

ORIENTALISM IN FRENCH CLASSICAL DRAMA

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CHAPTER I

Médée and the traveler-savant

SUMMARY

Corneille's Médée (1634–5)

Jason and his wife Médée, a foreigner from Colchis (Asia), have come to Corinth to seek refuge after Médée has committed an atrocity against Jason's enemy Pélée in Jason's kingdom Thessaly (both Corinth and Thessaly are Greek kingdoms and thus in the "West").

Jason's fellow argonaut and friend Pollux arrives in Corinth from Asia after a long absence, and Jason brings him up to date. He tells him he is leaving Médée for the Corinthian king Creon's daughter, Créüse.

Pollux is horrified at Médée's act, but also dismayed at Jason's self-serving philandering. Having spent a prolonged time in Médée's part of the world, he knows her and the ways of her people well. He warns Jason against Médée's powers and her sure revenge. Jason uses the alibi of their children's security as reason for his need to part from Médée.

Jason asks Créüse to intervene with her father Creon and secure safe haven for his children, and Créüse agrees to provided that he do her a favor.

Médée launches into a tirade and consults with her confidante Nerine. She still loves and wants Jason. She is torn between fierce anger and enduring passion. Nerine counsels her against any rash behavior.

Creon officially banishes Médée. He is willing to keep her children, but she must go. She argues her case unsuccessfully, but she obtains the reprieve of a full day, time enough to avenge herself.

Creon and his daughter, along with Jason, consult together. Another pressing issue before them is Aegée's wooing of Créüse. Créüse prefers the young hero Jason to the aging king of Athens. When Jason expresses gratitude for her preference, she exacts her price both for this and the saving of his children: she wants Médée's golden robe. Jason hesitates to wrest the robe, Médée's only patrimony, from her, but unheroically plots to enlist Nerine's assistance in securing it for Créüse.

Créüse officially refuses Aegée.

Nerine and Jason discuss Médée's situation and Jason brings up the matter of her robe. Médée arrives and the couple confront each other directly for the first time.

She argues her case again, and presents her plight as the result of all she has done for him. Again, Jason uses the children as alibi. They need a safe haven, says he. Médée repeats her love for him, and warns him directly that she will take revenge.

Médée reacts to Nerine's presentation of Creüse's request for the robe. Now she sees there will be no change and gives full rein to her anger. She concocts a magical poison and soaks the garment in it. She instructs Nerine to take both the robe and her children to Creüse.

The spurned Aegée had tried to storm Creon's palace and remove Creüse by force, but Creon, aided especially by the heroic Pollux, managed to take him prisoner instead. Médée intervenes with her magic, comforts and frees Aegée, and in return he offers her safe haven in Athens when she leaves Corinth.

One of Creon's soldiers, under Médée's spell, reports to her that Creon and Creüse have been destroyed by the gift-robe. Jason doesn't yet know this since he is off saying good-bye to Pollux who is leaving town. Médée decides to complete her revenge, to punish Jason both as lover and as father by killing his children.

Creon and Creüse are dying as Jason finds them. Furious, he vows to punish Médée for their murder by killing the children he now calls hers.

Jason and Médée have their second and final confrontation: Médée announces that she has killed their children – the final vestige of their love. She takes flight in her chariot and Jason kills himself.

Questions to ponder

(1) *Why does Corneille replace the traditional chorus of all earlier versions with the character Pollux? What is gained? What is lost?*

(2) *Why does Corneille's Creüse covet and ask for Médée's robe, when in all earlier versions it is Médée's idea to give it to Creüse? What is gained? What is lost?*

(3) *Why, in Corneille's later play, *La Toison d'or* (1661), which represents the earlier story of the Argonauts, does Pollux not appear at all, although the playwright had taken the trouble to invent him in 1635 and cast him as Jason's close friend?*

On peut concevoir des mythes très anciens, il n'y en a pas d'éternels; car c'est l'histoire humaine qui fait passer le réel à l'état de parole, c'est elle et elle seule qui règle la vie et la mort du langage mythique. Lointaine ou non, la mythologie ne peut avoir qu'un fondement historique, car le mythe est une parole choisie par l'histoire: il ne saurait surgir de la *nature* des choses.

[We can conceive of very old myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which turns reality into speech-act, it alone regulates the life and death of mythic language. Distant or not, mythology can have only a historical grounding, for myth is a speech-act chosen by history: it cannot come from the "nature" of things.] (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*)¹

In the seventeenth century, at least eight different versions of the Medea myth appeared, in the form of translations, tragedies, and operas.² This is

not unusual. The story has long had a fascination for Western European culture.³ The plight of the exotic woman imported from another world, along with other forms of plunder from that same place, submitted to local politics and mores, with dire consequences for all, organizes the core of these versions and resonates through time.⁴ The unspoken lesson appears to warn that the introduction of foreign women into a given culture is dangerous to that culture's stability. Exogamy extends only so far as the edges of a set community. But what of the operational features of endogamy?

