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THE ROLE OF LOVE IN THE TRAGEDIES OF THOMAS CORNEILLE

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THE ROLE OF LOVE IN THE TRAGEDIES OF THOMAS CORNEILLE

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# THE ROLE OF LOVE IN THE TRAGEDIES OF THOMAS CORNEILLE

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to classify the literature of the seventeenth century, literary critics of the past have tended to yield to the danger of oversimplification, and have filed the work of the period under the heading, classicisme. The formulation of the classical doctrine is attributed to some nineteenth-century writers who were searching for a neat classification of literary works. "To the less intelligent romantic polemicists - Stendhal and Chateaubriand were not of this number - classicisme meant little more than authority, reason, order, rules, artificiality, grandiosity, impersonality, abstraction, and the like."<sup>1</sup> Until quite recently critics and teachers have blindly followed the sterile definition established in the nineteenth century.

This monolithic concept tainted the study of the theatre. The dogmatic approach centered on the unities of time, place, and action, which were supposedly a manifestation of the era's devotion to reason. Moreover, the examination of dramatic pieces was limited to the works

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<sup>1</sup>Jules Bordy, French Classicism: A Critical Miscellany (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. vi.

of the sacred triumvirate, Pierre Corneille, Molière, and Racine. If a critic happened to mention the name of one of the multitude of minor dramatists of the period, he would always judge his work according to its resemblance to the masterpieces of the big three.

Fortunately, within the past few years there has been a tendency toward a more realistic approach to the works of the seventeenth century. Serious students of literature have begun to question the judgments of their predecessors and have attacked their oversimplified notions. As a result, the entire view of the literature of the period is being revitalized. Not only does it unveil a live, varied century, but it also reveals the many authors of the period who, although they were not among the number of great writers, did set the stage for the masterpieces. Furthermore, "the capital province of the drama has been re-explored with exceptional vigor in a persistent campaign of reconstruction."<sup>2</sup> This exciting, vital criticism is still in its infancy and requires a considerable amount of scholarship devoted to the minores in order to present a true picture of seventeenth-century literature.

As a result of the past, monolithic approach to the seventeenth-century theatre, there is little critical scholarship centered on the work of Thomas Corneille. However, his name is mentioned in many of the old histories of French literature and theatre, Nisard and La Harpe, for example. The critics usually describe him as a mediocre playwright who is noteworthy only because he was the brother of the great Pierre.

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<sup>2</sup>Nathan Edelman, ed., The Seventeenth Century, Volume III of A Critical Bibliography of French Literature, general editors David C. Cabcen and Jules Brody (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1961), p. vii.

Until recently there was only one study of his work, Gustave Reynier's Thomas Corneille: Sa vie et son théâtre,<sup>3</sup> which was published in 1892. In the first half of the book Reynier offers an account of Thomas's life and emphasizes his relationship with his brother. He then classifies Thomas's plays under the headings: tragédies romanesques, tragédies cornéliennes, tragédies raciniennes, comédies espagnoles, comédies françaises, and opéras - tragédie et comédie lyriques - les pièces à machines. Under the division of tragédies romanesques, he offers his remarks on Timocrate, Bérénice, Darius, Pyrrhus, Persée et Démétrius, Antiochus, Théodat, and Bradamante; the so-called tragédies cornéliennes which he discusses are La Mort de Commode, Stilicon, Maximian, Laodice, Camma, and La Mort d'Annibal; then he defines Ariane and Le Comte d'Essex as tragédies raciniennes. Reynier's work is a typical example of the past criticism of the theatre of this period, for he makes constant judgments of Thomas's works according to their resemblance to the triumvirate. As a whole, his work is a case of poor scholarship. To many of Thomas's plays he makes only incidental reference, and the analyses that he does offer are often filled with errors. He even makes mistakes in his plot summaries.

David A. Collins offers a recent publication of his doctoral dissertation, Thomas Corneille: Protean Dramatist,<sup>4</sup> printed in 1966. Collins' study is a great improvement over his predecessor. He constructs accurate plot summaries. He then examines the texts of Thomas's

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<sup>3</sup>Gustave Reynier, Thomas Corneille: Sa vie et son théâtre (Paris: Hachette, 1892).

<sup>4</sup>David A. Collins, Thomas Corneille: Protean Dramatist (London: Mouton, 1966).



plays, placing special emphasis on his tragedies. The author also presents the observations of past critics as well as some of his own. The work is scholarly and interesting. However, he yields to the temptation of classifying many of Thomas's tragedies Cornelian.

These are the only two texts which are devoted exclusively to the study of Thomas Corneille. However, many authors of histories of French literature have found at least a small place in their work for the remarks on Pierre's younger brother. The most significant of these are Antoine Adam's Histoire de la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle,<sup>5</sup> and the brand new work in English, A Literary History of France,<sup>6</sup> by P. J. Yarrow.

Yarrow offers an additional source for the elucidation of Thomas's theatre in the September, 1955 issue of Orpheus. In his "Timocrate, 1656: A Note on French Classicism"<sup>7</sup> he presents a valuable piece of scholarship. In his clear, well-organized article he discusses the classical and baroque features of the play as well as some of the dramaturgical devices used by the playwright.

Maurice Descotes also contributes an excellent account of Timocrate. He devotes twenty-five pages to it in his Public de théâtre et son histoire.<sup>8</sup> Here emphasis is placed on the relationship between the play

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<sup>5</sup> Antoine Adam, Histoire de la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Vol. IV (Paris: Domat, 1954).

<sup>6</sup> P. J. Yarrow, A Literary History of France, Vol. II: The Seventeenth Century. 1600-1715 (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967).

<sup>7</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Timocrate 1656: A Note on French Classicism," Orpheus, III (September, 1955), 171-82.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Descotes, "Le Timocrate de Thomas Corneille (1656) La stabilisation du public," in Le Public de théâtre et son histoire (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1964), pp. 91-126.

and the demands of the contemporary audience.

Some interesting remarks on the cri du sang in Thomas's dramas are found in Clifton Cherpach's The Call of Blood in French Classical Tragedy.<sup>9</sup> The study reflects the author's profound knowledge of Thomas's works. He points out through the textual analysis of the dramatic pieces that the cri du sang is practically nonexistent in the works.

Lacy Lockert, an English teacher at Vanderbilt University, has recently made a worth-while contribution to the study of the minor French playwrights of the seventeenth century. He has written three books: The Chief Rivals of Corneille and Racine - Moot Plays of Corneille,<sup>10</sup> 1956, Studies in French-Classical Tragedy,<sup>11</sup> 1958, and More Plays by Rivals of Corneille and Racine,<sup>12</sup> 1968. His works are praiseworthy because he gives the student an introduction to the minores through an English translation of some of their works. Most of the plays of the minor dramatists of the period are quite difficult to obtain because they have not been reprinted during this century. Thus, Lockert offers the reading public a valuable aid to the understanding of the literature of the period. In More Plays by Rivals of Corneille and Racine he gives an adequate translation of Thomas Corneille's Timocrate, Maximian, and Ariane. It is obvious, however, that he is a

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<sup>9</sup>Clifton Cherpach, The Call of the Blood in French Classical Tragedy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958).

<sup>10</sup>Lacy Lockert, The Chief Rivals of Corneille and Racine - Moot Plays of Corneille (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1956).

<sup>11</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, Studies in French-Classical Tragedy (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1958).

<sup>12</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, More Plays by Rivals of Corneille and Racine (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968).

translator and not a literary critic, for although he does make a valid remark from time to time, his criticism on the whole is quite weak. In fact, it is evident that the author has little to offer in the way of original remarks, for rather than seizing the opportunity to demonstrate his eloquence, he merely repeats verbatim the criticism he has made in his previous works.

Slatkine Reprints in Geneva is offering some necessary tools for the understanding of the literature of this period. The editor is printing the works of many of the minor authors. Soon to be available are Thomas's complete dramatic works, while Gilbert Sautebin's Thomas Corneille Grammairien<sup>13</sup> has just been released.

The greatest study of the theatre is Henry Carrington Lancaster's French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century.<sup>14</sup> In his nine tomes he discusses all the major and minor playwrights, their works, their sources, the place and date of their first performance, and in brief, every aspect of the seventeenth-century theatre. The work is a monumental piece of scholarship. The subject-author index appended to each of the five parts offers the reader a quick and easy reference to the material he seeks. In addition to its self-sufficient worth, the text offers the serious student a starting point for in depth analysis of the theatre.

For an examination of Thomas Corneille's theatre there is no

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<sup>13</sup>Gilbert Sautebin, Thomas Corneille grammairien (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1968).

