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Mitchell Greenberg

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CORNEILLE, CLASSICISM AND  
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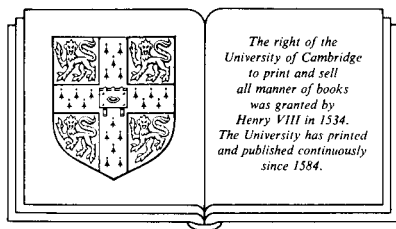
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# CORNEILLE, CLASSICISM AND THE RUSES OF SYMMETRY

*MITCHELL GREENBERG*

*Professor of French, Miami University, Ohio*



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Pour Julia et pour Marie-Claire

Et comme notre esprit, jusqu'au dernier soupir,  
Toujours vers quelque objet pousse quelque désir . . .

(*Cinna*, II, i, 367–8)

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

This series aims at providing a new forum for the discussion of major critical or scholarly topics within the field of French studies. It differs from most similar-seeming ventures in the degree of freedom which contributing authors are allowed and in the range of subjects covered. For the series is not concerned to promote any single area of academic specialization or any single theoretical approach. Authors are invited to address themselves to *problems*, and to argue their solutions in whatever terms seem best able to produce an incisive and cogent account of the matter in hand. The search for such terms will sometimes involve the crossing of boundaries between familiar academic disciplines, or the calling of those boundaries into dispute. Most of the studies will be written especially for the series, although from time to time it will also provide new editions of outstanding works which were previously out of print, or originally published in languages other than English or French.

## PREFACE

On September 12, 1642, in Lyons, Place des Terreaux, the headsman's ax falls anew, punishing Henri d'Effiat, Marquis de Cinq-Mars, for the crime of 'lèse-majesté'. As if to conjure away premonitions of the uncertainties that always accompany a new regency, uncertainties that threaten the edifice of Absolutism so laboriously constructed during their joint reign, Richelieu and Louis XIII insist on the execution of Cinq-Mars and his co-conspirator, de Thou, as a final spectacular demonstration of royal authority. This execution is only the latest in a series that throughout the 1620s and 1630s radically underlined the decline of the nobility and the concomitant rise of 'raison d'Etat': Marillac's death was perhaps the most unjust, Montmorency's the most pathetic. Surely, however, Cinq-Mars' execution fired the imagination of his contemporaries, and of history, as the most tragic.

Of the many versions of the conspiracy, trial and execution of d'Effiat we possess, Vigny's fictional narrative *Cinq-Mars* is particularly compelling in its Romantic excess:

'Qu'attends-tu? que fais-tu là?' dit-il [Cinq-Mars] ensuite à l'exécuteur qui était là et n'avait pas encore tiré son couperet d'un méchant sac qu'il avait apporté. Son confesseur, s'étant approché, lui donna une médaille; et lui, d'une tranquillité d'esprit incroyable, pria le père de tenir le crucifix devant ses yeux, qu'il ne voulut point avoir bandés. J'aperçus les deux mains tremblantes du vieil abbé Quillet, qui élevait le crucifix. En ce moment une voix claire et pure comme celle d'un ange entonna l'Ave maris stella. Dans le silence universel, je reconnus la voix de M. de Thou, qui attendait au pied de l'échafaud; le peuple répéta le chant sacré. M. de Cinq-Mars embrassa plus étroitement le poteau et je vis s'élever une hache faite à la façon des haches d'Angleterre. Un cri effroyable du peuple, jeté de la place, des fenêtres et des tours, m'avertit qu'elle était retombée et que la tête avait roulé jusqu'à terre. (Cinq-Mars, pp. 371–2)<sup>1</sup>

The paraphernalia of death and the figures of rhetoric are combined in this narration to represent the drama that is at the heart



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of seventeenth-century tragedy. The execution – that face-to-face with death – underscores the immense dissymmetry between Sovereign and subject.<sup>2</sup> In a brief instant those strands that constitute the diverse networks of power and pleasure structuring society are concentrated in one spectacular show of force. Curiously, it is precisely this spectacle that is denied Classical representation. The ‘bienséances’ exile death to the wings of the theater. The spectacle of death is never allowed onto the stage of tragedy and the center of the tragic is forever condemned to another scene, to another place.

What could not take place on the seventeenth-century stage is allowed to happen in Romantic fiction. Vigny’s retelling of the most powerful example of Absolutist prerogative brings these two irreconcilable ‘scenes’ together. In the tumult of the carnival organized by Richelieu to inaugurate his new residence, in the nighttime blurrings and interminglings of a populace’s unleashed quest for pleasure, an incongruous encounter figures the origin of the narration we have just read. On the ‘Pont-neuf’, next to the newly erected statue of Henri IV, two spectators are thrown together and find themselves isolated from the movement that swirls about them. The two friends (for they are ‘friends’) use this moment of calm and recognition to criticize the political events of these last days of the Cardinal’s reign. What fortuitous stroke of genius led Alfred de Vigny to end his novel with this chance encounter? Was it simply coincidence that made him place the narration of Cinq-Mars’ spectacular death in a letter that the English poet John Milton hears read to him by his friend, the French dramatist Pierre Corneille?

