms of the size of role; one sometimes has the sense that five characters (including the dead but ever-present Pompée) are competing for the starring role.

The question remains to what degree Corneille was constrained by his own history as well as the well-known Roman history he depicts, and to what extent he rebelled against these constraints. Are

the abundance of heroes a sign of Corneille's aspiration to the sublime or a sign of parody? For Forestier, speaking in more general terms, "La poétique de Corneille est une poétique de la grandeur, c'est-à-dire du sublime" (277), while Schlumberger, speaking specifically of *La Mort de Pompée*, says: "Constamment la mesure est dépassée et la surcharge confine à la parodie" (102). Certainly the image of the sublime Corneille is a far more comfortable and familiar one than a parodic Corneille. But the possibility needs to be considered. After all, why depict a series of historical characters who have often been cast in heroic roles of various sorts, some more often than others, only to subtly or not so subtly undermine the possibility of a hero in this play? And what of the heroic status of the absent Pompée? It would appear that César, Cornélie, and Cléopâtre aspire to the heroic in an attempt to compensate for the absence of the "true" hero, Pompée. However, Pompée is a particularly problematic choice for the play's hero, only in part because, as Couton points out, "Une poignée de cendres, même d'un très grand homme, fait pourtant un étrange protagoniste" (*Corneille* 102). More unsettling is that Corneille's Pompée is not really heroic. While heroism may be a natural association with the name Pompée, heroic actions on his part are no more in evidence within the play than is Cléopâtre's sexuality. 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 Ptoloméé and Cléopâtre's father, at César's bidding. He receives many positive epithets from almost all the characters (e.g., "ce Héros si cher", "cette grande âme," "ce guerrier magnanime") 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. In the final analysis, Pompée's absence from the play figures the absence of heroism. His absence occasions multiple moves of compensation, but none can compete with the black hole he embodies at the heart of play. Despite all the tactics Corneille employs to make him present on stage, he never becomes a substantial character; because he never acts, he never becomes more than an object, and an object in the place of a character, in the place of a hero, marks *La Mort de Pompée* as a profound departure from the tetralogy.

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<sup>1</sup> Forestier calls *La Mort de Pompée* an "œuvre de transition dans laquelle il est difficile de discerner les intentions de Corneille" (248); Sweetser calls it "un tournant dans l'œuvre cornélienne" (128).

<sup>2</sup> Besides Sylla, the other significant absent characters in Corneille's theater are: Florange (*La Veuve*), Florise (*La Suivante*), Flavie (*Théodore*), Pison (*Othon*), and Mandane (*Suréna*). None, however, is mentioned nearly as frequently as Pompée and certainly none has lent his or her name to the play in which one appears, or rather, does not appear. I am currently working on an article dealing with the general question of the absent character in Corneille's theater entitled "The Presence of Absence: Absent Characters in Corneille's Theater".

<sup>3</sup> Even more playfully, Corneille opens his dedicatory letter to Mazarin with: "Je présente le grand Pompée à Votre Eminence, c'est-à-dire le plus grand personnage de l'ancienne Rome, au plus illustre de la nouvelle" (1071). The verb *présenter* has ironic resonances, as Corneille's Pompée is distinguished by never being presented on stage. All references are to Couton's edition of *La Mort de Pompée*.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the five lengthy *récits* in this play equal in number and far exceed in number of lines the narratives found in *Horace* and *Le menteur*, its closest rivals. A brief example will give a clear idea of the difference in scope. Achorée, who is the narrator of three of these five *récits*, speaks 201 lines in those three passages; *Le menteur's* Dorante who is known for his narrative lies, only speaks 117 lines of *récit* in the entire play.

<sup>5</sup> Corneille himself goes to considerable length in his *Examen* to justify the situation of a *récit* where neither narrator nor addressee is a main character (1078).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, of the five lengthy *récits*, only one involves the predramatic past: Cléopâtre tells Ptoloméé how she came to meet and develop a relationship with César.

<sup>7</sup> Reported direct discourse is not necessarily limited to *récits* but that is where it is most often found. Reported direct discourse is frequently used to make a lengthy *récit* more varied, vivid and dramatic (Ekstein 60). The relatively frequent occurrence of reported direct discourse in this play can thus be linked to the high frequency of *récits*.

<sup>8</sup> Achorée uses the same omniscient stance in his *récit* involving César's reaction to learning of Pompée's death (ll.735-99). He begins circumspectly, saying, "si j'ose en faire conjecture" (l.773), but soon moves from conjecture to assertion:

Il [César] se juge en autrui, se tâte, s'étudie,  
Examine en secret sa joie et ses douleurs,  
Les balance, choisit, laisse couler des pleurs,  
Et forçant sa vertu d'être encor la maîtresse,  
Se montre généreux par un trait de faiblesse. (ll.781-86)

<sup>9</sup> Hubert discusses the symbolic import 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 overdetermine the idea of division, a dominant theme in a play dealing with a fatal rift in history" (121).

<sup>10</sup> "A ces mots Achillas découvre cette tête" (l.761) and "Ensuite il [César] fait ôter ce présent de ses yeux" (l.787).