<sup>14</sup>Henry Carrington Lancaster, A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century (9 vols.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1929-42).

complication in the choice of a text. In 1692 Thomas revised the spelling of his plays, and this was the only change that he made. There are no variants to confuse the selection of the text. The citations in this work are taken for the most part from the Edouard Thierry edition of Thomas's plays<sup>15</sup> published in 1881. The spelling in this publication has been modernized and lends itself to ease in reading. Darius, Pyrrhus, Théodat, and La Mort d'Achille do not appear in this text, so the quotations have been taken from the 1758 edition published in Paris by the Veuve David.<sup>16</sup> The citations from this text have been modernized in this study only slightly in order to provide a clear text to the reader. Finally, the citations of Ariane and Le Comte d'Essex have been taken from the 1830 printing of the Chefs-d'oeuvre de Thomas Corneille<sup>17</sup> which is appended to the eleven-tome edition of the Oeuvres de P. Corneille. This text was selected because it contains the commentaries of Voltaire.

#### Statement of Purpose

The ultimate aim of this study is to augment the understanding of the seventeenth-century theatre by examining the works of the minor playwright Thomas Corneille. It will be seen that the importance of the amorous male-female relationship in Thomas's works cannot be

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Corneille, Théâtre complet de T. Corneille, ed. by Edouard Thierry (Paris: Sanchez et Cie, 1881).

<sup>16</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Oeuvres de T. Corneille (9 vols.; Paris: Chez la veuve David, 1758).

<sup>17</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Chefs-d'oeuvre de Th. Corneille Vol. XII of Oeuvres de P. Corneille (Paris: Chez l'editeur, Rue de l'Arbre-sec, 1830).

underestimated, for it assumes an essential role in the development of each drama. The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate the dramaturgical function of love in the tragedies of the younger Corneille. Unlike most previous scholarship, no attempt is made to judge his dramatic pieces by their resemblance to those of the triumvirate; rather, investigation of the texts of his plays is used as the basis of analysis.

The Role of Love in the Tragedies of Thomas Corneille is founded on the premise that the function of the theatre is to entertain the spectators. The playwright must necessarily construct his work in such a way that it offers some pleasure to his viewers, or else low box office proceeds will force the theatre to eliminate the script from the bill. A universal device to maintain audience interest is the love between a man and a woman, for "the need to love is the secret of living, suffering, and dying."<sup>18</sup>

The representation of love varies according to the whim of the author as well as to the demands of his viewers. It must be remembered that a small minority of the French nation frequented the theatrical productions in the seventeenth century. This small group was comprised of members of the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie. Preoccupied with their language, these individuals formed assemblages in which they engaged in the analysis of literature. In fact, the Académie Française had its origin in one of these gatherings.

Of great importance to the development of the arts in France at this time was the growing influence of women. In the salons of Fouquet,

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<sup>18</sup>Wallace Fowlie, The Clown's Grail. A Study of Love in its Literary Expression (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1948), p. 7.

Mme de Sablé, Mlle de Scudéry, and others, who continued the tradition that Mme de Rambouillet had begun, men and women took part in the criticism of literature and the prevailing manners. Here the ladies dominated the scene while the men literally sat at their feet and joined the discussion. According to de Pure in his Idée des spectacles, women were the determining factor for the establishment of the rules of art.<sup>19</sup> D'Aubignac affirmed, "Les femmes se mêlent de juger de tout. ... Il n'y a point de ruelle de lit ou elles n'entreprennent de faire des leçons de l'unité de temps."<sup>20</sup>

During the meetings, a favorite topic of conversation was the popular heroic-gallant novel. Most notable of these were Mlle de Scudéry's Cyrus and Clélie and La Calprenède's Cléopâtre. Here love was the sole preoccupation of the protagonists, and the heroes fought for their ladies and trembled in their presence. All questions concerning love were debated, and as in the Carte de Tendre, the members of the salons attempted to classify and describe the stages in the progression of love.<sup>21</sup> The elite society was so steeped in the literary arts that it imitated the manners of the romanesque heroes and heroines. The novels, in turn, reflected the characteristics of their readers. Finally, theatrical productions mirrored the fashionable audience.

Thomas Corneille was well aware of the amorous debates of his spectators, for he was a frequent visitor of précieux salons. As Reynier recounts:

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<sup>19</sup>Descotes, Public de théâtre, pp. 95-96.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>21</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 53.

Thomas avait été fort recherché dans les sociétés élégantes, particulièrement dans celles où régnait encore le goût du romanesque et du précieux et qui continuaient, à leur manière, les traditions de l'Hôtel de Rambouillet. Après avoir été le protégé de la comtesse de Noailles, de la comtesse de Fiesque, de la duchesse de Montpensier, il avait été fort bien accueilli dans le salon de Mme Deshoulières. ... <sup>22</sup>

Throughout most of his career, the playwright clung to the précieux ideal and represented it on the French stage. It was only in three of his later works, Ariane, La Mort d'Achille, and Le Comte d'Essex that he changed his rendition of love, for by this time his audience was turning away from a superficial predetermined code and toward a more realistic analysis of human passions.

This discussion will demonstrate the playwright's dramatic manipulation of amorous relationships to maintain the interest of his contemporary audience. The artificial division of Thomas's works into categories of romanesque, Cornélien and Racinien tragedies has been avoided. Rather, the plays have been grouped according to the function of love. Because love and hidden identity are so closely intertwined, the identity plays will be discussed in one section. Then a chapter will be devoted to the author's various dramatic renditions of précieux love, followed by an examination of the fatal culmination of this love. Finally, the playwright's new approach to a more real, human love will be analyzed. Within each chapter the plays will be dealt with chronologically.

The study omits only one of the works which Thomas labeled tragédies, namely, Bradamante. This play was staged at the Théâtre français in 1695 although it was written some fifteen years before. The drama is

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<sup>22</sup>Reynier, Thomas Corneille, pp. 71-72.

merely a reiteration of the Bradamante theme, and offers nothing original. Therefore, it was deemed unnecessary to include it in this discussion.

### Brief Biography

As past critics have constantly pointed out, it cannot be denied that Thomas Corneille was influenced to some degree by his brother Pierre, for although there was a nineteen-year difference in their ages, the two had a close and lasting relationship. Pierre was still living in the family home in Rouen when Thomas was born in 1625. Similar to Pierre, Thomas earned a degree in law. Moreover, in 1649 the association became even closer, for Thomas married Marguérite de Lamperrière, the younger sister of Pierre's wife. Then in 1662 the two couples moved from Rouen and shared a house in Paris.

However, in his own right, Thomas earned a prominent position among his contemporaries. He was a prolific and successful playwright. In the course of forty years he wrote some forty-two dramatic pieces: one, La Devineresse (1679) brought him over 5600 francs, the greatest financial success for a play in the century; furthermore, Thomas's Timocrate (1656) was the most popular first-run performance of the age, for it played over eighty times during the 1656-57 winter season.

The younger Corneille demonstrated his dramatic abilities early in life. When he was about fifteen, he composed a play in Latin verse at the Jesuit college of Rouen. The director was so pleased by the work that he substituted it for the one scheduled to be performed at the graduation ceremonies. After receiving his law degree in 1646 at the University of Caen, Thomas's attention again turned to the theatre,



and four years later he made his debut with Les Engagements du hasard, an adaptation of Calderón's Casa con dos Puertas mala es de guardar and Empeños de un acaso. The play consists of a hodgepodge of episodes loosely connected by a love interest and animated by a series of quid pro quo. There is the staple use of closets to hide suitors and the disguise of heroines who force their lovers into ironic avowals of love for nonexistent women.

Throughout his career, Thomas used this same type of situation filled with quid pro quo, disguise, and imbroglia, based on a plot of a Spanish comedia.<sup>23</sup> In this category of plays may be listed: Le Feint astrologue (1650), Don Bertrand de Cigarral (1651), L'Amour à la mode (1651), Les Illustres ennemis (1655), Le Geôlier de soi-même (1655), Le Charme de la voix (1656), Le Galant doublé (1660), Le Baron d'Albikrac (1667), La Comtesse d'Orgueil (1670), and Don César d'Avalos (1674).

Thomas presented two additional comedies which were not based on Spanish sources. In 1652, during the revival of interest in pastoral literature, he authored Le Berger extravagant, a burlesque of this genre. Moreover, he offered Le Baron des Fondrières in 1686; however, the work was never published, and the manuscript is lost. He also collaborated with other writers. With Montfleury he wrote Le Comédien poète, which was given in 1673. De Visé and Thomas were coauthors of the lyric tragedy, Circé, 1675, the comedy, L'Usurier, 1685, and the prose comedy, Les Dames vengées, 1695. They also produced the machine plays, L'Inconnu,

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<sup>23</sup>For a study of Thomas Corneille's comédies espagnoles see Ernest Martinenche's La Comédia Espagnole en France de Hardy à Racine.