Even today, minority female populations, women who perceive themselves to be either excluded from the dominant culture or admitted only along the edges, identify readily with the plight of Medea. In the United States, Constance Carroll speaks of the empathy the figure of Medea inspires among the black women students reading Euripides in her college-level classics course:

Black women students, much more than white women students, understand and can identify with the situation of Medea . . . The black woman in higher education is not unlike Medea. She is inexperienced in the system, just as most of her peers and family have traditionally been excluded from it. Black even more than white women need "magic," that is, superior ability, in order to receive equal opportunities.⁵

At the same time, the German author Christa Wolf also identifies with Medea with regard to her own doubly fraught role as a woman intellectual and her forcibly politicized outsider status as she negotiates her complicated former East German past in *Médée, voix*.⁶ And the pied noir Marie Cardinal, in her introduction to a recent popular paperback version of the Euripides *Medea* finds in this outsider's status not only the expected parallel with North African women of the French colonies who find themselves imported into France, but also with women of French origin (like herself) brought up in North Africa and then repatriated into the hexagon they have never known, where they are strangers in their homeland.⁷ Such women, be they of colonized or of colonizing background, suddenly find themselves uprooted, demonized, and having to cope in the alienating space of the righteous metropole where they are the "Other." Both exploitation and exile exact their price. In this era, Medea proves to be a useful shorthand for women who don't fit in or belong comfortably to the society which nevertheless is their given milieu and with which they must contend. They are doubly "Other."

At different historical junctures, some aspects of this particular story are highlighted and others played down. Innovations crop up and then disappear, in keeping with preoccupations and moods of the day. The obvious example is that Euripides's Greek *Medea*, composed during Pericles's golden reign, stresses pathos and evokes complicated feelings of pity, whereas Seneca's Roman version, marked by the degenerate reign of Nero, focuses on fury and provokes horror. Corneille claims to have been inspired primarily by Seneca, and this surface resemblance is substantiated in a line-by-line comparison of the versions. But, as we shall see, his adaptation is different in important respects.⁸

A number of recent critical studies of Corneille's seventeenth-century *Médée*, produced closely together in the past twenty years, offer varied critiques of his version and attest to a resurgence of interest in the play. The witchcraft trials of 1634, anthropological concerns with the role of the gift, current psychoanalytic debates, feminist studies of woman as outsider, the shaping of the political institution in Early Modern France, the construction of the Corneillian hero, and the primacy of pleasure over morality in the world of art – all of these current topics find grounding and focus in Corneille's *Médée*.⁹

Despite this scholarly attention, Corneille is not remembered by the public today for his *Médée* the way he is for *Le Cid* and a few of his other plays. The Medea story continues to be invoked and celebrated regularly in Western discourse, and so does Corneille's oeuvre generally, but not his *Médée*. His version has not been definitive. While the fact that the handy pedagogical Classiques Larousse series does not carry an edition of the play is no sure indicator of obscurity, it does tell us that *Médée* is not in high demand among students.¹⁰ Of course, the classical corpus generally is suffering a diminishing presence in the French classroom, where the French theatre public is formed. *The New York Times* of January 3, 1999 reported that lycée students were once required to read several plays by Corneille and Racine each; but today, students in France are required to know only one play from the combined corpus.¹¹ Hence the odds, already poor (if not nil), have significantly diminished that they would be reading Corneille's *Médée*.

This suggests that *Médée* does not support France's official story about itself, the preferred version that French school children are required to ingest as part of their indoctrination into their cultural heritage, their lesson in "Frenchness" (*Le Cid* or *Phèdre* remain key readings, for example). However, with ongoing attention to the discourse of Orientalism as symptom of a major Western blindspot, and with the conflation of the

status of women with the Orient in the male Occidental economy, the questions raised in Corneille's *Médée* are highly pertinent to today's world, and this play, coupled with the many critiques of East–West relations now available, offers a key point of entry into debate on this concern.¹²

Why did Corneille revisit the Medea myth in 1634–35? What was the attraction of the story for him, for the audience he wanted to please? To which of their concerns did he address his version? For what contemporary message did this old story serve as a useful vehicle? One could speculate that this young playwright was simply claiming pride of place alongside Euripides and Seneca. But even then, why this particular play and not another? To venture an answer to this question, we need to look not only at what was available to him in the received story, what he did with it, and how he made it speak to his contemporaries. We also need to look at what was going on in his environs at the time he undertook to write this play.

Corneille's *Médée* features significant preoccupations and an important innovation that bear the particular mark of the early French seventeenth century and set it apart from all preceding and subsequent versions. It speaks eloquently of a moment in a story of France that the country does not care to dwell on. It is this eruption and insertion of history into myth that interests me here. I contend that the early decades of the seventeenth century prepared the way for the institutionalizing of France as a colonial power under Louis XIV's minister Colbert.¹³ I believe that Corneille's play bears witness to and contests the construction of the *mentalité* necessary to this project.

Well before the systematization of commerce that would take place under Colbert, Louis XIII's minister Richelieu had studied the state of the French economy and decided to take action. In examining the mercantile economies of Genoa and of Holland, he had recognized that their wealth was highly disproportionate to their size, and that France would do well to follow their example. In 1626–27, he legislated against barriers and set in place incentives that would stimulate maritime trade. Nobles were traditionally not meant to “work,” but Richelieu aimed to remove the threat of derogation to those who would, specifically with trading companies or in founding their own. He also offered titles of nobility to commoners who would finance for at least five years a ship of two hundred to three hundred tons, as well as to merchants who served abroad as consuls.¹⁴ He summarized the new policy in these few words: “Donner prix au trafic, et rang aux marchands” (336). [“To make commerce a worthy pursuit and to ennoble merchants.”]

With this new incentive for both the nobility and the bourgeoisie, the way was set for greater participation and a significant increase in French maritime trade. In the next few years, more and more Frenchmen would be plying the waters of the Mediterranean and more distant seas, and would need new codes of behavior as they took up interests and professions no longer governed by their traditional roles. As they engaged in commerce and French representation abroad, they would be wrestling personally with the very issues that Corneille's play would address. Hence, *Médée* was a timely production with useful lessons for these new merchant travelers and diplomats.

