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'Dying of the fifth act': Corneille's (un)natural deaths

Towards the end of a rather poor tragedy, one eighteenth-century spectator was surprised to see the tragic hero – who had otherwise been entirely healthy – suddenly die for no discernible reason. On asking his neighbour what the hero had actually died of, he was met with a bafflingly simple answer: 'What of? Of the fifth act!'¹ In this anecdote, the German playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing succinctly mocks both certain dramatists' slackness in establishing narrative closure and the undemanding complicity of spectators prepared to accept such clumsy endings. For Lessing's uncritical spectator, the 'fifth act' is something like a disease – a readily diagnosable medical condition that affects only fictional characters. In a well-constructed tragedy, Lessing implies, people do not just die unexpectedly.

And yet in real life, of course, people can – and sadly often do – die with little or no prior warning. Such deaths can thus form something of a stumbling block for dramatists. The very same death that might produce great and sincere sorrow in real life precisely because it is unexpected can, once transplanted onto the stage, break the dramatic illusion or otherwise leave us cold and unmoved. Indeed, it is fundamental to most conceptions of tragedy that ordinary deaths are not themselves tragic; in the words of one recent critic, each tragedy's underlying claim is that '*this* death is exceptional'.² Similarly, the sixteenth-century playwright Jean de La Taille insisted that tragedy should concern itself with 'larmes et

¹ 'Woran? am fünften Akte'. G. E. Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, pp. 30–506, in *Werke*, 3 vols, II: *Dramaturgie, Literaturkritik, Philologie und Allgemeines* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), p. 40.

² Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 1.

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3 miseres extremes', and not with events that take place 'tous les jours naturellement et par
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5 raison commune, comme d'un qui mourroit de sa propre mort'.³ As La Taille implies, in
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7 tragedy one should not die of a death that obeys the 'raison commune' that we are all mortal.
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9 Rather, a tragic death requires some external intervention, the irruption of some deadly event
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11 before the hero's 'natural' time has come. In short, a good tragedy requires the hero to be
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13 killed, and this killing, whether it takes the form of murder or suicide, needs to be causally
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15 motivated. Natural deaths, in contrast, have little or no place on the tragic stage.
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19 Of course, Pierre Corneille was never one to shy away from a dramatic challenge.
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21 Throughout his career Corneille took many risks in flouting dramatic convention and
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23 audience expectation, with varying degrees of popular and critical success. This article
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25 focuses on a small, somewhat disparate handful of characters in Corneille who – for want of a
26
27 better phrase – 'just die', without the need for bloodshed or murder. Their deaths are what I
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29 shall call '(un)natural' deaths. They are 'natural' in that they could occur in real life, but
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31 onstage they risk appearing unnatural and artificial – a clumsy concession, as Lessing might
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33 imply, to the dramatist's need to wrap up his plot in appropriately tragic fashion. There is, of
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35 course, an overlap here with the long-ridiculed *deus ex machina* conclusion, in which some
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37 powerful external force steps in at the eleventh hour to resolve an otherwise untenable
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39 situation onstage; indeed, as I shall argue, we are certainly invited to see a divine hand at
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41 work in the case of *Attila, roi des Huns* (1667). Generally speaking, though, (un)natural death
42
43 in Corneille afflicts characters who, unlike the notorious Hunnish king, do not really deserve
44
45 to die. In the other plays in my corpus – *L'illusion comique* (1635), *Théodore, vierge et*
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47 *martyre* (1646), and *Suréna, général des Parthes* (1674) – women die of sorrow on being
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54 ³ Jean de La Taille, *De l'art de la tragédie*, ed. by Frederick West (Manchester: Manchester
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56 University Press, 1939). p. 24.
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3 separated from their beloved. Their deaths are, at least on an ethical level, excessive, even
4 gratuitous. Furthermore, we should also note that their deaths are in an important sense (*pace*
5 Jean Emelina⁴) quite distinct from suicide; whereas suicide implies agency, volition and
6 responsibility, what we have in these cases is an apparently involuntary collapse of the
7 character's physical body.
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14 The idea of dying of grief, sorrow or thwarted love has a long literary heritage in
15 France, at least from *La Chastelaine de Verger* onwards. Indeed, it was widely believed in
16 early-modern Europe not only that people could die of excessive passion, but also that such
17 deaths were quite commonplace.⁵ And although it is hard to square with Aristotelian demands
18 for a rigorously constructed plot, we find this motif lurking around the very heart of French
19 'classicism', at the start of *Phèdre* and at points throughout *La Princesse de Clèves*.⁶
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Unsurprisingly, dying of love also forms a leitmotif of amorous discourse at the time,
although, as Corneille reminds us, we should not always take characters' evocations of death
too seriously, at least in comedy:

⁴ In his otherwise very helpful table charting the different types of death in Corneille's tragic canon, Emelina lists Isabelle's and Eurydice's deaths as 'suicides', Attila's as an 'execution', and does not mention Rosine or Flavie. See 'Les Morts dans les tragédies de Pierre Corneille: *Le Cid, Othon, Suréna*', in *Comédie et tragédie* (Nice and Paris: Publications de la Faculté des lettres, arts et sciences humaines, 1998), pp. 245–66 (pp. 246-47).

⁵ See, for example, Jean-François Senault, *L'homme criminel ou la corruption de la nature par le péché* (Paris: Le Petit, 1656), p. 465.

⁶ Essam Safty's *La Mort tragique: Idéologie et mort dans la tragédie baroque en France* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), pp. 246-47, lists a few brief examples of tragic 'deaths of grief', but with only one glancing reference to Corneille.

