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978-0-521-12342-6 - Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry

Mitchell Greenberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

‘Toutes nos passions ne savent qu’obéir.’

Cornelian tragedy emerges during the 1630s and 1640s and radically alters the course of French and European theater. More important still, this new tragedy, standing apart from those inchoate forms of representation that we have come to identify with the term ‘baroque’, imposes Classicism’s Law upon chaos, its concept of ideality on materiality, and elaborates a radically different model of human subjectivity.

The period that forms the contextual framework inside which Cornelian tragedy evolves has been diversely studied as a period of transition – of transitions in esthetics (from baroque to Classical), in the political and social structures governing French life, and, finally in the ideological parameters informing discursive reasoning itself.<sup>1</sup> Among recent critics who have attempted to theorize this transition, M. Foucault’s concept of ‘epistemic’ change, precisely because it embraces the internal contradictions of this epoch while proposing a general method for its comprehension, remains a forceful argument for grasping the interrelation of social, esthetic and discursive practices that constitute what we have come to identify as the Classical epiphany of Cornelian dramaturgy.

Corneille’s dramatic breakthrough occurs during that era Foucault has called ‘la période du grand renfermement’, whose defining trait would be its compulsion to enclose and exclude. The world is separated into distinct and identifiable areas of social, psychological, linguistic and sexual differences.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, the universe Corneille created in his great tragedies seems both to corroborate and to celebrate this brave new world of difference. The Cornelian universe has been lionized as the realm of light. Its clarity is the resplendence of division, of sharply delimited, unconditional boundaries. Shadows are not allowed to adhere to the contours of ideals or heros. In this world choices, when they are given, are absolute: one is either Roman or Alban, Horace or Curiace, for Emilie or for Auguste. It is in the absolute brilliance of their

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[More information](#)

## Corneille, Classicism and the ruses of symmetry

choices, choices which always seem irrevocable, ultimate confrontations with a personal and political truth, that the 'moi' of the Cornelian hero stands out and is so sharply framed.

The relation between text and context, between the world in which Cornelian dramaturgy emerges and the subject of that dramaturgy, engages us in a dizzying play of mirrors. We can best approach the analysis of this relation by considering the dialectical nature of the rapport that unites the theater (as both text and production) to its audience. A successful dramatic text always responds in some mysterious fashion to its public's expectation. It is always the fulfilment of the audience's desire, even if that desire remains unknown to the audience, even if the audience would be incapable of articulating it.<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely to this ambivalent locus – the theatrical experience as the space of a reciprocal desire – that we must look to pinpoint accurately the mutual imbrication of history, ideology and representation that is at work in the Cornelian world.<sup>4</sup> We must dwell in this space in order to understand the 'archeology' of this desire as it articulates both seventeenth-century history and politics and by so doing establishes the link between its own time and ours. The first question we must ask ourselves, therefore, as we enter into our discussion of the Cornelian world, is: what is this desire that we can perceive only in its fulfilment, only, that is, in the plays? – and, then: why and in what way(s) does this response give us pleasure?

Surely the coincidence of the rise of the Absolutist Monarchy with the representation of Cornelian subjectivity has not gone unnoticed. Critics as diverse as P. Bénichou, B. Dort, S. Doubrovsky and R. J. Nelson have attempted to draw parallels between the birth of the Cornelian hero and the emergence of a centralized State.<sup>5</sup> It is not my intention here to go over that well-mapped terrain. I would only like to identify a few 'markers' in this terrain that prove to be particularly relevant to the following discussion.

The move to Absolutism traces a shift from fragmentation to integrity. For the first quarter of the seventeenth century France still reeled from the turmoil of the preceding fifty years. The Religious Wars had rent the nation not only into two religious camps, but into sundry antagonistic political factions. The shock of these wars and of the havoc created by them produced a sense of discontinuity and disintegration whose resonance echoes in the major writers of the later sixteenth century: Ronsard, Montaigne, d'Aubigné. All of them give voice to the fear that France no longer existed.

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[More information](#)

## Introduction

Perhaps the rhetorical exercise that most effectively expresses these fears is the metaphor of France as a fragmented body, more specifically the fragmented body of the Mother:

O France désolée! ô terre sanguinaire,  
 Non pas terre, mais cendre! ô mère, si c'est mère  
 Que trahir ses enfans aux douceurs de son sein  
 Et quand on les meurtrit les serrer de sa main?  
 Tu leur donnes la vie, et dessous ta mammelle  
 S'esmeut des obstinez la sanglante querelle;  
 Sur ton pis blanchissant ta race se débat,  
 Là le fruit de ton flanc fait le champ du combat.