1675, Le Triomphe des dames, 1676, La Devineresse, 1679, and La Pierre philosopale, 1681. Furthermore, Thomas was a collaborator in the operas Psyché, 1678, Bellérophon, 1679, and Médée, 1693. As Wogue stated: "Quand on aime les imbroglis compliqués, il compose les pièces inextricables; quand on aime le burlesque, il est encore plus burlesque et cynique que Scarron...."<sup>24</sup>

The esteem of his contemporaries is marked by Thomas's revival of Molière's Don Juan. Molière's widow wished to restage Don Juan so she turned to Thomas. He rendered the prose work into verse, altered a few scenes which the censors had found objectionable, and presented it in 1677 under the title, Lé Festin de Pierre. It was this form of Molière's play which was staged for one hundred and seventy years until the restoration of his original prose work.

His contemporaries admired him further for his tragedies and his other works. From 1681 to 1700 Thomas and de Visé held the coeditorship of the Mercure galant. After the death of Pierre, the academy awarded Thomas his brother's seat. He then gained merit as a grammarian. In 1687 he published a critical edition of Vaugelas's Remarques, in which he discussed the changes of language usage which had taken place since the writing of this work. Then in 1694 he presented his Dictionnaire des arts et des sciences. He began to go blind in 1704, but he continued his work. In 1708 he offered his Dictionnaire universel géographique et historique which he had been working on for fourteen years. In the interim he published his translations of Ovid's Metamorphoses.

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<sup>24</sup>Jules Wogue, La Comédie aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles (Paris: Henri Paulin et Cie, 1905), p. 154.

He finally retired at Andelys after he had gone virtually blind, and he died there in 1710.

## CHAPTER II

### A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Essential to the plays Timocrate, Bérénice, Darius, Pyrrhus, and Laodice is the theme of hidden identity. In these tragedies, the incognito hero enters the stage and leads the audience through the précieux cartography of love.

Thomas Corneille was not the first to use mistaken identity as a theme in drama. "The technique can be traced to Greek tragedy, for in its fashion, Sophocles' Oedipus Rex was an identity play."<sup>1</sup> However, the device had become quite popular in the seventeenth-century French theatre, and it appeared in many plays which were presented prior to Thomas's Timocrate; for example, it appeared in Du Ryer's Alcimédon (1632), Scudéry's Prince déguisé (1634), and in Pierre Corneille's Don Sanche (1649). Although Thomas was not unique in his concealment of the hero's identity, he did augment the popularization of its dramatic presentation. The diversity of his treatment of this device will be seen in the analysis of the plays in this chapter.

#### Timocrate

Thomas's first tragedy, Timocrate, was a hit in 1656 and had an

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<sup>1</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 50.

unprecedented run of nearly six months; furthermore, according to De Visé's account in the Mercure galant of 1710, the rival troupes of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Marais both played Timocrate simultaneously for a time and "tout Paris la savait par coeur."<sup>2</sup> As Reynier states, Thomas knew that the time was ripe for a heroic-gallant tragedy and that the spectators would applaud a play which contained all the elements of the novels they had been reading: "fictions invraisemblables, caractères de convention, discussions amoureuses, analyses poussées jusqu'au fin du fin."<sup>3</sup> So, Thomas borrowed the eighth episode, "l'Histoire d'Alcamène et de Ménalippe," from La Calprenède's novel Cléopâtre, and created the tragedy, Timocrate.

Timocrate opens in medias res, and in the first scene Nicandre discusses the valiant Cléomène with his confidant, Arcas. Through their conversation, the audience discovers that Cléomène, the heroic warrior, has been responsible for their Argos victory against the Messenians. The conversation also introduces the audience to part of the love interest in the play. There are two rivals for the Princess's hand; both are kings from neighboring lands who have come to lend their support to Argos in the war against Timocrate's Cretan army. The two kings, upon seeing the princess, were immediately enthralled by her charms. In addition to the kings, there is yet another rival for the affections of the princess; Nicandre tells Arcas that he too loves the princess Eriphile, but since he has no crown to offer, he feels that if he were to tell her of his love, she would think that he was pursuing the crown she has to offer rather than her love.

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<sup>2</sup>Gustave Reynier, Thomas Corneille, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

After Nicandre and his confidant introduce the audience briefly to the heroic deeds of Cléomène, Cléomène himself enters the stage in scene two and reveals his noble attitude to the audience. Nicandre praises Cléomène and tells him to ask for a reward for his service to Argos. To this Cléomène replies altruistically:

Ah, de grace, Seigneur.  
 Arrêtez un discours qui blesse mon honneur.  
 Si l'on croit dans Argos que j'ai l'âme si basse,  
 Qu'un intérêt honteux m'retienne ou m'en chasse,  
 Peut-être y montrerai-je avant un jour ou deux,  
 Qu'une mort éclatante est le prix que j'y veux.  
 (I,2)

In the conversation between Cléomène and Nicandre, Nicandre informs both Cléomène and the audience that the struggle between Crete and Argos has been long and bitter. The king of Argos, four years prior to the action of the play and two years prior to Cléomène's arrival in Argos, died while he was a prisoner in Crete. The queen, believing that the king had been assassinated, lusts for revenge; she waged war with Crete, and Demochares, king of Crete, was killed. However, his son, Timocrate, who had been believed dead, entered the battle, and his mere presence won the battle for Crete.

In the third scene Thomas continues his exposition of the friction between Crete and Argos. The queen enters with the rivals, Cresphonte and Léontidas. She informs the rivals, Nicandre, and Cléomène that Timocrate demands the princess's hand as the price of peace between the two countries. The queen claims that she has called them together to seek out their advice, but in reality she feels sure that they will all second her stand; she wants revenge. She knows that they are all aware of her hate for Timocrate, for the story of

her husband's death and her feelings about it are common knowledge in the realm. In addition, by portraying Timocrate as a despot who ignobly demands the princess as a payment for peace, the queen presents the marriage as a travesty to honor.

Si je veux par la paix éloigner la tempête;  
 Ma fille d'un tyran doit être la conquête;  
 Et par son hymen seul, dont je frémis d'horreur;  
 Je puis de Timocrate apaiser la fureur. ....  
 (I,3)

With this approach the queen automatically wins over Léontidas and Cresphonte, who as kings must act honorably and as rivals for the princess's hand must fight to keep her away from the "tyrant." To Cresphonte's:

Rendez donc hautement menace pour menace;  
 Que sa mort soit le prix d'une insolente audace....  
 (I,3)

and Léontidas's:

Il tient la foudre en main toute prête à lancer.  
 Certes, il faudrait être ennemi de la gloire  
 Pour céder sans combat le prix de la victoire.  
 (I,3)

Nicandre adds:

... offrons lui le combat.  
 Par là dès aujourd'hui prévenant sa menace,  
 Ettonons sa fierté par une belle audace,  
 Et faisons éprouver à cet ambitieux  
 Que jamais les tyrans ne sont amis des Dieux.  
 (I,3)

It is only Cléomène who dissents, and in his dissension he appears dishonorable. He states that for the good of the kingdom the queen should have Eriphile marry Timocrate. Moreover, to add to his sin of dissension, he contradicts the queen and tells her that Timocrate is not the evil demon that she thinks he is. The queen silences him, and

decrees that when she has Timocrate she will kill him, and the man who captures the Cretan king for her will get the princess for his reward.

In the final scene of Act one, Nicandre seeks the aid of Cléomène in gaining the victory over Timocrate so that Nicandre will win the princess. At this request, however, Cléomène, sighing, admits that he too loves the princess in spite of his lowly station. This painful love, which because of the difference in classes could not possibly come to fruition, is against common sense, but it is, nevertheless, indestructible. Absence from the beloved has had no effect on the omnipotence of Cléomène's love; only death can free him from its grip:

... ses regards trop puissants  
Ont contre ma raison fait révoluer mes sens,  
Dans la gêne secrète où cette amour m'expose,  
De mon éloignement ne cherchez plus la cause.  
Par une prompte fuite opposée à ces feux,  
J'ai cru me dérober à l'orgueil de mes vœux;  
Mais en vain, dans l'espoir de guérir par l'absence  
Je m'en puis imposé l'affreuse violence,  
Cet effort dans mon mal n'a pu me secourir,  
La mort seul le peut, et je reviens mourir.  
(I,4)

Because of Cléomène's love for the princess, he tells Nicandre that he would prefer that she marry a man she could not love so that although she might physically belong to another, her heart would remain free. Nicandre, who by all appearances, is in the same plight as Cléomène, sympathizes:

Abandonnez votre âme à ces doux sentiments,  
Qui d'un feu sans espoir amusent les tourments.  
(I,4)

Thus, in the exposition, Thomas gives the audience the information pertinent to the play. He gives the historical background of the conflict between Crete and Argos; he presents the vengeful queen and her



offer of the princess's hand to the one who will deliver her Timocrate to kill; and he introduces the avowed rivals, Cresphonte and Léontidas, and the secret admirers, Nicandre and Cléomène. However, the one important fact that he does not disclose, and will not disclose until Act IV, is the true identity of Cléomène; Cléomène is really Timocrate, who impassioned with his love for the princess of Argos, has come to the Argos court in order to earn the respect of the queen, and ultimately to win the hand of the princess.