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5 nous ne voyons autre chose dans les comédies que des amants qui vont mourir, s'ils
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7 ne possèdent ce qu'ils aiment, et de semblables douleurs ne préparant aucun effet
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9 tragique, on ne peut pas dire qu'elle aillent au-dessus de la comédie.⁷
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14 The fact that substantially the same rhetoric can prepare an 'effet tragique' in some of his
15
16 tragedies, of course, rather undermines Corneille's bold claims here. We should also note
17
18 that, although Corneille distributes this romantic rhetoric fairly evenly between his male and
19
20 female characters, actually dying of love is for Corneille an exclusively female phenomenon,
21
22 men tending to commit suicide in equivalent circumstances.⁸ A similarly 'feminine' response
23
24 is the swoon; indeed, Chimène is only the most famous of Corneille's women to faint on
25
26 believing her beloved dead or doomed. In Corneille's first two plays, *Mélite* and *Clitandre*,
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28 women fall into such a deathlike state that others believe that they too have died; the same
29
30 briefly happens to Cornélie on witnessing her husband's death in the tragedy *Pompée*.
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42 ⁷ Corneille, *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols, ed. by Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade],
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44 1980–87), II. 552. All references to Corneille's writings will be to this edition; unless
45
46 otherwise indicated, plays will be referenced by act, scene and line number, and other
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48 writings referenced by volume and page number.
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51 ⁸ For example, Jason in *Médée* and Placide in *Théodore* commit suicide after the deaths of
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53 their beloveds, although in both cases here the situation is exacerbated by their inability to
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55 avenge the beloved's death.
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3 *L'Illusion comique* (1635, 1660)
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5 The first example of an apparently 'real' death from grief in Corneille's theatre is also the
6 most problematic, because it occurs in an explicitly metatheatrical context. *L'Illusion*
7 *comique* famously ends with a performance of a tragedy in which the hero is stabbed to death
8 onstage. Both the audience and its onstage surrogate Pridamant do not yet know that they are
9 watching a theatrical performance rather than reality. Importantly, these scenes were subject
10 to some considerable rewriting by Corneille. In the lesser-known original version of the play,
11 the hero is murdered in the middle of an adulterous assignment with the princess Rosine.
12 Shocked by his death, Rosine swiftly dies as well, finding some consolation in following her
13 lover to the grave (V. 5. 1701-04). The hero's wife Isabelle (playing the noblewoman
14 'Hippolyte'⁹) witnesses this murder but remains devoted to her unfaithful husband. She
15 insists that his killers should kill her too in order to complete their victory; when they refuse
16 to do so, the play ends ominously, with her being escorted off to their master, who is
17 apparently in love with her (V. 5).
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34 Corneille's rewritten version of 1660 removes the 'other woman' Rosine from the
35 stage entirely, and transfers her grief-stricken death onto Isabelle herself; it is now on her
36 death that the play-within-a-play ends. This change has two main advantages: one ethical,
37 one aesthetic. Firstly, Corneille's second version resolves the thorny moral issues of the
38 original ending, in which an unseen persecutor has his rival murdered and takes sexual
39 advantage of his widow. Secondly, by displacing this death from an entirely secondary
40 character to – apparently – one of the play's principal characters, Corneille is able to exploit
41 the 'love and death' motif far more fully and convincingly.
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54 ⁹ For ease of reference, and in order to reflect better the experience of Corneille's spectator, I
55 shall refer to the characters in the inner drama by the names of the characters who play them.
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3 After all, surprising as Isabelle's death might be, the possibility of dying of love is not
4 suddenly raised at the end of the play unannounced. Death features heavily (albeit
5 unsystematically) in the play's romantic rhetoric throughout, and the theme has clustered
6 most insistently around Isabelle. At times, for example, we find echoes of the neo-Platonic
7 theory that lovers 'die' and are then reborn in their beloved – for example when Lyse tells
8 Adraste that Clindor and Isabelle 'meurent l'un pour l'autre, et n'ont qu'une pensée' (II. 7.
9 581). Bound to the beloved's soul and life, the neo-Platonic lover risks a rather more literal
10 death if the beloved actually dies. Accordingly, when Clindor faces the death penalty Isabelle
11 sees the two options facing her too as 'la vie, ou la mort' (IV. 6. 1220). Elsewhere Isabelle
12 announces that she will not outlive her lover, although it is unclear whether she intends to
13 commit suicide or whether she expects to die naturally of grief:
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30 Mais en vain après toi l'on me laisse le jour;
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32 Je veux perdre la vie en perdant mon amour:
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34 Prononçant ton arrêt, c'est de moi qu'on dispose;
35
36 Je veux suivre ta mort puisque j'en suis la cause,
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38 Et le même moment verra par deux trépas
39
40 Nos esprits amoureux se rejoindre là-bas. (IV. 1. 1013-15)
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45 Whatever the case, Corneille uses a technique here that he will also exploit elsewhere: to
46 weave death into the rhetorical fabric of the play so that the character's own final demise is, if
47 not motivated on a strictly causal level, then at least prepared thematically.
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51 Yet if this particular play anticipates certain techniques that Corneille will adopt with
52 later (un)natural deaths, it also undermines them in advance – not least by subjecting the very
53 notion of dying of grief to some sustained metatheatrical mockery. Significantly, the first
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3 person to allude to the idea in this play is not Isabelle, but the buffoonish soldier Matamore,
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5 who is, at least in his own fantasy world, as deadly a lover as he is a warrior. He claims, for
6
7 example, that swathes of women have fainted or even died of love for him, and reminisces
8
9 about the time when
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14 Je ne pouvais sortir sans les faire pâmer;

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16 Mille mouraient par jour à force de m'aimer... (II. 1. 263-64)
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21 He speaks nonchalantly about the death he will inflict on the queen of Iceland: 'Je lui vais
22
23 envoyer sa mort dans une lettre' (II. 1. 470), and welcomes his servant Clindor's claims that
24
25 two princesses also died of love for him (II. 1. 447). Matamore's rhetoric here threatens to
26
27 undermine in advance the plausibility of Isabelle's death, since it implies that dying of love is
28
29 something fictional or fantasized rather than realistic. Unlike my later examples, *L'Illusion*
30
31 *comique* thus exhibits a complex tension between treating the 'death of grief' motif as
32
33 something real, and dismissing it as a mere fiction beloved of fantasists or playwrights.
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37 Whatever the case, Isabelle's death is clearly not implausible enough to disabuse the 'frame-
38
39 play' spectator Pridamant, whose continued embrace of the dramatic illusion implies a certain
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41 continuity between the 'frame' world and the onstage world he is watching. Indeed,
42
43 Pridamant not only deems dying of grief an utterly plausible outcome for Isabelle, but he also
44
45 swiftly envisages the same fate for himself. Indeed, it is only when Pridamant announces
46
47 'Adieu, je vais mourir, puisque mon fils est mort' (V. 6. 1740), that the wizard Alcandre
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49 decides to disabuse him, thus preventing Clindor's purely fictional death from triggering a
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51 potentially genuine one in the 'real world' of the frame narrative.
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Théodore, vierge et martyr (1646)