(D'Aubigné, *Misères*, vv. 89–96)<sup>6</sup>

This image is powerful even as it is banal. Primarily we are given an image of excess and of decomposition. Transforming France into the Mother, these writers transform the Mother into a wasteland. Exposing the naked body of the Mother to the reader's gaze transgresses the same taboo, participates in the same destruction that puts an end to France. Our transgression not only destroys the image of the 'nation', but, by so doing, also successfully eradicates a millenary association that linked the concept of the State to the body of the Sovereign and to that Sovereign's special relation to God.<sup>7</sup> The images of late sixteenth-century literature break any possible link between the 'Sovereign body' and a corporate State. The apparent undermining of this dream has consequences that are far more revealing than a glance at a rhetorical exercise would seem at first to indicate. Beyond the rhetoric is an entire history, an ideological history, where the religious, judicial and social networks of the nation are interwoven in the 'image' of the integral body of the monarchy. We have learned from the classic demonstration of Kantorowicz that the elaboration of this image throughout the Middle Ages was essential for grounding the monarchy in Christianity, for, that is, establishing through the Christic parallels the link between God the Father and his representative on earth, the 'most Christian King', who ruled by divine right. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, the dream of a unifying, protective and available presence underlying all social organization – familial, political, religious – seems to exist, if at all, as a negative, unattainable fantasy.

By insisting, however, on the decomposition of the maternal body, the writers of the sixteenth century reveal both their own investments in the dream of a patriarchal monarchy and their desire to save it, to save the corpus of the State from its own destruction.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Corneille, Classicism and the ruses of symmetry

When they reverse the image of France into the destroyed and self-destructive 'terre mère' the possibility of any subjective grounding, rather than being entirely swept away, is displaced, transformed into isolated, suffering fragments. The nation has become a wound that demands to be healed, to be made entire again, to be subjugated to the order of an Integrity that escapes it.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the reign of Louis XIII, although the wars were long over, their echoes still resonated throughout French society. This society was a stranger to itself, neither completely foreign (to what it had been before the wars) nor entirely familiar. Imperceptibly it had been altered.<sup>9</sup> It is in the instability of this context that the appeal of and to Absolutism takes root. We are aware of the long road that leads from Thomas Hobbes and Jean Bodin to Richelieu. This road is not straight, nor can it be said to begin arbitrarily with these two theoreticians of the early sixteenth century. Machiavelli stands behind them, and behind him an entire network of political and theological speculation that, from the Middle Ages, prepared the way for the renewed metamorphosis of the monarchy in the resplendence of Louis XIV.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, we can state fairly accurately that it was during the 1620s and 1630s that the last stones of the Absolutist edifice were added by Richelieu.<sup>11</sup> These stones supported the scaffold upon which the bodies of the King's subjects were sundered so that the integral Body of the State could be reconstructed. Richelieu's achievement, the new Absolute State, is bolstered, primarily, by the spectacular manipulation of fear, a fear of the implacable Law that can be visited on any subject. It is our own vulnerability, our own death/dispersion, that is directly related to the maintenance and worship of the intact body of the monarch, become an absolute Integrity:

The absolutist theory depicted a regime organized by perfect unitary sovereignty. This tradition stressed the central role of the monarch himself as the ordering principle of all social life, the ultimate source of authority and energy within the state . . . Absolutism required on the one hand an intense personalization of Kingly power, an incarnation of pure authority in a single human individual to be adored and obeyed, and on the other abstraction from any human qualities in the tangible symbol of the state, pure authority and public purpose organized without human frailty.

(Keohane, *Philosophy and the State*, p. 17)

There can be no doubt that this King-Father, who joined the political to the religious, and from whose own mystical union with God flowed the unity of France, was the object of desire, the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

revered and feared object of desire of the majority of the French people.<sup>12</sup> They looked to the king to reconstitute the unity that eluded and taunted them.