In this play Thomas skillfully uses mistaken identity; not only does he hide the identity of Cléomène from the other characters in the play, but he also hides his identity from the audience. He uses it as a device to create suspense and surprise. Thomas states in his dedicatory épître that few people were able to guess the identity of Timocrate.

Timocrate's hidden identity provides a dimension to the role of love in the play. Not only does the reader see that the three rivals, Cresphonte, Léontidas, and Nicandre, ready to shed blood in order to win the princess from the amorous enemy, Timocrate, but the reader also sees Timocrate-Cléomène apparently leaving his homeland, his royal position, and his army in order to win the hand of the princess. Timocrate, in essence, is giving up everything for the princess. He is, therefore, an example of the gallant hero produced by the influence of the précieus salons and depicted in the fashionable novels, for according to romanesque logic, the gallant hero will sacrifice everything for his love, "son armée, son peuple, sa gloire, sa liberté et même sa vie; il cesse de commander, il laisse ses troupes étonnées

reculer et s'enfuir, il se laisse faire prisonnier."<sup>4</sup> Love to the hero is omnipotent; it overpowers common sense, and it cannot be destroyed.

Throughout the second act Thomas leads the spectator through the Carte de Tendre. In the first scene he introduces the audience to the woman that the four men are vying for. In the conversation between Eriphile and her confidante the audience sees a princess who has a serious problem; she is in love with Cléomène, a mere subject, and she believes that the underling has scorned her. Between acts Eriphile has heard that Cléomène wishes her to marry Timocrate. She is enraged by this insult, but she confesses that she still loves Cléomène:

Je l'aimai cet ingrat, oui j'aimai Cléomène;  
 Mais qu'inutilement j'ose flatter ma peine,  
 Si malgré mon courroux, par son crime enflammé,  
 Je sens que j'aime encore, quand je dit que j'aimai.  
 Hélas! Lorsqu'à mes pieds avec de fausses larmes,  
 Ce spécieux dehors d'un immuable amour  
 Cachait la trahison qu'il vient de mettre au jour.  
 (II,1)

The princess admits that she herself is responsible for this forbidden relationship:

Contrainte à l'avouer, je l'avoue avec honte,  
 Je rendis son audace et plus fort et plus prompte;  
 Et le rang que je tiens la pouvant arrêter,  
 J'en descendis exprès pour l'y faire monter.  
 (II,1)

She encouraged him with her eyes, and when he remained respectfully silent in his lowly station, she willfully permitted her sighs to reach his ears. Although she realized her crime in encouraging Cléomène's love, she was unable to prevent herself, for,

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<sup>4</sup>Daniel Mornet, Histoire de la littérature française classique (Paris: Armand Colin, 1940), p. 220.

Quand par l'amour la raison est séduite,  
 Elle abandonne un coeur à sa propre conduite;  
 Et libre en ses desirs, on doit peu s'étonner  
 S'il cherche à ne rien voir qui le puisse gêner.  
 (II,1)

Her love, dominating her reason, allowed her to rationalize. She told herself:

Puisqu'il ose m'aimer, il est digne de moi...  
 et de ses voeux le téméraire hommage  
 D'un coeur qui se connaît est un clair témoignage.  
 (II,1)

Finally, she simply gave in to her love:

Alors ma passion, pour me séduire mieux,  
 M'offrant dans Cléomène un héros glorieux,  
 Sans voir ce qu'il était, sans le vouloir connaître  
 Je voyais seulement ce qu'il méritait d'être.  
 (II,1)

Thus, Eriphile analyzes, step by step, her encouragement of Cléomène and the shrewd guile of her love in its seduction of her reason.

If there is any doubt about the strength of Eriphile's character because of her submission to love for Cléomène, that doubt is eliminated in her encounter with Nicandre. When Nicandre approaches the princess humbly and tells her that he loves her, she tells him to devote his attention to fame and honor rather than to the "appas décevants d'un si faible bonheur" (II,2). She then tells him to defend the realm and to give no one cause to believe that the only reason for his chevalric exploits is to gain the throne. When Nicandre chafes under this unjust accusation that he might be seeking her hand to gain a crown, Eriphile states clearly and openly that he is simply not good enough for her; she is a princess while he is merely her subject. Then she states:

Et sachez, qu'un grand coeur, s'il veut toucher le mien  
Doit mériter beaucoup, et ne demander rien.  
(II,2)

The power of this statement is carried out in the confrontation scene (II,4) between Cléomène and Eriphile. Eriphile, feeling scorned, focuses all of her arrogance on Cléomène. She speaks to him as a subject and rules the first part of the scene. She welcomes Cléomène with:

Parlez. Si c'est ce qui vous mène.  
Je vous dois audience aussi bien que la reine.  
(II,4)

He tries to soften her with tender words, but she, maintaining her distance and continuing to dominate the action, interrupts him time and again, reproaching him for suggesting that she marry Timocrate. Cléomène explains that he suggested this marriage out of love for her and for her increased honor at gaining Timocrate's throne. Then he explains how much he loves her by telling of his sacrifice for love:

Voyez jusqu'où pour vous cet amour m'a porté.  
Il m'a fait renoncer à tous ces avantages  
Qu'un glorieux espoir permet aux grands courages.  
(II,4)

The princess becomes even angrier because he says that he has made this base suggestion out of love for her. Her anger reaches such a pitch that she uses "tu" in her admonishing statement. Cléomène continues to explain:

Renoncer pour l'amour au soin de sa fortune,  
N'est que le faible effet d'une vertue commune....  
(II,4)

He finally begins to win her over by pleading that his low birth does not permit him to woo her, and that he would rather lose her to the best man:

Ma flamme a cru devoir ne céder qu'au plus digne;  
 Et je laisse, Madame, à juger qui des trois  
 A fait parler pour lui de plus nobles exploits.  
 (II,4)

Eriphile still cannot tolerate the thought of marrying Timocrate, and she seconds her mother's wish for his death. Since this is her desire, Cléomène assures her that although he is against Timocrate's death, "la perte est assurée". As the scene closes, Eriphile's love surfaces and she encourages Cléomène to earn the right to marry her by capturing Timocrate. Thus, in the first scene between the lovers, Thomas Corneille depicts the woman controlling the situation, while the lover submits to her, offering his support to a cause which he disdains.

In this scene Thomas demonstrates his skill in portraying the lovers. The princess appears haughty and dominating when the scene opens. However, she still holds the audience's sympathy, for through her previous conversation with her confidante, the spectators realize that the princess loves Cléomène and is deeply hurt at the suggestion that she marry the detestable Timocrate; the observer is aware of her attempt to mask her suffering with arrogance. It must be remembered too that the seventeenth-century audience sympathized with Eriphile because they did not know that Cléomène was really Timocrate. As Thomas develops the scene, the hero captivates the viewers because although he is supposedly not a king by birth, he does act like a king, and his prowess in battle has already earned the spectators' respect.

Between Acts II and III the men have gone to battle. Then Act III opens with the monolog of ~~Eriphile~~ Eriphile in which the princess describes her fear for the safety of Cléomène. The following four scenes are

devoted to récits and conjectures on the state of the war between Crete and Argos. As Lockert states, "Act III is a triumph of suspense," as the tidings of the war are brought in.<sup>5</sup> First, the Cretans capture Timocrate's chief lieutenant. Then Timocrate, who has been absent from the activities, suddenly appears and overpowers the allied kings, thereby eliminating two of his rivals. Next, Timocrate captures Nicandre; then he releases him. Finally, in the sixth scene, Cléomène appears on the stage, tells the queen that he has captured Timocrate, and claims the princess's hand. The queen is shocked that he forgets his station and dares to ask for Eriphile's hand. Cléomène replies:

Cette ambition même est un illustre signe,  
Que ce que je suis ne m'en rend pas indigne,  
Et qu'il n'est pas de prince à qui l'éclat du sang  
Ait dans toute la Grèce acquis un plus haut rang.

The logic is that only a prince could act in the noble manner that he did, and, therefore, he is a prince and worthy to wed Eriphile. The queen readily accepts this as Cléomène's credentials and prepares to have the marriage the following day.