One marginal nobleman who pursued such a career under the new Richelieu dispensation was the traveler, linguist, and diplomat Laurent D'Arvieux (1635–1702). He was born in the year of the staging of *Médée*. This was also the year of the founding of the Académie française, the ambitious purpose of which was: “que les sciences et les arts y fleurissent et que les lettres y soient en honneur aussi bien que les armes.” [“That the arts and sciences may flourish there, and that letters may be honored as much as arms.”] The flourishing of the sciences, arts, and arms depended precisely on the mercantile wealth which Richelieu had moved to stimulate. The editor of D'Arvieux's *Mémoires*, Jean-Baptiste Labat explained his subject's choice of career as a direct consequence of Richelieu's new law:

Il [D'Arvieux] considera que le commerce en gros qui se fait au Levant, étoit le seul moyen qui fut ouvert aux Gentilshommes pauvres pour rétablir leurs familles; que les maisons les plus considerables de Marseille & de la Provence s'étoient établies par cet endroit, sans avoir dérogé à leur noblesse par le privilege special que le Roi leur a accordé, & souvent réitéré, de pouvoir faire le commerce en gros, & de faire valoir leur argent dans les Echelles du Levant, comme les Nobles le font à Venise, à Gennes, à Florence, à Livorne, & autres Villes d'Italie, & comme ils le font encore en Angleterre, et en bien d'autres Endroits.¹⁵

[He realized that the wholesale trading which took place in the Levant, was the only way for gentlemen of limited means to re-establish their families; that the most considerable families of Marseille and Provence had established themselves in this way, without compromising their nobility, thanks to the special privilege granted them by the King, a privilege often renewed, which was to be able to conduct trade and risk their wealth in the trading posts of the Levant, as noblemen do in Venice, Genoa, Florence, Leghorn, and other Italian cities, and as they still do in England, and in many other places.]

As if to offer a useful model to this new population of seafaring and trading Frenchmen, Corneille introduces into the traditional plot

a completely new character, Pollux. This is the only place in his *oeuvre* that Corneille uses this character. By 1661 he will take up the Jason story again, when, working backwards in the myth cycle, he will produce *La Conquête de la Toison d'or*. Pollux disappears here, although traditionally – and even within the text of Corneille's own *Médée*, along with his brother Castor – he had been cast as one of the Argonauts, and so should have remained essential to the plot. This disappearance is doubly curious since, in the earlier *Médée*, Pollux is a crucial, if not a major, figure, and he is cast as Jason's great friend as well. Nor will Pollux figure ever again in plots by any other playwrights. He is Corneille's unique one-time invention as the playwright accords cultural attention to the new Richelieu laws and the new social profile they call for. Pollux plays an obvious pivotal role in *Médée*: he negotiates the binary tension between Jason and Médée, between the smug Greek state and the destabilizing exotic other. But he does more than that: he enfigures the noble profile of the traveler-savant who brings his knowledge – a specific product of travel abroad – home. Corneille thereby stages the idea of knowledge as a negotiable commodity and of travel as directly useful to the state. Pollux heralds the important entry onto the stage of the traveler returned home who will offer his knowledge of other people to the service of his own kin. He represents the formation and introduction of the collector of human knowledge into literary consciousness. This Pollux marks the emergence of the early and incidental anthropologist. The world where he has done his “field work” is Asia, the world of the Other, the “barbare.”¹⁶

We might consider Corneille's foray into Medea's country as an act poetically sympathetic with his character Pollux's, and politically consonant with that of many of the travelers of his time. Corneille also brought the Orient home. Here, in his adaptation of the Medea story, he actively debates and challenges the assignation of “barbare” to the East, and explores the modalities of the term. He offers a critique of the Western distinction between insider and outsider, civilized and uncivilized, just at that moment when the edges are about to be at once blurred and reinscribed. He discretely sketches out the profiles of the new creatures who would be the agents of that blurring and reinscription, particularly in the figure of Pollux, the world-wise traveler and adviser to the state. At the same time, he discredits the plunderer and the fugitive Jason. There is a new brand of heroism in the making and a new taxonomy of the traveler taking shape, in keeping with Richelieu's program.¹⁷ And Corneille stages an idealized model of this traveler in Pollux before

he assimilates and becomes merely another strand in the fabric of society.

It is by highlighting the function of Pollux that we can access the historicity of Corneille's version and appreciate it in the immediate context of its production. Corneille does not make much at all of his invention of Pollux, and in fact he plays it down. But perhaps it is precisely through our least self-conscious gestures that history speaks itself.

"BARBARE" – MÉDÉE ON TRIAL

In 1634–35, Corneille's staging of *Médée* actively challenged her traditional status as either pitiful victim or vicious harridan, and attempted to portray her in a more neutral light, with an important and firm legal argument of her own, even within the Western dispensation. She is brought once again to trial on stage, and then to print. In his "Dédicace," Corneille refrains from casting judgment on her and from disposing the audience favorably or unfavorably toward her.¹⁸ He slips ironically between the received story of the character Médée and his production of her – his play: "Je vous donne [*Médée* / Médée] toute méchante qu'elle est, et ne vous dirai rien pour sa justification. Je vous la donne pour telle que vous la voudrez prendre, sans tâcher à prévenir, ou violenter vos sentiments par un étalage des préceptes de l'art" (535). ["I give you [*Médée* / Médée] in all its/her wickedness, and I will not attempt to justify it/her. I give it/her to you for such as you want to take it/her, without trying to predict or violate your feelings by setting forth the precepts of dramatic art."] The playwright suspends and solicits judgment. If Corneille invites the audience's position on the staging / the case of [*Médée* / Médée], it is because he is sure of his craft – the play will evoke a positive response – and because there is no obvious answer – the virtue of Médée and her general predicament are open to debate. In fact, conflicting and even self-contradictory opinions must mark any ethical discussion in a cross-cultural world.¹⁹