Corneille adopts a rather different approach to (un)natural death in his 1646 martyr-play *Théodore*, and seems quite happy with the result. In 1660, the year he rewrote the death scenes of *L'Illusion comique*, Corneille not only left *Théodore* almost unchanged but even congratulated himself on his handling of his denouement, claiming that 'la maladie de Flavie, sa mort, et les violences des désespoirs de sa mère qui la venge, ont assez de justesse'.¹⁰

Here, the lovesick and bedbound Flavie, who never appears onstage, is desperately in love with Placide, and it is simply accepted by all the characters that she will die if Placide refuses to marry her, if not before. Flavie's mother Marcelle, whose utter devotion to her daughter is the one restraint on her cruelty, repeatedly attempts to force Placide to marry Flavie and save her life. Given that Placide loves elsewhere, the question is thus less *whether* Flavie will die than *when* she will die – and, of course, *what* will happen afterwards. Flavie's function in the plot is therefore quite different from what we have seen with Isabelle and Rosine. Unlike these characters, who die of grief only *after* their beloved's death, Flavie is so frail that she risks dying of rejection by a lover who remains alive. Indeed, as things transpire, Flavie not only dies *before* her lover, but even provokes his death with hers.

It is, I would argue, crucial to Corneille's dramaturgy that Flavie never appears onstage. If she were brought onto the stage, her very appearance might put into question the inevitability of her death; we might expect her to finally rise above her physical weakness in some great magnanimous ('Cornelian') triumph of the will. As it is, being bedbound both justifies her absence from the stage and enshrines her frailty as the essential component of her being. Indeed, for Corneille, Flavie is essentially a function of the plot rather than a three-dimensional character. We do not have any great emotional investment in her, as Corneille

¹⁰ 'Examen' to *Théodore*, II. 272.

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3 himself admits (II. 272); we never see her or hear her words recounted; and her eventual
4
5 death is of interest only in the effect it has on the other characters.
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7 Perhaps because of Flavie's functional role, we do not have any sustained rhetorical
8
9 association of love and death here. Corneille indicates this from the very start, when he has
10
11 Placide explain that he loves Théodore and then baldly announce that 'Flavie, au lit, malade,
12
13 en meurt de jalousie' (I. 1. 62-63). A century later, Voltaire would condemn this line as
14
15 utterly unpoetic in comparison with Racine's evocative description of the dying Phèdre:
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21 Ce style prosaïque est inadmissible dans le tragique. La poésie n'est faite que pour
22
23 déguiser et embellir tous ces détails. Voyez comment Racine rend la même idée:
24

25 Phèdre, atteinte d'un mal qu'elle s'obstine à taire,
26
27 Lasse enfin d'elle-même et du jour qui l'éclaire...¹¹
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32 But there is a reason behind Corneille's prosaic tone, and in particular his two parenthetical
33
34 descriptors: 'au lit, malade'. The literalism of the bed and the illness neutralizes in advance
35
36 any rhetorical ambiguity that the phrase 'mourir de jalousie' might otherwise have. As
37
38 Corneille indicates from the start, then, in this particular play he is not interested in creating
39
40 poetic or dramatic effects by juxtaposing literal and metaphorical deaths.
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43 Functionally speaking, Flavie occupies one end of a chain of lovers: she loves
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45 Placide, who loves Théodore, who loves God.¹² Yet Corneille complicates this situation by
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50 ¹¹ Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille*, ed. by David Williams, in *Œuvres complètes de*
51
52 *Voltaire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1970-), vols. LIII-LV (LIV. 465).

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54 ¹² See Georges Forestier, *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l'œuvre* (Geneva: Droz,
55
56 2004), p. 238.
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3 introducing Flavie's mother, the vicious Marcelle. Desiring above anything else to keep her
4
5 daughter alive, Marcelle is thus required to hold back her murderous rage towards Placide.
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7 Marcelle is quite open that she would have Placide killed were it not for her daughter's
8
9 precarious health:
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14 ...pourrais-je épargner cette insolente vie,
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16 Si sa perte n'était la perte de Flavie,
17
18 Dont le cruel destin prend un si triste cours
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21 Qu'aux jours de ce barbare il attache ses jours? (I. 3. 239-42)
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25 And Placide realizes that Marcelle cannot truly pose a threat so long as her daughter remains
26
27 in lovesick thrall to him. The chain of lovers linking Théodore and Flavie is stable only if
28
29 Flavie is still alive; indeed, it must be kept stable precisely to ensure that Flavie stays alive.
30
31 Placide's survival thus also depends on Flavie's, which explains why he later indulges
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33 Marcelle's later request to visit her and show her at least 'une feinte douceur' in order to
34
35 rescue her from 'les portes du trépas' (III. 5. 1062; 1064).
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38 As the play progresses, however, Flavie's health starts to depend more on Théodore's
39
40 misfortune than on Placide's goodwill. Like a pathological, almost vampirical, version of *Le*
41
42 *Cid's* Infanta, Flavie provides a sort of inverse barometer for Théodore's safety; she thrives
43
44 on Théodore's misfortune and suffers when Théodore is happy. The news that Théodore is to
45
46 be prostituted, Marcelle assures us, will 'soulager' Flavie and bring her 'allégresse' (I. 4. 341;
47
48 340). Conversely, Théodore's escape from the brothel is the final nail in Flavie's coffin; as
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50 Paulin puts it,
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56 Flavie est aux abois, Théodore échappée
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3 D'un mortel désespoir jusqu'au cœur l'a frappée;