Absolutism then may be seen as desire, and desire as a metaphor that hides and reveals a totality that shines in the person of the king, his own physical body. It shines so brightly that it blinds those who behold it. This apogee of desire, the deification of the king, a king who is both a body, a physical presence in the world, and yet not of the world, becomes in Classical ideology a metaphysical imperative. This body lost in its own radiance finds its most adequate metaphor of itself, the representation of a representation, in that other image of self-contained, self-absorbed brilliance, the sun,

the noblest of all . . . which by virtue of its uniqueness, by the brilliance that surrounds it, by the light it imparts to other heavenly bodies that seem to pay it court, and by equal and just distribution of this same light to all the various parts of the world, by the good that it does everywhere, constantly producing life, joy and activity everywhere, by its perpetual yet always imperceptible movement, by never departing or deviating from its steady and invariable course assuredly makes a most vivid and a most beautiful image for a great monarch.

(Louis XIV, *Mémoires*, pp. 103–4, quoted in Keohane, p. 251)

The desire that underlies Absolutism is a drive toward integrity, toward the figure of the One, the center, self-contained and self-generating. It is the plenitude that nourishes, engenders all life, all movement. It begets all order, all hierarchy and in that begetting is a source of joy, of pleasure: the King as Sun, and the Sun as Father.<sup>13</sup> In this new paternity the rent body of the Mother is not only sutured, but Integrity renders maternity redundant. The body of the Mother is obfuscated by the brilliance of the King, and France, ‘une mère affligée’, becomes the ‘Fatherland’ (‘la patrie’).

Absolute Monarchy, then, would be impossible without a metaphoric substructure of Patriarchy, without the structuring of familial organization around the center/Sun of the Father. Politics becomes a family affair where the State doubles the family, where each is inseparable from the mirror image of the other. In the confines of this double enclosure the King is first and foremost ‘le père du peuple’.

The unity of the Father is the unity of exclusion. All that contravenes, or is opposed to, its mimesis is exiled to the frontiers of representation, to its outside. An obsessive drive against dispersion, a constant dread that chaos–disruption is always ready to

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[More information](#)

## Corneille, Classicism and the ruses of symmetry

break loose in the world, a horror of the loss of control, is the constant negative other of Paternal order. Integrity is achieved only with the greatest vigilance, the greatest sacrifice. This sacrifice is part of the desire, part of the pleasure of the ambivalent dialectics between Law and chaos, between mastery and submission, between suffering and rapture, that is at work in the esthetics of tragedy. The juncture of these apparent antitheses, the focal point of the tragic, is also a vanishing point. The moment of tragic bliss is always a point of no return, is always a repetition, a re-turn of something always other and yet the same, of some other pleasure, on some other scene.

Despite their regal trappings, Corneille's great plays circumscribe a tragic locus which repeats familial enclosure. Cornelian tragedy, like Greek tragedy, finds its most fertile ground, its real inspiration, in the *mise-en-scène* of familial binding. In Corneille's theater, however, it is impossible to separate the family from the State. Corneille's tragic universe is inherently a political world where the family is constantly called upon to mirror the State.<sup>14</sup> In this theater which ignores the separation of the world into private and public spheres all existence is invariably political.

We might pause here to reflect that if in Corneille all existence is political, this statement can be turned around to argue that this political existence insofar as it engages the very heart of the family's constitution – marriage – is in one very important sense sexual. The joining of the subject to the family and the family's continuity through the subject in marriage occupy the epicenter of all dramatic tension in Corneille. 'Cet hyménée . . . importe', the admonition of the Infanta in the *Cid*, echoes throughout the great tragedies as a hollow plea. In all of these plays the marriage that motivates the tragic dilemma is either deferred, left in suspense (*Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Cinna*), or occurs before representation, informs the other scene of tragedy, as its past, its other (*Polyeucte*). It is this union, this bringing together of two 'natural' partners to form a new harmonious symmetry, that is finally left hanging.

When the dramatic locus is the most narrow, when desire and obstacle, transgression and punishment can all be located within the narrow confines of 'la proximité du sang', in the binding and undoing of those most sacred ties, ties of love and of family, tragic pleasure/pain reaches its most exquisite proportions. At the same time it is these ties that, although capable of being rent, can never be abandoned, that provide us with our first insight into the particular pleasure of Cornelian theater and the involvement of this pleasure in Absolutism.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