Médée's virtue is the focus of the play's debate. The traditional Médée, from Colchis on the southeast shore of the Black Sea, was considered by the Greeks to be a "barbare," or stranger, with all that the term connotes.²⁰ This epithet was crucial to the role she had been assigned in the earlier classical plays. Corneille's Médée was also from Colchis. But, what matters in his adaptation is not merely that she is a stranger, but the compounded fact that she is a stranger and a woman, from Asia, hence doubly, if not triply, suspect.²¹ Corneille invites the public to take

the position of judge, to serve as jury, and to decide on the case of the heroine and of his tragedy at once, while he disappears and constructs his plea, seeking if not exoneration at least comprehension for her, and certainly applause for himself. His precocious presentation of this troubling outsider and her dilemma – spurned and abandoned in a country not her own – anticipates the development of anthropological sensibility over time and the revaluation of Médée that has taken place in the twentieth century. Corneille's Médée is not simply a mute topic of discourse; she talks back and has as much to say about the people of Corinth as they have to say about her and her world. She is as much a participant-observer in the world of Corinth as Pollux, the neo-anthropologist, has been in hers.²²

Corneille's presentation follows in the tradition of such recent precursors as Montaigne with regard to its close scrutiny and arguing of the term "barbare."²³ While denoting "outsider," it also connotes "savage" or "uncivilized" as an epithet. Fluidly, it can apply as readily to the "insider" culture as to the "outsider"; Corneille challenges the fixity of its assignment. Creon will use the term "barbare" as an insult, a negative passport, as he lists for Médée all of her crimes:

Barbare, as-tu si tôt oublié tant d'horreurs?
 Repasse tes forfaits avecque tes erreurs,
 Et de tant de pays nomme quelque contrée
 Dont tes méchancetés te promettent l'entrée.
 Toute la Thessalie en armes te poursuit,
 Ton père te déteste, et l'univers te fuit.

(2.2.383–88)

[Barbarian, have you so quickly forgotten so many horrors? / Think on your crimes and your errors, / And among so many lands name me one country / Where your wickedness will allow you entry. / All Thessaly, up in arms, pursues you / Your father loathes you and the universe flees you.]

Médée will return the insult, in more sweeping terms, and turn it on the supposedly civilized Corinthian population represented by their king, as she rebuts his wrenching offer to keep her children when she is banished:

Barbare humanité qui m'arrache à moi-même,
 Et feint de la douceur pour m'ôter ce que j'aime!

(2.3.493–94)

[Barbaric humanity which tears me from myself / And feigns kindness in order to take those I love away from me!]

Thus Corneille, through Médée, presents the Greek westerners as “barbares” here in an ethical sense, and in so doing stands the geographical term on its head. When Médée confronts Jason, she reminds him that in the early days of their liaison, he was not at all put off by the idea of a foreigner. When she speaks of herself, she uses the term “barbare” ironically, as if citing her Greek detractors. She shifts cynically then in mimicry style, echoing back but recasting “une Scythe” (Scythia being the land of Colchis), which once referred simply to her in relation to her place of provenance, and was the innocent name of a people rather than the loaded epithet it has become in Jason’s new usage:

Tu n’étais point honteux d’une femme barbare:
Quand à ton père usé je rendis la vigueur,
J’avais encor tes vœux, j’étais encor ton cœur;
Mais cette affection mourant avec Pélée
...
Une Scythe en ton lit te fut lors un affront.

(3.3.817–25)

[You were in no way ashamed of a barbarian wife / When I restored your weary father’s vigor to him / I still had your troth, I was still your true love / But when this affection died, along with Pelias / ... / A Scythian woman in your bed became an affront.]

In Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* of 1690, the two definitions of “barbare” illustrate how the term came to signify in the French seventeenth century.²⁴ The first conflates completely the connotational components of “stranger,” “cultural difference,” and “cruelty” without any reflection on the biased nature of the understanding: “(1) Barbare: Estranger qui est d’un pays fort éloigné, sauvage, malpoli, cruel, et qui a des mœurs fort différentes des nôtres... Les Grecs appelloient Barbares tous ceux qui n’étoient pas de leur pays, et ce mot ne signifie en leur langue qu’estranger.” [“Barbarian: Foreigner who comes from a very distant, savage, rude, cruel country, and who has customs very different from ours... The Greeks used the term Barbarians for those who were not from their country, and this word in their language only means foreigner.”]

The second definition, and, for our purposes the most pertinent, focuses specifically on the sense of “cruelty:” “(2) Barbare: signifie aussi seulement cruel, impitoyable, qui n’écoute point la pitié, ni la raison. Un père est barbare, quand il n’a point de tendresse pour ses enfants, un prince est barbare, qui tyrannise ses sujets. *Médée faisait des actions barbares.*” [“Barbaric [adj]: also simply means cruel, pitiless, someone who is deaf

to pity and reason. A father is barbaric when he has no tenderness for his children, a prince who tyrannizes his subjects is barbaric. *Medea committed barbaric actions.*”] The hypothetical examples here feature generic males in conceivably current domestic (“un père”) and then in state (“un prince”) situations, but, ironically, when it comes to furnishing concrete examples, to naming, the scapegoat woman – the specific female from the East, from the past and with a past – Medea is invoked. If Corneille had attempted to put into question the connotations of the term “barbare,” and to loosen the hold of Médée’s reputation in the Western mind-set in 1634–35, by 1690, Furetière had put her back in her place. She is cited as the very example of the “barbarie” she herself had condemned in the Greeks. Medea is always already irredeemably and necessarily the “Other,” by a profound ideological economy that needs for her to be just that, along with the category of woman in general. Evidently, to judge by the authoritative dictionary definition, Corneille’s critique of the conflation did not prevail; the myth was more powerful than his version of the story. The French literate readership still subscribed to the “barbare” / “étranger” / “cruel” tautology, and Médée still served as its handy epitome.