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5 Marcelle n'attend plus que son dernier soupir. (V. 1. 1527-29)
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10 What ultimately triggers Flavie's death is thus not Placide's rejection of her, but Théodore's
11 escape from ignominy. Perhaps reflecting the inverse relationship between the two women,
12 Flavie's death is finally announced by none other than her rival, Théodore himself (V. 5.
13 1613-16). As Théodore realizes, now that Flavie is dead, the final check to Marcelle's rage
14 has been removed. Nothing can now stop Marcelle from unleashing one of the bloodiest
15 denouements in Corneille's canon: within a matter of scenes, four main characters will have
16 been stabbed to death. Quite unlike Isabelle's death in the rewritten *L'Illusion comique*, then,
17 Flavie's death does not resolve the dramatic action, let alone spare a villain the need for
18 further crime. On the contrary, what triggers one of the bloodiest slaughters in Corneille's
19 work is the essentially un-tragic death of a single, unknown, offstage character.
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34 *Attila, roi des Huns* (1667)
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36 Despite his apparent satisfaction with the conclusion to *Théodore*, Corneille never attempted
37 to reuse the technique. The closest he would come is with Emilie (in *Sertorius*, 1662), whose
38 death in childbirth, far away in Rome, finally leaves Pompée free to return to his estranged
39 wife Aristie. As d'Aubignac snidely put it, Corneille here effectively disposes of an unwanted
40 secondary character with 'un coup de Tonnerre'.¹³ It is tempting to see Corneille's next
41 (un)natural death, at the end of *Attila*, as a defiant embrace of precisely the sort of death that
42 d'Aubignac here denounces. Yet Attila's death also marks another change in direction for
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54 ¹³ *Dissertations contre Corneille*, ed. by Nicholas Hammond and Michael Hawcroft (Exeter:
55 University of Exeter Press, 1995), p. 40.
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3 Corneille. Whereas the female characters who die of grief (Rosine, Isabelle, Flavie and, later,
4 Eurydice) are all ultimately secondary characters, invented by Corneille, the whole tragedy of
5 *Attila* is constructed around the historically attested violent death of a notoriously cruel male
6 figure.¹⁴ The historical Attila is probably best known for two things, both of which – as the
7 gazetteer Robinet’s account of Corneille’s play suggests – make him a rather counter-
8 intuitive choice of hero:

19 ...d’un roi des plus mal nés,
20
21 D’un Héros qui saigne du nez,
22
23 Il a fait, malgré les critiques,
24
25 Le plus beau de ses *Dramatiques*.¹⁵

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28
29 Corneille knew that he was setting himself a challenge in choosing a tragic hero who was not
30 only a monstrous barbarian but who also died from a copious nosebleed. Even by Corneille’s
31 idiosyncratic standards, Attila’s death is highly inappropriate for tragedy both in its
32 gruesomeness and its lack of *vraisemblance*, and it is interesting to see the steps Corneille
33 takes to make it broadly acceptable to audiences. Firstly, I shall argue, Corneille attempts to

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¹⁴ Given the highly provocative nature of *Attila*’s denouement it is, to say the least, surprising that this tragedy scarcely features in Georges Forestier’s otherwise meticulously thorough ‘genetic’ study of Corneille’s plot construction, *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l’œuvre*.

¹⁵ Robinet, *Lettre à Madame*, cited in Georges Mongrédien, *Recueil des textes et des documents du XVIIe siècle relatifs à Corneille* (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1972), p. 214.

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3 consolidate these two problems into one by thematically associating Attila's cruelty with his
4
5 undignified death. Secondly, despite Robinet's rather flippant summary, Corneille preserves
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7 some tragic decorum by presenting Attila's death as a haemorrhage rather than specifically as
8
9 a nosebleed. Thirdly, Corneille exploits another historical source that challenges the
10
11 nosebleed hypothesis. According to Marcellinus Comes, Attila 'was pierced by the hand and
12
13 blade of his wife' Ildico,¹⁶ and Corneille raises the possibility of this alternative outcome
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15 when he has the French princess Ildione plan to marry and then assassinate him. Presumably
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17 aware that his spectators will be expecting a nosebleed, Corneille thus keeps both historical
18
19 accounts active as possibilities as his tragedy progresses.
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23 Yet spectators familiar with Corneille's general practice might have had reason to
24
25 doubt the likelihood of Attila's assassination. A decade earlier, Corneille had explained that
26
27 characters who are set to win spectators' affection and goodwill should be spared the need to
28
29 spill others' blood: 'C'est un soin que nous devons prendre de préserver nos héros du crime
30
31 tant qu'il se peut, et les exempter même de tremper leurs mains dans le sang, si ce n'est en un
32
33 juste combat' (III. 160). Wicked characters might deserve to die, but the dramatist should
34
35 nonetheless spare his heroes the need to deal this deadly blow. Accordingly, Corneille's
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37 previous villains have tended either to be dispatched by the hand of a secondary character or
38
39 to commit suicide, like Marcelle, in a fit of murderous rage. These latter deaths have the
40
41 advantage of dispatching both murderer and victim in a single gesture, thus preserving the
42
43 heroes' innocence; indeed, Corneille suggests that such a suicide leaves a strong moral
44
45 example, 'puisque'elle devient un effet de la justice du ciel, et non pas de la vengeance des
46
47 hommes' (III. 160).
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53 ¹⁶ See Hector Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (London: Cambridge University Press,
54
55 1926), p. 39, n 1.
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1
2
3 A similar idea of heavenly justice underpins *Attila*, in which Corneille's characters
4 take care to present Attila's death as an exemplary case of God's justice. Surprising and
5 timely as it is, Attila's death does not come entirely out of the blue. Indeed, Corneille takes
6 care to 'prepare' Attila's death, by offering indications and clues about it from the opening
7 acts, so that the spectator is familiar with the possibility long before death strikes. Corneille
8 does this, primarily, through the figure of blood. Blood flows throughout this tragedy – not
9 literally, since *Attila* has one of the lowest body-counts in Corneille's tragic canon, but
10 rhetorically, as befits Corneille's understanding of Attila as more tactician than warrior.