In the final scene of Act III Thomas introduces a complication to the action, which he develops in Act IV. Nicandre, reflecting his chivalric virtue, feels duty-bound to save Timocrate since Timocrate had freed him earlier. Between acts Nicandre sends his confidant, Aucas, to offer the man whom they believe to be Timocrate, a way to escape; however, the man refuses. As the act develops, the captured "Timocrate" is discovered to be merely one of Timocrate's warriors. This information leads to a scene between Eriphile and Cléomène (IV,4), which is similar

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<sup>5</sup>Lockert, More Plays, p. 272.

to their previous encounter. Again Eriphile assumes the dominant position while Cléomène submits to her wishes. This time Eriphile accuses Cléomène of sinning against the code of honor by offering a false Timocrate to obtain her hand. Cléomène then uses his previous tactic for soothing her; he demonstrates how deeply he loves her by pointing out how much he has had to pay for love. He also continues to esteem Timocrate. Eriphile, as in their previous encounter, remains unswayed by Cléomène's plea for Timocrate. According to the princess, Timocrate's birthright to the throne of Crete is such a heinous crime that his valorous deeds cannot eradicate his culpability, and she hopes only for his death. Again in submission to his beloved's wishes, Cléomène says that he will have the Cretan king assassinated.

In the final scene of Act IV after the confrontation with the captured "Timocrate," who is merely a lieutenant, Cléomène reveals his true identity to the queen. The queen finds herself in a quandary; she does not know whether she should marry him off to her daughter or have him killed. Throughout the play there has been the recurrent juxtaposition of love and hate. This leitmotif is succinctly elucidated in the queen's statement:

Vous avez su forcer ma haine à se trahir,  
 Vous m'avez fait aimer ce que j'ai cru haïr.  
 (IV,9)

The paradox persists as the act closes, for Timocrate, as Cléomène, still insists that the queen keep her word and give him the princess as a reward for rendering her the Cretan king. The hero tells her:

Votre haine est forcée à payer mon amour;  
 Et que, quoi qu'un époux à ma perte l'anime,  
 Vous m'aurez fait son fils avant que sa victime.  
 (IV,8)

Between Acts IV and V, the Cretan warriors have established a beach-head and the people of Argos, having heard that Cléomène is Timocrate, lust for his blood. With her lover in peril, Eriphile asks Nicandre to save Timocrate, but out of obedience to the queen, Nicandre refuses. Eriphile then accuses him of aspiring to the throne by getting rid of the last rival. Nicandre in true chivalric fashion says:

Le dessein que mon coeur fit toujours de vous plaire,  
M'oblige à respecter jusqu'à votre colère.  
(V,2)

Robbed of her last hope for saving Timocrate, Eriphile bemoans her plight to her confidante (V,3). This leads directly into the arrival of Timocrate and a rief scene between the lovers. Now that it is obvious that the man she loves is worthy of her by virtue of both his birth and his valorous deeds, the princess speaks to Timocrate as a lover; she no longer rules the conversation as a princess over a subject. Instead, she explains the paradox of her love:

Pour vous toujours du sort la funeste rigueur  
A contre mon devoir fait révolter mon coeur.  
Ce devoir autrefois l'empêchant de se rendre,  
Pour aimer Cléomène il ne le put entendre;  
Et maintenant encore, quoi qu'il ose tenter,  
Pour haïr Timocrate il ne peut l'écouter.  
(V,4)

Timocrate, a true gallant hero, can die happy knowing that Eriphile loves him:

Et, sans murmure aucun, je m'en verrai trahi,  
Si je meurs assuré de n'être point haï.  
(V,4)

This scene of galanterie is interrupted by the queen who has arrived at a solution to her problem; Timocrate will marry Eriphile,



and then immediately afterwards, he will be put to death. Although there is a complete lack of verisimilitude in this decision, it is the only way that the queen can keep her word. However, Nicandre, strangely enough, relieves the queen of the responsibility for Timocrate's fate, for in a coup de théâtre Nicandre permits the Cretans to enter the city. The queen then, vanquished, abdicates the throne to Timocrate, and the play closes on a happy note.

Thus, Timocrate is essentially a romantic composition in which the plot depends upon the hero's hidden identity, his prowess, and his love, and therein the play resembles its main source, the heroic-gallant novel of La Calprenède.<sup>6</sup> The hero exalts love over other virtues and submits completely to the woman he loves, even to the point of renouncing his royal identity and assuming the role of a subject in order to win her love; then he wins her respect by obeying the chivalric code and demonstrating his prowess in battle. Moreover, Thomas' approach to love in Timocrate is modeled on its romanesque source, for love is intellectual and not purely sexual. Therefore, the spectators of the seventeenth century, who were so taken with the novels of the time, relished Thomas' romanesque Timocrate.

However, the subject alone is not completely responsible for the tremendous success of Timocrate. The structure is equally important, and the dramaturgy of Timocrate is excellent. The entire action of the play is dependent upon love; Thomas uses love not only as the subject of the play, but also as a device that begins the action and complicates it. In addition, each conversation and each récit directs the play

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<sup>6</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, pp. 185-86.

toward the denouement. There is no useless verbiage; the speakers make their point adequately and then exit. Finally, Thomas maintains suspense throughout the play with one surprise following another. Almost every scene brings about some reversal in the situation, and leaves the outcome of the play in doubt until the last moment. In fact, the handling of suspense is so skillful in Timocrate that Yarrow compares the play to a detective story.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, both the subject and the structure of Timocrate were responsible for its success.

### Bérénice

The year after the success of Timocrate, the Marais troupe presented Thomas's Bérénice. Thomas again borrowed from a heroic-gallant novel; this time he went to the sixth book of Mlle de Scudéry's Grand Cyrus for the plot of his play. Similar to Timocrate, Bérénice is centered on romanesque love and mistaken identity. However, contrary to Timocrate, Bérénice received only mediocre success.

In the first act Thomas offers the audience an adequate foundation for the love story. Léarque, king of Phrygia, wants to marry his sister Philoclée off to Philoxène, the prince who is next in line for the throne of Lydia, and he wants to marry Bérénice, a member of the nobility, to Anaxaris. However, Bérénice and Philoxène are in love. This information is revealed in the first scene as the king speaks to Araxe, who is supposed to be Bérénice's father; the material offered in the first scene is supported and emphasized in the subsequent scenes of Act I, in which Bérénice, Philoclée, and Philoxène appear.

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<sup>7</sup>Yarrow, "Timocrate 1656," 178.

The rest of the play is concerned with the complication and eventual solution to the plight of the lovers, Philoxène and Bérénice. Unlike Timocrate, who is aware of his identity throughout the play, the identities of Philoxène and Bérénice are hidden from the two characters themselves until the moment that they are revealed to the audience. First, Thomas discloses that Philoxène is not really the prince of Lydia, but rather he is the son of Cléophis, who was formerly his preceptor; the child Philoxène died and Cléophis' son was substituted for him (II,4-5). As a result of this coup de théâtre, the marriage of the young lovers would be propitious, for Philoxène is no longer worthy to marry Léarque's sister. Then, in another coup de théâtre, Thomas discloses Bérénice's identity; Bérénice is really Léarque's daughter (III,2). This information is provided in a letter which the queen wrote before her death and which Araxe has been holding according to the queen's wishes. As a result of Bérénice's identity change, the lovers see little hope for the fruition of their love, for again the king opposes their marriage because of reasons of state. Finally, in the last scene of Act V, Thomas discloses the true identity of Philoxène; Philoxène is really Atis, the rightful ruler of Phrygia. Thus, the two lovers can marry.

In the midst of the hodgepodge of mistaken identity, with first Philoxène being too royal to marry Bérénice, then Bérénice being too royal to marry Philoxène, there is the figure of Anaxaris who adds to the general confusion by hovering over Philoclée and then Bérénice, offering his love to whichever woman is in line for the throne at that moment.

Unlike Timocrate's one main line of action, which Thomas intensifies with integral supporting actions, Bérénice consists of many broken lines of action. The first two disclosures of identity only give the play a circular movement, and bring the love interest to its original problem; that is, one of the lovers is too nobly born for the other. The linear direction of the action is further destroyed by the detailed récits following each revealing identity scene. In addition, the character Anaxaris only helps to create the circular movement in his vacillation between Philoclée and Bérénice.

Moreover, there is no dominant central figure for the audience to concentrate on. As Collins observes,<sup>8</sup> Timocrate is a cohesive central figure who appears in all acts and always in an aura of mighty accomplishments. Timocrate is the director of his own fate; he hides his identity, proves his prowess in war, and systematically disposes of his rivals in order to win the princess. On the other hand, Philoxène is not a striking, dominant character. He does not appear in all of the acts, nor is his presence constantly brought to the spectators' attention by the actions or words of the other characters. In addition, although his warring prowess is spoken of, there is very little demonstration of it. He proves his valor only once during the course of the play, and this is mentioned in a brief récit:

Seigneur, les dieux sur l'heure ont ordonné sa peine.  
Fort de l'appui du peuple, il (Anaxaris) bravait Philoxène,  
Et le voyant suivi de fort peu de soldats,  
Il croyait sa défaite indigne de son bras:  
Mais Philoxène ému des pleurs de la princesse,  
Sait inspirer aux siens tant de coeur et d'adresse,

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<sup>8</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, pp. 69-70.