TURKS ON TRIAL

If the mythical Médée from the East was on trial on the French stage at this time, the actual Ottoman from the East also was being scrutinized in a more generalized discourse. The staged and unresolved trial of Médée resonates with opinions that would be articulated by the French about the Turks, their contemporary “Others,” throughout the century. As we have seen, increased contact with the Levant on the part of merchants, travelers, scholars, adventurers, and missionaries at the time of Corneille’s invention appeared to produce conflicting, but always judgmental, opinions of the Turks. “Different” to the French was a tenuous category; whereas they had no difficulty with “good” or “bad.” Some opinions tended to be revisionist, challenging common negative prejudice. However, even when writers expressed positive opinions about the Turks, they would frame them in the more widely held and negatively charged discourse. For example, the traveler Jean Thévenot contrasted common belief with informed opinion, falling back on a safe pre-Christian, pre-Islamic ethic:

Beaucoup croient en Chrestienté que les Turcs sont de grands diables, des barbares, et des gens sans foy, mais ceux qui les ont connus et conversés en ont un sentiment bien différent, car certain que les Turcs sont bonnes gens [sic], et

qui suivent fort bien ce commandement qui nous est fait par la Nature, de ne rien faire à Autrui que ce que nous voulons qui nous soit fait.²⁵

[Many in Christendom believe that the Turks are great devils, barbarians, people without religion, but those who have known them and spoken with them have a very different sentiment, for it is certain that the Turks are good people, and who follow the commandment given to us by Nature, to do unto another as we would have him do unto us.]

And another traveler, Monsieur du Loir, attempted to disabuse his countrymen of their negative ideas about the Turks – all the while reiterating them, and expressed positive sentiments expansively, making a claim for their essential goodness:

Je vous dirai donc quant aux Turcs, qu'il ne faut pas les croire si grossiers et si brutaux que plusieurs se les sont imaginés, et certainement si l'équité est plus considérable que la politesse dans les moeurs, ils ne sont pas moins gens de bien que nous.²⁶

[I will tell you then, with respect to the Turks, that you must not believe them as coarse and brutal as imagined, and certainly, if integrity in manners is more important than politeness, they are no less good men than are we.]

The French priest, Robert de Dreux, went so far as to admire the Turks' religiosity rather than dismiss it as fanaticism.²⁷ The traveler–merchant Jean Chardin reported that among seasoned diplomats, Ottoman governance inspired great admiration. The Venetian ambassador Quirini considered their political style an excellent model for Europeans, on the one hand because founded in common sense and at the same time (and here was a back-handed compliment!) precisely because of its un-European character – its inscrutable workings.²⁸ Chardin further noted the outstanding fairness of the Turks with regard to the treatment of diplomats and the tradition of immunity and tax-free supplies for their establishments in Constantinople.²⁹ And when Donneau de Visé in Paris put together his third-hand version of the sultan Mahomet IV's demise, he insisted (to give his story some positive value) on the virtue of at least some Turks: "Vous ne serez pas surpris[e] qu'il y ait des Turcs, dont le caractère soit humain. L'humanité est de tout pays, et il se trouve de la vertu parmy les Peuples les plus barbares."³⁰ ["You will not be surprised that there may be Turks of a human character. Humanity is a quality found in every land, and virtue is found among the most barbaric peoples."]

But just as French travelers – both of the active and of the armchair variety – were combating blind prejudice and ages-old hostility against

the Turks (generically subsumed as “infidels”), tentatively reconstructing them to be good, refined, moderate, and intelligent people, so were others reiterating and finding more fuel for their distrust and dislike of them.

In 1670, the historian Ricaut attempted a dissection of the Ottoman state that might serve as a guide for the Europeans’ political strategizing. Absolutism might be fine for the French, but was unacceptable elsewhere. Rhetoric such as his set the official record:

Quand j’examine de près la constitution du Gouvernement des Turcs, [...] je vois une puissance tout-à-fait absolue dans un Empereur, sans raison, sans vertu et sans merite, dont les commandements, quelque injustes qu’ils soient, font des loix: les actions, quoy qu’irregulières, des exemples: et les jugemens, sur tout dans les affaires d’État, des resolutions auxquelles on ne se peut opposer.³¹

[When I closely examine the set-up of the Turkish government, [...] I see a quite absolute power in an emperor, without reason, without virtue and without merit, whose commandments, as unjust as they are, make the laws: whose actions, although irregular, set the example: and whose judgments, on all matters of State, provide resolutions which cannot be opposed.]