<sup>11</sup> Hubert says: "The defeated leader has at last taken possession of the stage, as though his ashes had finally made his ideal presence tangible and operative" (128).

<sup>12</sup> César says to the widow: "Et qu'une Urne plus digne de vous et de lui, /... / Renferme avec éclat ses cendres réunies" (ll.1688-90, emphasis mine).

<sup>13</sup> Doubovsky underlines the impossibility: "Cléopâtre, qui met donc l'amour au service de l'ambition, et César, qui met l'ambition au service de l'amour, loin d'assurer, par leur union, l'unification bienfaisante des contraires, s'avèrent, en fait, incapables de se rejoindre. Ce qui caractérise *la Mort de Pompée*, c'est son *inachèvement*, au sens où la pièce appelle vainement une synthèse vivante de la royauté impuissante et de la puissance anti-royale" (281).

<sup>14</sup> Picciola notes, "en substituant le titre de *Pompée* à celui de *La Mort de Pompée* ..., Corneille montrait bien que son sujet consistait dans la permanence paradoxale de la présence de Pompée" (102).

<sup>15</sup> Almost all of the physical description of Cléopâtre's charms is his, rather than

César's. César calls Cléopâtre "cette Reine adorable" (l.945) and then Marc Antoine takes over:

Où, Seigneur, je l'ai vue: elle est incomparable,  
Le Ciel n'a point encoir par de si doux accords  
Uni tant de vertus aux grâces d'un beau corps,  
Une majesté douce épand sur son visage  
De quoi s'assujettir le plus noble courage,  
Ses yeux savent ravir, son discours sait charmer,  
Et si j'étais César, je la voudrais aimer". (ll.946-52)

<sup>16</sup> In terms of number of lines spoken, she is fourth behind Cléopâtre, Ptolomée, and César, but not a distant fourth (30 lines fewer than César). What is noteworthy is that when she is on stage (six scenes, as opposed to twelve for Cléopâtre, nine for Ptolomée, and eight for César), she verbally dominates the stage to a far greater degree than anyone else: where Cléopâtre, Ptolomée, and César speak 39%, 37%, and 43% respectively of the lines spoken while they are on stage, Cornélie's figure is almost 57%.

<sup>17</sup> Gérard points to Cornélie's curious form of reasoning: "We ought to be surprised that on her first appearance on the stage in III, iv, Cornélie should not demand Ptolomée's punishment: this is offered by César. On the contrary, Cornélie's first speech concentrates on her hatred of César, who had no share in the murder of Pompée" (341).

<sup>18</sup> Corneille goes out of his way to insist upon, not only the historicity of the events and characters themselves, but the vast array of historical sources upon which he relied: "Si je voulais ... te donner le texte ou l'abrégé des Auteurs dont cette Histoire est tirée, ... je ferais un Avant-propos dix fois plus long que mon Poème, et j'aurais à rapporter des Livres entiers de presque tous ceux qui ont écrit l'Histoire Romaine" (*Au Lecteur* 1072).

<sup>19</sup> In his *Discours de la tragédie*, Corneille says: "Il y a des choses sur qui nous n'avons aucun droit; et pour celles où ce privilège peut avoir lieu, il doit être plus ou moins serré, selon que les sujets sont plus ou moins connus. Il m'était beaucoup moins permis dans Horace et dans Pompée, dont les histoires ne sont ignorées de personne, que dans Rodogune et dans Nicomède, dont peu de gens savaient les noms avant que je les eusse mis sur le théâtre" (172). In the *Examen to La Mort de Pompée*, Corneille goes even further: "Elle [l'histoire] est si connue, que je n'ai osé en changer les événements" (1074-75).

<sup>20</sup> "Self-assertiveness, the willingness to sacrifice all ethical values to lust for power, the determination to use power, once achieved, for purposes of self-indulgence in complete disregard of law and morality: these are the features which turn those three characters [César, Cléopâtre, Ptolomée] into paradigms of tyranny. As opposed to them, Corneille has built up an image of Cornélie which is as univocal in righteousness as Ptolomée is univocal in evil" (345-46).

<sup>21</sup> César has elicited a wide range of critical reaction, with some interpreting him as a hero and others as a self-interested hypocrite. Gérard makes the case that César is motivated by nothing more lofty than ambition (232 and passim), Hubert presents him as an actor, and Soare constructs a devastating assault on César than invokes Matamore and Tartuffe (195, 197). More moderate, Revaz-Zürich finds César to be a positive character in contrast to Ptolomée, but a negative one when compared to Cornélie (262). Forestier argues that the differences between Corneille's presentation of César and the dark, cynical portrait of the emperor by Lucan, the playwright's avowed primary source, lend credence to a positive interpretation of César despite textual evidence suggesting hypocrisy. Couton best sums up the frustration caused by such a broad range of interpretive possibilities: "C'est un disgrâce qu'un conquérant soit toujours Picrochole par quelque côté et que leur langage ne permette pas de distinguer vrai et faux brave" (1725).

<sup>22</sup> As a kind of counterpoint to the critical urge to find a hero, several critics have argued that one character or another is unnecessary to the action of the play: Tomlinson finds Cléopâtre to be not indispensable (74) and Lancaster suggests improving the structure by eliminating Cornélie (501).

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