11
12 As the play demonstrates, Attila's principal strategy in both military and political
13 conflict is to set his enemies against each other, thus keeping himself safe and his hands
14 clean. This general strategy, however, might show that Attila has learnt a lesson from one
15 fateful time when he did the opposite. In act II we learn that Attila has been subject to a
16 vicious daily haemorrhage ever since he murdered his own brother Vleda (some eight years
17 previously, according to the sources). As one character explains,

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35
36 Le sang qu'après avoir mis ce prince au tombeau
37
38 On lui voit chaque jour distiller du cerveau,
39
40 Punit son parricide, et chaque jour vient faire
41
42 Un tribut étonnant à celui de ce frère.
43
44
45 Suivant même qu'il a plus ou moins de courroux,
46
47 Ce sang forme un supplice ou plus rude ou plus doux,
48
49 S'ouvre une plus féconde ou plus stérile veine;
50
51 Et chaque emportement porte avec lui sa peine. (II. 1. 379-86)
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3 The extent of the bleeding varies in force depending on Attila's anger. From the start, then,
4
5 Attila's haemorrhage is inscribed into a narrative of crime and punishment. Corneille thus
6
7 links together two historical 'givens' (Attila's fratricide and his haemorrhage) through a
8
9 symbolic narrative of guilt and retribution. Attila's very body is punishing his previous
10
11 'parricide' – the shedding of his own family blood – through the ritual shedding of his own
12
13 blood.
14

15
16 Fitting as it is, though, this narrative is not as simple as it first appears. For a start,
17
18 Attila's bleeding is causally overdetermined. If his daily haemorrhages are a punishment for
19
20 his brother's death ('un tribut étonnant'), each individual bout also punishes an individual fit
21
22 of rage. This punishment, this (to quote the novelist Céline's evocative phrase entirely out of
23
24 context) 'death on the instalment plan', is both too much and too little. On the one hand,
25
26 Attila sheds more of his own blood alive than he could ever do in death. And yet Attila's
27
28 protracted punishment also leaves him alive to commit further atrocities. If some supernatural
29
30 force lies behind Attila's punishment, then, it does not punish him with immediate death, but
31
32 rather defers this final punishment indefinitely, allowing him to continue to inflict bloodshed
33
34 onto the world.
35
36

37
38 Since Attila's haemorrhage is overdetermined, it is fitting that his final moments
39
40 testify to both his current rage and his founding act of fratricide. Corneille does his best to
41
42 intertwine, both thematically and causally, Attila's fratricide with his final deadly
43
44 haemorrhage. The original motivation for his murder of his brother already involves the two
45
46 foreign kings, Ardaric and Valamir, who are present at his death. As we are told, Attila took
47
48 violent offence to his brother's respect for the two kings:
49
50

51
52
53
54 Son frère aîné Vlêda plus rempli d'équité

55
56 Les traitait malgré lui d'entière égalité;
57
58
59
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1
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3 Il n'a pu le souffrir, et sa jalouse envie
4
5 Pour n'avoir plus d'égaux s'est immolé sa vie. (II. 1. 375-78)
6
7
8

9
10 If Vleda's respect for the kings initially led Attila to kill him, it is the kings' continued
11 respect for each other, and their stalwart refusal to fight to the death as Attila insists, that
12 bring him to paroxysms of frustrated rage. It is here that Corneille addresses the question of
13 divine punishment most explicitly. Attila defiantly explains his self-appointed title of 'God's
14 scourge'. As he explains, God does not always punish instantly; he sometimes withholds his
15 wrath and sometimes inflicts his punishment on the whole earth. Attila regards himself as
16 being the vessel of God's current wrath. Between the biblical Flood – the 'déluge d'eaux' –
17 and the prophesied 'déluge de feux' that will eventually consume the earth, comes the
18 'déluge de sang' that Attila embodies (V. 3. 1573-82).
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29
30 There is deep irony here, of course. Attila's claims about how God sometimes
31 withholds punishment remind us both that Attila himself is living on borrowed time, and that
32 the deluge of blood may well be his own. Attila may be God's agent, but – as the Roman
33 noblewoman Honorie points out (V. 3. 1583-92) – he remains subject to God's power. As she
34 warns him, the very tyrants that enact God's judgement on their subjects are themselves also
35 (and especially) condemned to his divine wrath. Attila refuses to be put off by such threats,
36 and insists that he will enact God's bloody wishes until the end. It is at this point that Attila
37 starts to bleed. Honorie interprets this bleeding as a message from the afterlife that the tyrant
38 is finally being summoned to join his victims:
39
40
41
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50
51
52 Ton sang, qui chaque jour, à longs flots distillés,
53 S'échappe vers ton frère et six rois immolés,
54
55 Te dirait-il trop bas que leurs ombres t'appellent?
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Faut-il que ces avis par moi se renouvellent?
4

5 Vois, vois couler ce sang qui te vient avertir,
6

7 Tyran, que pour les joindre il faut bientôt partir. (V. 4. 1599-1604)
8
9

10
11 Attila defiantly replies that he would welcome dying gradually by haemorrhage, since –
12 unlike the divine ‘foudre’ (V. 3. 1605) predicted by Honorie – this will still grant him enough
13 time to punish all his enemies. He then leaves, taking his bride Ildione to the altar.
14
15

16 Although Honorie seems not to trust her own claims about divine punishment, God
17 seems to prove her right; Valamir soon arrives and triumphantly announces the tyrant’s death.
18 Perhaps fittingly, Valamir offers two concurrent explanations for Attila’s overdetermined
19 death; he attributes it to both Attila’s cruelty and to the workings of heaven:
20
21
22
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28
29

30 Écoutez

31
32 Comme enfin l’ont puni ses propres cruautés,
33

34 Et comme heureusement le ciel vient de souscrire
35

36 À ce que nos malheurs vous ont fait lui prédire. (V. 6. 1727-30)
37
38
39

40 As Valamir recounts, although Attila himself is ‘stunned’ by the sudden onset of his blood –
41 ‘il s’étonne’ (V. 6. 1734) – he shows little concern, explaining that if his blood does not stop
42 flowing, ‘on me paiera ce qu’il m’en va coûter’ (V. 6. 1736). It is at this point that he
43 suddenly freezes, ‘sans parole, sans force’ (V. 6. 1737). The timing of Attila’s paralysis here,
44 like the discreet textual echo of the ‘tribut étonnant’ that his blood pays daily to his brother, is
45 surely significant; Attila seems to be punished for refusing to recognize his blood loss as
46 punishment for his previous crimes, and for regarding it as something that itself needs to be
47 avenged or repaid.
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3 Attila's death goes through various stages that gesture towards different causal,
4
5 symbolic and poetic explanations.¹⁷ He is suddenly reawoken from his paralysis by a vision
6
7 of his murdered brother and the ghosts of six other kingly victims. Yet rather than being
8
9 haunted by remorse, Attila is unrepentant, and – like Racine's Oreste – hopes to slaughter his
10
11 hallucinated victims a second time in a fit of rage. Yet this final burst of rage opens up all the
12
13 'channels' of his blood; his soul, blood and life all spew out from his body, and he collapses
14
15 in a heap. Valamir's account ends as it begins, stressing how Attila's own cruelty – his
16
17 'fureur(s)' (V. 6. 1767-68) – has served as his own punishment. Yet heaven is, once again,
18
19 swiftly given its due. The king Ardaric now comes onstage, proclaiming the 'bonheur
20
21 étonnant que le ciel nous renvoie' (V. 7. 1773). For a third time now, Attila's punishment is
22
23 presented as 'stunning' (*étonnant*), which of course it is, in more ways than one. Historically
24
25 attested, it nonetheless defies *vraisemblance*; and yet, despite being (in John D. Lyons's neat
26
27 expression) not a *deus ex machina* but a *deus ex historia*,¹⁸ it nonetheless requires all
28
29 Corneille's poetic, rhetorical and dramatic skills to prevent it from being the clumsy
30
31 denouement that it threatens to be.
32
33
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38