The most obvious targets of criticism were the doubly “Other” Turkish women. Thévenot engaged in ambivalent attempts to habilitate the Turks’ reputation, but he found in their women an outlet for his combined prejudice and misogyny. In describing these women’s indolence, he sketched out a viciously detailed portrait:

Or ces femmes sont fort superbes, elles veulent presque toutes estre vestues de brocart, quoy que leur mary ayt à peine du pain, cependant elles sont extremement paresseuses, passant toute la journée assises sur un divan sans rien faire, si ce n’est qu’elles brodent des fleurs sur quelque mouchoir . . . Cette grande oisiveté fait qu’elles sont vicieuses, et qu’elles appliquent toutes leurs pensées à trouver les moyens de se divertir.³²

[Now, these women are quite proud, almost all of them want to dress in rich clothes, although their husband may hardly have any bread, nonetheless they are extremely lazy, spending all day sitting on a sofa without doing anything, other than embroidering flowers on some handkerchief . . . This great laziness makes them depraved, and they devote all their thoughts to finding ways to amuse themselves.]

At the same time, to his credit, he considered them to have vices not inherently, but as a consequence of the particular ways in which they were regarded and treated. While passing harsh judgment on them, he

attempted to understand the conditions of their life that might account for their supposed depravity:

Les Turcs ne croyent pas que les femmes aillent en Paradis, et à peine les estiment-ils animaux raisonnables, aussi ils ne les prennent simplement que pour leur service, comme ils feroient un cheval. (107)

[The Turks do not believe that women go to Heaven, and they barely consider them animals capable of reason, therefore, they merely make use of them for their services, as they would a horse.]

But Thévenot vacillated as he passed judgment on the Turkish men. In one breath he extolled the virtue of moderation as practiced among the Turks with regard to drinking, violence, and gambling, and in the next he excoriated their homosexuality: “Ils sont fort amoureux, mais d’un amour brutal; car ils sont grands Sodomites”(p. 113). [“They have a very amorous temperament, but a brutal one, for they are great sodomites.”]

Thévenot castigated the Turks in a most intolerant tone for their own degree of intolerance toward people from other cultures, apparently ignoring the fact that Constantinople was one of the most cosmopolitan cities of the time, and choosing to ignore the Catholic-Protestant tensions of his own country, not to mention various ongoing prejudices against Jews and others. He apparently did not fully appreciate the highly diverse composition of Constantinople in the mid-seventeenth century. At this time, ten thousand neighborhoods (or “quartiers”) were Muslim; three hundred and four were Greek; six hundred and fifty-seven were Jewish; twenty-seven were Armenian; and seventeen were European (or “Francs”).³³ Thévenot picked up only on prejudice. As he saw it, the Turks did not manifest a sufficiently cosmopolitan attitude and were altogether too arrogant for European taste:

Quant à leurs vices, ils sont fort superbes, s’estimans plus qu’aucune autre Nation; ils se croient les plus vaillans de la terre, et il semble que le monde ne soit fait que pour eux; aussi méprisent-ils en gros et en general celles qui ne suivent pas leur Loy, comme les Chrestiens et les Juifs; et ils appellent ordinairement les Chrestiens chiens. (p. 112)

[With respect to their vices, they are very proud, esteeming themselves above any other nation; they think themselves the most valiant on earth, it seems to them that the world was made only for them; thus they hold in general contempt those who do not follow their law, such as the Christians and the Jews; and they typically refer to Christians as dogs.]

Thévenot reduced not only the Turks’ attitude toward, but the content of, their knowledge to one sole sentence. He decried their lack of

intellectual curiosity while in a way demonstrating his own, and evidently was unaware of the important cultural exchanges that had flourished under Francis the First and Soliman the Magnificent:

Les Turcs cultivent peu les Sciences, et ils se contentent d'apprendre à lire et à écrire, et estudient souvent l'Alcoran, dans lequel est compris leur Droit Civil et leur Droit canon; quelques-uns s'appliquent encore à l'Astrologie, et peu à d'autres Sciences. (p. 112)

[The Turks make little attempt to cultivate knowledge, and content themselves with learning to read and write, and they often study the Koran, which contains their civil and canon law; some still devote themselves to astrology, and very little to other sciences.]

The intellectual curiosity that had accompanied increased wealth and fueled the Renaissance, occasioning a lively circulation of texts and ideas between Europe and the Orient, appears here to give way to a flat and highly judgmental attitude *vis-à-vis* the Turk.³⁴

In 1661, François de Mézeray would punctuate the second volume of his authoritative *Histoire des Turcs* with the expression of a vaguely collective wish for a renewal of the Crusades against the Turks:

Tous les gens de bien souhaitent ardemment que la Paix générale réunisse tous les princes Chrétiens et les oblige de tourner leurs forces contre ce barbare ennemi de la liberté et de la Religion.³⁵

[Every worthy person ardently wishes that the general peace might reunite all the Christian princes and force them to direct their energy against this barbarian enemy of liberty and of religion.]

As so often in the past, religion, the convenient (not at all to say insincere) European blindspot, was harnessed to serve as a rallying cry to muster European forces against the East.

Even the philosopher-mathematician Leibniz, as we saw in the "Orientation," while strategizing to distract Louis XIV from waging war in Europe, had only the most virulent of words concerning these people. In his argument to persuade the French king to mount a final crusade against them, he insisted on their depravity, playing on popular European iconographic cliché:

Ce pays est en quelque sorte la patrie des ténèbres et de la barbarie; et le Sultan, plongé lui-même dans l'ignorance, traîne sur le trône, parmi des troupeaux de femmes et d'eunuques, sa robe de Sardanapale.³⁶

[This country is, in a way, the land of darkness and barbarism; and the Sultan, himself sunk in ignorance, trails his Sardanapalian robe on the throne, among the troops of women and eunuchs.]