The theater as spectacle constitutes a privileged locus in which diverse strategies of power and pleasure are essayed and affirmed. These strategies elaborate the parameters inside which the experience of the world, an experience that is always an experience of representation, makes possible the elaboration of subjectivity. It is this subjectivity in turn that reflects in its pleasure the power structures of representation that corroborate its own mode of self-apprehension. More so than any other form of art the theater, the theatrical space, is most obviously dialectical in the ambivalent structuring of the dichotomy separating spectacle and spectator. Despite the ever-present ramp (real or imaginary) that divides stage from audience, actor from spectator, the space of illusion from the reality of the parterre, the theater's essential mystery both recognizes and denies these separations.<sup>15</sup> Audience and actors are embraced within the theatrical space: each is potentially capable of assuming the role of the other. Although the classic dictum 'all the world's a stage' became a cultural topos at the end of the sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, its acuity was not dampened. In a world given to the spectacular imbrication of symbols of power with the subjects of that power, Corneille's epoch certainly viewed the world as a stage. It also knew that the stage reflected a perfectly coherent world. Actors and spectators held up mirrors to each other. Caught in a *mise-en-abîme* of representation, the theater in its illusoriness inscribes the spectators within its own frame of reference, within its own desires, and pleasures them.

In order to approach an elucidation of the pleasure shared in the Cornelian universe we will always have to repeat the double gesture of theatricality: we must confront an analysis of the internal dynamics of the tragic plot (the essential dilemma of the Cornelian family/State) with what in that plot reflects the desires of its audience – of those spectators who are silently, but not passively, participants in its representation.

The interreaction of actor and spectator, the confusion of illusion and reality, and their reversal are the most (politically) dangerous aspects of theatrical pleasure, containing the greatest potential for political unrest.<sup>16</sup> If the theater produced an uncontaminated pleasure, a release of unfettered desire, it would probably not be so privileged an art. In a recent book, M. H. Huet has analyzed the role of the theater during the French Revolution and its manipulation by the different governing coalitions. She concludes that

The Revolution's constant concern with making the people into a public did not necessarily correspond to any form of political liberalism; . . . it

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Corneille, Classicism and the ruses of symmetry

was inscribed in a tradition that consists in repressing by means of spectacle. To make a spectator of the people, while making sure that the possibility of a spectator–actor reversibility remains carefully controlled, is to maintain an alienation that is the real form of power.

(*Rehearsing the Revolution*, p. 35)

Curiously, the leaders of the Revolution which deposed the monarchy by the highly ritualized sundering of the King's body (the beheading of the 'père de peuple') resorted to the same type of pleasure to control its citizens as did that same monarchy at its beginnings. In order to see beyond what appears to be an historical and esthetic contradiction, in order to speculate on the continual appeal of the theater across the centuries, and across societal upheavals, I suggest we turn to a discourse that is rooted both in familial trauma and in that trauma's representation as tragedy. Perhaps more than any other theory that one could invoke to elucidate literary texts, psychoanalysis is most at home in the theater. Surely, a discipline that enjoys so intimate a relation with *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*, that has so laboriously and minutely constructed a theory of subjectivity as dependent on a never-resolved desire for and struggle against the Father and his Law, can afford us a privileged approach to the theater in general, and to Cornelian tragedy in particular. Rather than appear as a discipline foreign to Corneille's great creations, psychoanalytic discourse might be regarded as continuing, in another register, the dialogue with this enigmatic Other, God–Sovereign, who continues to inhabit our dreams and desires as well as those of Corneille and his contemporaries. The Emperor changes clothes, speaks another language, and remains as attractive and powerful as ever.

The work of Freud and his followers suggests that the theatrical scene functions very much like the dream scene.<sup>17</sup> Like a dream, the play articulates, in the individual and collective unconscious of the spectators, the dialectic of Law and desire. The particular imbrication of politics and desire in Corneille's theater involves the spectator in a plot that also functions as a fantasy of sacrifice and death. Through the illusion of representation pleasure is produced in the spectator as he is implicated in the epiphany of tragedy. Like dreams, the theater functions as both the projection and the satisfaction of desire. Play-acting, like dreaming, figures the dangerous intrusion of the passions into the universe of the Law. It also, however, figures the reappropriation of these passions by the Law. The theater as immolation allows us to participate in the ambiguous pleasure of affirming the obstacles of desire while



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

transgressing them.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Anne Ubersfeld suggests, the stage allows the transgression of the ideology it represents and also the concomitant recuperation of that ideology's strictures:

Le théâtre a le statut du rêve: une construction imaginaire dont le spectateur sait qu'elle est radicalement séparée de la sphère de l'existence quotidienne . . . [Le spectateur] . . . peut se permettre de voir fonctionner les lois qui le régissent sans y être soumis, puisqu'elles sont expressément visées dans leur réalité contraignante.<sup>19</sup>

The enigma of theatrical pleasure resides in its ambivalence; it is both liberating and confining.<sup>20</sup> This paradox has tantalized philosophers and aestheticians from antiquity to the present. Since Aristotle's sybilline pronouncements on 'catharsis' this enigma has essentially been reduced to determining how the suffering of the hero produces pleasure in the spectator. In his brief paper 'Psychopathic Characters on the Stage', Freud proposed a solution to this enigma by speculating that the pleasure of the spectator in seeing the hero, who 'first and foremost rebels against God or against something divine', is essentially masochistic: 'pleasure', he wrote, 'is derived, as it seems, from the affliction of a weaker being in the face of divine might, a pleasure due to masochistic satisfaction' (*Standard Edition*, VII, p. 306). For Freud, the pleasure of the spectator would be intimately linked to a masochistic terror, a terror that in itself is inseparable from a sadistic turn: spectator and actor revolve in a spectacle of execution where each is victim, each tormentor.<sup>21</sup>

Freud's speculations on the actor-spectator relationship which he couches in the vocabulary of sexuality point to and reinforce our initial assumption that the theater represents the locus of an exercise of sovereignty. This conjunction of heterogeneous discourses becomes even more revealing when we realize that Corneille himself in his theoretical writings seems to corroborate the perspicacity of Freud's intuition. Corneille did not have to wait for the twentieth century to know that the intensity of tragic pleasure increases in direct proportion to the symmetrical intimacy binding victim and torturer: 'C'est donc un grand avantage, pour exciter la commisération, que la proximité du sang et les liaisons d'amour ou d'amitié entre le persécutant et le persécuté, le poursuivant et le poursuivi, celui qui fait souffrir et celui qui souffre' (*Discours de l'utilité et des partis du poème dramatique*, p. 42).

In general, when we consider Classical structures as they were elaborated during the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV, and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Corneille, Classicism and the ruses of symmetry

Cornelian theater in particular, we realize that it is this drive to symmetry, a symmetry that is always a mystification, that underpins their elaboration. Symmetry, sexual and esthetic, becomes the invisible scaffold upon which Classicism is erected.<sup>22</sup> In its perfection, this most invested of esthetic criteria camouflages a violence that is at its center. The symmetry of Classicism functions to obfuscate an original dissymmetry that is the mainspring of all Absolutist political theory. This dissymmetry can be made apparent only in moments of tragic epiphany or in the moment of execution. On a first level, at least, the 're-connaissance' of Classical symmetry is always a 'méconnaissance': it disguises the ponderous and total difference that separates the Sovereign from his subject(s). The harmony of form hides the violence of ideology.<sup>23</sup>

This violence is re-structured in the Cornelian universe, where the world is presented as divided into a symmetrical, if unequal, sexual division. Serge Doubrovsky has commented on the separation of the Cornelian world into male and female camps, camps which are, according to him, clearly opposed in their 'essence'.<sup>24</sup> It has been argued by recent feminist critics that the equation of a biological separation of the sexes to an essential distinction of masculinity and femininity is a 'metaphysical illusion'.<sup>25</sup> This illusion is made possible by the repression of an ambiguous locus of sexual 'indifference', of a bisexuality in which both sexes participate, which marks them both, but which, it seems, males in a patriarchal culture repress more thoroughly.<sup>26</sup>

Feminist theorists, particularly those who speak from within the institution of psychoanalysis, add yet another twist, a powerfully de-centering twist, to the role and importance of the metaphor of the Father in western representation. It is, they speculate, only from the male perspective of repression that an 'essence' of virility and its obverse, femininity, can be enunciated.<sup>27</sup> This proves to be a compelling argument in attempting to analyze Corneille's tragic universe, for in the patriarchal order that defines the world of Cornelian drama, the power of this repression acquires the force of Law. It informs the possibilities and limits of human freedom according to an implied sexual difference. The way this difference struggles with its own uncomfortable relation to the Law structures the tragic potential of the great plays.

In a patriarchal culture such as we see elaborated in Corneille the masculine is the standard for all conduct in social interreaction. Femininity is never articulated in any way which is not already inextricably bound to the politics of virility. It is always seen as masculin-