39 *Suréna, général des Parthes* (1674)

40 Corneille draws on these poetic, rhetorical and dramatic skills to far greater pathetic effect
41
42 when dealing with the final death in his whole canon, that of Eurydice in his swansong
43
44 tragedy *Suréna*. It is perhaps striking that, leaving aside the Senecan-inspired bloodbath of
45
46
47

48
49 ¹⁷ For more on the mode and symbolism of Attila's death, see John D. Lyons, *The Tragedy of*
50
51 *Origins: Pierre Corneille and Historical Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,
52
53 1996) pp. 156–58.

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56 ¹⁸ Lyons, p. 176.
57
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1
2
3 *Médée*, Corneille's tragic career is effectively framed by two deaths from grief, Rosine's in
4
5 the first *L'Illusion comique* and Eurydice's in *Suréna*. Indeed, as I shall suggest, in the final
6
7 moments of his dramatic career Corneille revisits and reworks elements of the 'baroque'
8
9 earlier play, in an attempt to make them more palatable to contemporary ('classical') tastes.

10
11 Like that of *Théodore*, the plot of *Suréna* is based around a deadlock that can be
12
13 resolved only in death. The general Suréna loves and is loved by Eurydice; the two lovers
14
15 stoically but fatalistically agree that they will not marry the people proposed to them by the
16
17 king Orode, even at the cost of their lives. Using the same technique as in *L'Illusion comique*,
18
19 Corneille 'prepares' the heroine's death through a network of textual allusions. Both lovers
20
21 equate being separated from each other with death; indeed, this association underpins the
22
23 very first words that Suréna utters to Eurydice onstage:
24
25
26
27
28

29
30 Je sais ce qu'à mon cœur coûtera votre vue ;

31
32 Mais qui cherche à mourir doit chercher ce qui tue.

33
34 Madame, l'heure approche, et demain votre foi

35
36 Vous fait de m'oublier une éternelle loi :

37
38 Je n'ai plus que ce jour, que ce moment de vie.

39
40 Pardonnez à l'amour qui vous la sacrifie,

41
42 Et souffrez qu'un soupir exhale à vos genoux,

43
44 Pour ma dernière joie, une âme toute à vous. (I. 3. 249-56)
45
46
47
48

49
50 As in *L'Illusion comique*, though, it is the ill-fated woman who evokes death most frequently.
51
52 From her very first appearance, indeed, Eurydice reveals a certain melancholic mind-set that
53
54 constantly (in her words) 'poisons' itself by considering different possibilities and
55
56 predictions, however unlikely. As she explains,
57
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60

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5 Quand on a commencé de se voir malheureuse,
6
7 Rien ne s'offre à nos yeux qui ne fasse trembler,
8
9 La plus fausse apparence a droit de nous troubler,
10
11 Et tout ce qu'on prévoit, tout ce qu'on s'imagine,
12
13
14 Forme un nouveau poison pour une âme chagrine. (I. 1. 110-14)
15
16
17

18
19 Death is the only outcome that Eurydice can envisage. Surrendering Suréna to his arranged
20
21 bride would be an act of figurative suicide: 'Savez-vous qu'à Mandane envoyer ce que
22
23 j'aime, /C'est de ma propre main m'assassiner moi-même? (V. 5. 1075-76). Allowing Suréna
24
25 to die, however, would also kill her; she tells him that the very same sigh 'qui tranchera vos
26
27 jours' would 'tranche[r] aussi des miens le déplorable cours' (I. 3. 259-60). The prospect of
28
29 marrying the king's son Pacorus, to whom she is betrothed for political reasons, is perhaps
30
31 worst of all in its invocation of death:
32
33
34
35

36 EURYDICE. Au nom des dieux ne me le nommez pas,
37
38 Son nom seul me prépare à plus que le trépas.
39
40 PALMIS. Un tel excès de haine!
41
42 EURYDICE. Elle n'est que trop due
43
44 Aux mortelles douleurs dont m'accable sa vue. (I. 2. 205-06)
45
46
47
48

49
50 In her own words, she is beset by a 'mortel ennui' that seeks nothing more than to 'mourir
51
52 avec lui [Suréna]' (IV. 2. 1123-24).
53

54 Yet Eurydice, and Corneille through her, complicates the somewhat stock topoi of
55
56 'dying of grief' by proposing an alternative solution – a solution that she is, in a sense,
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 already living out. Rather than dying, she wants to carve out for herself an intermediate state
4
5 that languishes elegiacally between life and death:
6
7

8
9
10 Je veux qu'un noir chagrin à pas lents me consume,
11
12 Qu'il me fasse à longs traits goûter son amertume ;
13
14 Je veux, sans que la mort ose me secourir,
15
16 Toujours aimer, toujours souffrir, toujours mourir. (I. 3. 265-68)
17
18

19
20 This final line here is made all the more striking not only by its famous metrical irregularity
21
22 and because it is echoed by Suréna himself at the end of the act (I. 3. 348), but also because
23
24 of the paradoxical formulation 'toujours mourir'. Eurydice wishes not to die, but rather to 'be
25
26 dying' – to be in a permanent state of elegiac languor that achieves no end or respite in death,
27
28 but which is dedicated solely to her thwarted passion for Suréna. Suréna's death would finish
29
30 her off in an instant, but his survival would allow her to continue her state of loving suffering.
31
32