By the end of the seventeenth century, in the preface to his important systematizing *Bibliothèque orientale*, the orientalist Herbelot de Molainville would offer an entire classification of the accumulated common beliefs about the Oriental part of the world. He would denounce the negative reputation of the Turks as a “grande injustice,” but his reinscribing and contrasting of it with current more positive opinions about other cultural groups to the east, such as the Persians and the Arabs, hardly succeeded in rectifying popular belief. Indeed, one has to wonder what his purpose was in repeating such cultural slander. In any event, the Turks appeared to have acquired a fixed reputation:

Il faut dire la vérité, on fait quelque grace aux Arabes, et ils passent pour avoir autrefois cultivé les Sciences avec grande application. On attribue de la politesse aux Persans, et on leur fait justice. Mais, par leur nom seul, les Turcs sont tellement décriés, qu’il suffit ordinairement de les nommer pour signifier une Nation barbare, grossière, et d’une ignorance achevée, et sous leur nom, l’on entend parler de ceux qui sont sous la domination de l’Empire Ottoman.³⁷ [The truth must be told, we make some concessions towards the Arabs, and they pass for having formerly cultivated learning to a great degree. We attribute politeness to the Persians, and we are right to do so. But by their very name, the Turks are so decried, that normally it suffices to name them in order to refer to a barbarous nation, vulgar, and completely ignorant, and by their name we mean all those who are under the domination of the Ottoman Empire.]

Herbelot’s remarks attest to two strands of contradictory discourse that appear to run through the conversation: the Ottomans are either good or bad people – they cannot be both, or simply different. Like Médée, they are ever on trial, and their merit among the French is an ever-ready topic for debate. How to explain such opposed views? Although not without exception, a general observation holds that merchants and those who dealt directly with the Ottomans without language barriers tended to be disposed to have relatively favorable impressions. The pragmatic grounding of barter and trade set value on heterogeneity and difference not only with regard to goods, but also to their purveyors. The merchants’ concerns were of a more neutral sort, since they were intent primarily on making relationships work in order that their business flourish. Aristocrats and travelers directly under the French king’s patronage were rather more baffled by the structure of the Porte (the Sultan’s Constantinople palace and site of government), which both mirrored the French court society in its ostentation and at the same time totally defied its logic in its radically different mode of hierarchizing (an apple vendor could become a Vizir).³⁸ French courtiers needed to entertain

negative opinions of the Turks in order to demonstrate solidarity and loyalty to their own ruler, and French military were obligated to consider them at all times as the enemy, despite the fact that they also functioned as sometime allies, especially with regard to the Habsburgs. In similar spirit, we remember that, like a trader, Médée was a useful ally whose methods were not questioned as long as she was assisting the Argonauts in obtaining the Golden Fleece; it was only once she accompanied them back to their world and didn't fit in that she became a problem – their problem.

The negative discourse on the Ottomans was almost invariably cast in terms of religion. The depravity the French saw in the Turks was always a consequence of their “barbarity,” which amounted to the fact that they were infidels and enemies of Christendom. From behind this powerful screen, the French could cast aspersions on their Mediterranean neighbors, their local others, and maintain their own protective posture of defensive righteousness.

Thus, although intensified and accelerated contact was producing a more realistic view of the Ottomans among the French, strong prejudices still held sway. And the French right, indeed the moral duty to judge the Ottomans, went absolutely unquestioned. So it went with Médée, the “Other.”

TRAVEL ON TRIAL

Fundamental to these pronouncements on the Turks were the actual travelers who made them. The Mediterranean basin was populated by travelers of all sorts: they would take up this life of travel in the seventeenth century for different and often complex reasons. They engaged in variously motivated movement – in trading ventures, on government business, in search of objects or souls, out of curiosity, out of need, out of covetousness. In some cases they went because they chose to leave their own communities, in others because they were forced out, and in yet others (in the case of slaves) they had no choice at all, but were moved like chattel.

An example of such mixed motives is the story of the merchant Jean Chardin (1643–1713), whose travel account is quoted above. It is significant that he was the son of a jeweler. The jewelry trade and the whole economy of preciousness is based on rarity and distance. Beauty alone does not determine the value of a stone. If it is common, that is, easily found and acquired, then it is of lesser value. Therefore travel was a key

component of a jeweler's stock and trade. The other important feature of Chardin's background is that he was born into a Huguenot family. Taking his cue from his father's business and settling on the profession of merchant, he made his first great voyage, as far as Persia, from 1664 until 1670, traveling under the auspices of the French crown. Upon his return to France, he realized that the climate had become increasingly inhospitable for Protestants, and that as a consequence his personal prospects were not good. He shifted his allegiance to the English crown and his base of operations to London, and made his second great voyage from there. Upon his return, he published his travel journal for both of his voyages. He dedicated the volumes to England's Charles II in recognition and gratitude for the protection his reign had afforded him: "que votre Trône auguste soit toujours l'inviolable Azyle des Oppressez." ["May your august throne always be the inviolate refuge of the oppressed."] Despite the shift of his base of operations to England, the disaffected Chardin remained anchored in his French mother tongue, and so there is an interesting dissonance between his political and his linguistic allegiances, necessitated by his religious orientation, but not troubling his profession in commerce, which adds up to a complicated identity structure:

J'avois trouvé à mon retour en France, que la Religion où j'ay été élevé, m'éloignoit de toutes sortes d'emplois, et qu'il falloit ou en changer ou renoncer à tout ce qu'on appelle honneur et avancement. L'un et l'autre me paroissoit rude: on n'est pas libre de croire ce qu'on veut. Je songey donc aussitost à retourner aux Indes, où sans changer de Religion, ni sans sortir aussy de la condition de Marchand, je ne pouvois manquer de remplir une ambition modérée; parce que le commerce y est un emploi si considérable, que même les Souverains le font tout ouvertement.³⁹

[Upon my return to France I found that the religion in which I had been brought up, excluded me from all sorts of occupations, and that it was necessary either to change my religion, or give up hoping for any kind of honors and advancement. Both choices were difficult; one is not free to believe what one wishes. I thus immediately thought of returning to India, where without changing my religion or quitting the profession of merchant, I could not fail to satisfy moderate ambitions; for trade is such a considerable thing there that even sovereigns conduct it quite openly.]