By situating Corneille as the spokesman of his narrative’s tragic conclusion, Vigny’s novel makes him embrace the two scenes of seventeenth-century Absolutism: the executioner’s block and the theater. Although apparently separate, these two worlds are, as Vigny’s narrative suggests, joined by the scaffold that upholds them both. Separating the victim from the mob, the scaffold makes of the execution a spectacle. As a support for the stage it serves as a constant reminder that the theater is yet another locus where sovereign power is exercised.

The lines of power separating victim, executioner and witness are never radically distinct: they are always ambivalent, always reciprocal. It is precisely this ambivalent space in which all the participants are joined, this space of reversibility and co-mingling, that most adequately veils and reveals the ubiquitous power of the

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## Preface

Sovereign. Sovereignty emerges from this ritual of death where the guilty body that has violated the integrity of the ruler is punished. And who in the multifaceted crowd is not capable of an offending gesture? Who among us is not always also the criminal, a potential victim in the eyes of the Law?<sup>3</sup>

If the scaffold is always a spectacle of power, a theatricalization of power, may we not suspect that the theater, and here I am speaking most particularly about the tragic theater that Corneille so triumphantly institutes, is also the space of an execution? Here, in the theater, the distance separating Sovereign and subject is paradoxically both the greatest and the least. Is it not here, in the crossing over, in the mingling of the scenes of execution and tragedy that we, with Vigny, must situate Corneille?

More than twenty years ago S. Doubrovsky reminded us that Corneille's theater was 'historical'. At the same time he cautioned readers of Corneille not to misunderstand the meaning of 'history'.<sup>4</sup> Surely Corneille's plays are of their time, but they are not only a retelling of eventful or social history.<sup>5</sup> Rather they 'mirror' their moment, holding themselves up as a model of what in the world remains pure immanence. What this means, of course, is that tragedy is never just a mimesis but also, and perhaps more important, a poesis. The consequences of the way tragedy and history interact, the way, that is, that different discourses come together at different critical moments to form new clusters of interpretation, new ways of seeing, will bear heavily on the reading of Corneille this study proposes.

In a recent book, *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, Michel de Certeau argues powerfully for seeing historiography as an exercise of ideological control. He points out the difference between actual historical action – the past – and the political and ideological implications of its narration. In its effort to resurrect and yet contain the past, to make the dead speak, think or act, history, as a form of rhetoric, constantly invests the past with its own present:

Le discours sur le passé a pour statut d'être le discours du mort. L'objet qui circule n'est que l'absent, alors que son sens est d'être un langage entre le narrateur et ses lecteurs, c'est à dire entre des présents. La chose communiquée opère la communication d'un groupe avec lui-même par ce 'renvoi' au tiers absent qu'est son passé.<sup>6</sup>

History is dialogue with the dead where the present asks questions about itself and listens to its own answers. The narrative strategies de Certeau circumscribes as pertaining to 'history' are shared, I

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would argue, with 'literary history'. Texts are inscribed within both cultural and ideological frameworks that authorize the way they can be seen, the way they can be 'plausibly' analyzed, the way, that is, they are made to speak to and for us.

The readings of Corneille's tragic universe that I offer here form my own dialogue with his world. This statement, however, demands some elaboration. First of all I am not primarily concerned with studying Corneille in his 'historical' context: this is not a book about Corneille and the seventeenth century, but rather a book about Corneille, the seventeenth century and us, a book, in other words, that asks how the past engages us in its tragedy and how we, in turn, embrace it.

We continue to stage these tragedies because of the pleasure they give us. It is the examination of this pleasure that constitutes the central explorations of my book. It is my contention that pleasure is an effect of subjectivity, as that subjectivity is informed by the intermeshing of several networks – the networks of sexuality, of authority, and of representation. I find it intriguing that the notion of subjectivity as an ideological construct received, in the seventeenth century, its first and most powerful articulation in the tragedies of Corneille. Whether or not the Cornelian hero's 'moi' corresponds to, or reflects, the Cartesian 'ego' is less important than the coincidence of their simultaneous emergence. This coincidence does signal the arrival of a different and novel articulation of the self. This articulation, in turn, implies not only a restructuring of the individual but also the concomitant restructuring of the way that individual exists in and colonizes the world – a reformulation, in other words, of how the world is at once represented and made to represent this self.

The articulation of subjectivity, as both an ontology and a legacy, has been at the center of recent critical speculation: the putting into question of those presuppositions upon which the notion of an integral subject can or cannot come into being has been, at least since Nietzsche, the mark of 'modernity'. It will come as no surprise, therefore, that in my dialogue with Corneille I have recourse to diverse critical idioms (psychoanalysis, in its Freudian and post-Freudian forms, epistemology as represented most notably by Foucault, the various recent discussions by French feminists on sexuality and difference, and finally contemporary social analyses of the theater) that are the discourses most involved with unraveling the puzzle of subjectivity and representation. These heterogeneous idioms are invoked not as some irrefutable

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### Preface

'Authority', as if they, finally, could yield us the 'Truth' about Corneille that has remained hidden for the past 300 years. Rather, they are discourses that, by constantly putting into question the possibility of ultimate truth, enable me to dialogue with Corneille where he is most compelling and most problematical. In a study that wishes to trace those shifting borders of power and pleasure that allow Corneille's tragedies to continue to speak to us, to involve us in their world, to make, in other words, their past present, these discourses seem the most apt at engaging Corneille's texts where they engage us, in the unstable margins defining and undermining our articulation of ourselves in the world. At the same time, they also enable us to affirm this articulation, in its evanescence, as pleasure.