Que contre Anaxaris tous se portant d'abord,  
 Sans connaître la main ou le voit tomber mort.  
 (V,8)

Furthermore, in contrast to Timocrate's strong manipulation of his own fate, Philoxène in no way attempts to control his fate; instead, he submits completely to it. When he learns that he is not Philoxène, future ruler of Lydia, but only a subject, he says merely:

Seigneur, le ciel juste, et je dois sans murmure  
 Abandonner un rang que m'acquiert l'imposture....  
 (II,6)

And unlike Timocrate, who knows that only a prince acts in a princely fashion, Philoxène states that he is proud that although he is not of royal blood, he has acted like a prince:

Pour n'être plus son fils, suis-je moins Philoxène,  
 Et le dehors, sujet aux derniers accidents,  
 Peut-il mêler quelque ombre à l'éclat du dedans?  
 Si toujours la grandeur et d'âme et de courage  
 Fut d'un illustre sang le précieux partage,  
 C'est beaucoup d'avoir su la posséder au point  
 D'avoir été cru prince, et de ne l'être point.  
 (II,6)

Philoxène does not pose the slightest question on the veracity of announcement that he is not of royal blood.

The role of Bérénice is also quite weak; out of filial obedience, she resigns completely to her father's wishes. At the beginning of the play when Philoxène is believed to be of royal blood, Bérénice reminds him of his obligation to his position. In the first scene between the lovers Bérénice's first speech indicates the tone that she continues throughout the scene:

Mais puisqu'il est contraire à ce que je vous dois,  
 D'une dure contrainte il faut suivre les lois,  
 Et ne permettre plus à mon âme enflammée  
 Que l'heureux souvenir que vous m'avez aimé.  
 (I,5)

The entire scene centers on the conflict between Philoxène's exaltation of love over other duties and Bérénice's obedience to the rule of the king.

The following scenes between the lovers are scenes of galanterie. After Philoxène is told that he is not in line for the throne, he humbly approaches Bérénice with the news. Her virtue is slighted because he might believe that her pure love is tainted by ambition for the throne:

Mais je le connais trop pour m'en rendre complice  
Et souffrir qu'on impute à mon coeur enflammé,  
Que sans l'espoir du trône il n'aurait pas aimé.  
(III,1)

Then when Philoxène discovers that Bérénice is a princess and above his station, he tells her that he feels it is criminal for her to love him when duty demands otherwise. She, however, as a paragon of précieux virtue, insists that their love continue to exist although there is no hope of fruition:

Ose m'aimer encore pour vivre malheureux.  
Cette double disgrâce à qui ta raison cède,  
Ne trouve dans la mort qu'un indigne remède  
N'en cherche point la honte, et loin de recourir,  
Tâche à me disputer la gloire de souffrir.  
(IV,3)

In contrast to the pure love between Philoxène and Bérénice, there is the false love expressed by Anaxaris. He states at the outset that he is ambitious for the throne and that he will pursue the woman who can give it to him:

Ne présume donc point que mon âme aveuglée,  
Sans bien s'examiner, préfère Philoclée.  
L'amour m'appelle ailleurs, mon coeur parle pour lui,  
Mais je la vois au trône, et j'en cherche l'appui.  
(II,2)

He then flits to Philoclée and then to Bérénice when she is discovered to be Léarque's daughter. However, when Anaxaris goes through the motions of gallant love-making with Bérénice, she puts an immediate halt to his amorous speeches. Then she gives him a lesson on the précieux art of loving:

J'aime: ma lâcheté serait sans doute extrême,  
 Si je cessais jamais d'aimer autant que j'aime;  
 Mais quand de mon devoir l'inexorable loi  
 Dérobe à Philoxène et mon coeur et ma foi,  
 Quoiqu'en dépit du sort tout mon coeur lui demeure,  
 Sous l'effort du silence il est beau que je meure,  
 Plutôt que mon amour, dans ce coeur renfermé,  
 Lui laisse découvrir qu'il soit encore aimé....  
 Si j'ai part dans tes vœux, laisse-moi l'ignorer: ...  
 (V,2)

Because Bérénice has thwarted Anaxaris' aspirations for a marriage that would make him a king, he gathers his troops and begins a revolt, attempting to seize the throne by force. His ambition is destroyed only when he dies trying to usurp the sovereignty.

Thus, although Thomas used a popular heroic-gallant novel as his source and offered his audience a play whose subject was fashionable précieux love, his play lacked a central linear action leading directly to the dénouement. The revelations of hidden identities followed by long récits, the vacillation of Anaxaris, and the lack of a dominant central character all contributed to the failure of Bérénice.

#### Darius

Two years after Bérénice, Thomas again used hidden identity and précieux love in his play, Darius (1659). Although the source of the play is uncertain, it is obvious that Thomas was influenced by the

heroic-gallant novels of the day and also by the plays he had written previously. The historical elements of the play have been traced back to Justin, Diodorus, and Plutarch. However, there is an obvious similarity between the plot and the dramaturgical devices in Bérénice and Darius.<sup>9</sup> Reynier felt that the similarity in plots of the two plays was so strong, in fact, that he discussed only Bérénice in detail, and gave Darius summary treatment.

Darius is the rightful heir to the throne of Persia, and he is living incognito at the court under the name of Codoman. Here he has fallen in love with Statira, the daughter of the ruling usurper. The king wishes to marry his sister Amestis to Codoman, and Statira, to Mégabise, the villain of the play, who conspires to usurp the throne. The subject of the play is the complication and resolution of the plight of the lovers Statira and "Codoman". Hence, there is a resemblance between Bérénice and Darius in the presence of the incognito heir to the throne, the meddling of the king in the marriages of his subjects, the presence of a villain who attempts to seize the throne, and the love interest that dominates the play.

Although Thomas uses the same general plot for the two plays, in Darius, he demonstrates his dramaturgical skill in the structure of the play. Unlike Bérénice, Darius has one linear action which leads directly toward the denouement. This action, similar to his previous identity plays, is focused on the plight of the lovers and their expression of précieux love.

The princess believes that she is of higher nobility than the man

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<sup>9</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 189.



she loves, and as a result, she is obsessed with the conflict between her love and the dictates of her station, as were the heroines of the previous identity plays:

Je sais que de mon rang la dignité suprême  
 Me devrait assurer l'empire de moi-même,  
 Et domptant d'un beau feu les charmes trop puissants  
 Dégager ma raison du trouble de mes sens.  
 (I,5)

There are the conventional scenes of générosité between the lovers in which they discuss their pure love in précieux fashion. Darius, using the same tactic as Timocrate, requests that his beloved forget the man she is supposed to be in love with (Codoman-Darius), and marry Darius:

Oubliez Codoman pour aimer Darius.  
 Son sort de votre amour attend toute sa gloire.  
 (V,1)

Thomas strengthens the love interest of the play by focusing the spectators' attention on one central figure, that is, Darius. Darius, like Timocrate, knows who he is, but this time Thomas reveals the hero's identity to the audience early in the play. In Act II, scene 2, Darius discloses his identity to Amestis as well as to the audience. By permitting the audience to enter the secret early in the play, Thomas creates his opportunity to use dramatic irony.

The dramatic irony is most poignant in the scenes between Darius and Mégabise. Thomas reveals Mégabise's character in the first act; consequently, the spectators know that Mégabise conspires to claim the throne by fraudulently assuming the identity of Darius. Thus, when the real Darius approaches Mégabise to disclose his identity and gain his support, the audience is aware of the plans of both characters while they themselves are ignorant of each other's plans. Just as Darius is about to reveal his identity to Mégabise, Mégabise informs

him that he is Darius, and he even reiterates the same story supporting his identity that Darius has previously recounted to Amestis. Then Mégabise asks "Codoman" for his support. This situation leads to Thomas's use of double entendre throughout the scenes between Darius and Mégabise.

