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

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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. 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. 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)

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 Cornélle) 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. 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. 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. 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 Cornélle 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), Ptolomée (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 — 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 Pompee'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..." ll.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. 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", ll.1535) and the head ("sa tête... / Passe au bout d'une lance en la main d'Achillas", ll.1531). The body and the head have considerable symbolic resonance — Jaoüen speaks of "la simple allégorie de l'Etat sans tête à travers la décapitation de Pompée" (256) — 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" (l.11), referring not to trees but to soldiers. These headless bodies are a clear and concrete foreshadowing of Pompee's fate. Perhaps ironically, the audience next comes into contact with Pompee as a bodyless 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 10. 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 (ll.1485-1536).

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

Pompee's absence is circumvented in a different fashion when he takes on what one might call an active role. When Pompee'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 maudit imagine 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. (ll.761-68)

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

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

Pompee's body is literally scattered throughout La Mort de Pompee. 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 12. 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 13.

One final indicator of the paradoxical interplay of Pompee's absence and presence is the play's title. Published first as La Mort de Pompee, the title was later abbreviated in the second edition (1648) to Pompee. The first title suggests the eponymous character's absence and the second his presence 14. 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 (ll.1812). That the play is now generally referred to as La Mort de Pompee implies, however, that such transcendence has not been successful and that the hole left by the absence of Pompee from this play has not been filled.

There is another character whose absence, although far more limited than Pompee'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, Pompee being a far more immediate concern. Not only is César absent for
take the form of on stage presence, but extends to an unusual degree of rhetorical excess. 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, 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 porte 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 prophesies that marked the end of Cinna and Polyéucte 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-
scquences 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 voeux, / Par la main
l'un de l'autre [Ptolomée et 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
la ruine empechant 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 pro-
nouncements 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.

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 18. 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 personnages 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 19. The greatest liberty Corneille takes here is to
bring Cornélie, who merely fled in Lucan's account, into the dra-
matic 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 surfet 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 Ptolomée 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 (Doubrovsky 281). Faced with this excess mater-
"mial, Corneille has recourse to a variety of means of bringing the past
and the future to the on stage dramatic universe including récits,
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 struc-
tured 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.1587-8), and second when he brings on stage Marc
Antoine, who would later have a fatal passion for Cléopâtre. The his-
torical material of this play seems greater than Cornélie'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 pecu-
liarily 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 (II.289-316), Ptoloméc refers to her speech as a "conte ... fait avec adresse" (I.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 

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, Polyéucte), 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 Cornelle who is held aloft 20; Soare, after a blistering attack on César and Cléopâtre, holds Cornelle 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 Ptoloméc, 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) 21. 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" (Cornelle 102) 22. 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.
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, Corneille, 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 Ptolomée 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 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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1 Forestier calls La Mort de Pompée an "oeuvre de transition dans laquelle il est difficile de discerner les intentions de Corneille" (248); Sweetser calls it "un tournant dans l'oeuvre cornélienne" (128).
2 Besides Sylla, the other significant absent characters in Corneille's theater are: Flamant, Cleomène, Flore, Cléomène, Flamme (La Thétis), Flavio (Orphée), and Mandane (Sarabès). 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".
3 Even more playfully, Corneille opens his dedicatory letter to Mazarin with: "Je présente le grand Pompée à Votre Éminence, c'est-à-dire le plus grand personnage de l'ancienne Rome, au plus illustre de la nouvelle" (1071). The verb présent er 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.
4 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: Achorese, who in 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.
5 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).
6 In fact, of the five lengthy récits, only one involves the predramatic past: Cléopâtre tells Ptolomée how she came to meet and develop a relationship with César.
7 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.
8 Achorese uses the same omniscient stance in his récit involving César's reaction to learning of Pompée's death (II.735-99). He begins circumspectly, saying, "si j'ose en faire conjecture" (I.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 fonçant sa vérité, repose tout son espoir sur sa maitresse, Se montre généreux par un trait de foiblesse. (II.781-86)
9 Hubert discusses the symbolic import of the fauve as well: "Great Pompée must undergo a reduction to a fragment of matter. The separation of Pompéy'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 dominator theme in a play dealing with a fatal rift in history" (121).
10 "A ces mots Achille découvre ceste tête" (I.761) and "Ensuite il [César] fait ôter ce présent de ses yeux" (I.787).
11 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).
12 "César says to the widow: "Et qu'une Urne aussi digne de vous et de lui,.... Renferment vos cendres et des cendres réunies" (II.1688-90). The emphasis mine.
13 Doubrovsky underlines the impossibility: "Cléopâtre, qui met son amour au service de l'amour, et César, qui met l'amour au service de l'amour, loin d'assurer, par leur union, l'unicité bienfaisante des contraires, s'avèrent, en fait, incapables de se rejouindre. 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).
14 Piccoli notes, "en substituant le titre de Pompée à celui de La Mort de Pompée... Corneille avait bien que son sujet consistait dans la permanence pardiolaire de la présence de Pompée" (102).
15 Almost all of the physical description of Cléopâtre's charms is his, rather than
César's. César calls Cléopâtre "cette Reine adorable" (I.945) and then Marc Antoine takes over:

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

In terms of number of lines spoken, she is fourth behind Cléopâtre, Ptolomeé, 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 Ptolomeé, and eight for César), she verbally dominates the stage to a far greater degree than anyone else, where Cléopâtre, Ptolomeé, and César speak 39%, 37%, and 43% respectively of the lines spoken while they are on stage, Cléopâtre's figure is almost (17).

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

Cléopâtre 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 l'Examen" (1072).

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 Nicomedé, dont peu de gens savaient avant que je les usasse mis sur le théâtre" (172). In the Examen to La Mort de Pompée, Cléopâtre goes even further: "Elle [l'Histoire] est si connue, que je n'ai osé en changer les événements" (1074-75).

"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 characters [César, Cléopâtre, Ptolomeé] into paradigms of tyranny. As opposed to them, Cléopâtre has built up an image of Cléopâtre which is as univocal in rightousness as Ptolomeé is univocal in evil" (345-46).

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 Ptolomeé, but a negative one when compared to Cléopâtre (262). Forestier argues that the differences between Corneille's presentation of César and the, 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).

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 Cléopâtre (501).

Works Cited