Note that in his homage he expresses concern about the respectability of his profession in commerce, and claims to find confirmation of the legitimacy of his métier not in the example of any European kings, but in the way this merchant identity enjoys a positive valence in the Orient. And he can point this out in his discourse to the English king perhaps more easily than he might have to the French king. Not only was religion

a barrier to his social or material advancement in France; so, despite Richelieu's earlier efforts, was his profession in commerce. It appears it was easier for industrious noblemen to shore up their titles through trade than it was for successful merchants to climb the ranks (as we will see in 1670 with Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme*).⁴⁰ But in what would become known as the Protestant "nation of shopkeepers," where even kings did not disdain to engage in such concerns, he had found a more secure and nurturing home base.⁴¹

Chardin's travels took him as far as Persia, and this alone made him remarkable. What further distinguished him as a traveler was his route. In the seventeenth century, the Black Sea was closed to foreigners. In order to enter, travelers coming from the Mediterranean were required to obtain a passport from the Ottomans at Constantinople, and these were not readily distributed. Chardin was one of the few Europeans to reproduce the itinerary of the Argonauts, and to actually make his way to Persia across the Black Sea and through Medea's land of Colchis. In so doing, he both reinscribed its value as exotic – far away, seldom seen, and then only with difficulty (the sea was particularly treacherous) – not unlike the jewel; and as negotiable – he made it through the country; and he made it susceptible to narrative, he wrote to tell of it. He dined out on his stories both while on the road and then at home, and capitalized generally on the reputation he had built for himself through his adventures. Thus the activity of travel itself became commodified. Further, as a consequence of his travels, Colchis began to fall from complete mythic exoticism into a more prosaic geography, and the limits of the imagined world shrank as the frontiers of the known world expanded.

Chardin and his fellow-travelers – Thévenot, Tavernier, D'Arvieux, Grelot, Bernier – who plied the Mediterranean and produced judgments such as those cited above, are among the very ones mentioned regularly as the early and unwitting practitioners of the discipline of anthropology. For historians of anthropology looking back, they represented a new breed of seekers, setting the pace of a new form of enquiry, and making way for the formation of the eventual discipline of anthropology. It is to the specific formation of French anthropology in the 1950s that we now turn as we prepare to study Corneille's play in these contexts.

THE TRAVELER-SAVANT – EARLY MODERN ANTHROPOLOGY

Three centuries after the staging of the classical mind-set, after Corneille's invention of the Pollux character – prototypical budding anthropologist – Claude Lévi-Strauss, France's preeminent anthropologist

("the Dean of Structural Anthropology" / "de l'Académie française"),⁴² implicitly admits to the hold of the classical ideological model on his imagination. In his meditative and despondent *Tristes Tropiques* of 1955, he found himself out in the field in Brazil, obsessed and casting about for a form for framing his worries: "Il me sembla que les problèmes qui me tourmentaient fournissaient la matière d'une pièce de théâtre."⁴³ ["It seemed to me that the problems which were tormenting me would furnish material for a play."] Lévi-Strauss attempted to take control of his anxieties by casting himself as the playwright, and specifically a playwright modelled after the cultural icon Corneille: "Ma pièce s'intitulait: 'L'Apothéose d'Auguste,' et se présentait comme une nouvelle version de *Cinna*."⁴⁴ ["My play was called: 'The Apotheosis of Augustus', and was presented as a new version of *Cinna*."] Note that in the French edition (unlike in the English translation), Lévi-Strauss has simply named the play, taking it for granted that everyone knows Corneille to be the author; such is the presumed hold of the classical canon on the French-educated.

That Lévi-Strauss should have found himself coping with his alienation in the wilds of Brazil by summoning up familiar memories of Corneille, and thinking his anguish out through the old schooldays paradigm, speaks worlds of his firm rooting in his own French culture despite his life-long project to immerse himself in and to know others. His distinguished career as student, teacher, traveler, cultural diplomat, anthropologist crowned by academic awards at home is rudimentarily prefigured in the character of Corneille's Pollux. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss's orientation is considered by anthropologists to be of a more literary bent than that of his contemporaries: "[*Tristes tropiques*] was philosophical, elegant, and worthy of reflection and rereading, destined to be taught in literature classes as a model of belles-lettres."⁴⁵ Corneille and Lévi-Strauss may thus have more in common as French literary figures than in any other regard, but in addition, they each, across the centuries, respectively, anticipated and played out through their writing the trajectories of the many seventeenth-century travelers who began in increasing numbers to mediate culturally and politically between their French homeland and the rest of the world?⁴⁶

Studies of the development of the French collection of human knowledge as it accompanies the rise of the paired phenomena of exoticism and colonialism regularly skip the seventeenth century and also tend to overlook these activities in the more local Mediterranean basin.⁴⁷ More often than not, scholars make the leap from the standard springboard of Montaigne's "Des Cannibales" (Brazil) right over into the