When Mégabise seeks "Codoman's" help, Darius answers:

Et lorsqu'à Darius on doit une couronne  
 J'ose sur moi des dieux appeler le courroux,  
 Si je n'ai pas pour lui la même ardeur que vous,  
 Si de son premier sort l'abaissement extrême  
 Ne m'intéresse pas à l'égal de lui-même;  
 Et si dans mes souhaits rien m'est plus précieux  
 Que de revoir ce prince au range de ses aïeux.  
 (II,5)

Later, "Codoman" continues his support of "Darius":

C'est trop; et mon amour avec vous s'intéresse  
 Quand Darius au trône appelle la princesse.  
 Pour cet illustre hymen qui lui donne ce droit  
 Peut-être mon aveu peut plus qu'on ne croit;  
 Mais quoiqu'il faille alors que Codoman expire,  
 En vous le promettant à peine il en soupire  
 Sa flamme à Darius fait gloire de céder.  
 (III,5)

Suddenly, however, "Codoman" makes an about-face and tells Mégabise to give him proof that he is indeed Darius; then "Codoman" insists that he will prevent Mégabise from marrying Statira. Mégabise is bewildered by Codoman's sudden change:

Quoi? Quand je vous le dis, vous ne m'en croyez pas?...  
 Vos sentiments pour moi sont assez inégaux.  
 (III,5)

Codoman explains:

C'est que ce Darius n'aspirant au'à régner  
 Je ne voyais alors qu'un trône à dédaigner;  
 Mais ici qu'il s'agit de m'ôter la princesse,  
 Le seul objet pour qui tout mon cœur s'intéresse,  
 Puisque de votre sang j'ose me défier,  
 Il n'y faut point prétendre, ou le justifier.  
 (III,5)

Hence, Darius can play along with Mégabise when it is just a question of seizing the throne, but when his love is in jeopardy, this gallant hero must draw the line.

Thomas adeptly employs the character, Mégabise, to direct the action toward the denouement. Unlike Anaxaris and his confusing vacillations which break the thread of the action in Bérénice, Mégabise plots his conspiracy in the first act and then proceeds to carry out his plan step by step; he secretly assumes the role of Darius, gathers his forces, and tries to usurp the throne. Once he mounts the throne, Mégabise expects to take Statira as the spoils of war. Thus, the character supports the main love interest by posing a threat not only to Darius' position, but also to his future happiness with the woman he loves.

In conclusion, although the plot of Darius resembles that of Bérénice, there is one linear action in Darius, which is focused on the plight of the lovers. This action is supported by the presence of the strong central figure of Darius and the directed conspiracy of the rival, Mégabise.

### Pyrrhus

In about 1663<sup>10</sup> Thomas presented his Pyrrhus. The historical source is Plutarch, but again the play resembles his earlier identity plays in the plot and the dominant love interest. Pyrrhus, the heir of Aeacides, the late king of Epirus, is living in the court of Néoptolemus, the present king of Epirus. Pyrrhus is unaware of his

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<sup>10</sup>See Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 445. The date of the first performance of Pyrrhus is conjectural.

identity, and is living under the name of Hippias, a courtier. The real Hippias, who is also unaware of his identity, is living under the name of Pyrrhus; the queen, who is now dead, switched the two children because she feared for the safety of her son. When the action begins, the king expresses his desire for the marriage of his son "Pyrrhus" to Antigone, and his daughter, Déidamie, to "Hippias". As the plot develops, the audience sees that "Pyrrhus" and Déidamie are apparently in love, while Antigone and "Hippias" love each other. The linear plot line leads to the complication and ultimately to the resolution of the two parallel love affairs.

The exposition of the play is well-knit and fast-moving. After the king announces his desire for the two marriages, the audience sees that the couples to be married are mismatched. Moreover, in order to prevent the play from falling into complete confusion, Thomas reveals the identities of Pyrrhus and Hippias in the exposition. In the fourth scene of the first act, Déidamie discloses the real identity of the two men to the audience through a conversation with her confidante. In this conversation, Déidamie also discloses the important fact that Androclide, the father of Hippias, has a letter written by the queen that proves the identities of the two men. In the sixth scene, Déidamie approaches Androclide and tells him that it is time to show the king the queen's letter and resolve the situation. Here Thomas introduces the main source for the complication to the plot; Androclide wants his son to gain the throne, and therefore, he will not present the proof of the true identities of Hippias and Pyrrhus.

Thus, in addition to the resemblance of Pyrrhus to Thomas's

previous identity plays, there is also a resemblance to Thomas's conspiracy dramas. Androclide's conspiracy to place his son on the throne is an integral part of the action. Instead of the plot being complicated by rivals, even ambitious rivals, as in Thomas's prior plays involving hidden identity, the one complication to the plot of Pyrrhus is Androclide's conspiracy to put his son on the throne.

Androclide's conspiracy is well integrated into the primary love interest of the tragedy. Thomas introduces the plot in the exposition, and then he carries it through in the development of the action. As a result of Androclide's refusal to uncover the identities of Pyrrhus and Hippas, Déidamie refuses to marry "Hippas". This in turn leads to the king's ultimatum to Déidamie to marry "Hippas" "ou voir périr un frère" (II,2). Thus, unlike the women in Thomas's previous identity plays who demonstrate their servile obedience, Déidamie refuses to submit to the king's wishes and, consequently, provokes his wrath. She remains obstinate, so the king begins to carry out his threat by placing "Pyrrhus" under arrest.

After Thomas brings the suspicion of Déidamie's and "Pyrrhus'" incestuous love into the open, Androclide condemns his "son," and thereby prepares the way for the real Hippas to rise to the throne. Finally, Androclide prepares a rebellion, and the people storm the palace demanding that Pyrrhus be crowned. Although the rebellion fails and Androclide is dying from the wounds he has incurred in the battle, he persists in denying the real identity of Hippas and Pyrrhus. Finally, in the second to the last scene, he tells the truth and resolves the plight of the lovers. Thus, the complication and the resolution of the entire problem rests on the figure of the conspirator,

Androclide.

Unlike the conspiracy plays, however, the love interest predominates over the conspiracy. The subject of the play is the resolution of the problem which prevents the two pairs of lovers from marrying. The love interest is always before the spectators' eyes. Thomas never permits the audience to forget that the primary action involves the lovers; he does this by constantly returning to the lovers and their plights. Again, the love presented is précieux, and is expressed in speeches of galanterie.

#### Laodice

In 1668, Thomas again presented a tragedy, Laodice, in which the hero appeared incognito on the stage. The dramatist informs the audience in his "Au lecteur" that he drew the subject from the thirty-seventh book of Justin, the Latin historian of the eleventh century. Here appears the story of the usurpation of the throne of Cappadocia from the wicked dowager queen, Laodice; Laodice kills five of her sons in order to retain the throne, but she is finally assassinated by the people of Cappadocia and succeeded by her sixth son, Ariarate, who has been reared away from her. To this historical source, Thomas added many details which he may have borrowed from his own identity plays as well as from his brother's Rodogune.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to his previous identity plays, Thomas focuses on the conspiracy to usurp the throne and the incestuous passion of the queen, rather than on the plight of the young lovers in the play.

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<sup>11</sup>See Collins, Thomas Corneille, pp. 129-31 for a comparison of Laodice and Rodogune.

Thomas informs the audience of all the essential facts of the conspiracy early in the play.

In the first act he discloses the evil character of the queen and her heinous deeds through the conversations of the members of her court. Years before the action of the play begins, the queen killed five of her six sons and attempted to kill the sixth, Ariarate. Although the child, Ariarate, disappeared, the queen believed him to be dead. During the following years, the queen has turned the disappearance of Ariarate to her advantage by spreading the story that he was still alive, and thereby preventing her daughter, Arsinoé from marrying and assuming the throne. Now, as the action begins, the people of Cappadocia are in a state of unrest, for they wish to have a male ruler. The dowager queen in order to retain the throne, is planning to marry; her wickedness is further revealed in her disobedience to the ruling power of Rome, for she plans to refuse to accept the Roman ambassador's suggestions for a future mate and marry an unknown young man, Oronte, instead. Thus, in the exposition Thomas portrays the character of the evil, ambitious queen and prepares for her entrance in the second act. Moreover, by showing the audience that Oronte is really Ariarate, Thomas lays the foundation for the queen's incest.

Thomas introduces Ariarate-"Oronte" to the audience in the exposition. Thomas prepares for his entrance in the first scene. In a conversation between Axiane, the princess of Cilicia, and her confidante, Oronte is referred to as the "fameux inconnu" who has been in the court of Cappadocia for two years. "Oronte" to all appearances is not of royal blood, but he has proven his prowess in battle:

Depuis plus de deux ans que la faveur des dieux  
 Nous l'ayant envoyé le retient en ces lieux,  
 De nos fiers ennemis l'insolence étouffée  
 A ses moindres exploits a servi de trophée;  
 Et ce que leur audace ou médite ou produit,  
 Par ses sages conseils est aussitôt détruit....