33
34 The play, then, builds up through repetition a sense that the options facing Eurydice
35
36 are either literal death or, at best, an elegiac half-life that is akin to death and that can be
37
38 maintained only by constantly deferring the moment of Suréna's final surrender to Mandane
39
40 or to an executioner. Yet this stalling cannot last forever. The fifth act demands its victims,
41
42 and the wearily heroic Suréna goes off to meet his fate. Although he is supposedly being
43
44 banished from the court merely for the duration of Eurydice's wedding to Pacorus, everyone
45
46 onstage knows that he is leaving for the last time. His sister Palmis pleads with Eurydice to
47
48 change her mind and save his life. Eurydice finally relents, but too late; her maid now arrives,
49
50 announcing that Suréna has been killed by three anonymous arrows. Palmis now plunges into
51
52 angry despair, blaming in turn the king and his son for Suréna's death, the heavens for not
53
54 avenging it, and finally Eurydice herself for appearing so unmoved. As it transpires, though,
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56
57
58
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60

1
2
3 Eurydice's silence in fact expresses far deeper sorrow. After Palmis's angry tirade, Eurydice
4
5 announces, quite calmly, that she is dying, before turning to her attendant for physical
6
7 support: 'Non, je ne pleure point, madame, mais je meurs. /Ormène, soutiens-moi' (V. 5.
8
9 1732-33). This is the single line that Voltaire, in his brief commentary, deigns to quote from a
10
11 play for which he shows scant critical regard. According to Voltaire, this line has the
12
13 potential to encapsulate 'le sublime de la douleur', but fails because it does not fit with what
14
15 we have seen of Eurydice's character:
16
17

18
19
20 Il faut pour dire qu'on meurt de douleur, et pour en mourir en effet, avoir éprouvé,
21
22 avoir fait voir un désespoir si violent, qu'on ne s'étonne pas qu'un prompt trépas en
23
24 soit la suite. Mais on ne meurt pas ainsi de mort subite après avoir fait des
25
26 raisonnements politiques, et des dissertations sur l'amour.¹⁹
27
28
29
30
31

32 For Voltaire, only a display of violent despair, rather than intellectualized 'dissertations
33
34 d'amour', can sufficiently motivate a character's death from grief. For Corneille, though, it is,
35
36 if anything, Eurydice's dignified restraint during these final scenes that produces the pathos,
37
38 particularly against the backdrop of her previous elegiac laments. Corneille takes care to
39
40 contrast the heroically *généreuse* Eurydice against Suréna's more impulsive sister Palmis,
41
42 who is baffled by and distraught at her apparent passivity, and much of this scene gains its
43
44 pathos from this contrast between the two women. Eurydice remains nearly silent throughout
45
46 the last two scenes, uttering only a brief 'hélas!' at Ormène's confirmation that her lover is
47
48 dead (V. 4. 1718), and her final words contrasts starkly with the eleven-line tirade from
49
50 Palmis that precedes them.
51
52

53
54
55
56 ¹⁹ Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille* (*Œuvres complètes*, LV. 977).
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 A brief comparison with Isabelle's death in *L'Illusion comique* will help to illustrate
4 the 'sublime sorrow' of Corneille's final scene. Although they seem to have passed unnoticed
5 by commentators, there are some important similarities between the two scenes. Most
6 obviously, both Eurydice and Isabelle are confronted with the death of their lover; both
7 announce that they are dying; and both are tended to by their faithful servant as the curtain
8 falls. Despite these similarities of structure, though, Eurydice's tone is quite different to that
9 of Isabelle's hasty and chaotic final lines in *L'Illusion*:
10
11
12
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14
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20
21 ISABELLE. Vous ne l'avez massacré qu'à demi,
22
23 Il vit encore en moi; soulez son ennemi:
24
25 Achevez assassins de m'arracher la vie.
26
27 Cher époux en mes bras on te l'a donc ravie!
28
29 Et de mon cœur jaloux les secrets mouvements
30
31 N'ont pu rompre ce coup par leurs pressentiments!
32
33 O clarté trop fidèle, hélas, et trop tardive,
34
35 Qui ne fait voir le mal qu'au moment qu'il arrive!
36
37 Fallait-il... Mais j'étouffe, et, dans un tel malheur
38
39 Mes forces et ma voix cèdent à ma douleur,
40
41 Son vif excès me tue ensemble et me console,
42
43 Et puisqu'il nous rejoint...
44
45
46

47 LYSE. Elle perd la parole.
48
49 Madame. Elle se meurt, épargnons les discours,
50
51 Et courons au logis appeler du secours.²⁰
52
53
54

55
56 ²⁰ *L'Illusion comique* [1660 edition], p. 1447.
57
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Isabelle's final speech here is desperate and exclamatory; her words have no practical value and go unheeded by their various addressees. Indeed, her speech lurches between various addressees, from her husband's murderers, to her dead husband himself and then to an apostrophized 'clarté'; she then breaks off, beset by physical sensations that she proceeds to describe, before dying (melo)dramatically in the middle of a sentence in which she looks forward to being reunited with her husband. Eurydice, in contrast, is resigned and pragmatic in tone. Her final two and a half lines also shift between three addressees, but, knowing that her remaining time is precious, she is far more concise and practical. Rather than describing her thought processes or physical sensations, she swiftly passes on relevant information to the two women present. Only in her last line does she shift to a higher register, apostrophizing her dead lover with her final wish: 'Généreux Suréna, reçois toute mon âme' (V. 5. 1734). Here, of course, her words echo the end of her lover's first speech to her, cited above: 'Souffrez qu'un soupir exhale à vos genoux, /Pour ma dernière joie, une âme toute à vous' (I. 3. 255-56). While this neat textual echo builds on and – since Eurydice is now genuinely dying – literalizes the elegiac rhetoric of Suréna's earlier words, it also gestures beyond the literal, towards a more symbolic or spiritual domain in which the two lovers might be reunited. Both women gesture towards some reunion in the afterlife, but while Isabelle seems to take this prospect for granted, reunion with Suréna may be just a wistful, wishful aspiration for the dying Eurydice. Effectively, what Corneille does at the end of *Suréna* is to decouple the rhetoric from the death, offloading onto Palmis the bulk of the exclamatory rhetoric and apostrophes that Isabelle herself carries in the earlier play. This decoupling allows him to exploit the emotional benefits of the verse without this detracting from the dignified presentation of Eurydice.

Conclusion

As I have suggested, the motif of the (un)natural death – the death without a murderer – surfaces sporadically throughout Corneille’s dramatic career, and stands at the intersection of various issues. Yet while certain themes recur, these deaths are remarkably different in many respects. Although it would probably be misleading or reductive to offer any definitive conclusions about this strangely disparate bunch of deaths, a couple of observations should help to contextualize them all, and perhaps explain what makes the ending of *Suréna*, to my mind at least, so powerful.

As a dramatic theoretician, Corneille is – like Aristotle before him – very aware that our attention, as an audience, always risks being distracted away from the suffering of the tragic victim by the triumph of his or her persecutor.²¹ He fears that our overriding emotion might end up being unpleasant indignation at the latter rather than emotionally satisfying pity for the former. In this respect, the ‘(un)natural death’ motif allows Corneille’s spectator all the tragic pleasures of death but without the bitter aftertaste of seeing a villain triumphant. We certainly find something of this in *Suréna*, where Eurydice’s death spares her from the unwelcome advances of Pacorus – or, perhaps more correctly, where her death spares Pacorus from being placed in a situation that might discredit him in our eyes. In fact, *Suréna*’s own death in this final play – his assassination from a distance, by an unknown hand – also helps to concentrate the tragic focus further onto those who die, and away from those responsible. The same basic desire, to avoid presenting a villain triumphant, underlies the other examples as well, albeit in very different ways. As we have seen, for example, Corneille rewrites *L’Illusion comique* in order to avoid depicting the triumph of the prince

²¹ See Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 101–03.

1
2
3 Florilame. Of the two out-and-out villains in our corpus, Marcelle and Attila himself, both
4
5 end up dead; one engages in a bloody rampage and then kills herself, while the other is struck
6
7 down while attempting to drive his enemies to the psychological brink. In both cases, their
8
9 deaths thus spare the virtuous characters the need to commit bloodshed. Even so, it is really
10
11 only in *Suréna* and, briefly, in *L'illusion comique* that Corneille really seeks to exploit the
12
13 potential pathos of the (un)natural death.
14
15

16
17 The strategies Corneille uses to motivate these deaths also reflect some general
18
19 progression in his treatment of the theme. As his career progresses, Corneille increasingly
20
21 attempts to foreshadow or 'prepare' these deaths by appealing to another, more symbolic or
22
23 rhetorical, level of reality on which these deaths make sense or appear somehow appropriate.
24
25 In *L'illusion comique* and *Théodore* these appeals are not particularly strong. In *Théodore*
26
27 Flavie's illness appears emphatically literal, while in *L'illusion comique* Isabelle's apparent
28
29 'death', however well prepared rhetorically, is finally exposed as only ever having been a
30
31 fiction anyway. In *Attila* and *Suréna*, however, the sustained imagery of blood or death that
32
33 Corneille gradually builds up helps to pave the way for the character's eventual, literal, death.
34
35 Attila's causally overdetermined death, perhaps appropriately, is caught between two
36
37 paradigms. Like Flavie before him, Attila is already literally, physically ill; but as with
38
39 Eurydice after him, his death is also woven into the rhetorical fabric of the play long before
40
41 he actually dies. At the same time, his death also acquires some tragic irony lacking from the
42
43 other plays: Attila misreads his own symbolic role, seeing himself as God's scourge not his
44
45 plaything, and is finally struck down for it.
46
47
48

49
50 In contrast, the motivations for Eurydice's death in *Suréna* are shifted onto a purely
51
52 symbolic plane. Unlike Flavie and Attila, Eurydice is not physically ill, although her
53
54 melancholic temperament – announced in the very first scene – somewhat predisposes her to
55
56 death from the start. Indeed, Eurydice's melancholic psychology is entirely in keeping with
57
58
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60

1
2
3 the play's deathly symbolism; unlike in *Attila*, then, there is no ironic mismatch here between
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5 the character's view of events and the symbolic logic of the play itself. So while Attila's
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7 death is sudden, bloody, defiant, and shocking ('étonnant' being, as we have seen, the
8
9 operative word), Eurydice's death flows as naturally as poetic artifice allows from her
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11 temperament and her tragic situation. And yet, to complicate matters, we as spectators of
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13 *Suréna* might mistake all Corneille's careful 'preparation' of her death as just hollow,
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15 conventional romantic rhetoric. If this is so, then the denouement of *Suréna* completely
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17 inverts that of *L'Illusion comique* and – to my mind – marks its aesthetic triumph over its
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19 deliberately metatheatrical precursor. In the earlier play, we are briefly tricked into mistaking
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21 a play for reality, and a staged death from grief as a real death, before a final revelation
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23 definitively separates truth from fiction. In *Suréna*, in contrast, we might well take Eurydice's
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25 early claims about dying of love with a pinch of salt, as just so much clichéd romantic
26
27 rhetoric, before her final moments reveal – in a moment of terrible tragic irony for us – that
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29 her language has been literal all along.
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34 Only four years before *Suréna* was first performed, Molière's Monsieur Jourdain had
35
36 attempted to breathe new life into a stale, long-dead metaphor by subjecting the phrase 'Belle
37
38 Marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour' to all manner of garbled
39
40 reformulations.²² Over the course of his career, Corneille likewise takes the stock, hackneyed
41
42 notion of 'mourir d'amour' – or, in one case, 'de fureur' – and runs it through various
43
44 different permutations, each time with quite different effects. As we might recall, Monsieur
45
46 Jourdain finally discovers that he had actually struck lucky with his original formulation,
47
48 however trite it might seem to us. Although he would scarcely have appreciated the
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53 ²² Molière, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols, ed. by Georges Forestier
54
55 and others (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 2010), II. (II. 4).
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3 comparison, Corneille is perhaps not so different. After all, it is surely striking that in his
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5 final, most elegiac tragedy – the one with which he chooses to end his life as a dramatist, a
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7 good decade before his own natural death – the aging Corneille finds himself returning to his
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9 very first ‘death of the fifth act’.
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