(I,1)

In the following scene "Oronte" appears on stage, but Thomas does not yet reveal that "Oronte" is Ariarate. Here Thomas introduces the audience to the subordinate love interest of the play. "Oronte" and Axiane are in love, and in scene two Thomas offers the précieux members of his audience a scene of galanterie. "Oronte" tries to coax the princess into admitting that she loves him. Axiane refuses, however, for as Lockert observes, she "is the conventional princess, with heart divided between pride of birth and love for the one who seems hopelessly beneath her."<sup>12</sup> Later in the play (III,1) the princess, similar to her predecessors in the earlier identity plays, demonstrates her exaltation of pure love and becomes infuriated when "Oronte", employing Timocrate's tactic, suggests that the princess marry Ariarate.

Thomas demonstrates his dramaturgical skill in his manipulation of the princess, Axiane. First, her mere presence in the court of Cappadocia underlines the cunning of Laodice. Laodice, who really believes that her son Ariarate is dead, keeps the princess at court to marry Ariarate when he returns. Therefore, Laodice uses the princess to support the rumors she is spreading about Ariarate's eventual return; Laodice is using the princess as a pawn to retain control of the throne. In addition, Thomas uses the princess to present dramatic irony, for Axiane is really in love with Ariarate who is living under

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<sup>12</sup>Lockert, Studies, pp. 233-34.



the alias of "Oronte".

In the third scene, "Oronte" reveals to the audience and to Prince Phradate that he is Ariarate and has been living incognito in the court of Cappadocia with the permission of the Roman ambassadors. His objective is to gain the esteem of the queen and to claim the throne as gracefully as possible. As Collins observes, in Laodice, unlike Thomas's earlier identity plays, the role of false identity is functional rather than self-sufficient.

The significant difference between this play and his earlier identity plays is that in the latter the revelation of the alias, whether gradual or sudden, was in itself the justification for the action as well as the source of dramatic interest.<sup>13</sup>

In Laodice, false identity is inherent to the initial situation of the tragedy. Furthermore, in contrast to Thomas's previous identity plays, there are no complex, contrived explanations of the hero's identity; on the other hand, the explanation is terse and credible.<sup>14</sup>

Thomas adeptly creates dramatic irony through the use of hidden identity. Not only is the princess involved in the irony of the situation, but even more pointed is the queen's role. The queen herself has spread the rumors about her son's eventual return to succeed her. Although she has been perpetuating the stories of her son's return, to her this occurrence is impossible, for she believes that Ariarate is dead. Her sole purpose in keeping her subjects' interest aroused in Ariarate is to maintain control of Cappadocia. The irony of the situation is that she is actually preparing the people for his succession.

Through the use of hidden identity, Thomas attributes to the

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<sup>13</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 132.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

queen a vice which is absent from his historical source; he gives Laodice the additional vice of incestuous passion.<sup>15</sup> Although in his previous identity play, Pyrrhus, Thomas created a situation which appeared to the other characters as a criminal relationship between Déidamie and Pyrrhus, the spectators were aware that there was no incest involved because they knew the real identities of Pyrrhus and Hippias. In Laodice, on the other hand, it is the audience that is aware of the queen's romantic love for her son while the other characters are kept in the dark.

Although Laodice's love for "Oronte" is incestuous, the feeling that Laodice has for "Oronte" has some similarity to the pure love that the princesses in the identity plays possess. First, there is the conflict between her love and the disparity in position; her love dominates her common sense, and she is ashamed.

J'y trouve de la honte, et ma fierté s'en fâche;  
Je me traite en secret et de faible et de lâche,  
Et cependant mon coeur ne se peut arracher  
Aux flatteuses douceurs qui l'ont trop su toucher.  
(II, 1)

Then, in spite of her shame, her love dominates her:

Je vois sans cesse Oronte actif, ardent, fidèle,  
Par cent soins empressés me signaler son zèle,  
Au seul bien de me plaire attacher tous ses vœux,  
Se soumettre en aveugle à tout ce que je veux;  
Je m'en sens attendrie, et, par sa déference,  
De mon coeur avec lui telle est l'intelligence,  
Que je me défierais de moi-même aujourd'hui,  
S'il me fallait choisir entre le trône et lui.  
(II, 1)

However, at this point the similarity between Laodice's love and the heroines' pure love ceases. The heroines of the identity plays are

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<sup>15</sup>Lancaster, History, p. 596.

all young and preparing to marry for the first time. Laodice, on the contrary, has already married and has born six sons, the youngest of whom she is now in love with. The protagonist is ashamed that at her age she should feel the passion of youth:

Ce sentiment est lâche, indigne, bas, infâme,  
 Je m'en hais: mais j'ai beau le bannir de mon âme,  
 Il semble que des dieux la dure volonté  
 M'en ait fait, pour ma honte, une nécessité,  
 Que l'amour qui m'embrase, indigne d'une reine,  
 Soit de mon trop d'orgueil l'inevitable peine,  
 Et qu'exprès leur courroux ait voulu m'enflammer  
 A l'âge où, quoi qu'on puisse, on doit rougir d'aimer.  
 (II,1)

Thomas is skillful in his portrayal of the queen. He gives her a depth of love, but he makes her wickedness dominant so that the audience will not pity her. Immediately after the queen discloses her love for "Oronte" to the audience through a conversation with her confidante, the queen proposes marriage to "Oronte." She is so covert in her proposal that "Oronte" thinks that she is asking him to marry her daughter Arsinoe. Laodice clears up this mistaken notion and tells him that she wants him to marry her. She supports her proposal by explaining that the people demand a male on the throne, and in order to safeguard the throne for her son she wishes to marry "Oronte."

Ma principale gloire est d'être bonne mère,  
 Et j'en croirai l'éclat au plus haut point monté,  
 Si je mets pour mon fils le trône en sureté.  
 Comme de toutes parts l'ambition menace,  
 C'est l'assurer pour lui que vous y donner place....  
 (II,2)

The spectators know that Laodice's story is a lie, and in spite of the true emotion she has expressed in the previous scene, they have no pity for her.

Thomas emphasizes Laodice's contemptuous nature in this scene

by putting it in relief against the goodness of Ariarate. When Ariarate believes at first that the queen wishes him to marry Arsinoé, he humbly replies:

Vouloir jusques à moi au'Arsinoé s'abaisse!  
Non, non, quelques dédains qu'elle fasse éclater,  
Mon sort trop inégal me les fait mériter....  
(II,2)

Moreover, throughout the scene Ariarate, the rightful ruler of Cappadocia, although he is cognizant of the heinous crimes of his mother and although he himself has been one of her victims, he still remains respectful toward her. Then when he sees the plight that the queen is creating by proposing marriage, he attempts to relieve her from deeper involvement by revealing his identity to her. Nonetheless, she interrupts him before he can tell her:

Ah! Puisque de ce fils l'intérêt seul vous presse  
De ne pas confier le trône à la princess,  
Il ne faut plus cacher...  
(II,2)

As the play develops, the queen continues to provoke the hate of the audience. As part of the plan to trick the queen, a messenger arrives with the news that Ariarate is coming to Cappadocia with the Roman ambassadors. After hearing this news, the queen solicites "Oronte" to kill Ariarate. Thus, in contrast to the princesses who, because of their pure love, incite their men to noble deeds, the evil Laodice tries to incite the man she loves to heinous assassination.

Again in this scene Thomas emphasizes the queen's wickedness by placing it in opposition to the noble goodness of Ariarate. When the queen asks "Oronte" to murder her son, his physical expression reflects the horror that he feels and provokes the queen to observe: "Quoi,

vous ferait-il peur? Vous pâlissez, ce semble?" (III, 3) Thomas uses irony to its fullest when he has Ariarate as "Oronte" not only plead the cause of Ariarate, but also pretend to use his exact words and play his role:

Croyez, en m'écoutant, que c'est lui (Ariarate) qui vous prie,  
 Qu'en regardant sa mère il la cherche attendrie,  
 Et qu'enfin à vos pieds il vous dit par ma voix,  
 "Accordez-moi la vie une seconde fois,  
 Je vous suis odieux. Mais, quoi? Qui vous anime?  
 Être né votre fils n'est pas un si grand crime.  
 Daignez lui faire grâce en faveur d'un respect  
 Que jamais rien de moi ne vous rendra suspect,  
 Prenez-en pour garant la foi sincère et pure  
 Qu'à la face du ciel ma tendresse vous jure,  
 Cette foi que jamais les plus durs changements..."  
 (III,3)

Finally, the queen, having heard enough of his arguments, gives him the ultimatum of either murdering Ariarate or becoming a victim of her wrath. In spite of the queen's threat, "Oronte" refuses to kill Ariarate, preferring death to loss of virtue.

Hé bien, prenez ma vie, elle est à vous, madame.  
 Toujours la vertu seule a régné sur mon âme;  
 Et, s'il me faut mourir, je mourrai satisfait  
 D'avoir donné mon sang au refus d'un forfait.  
 (III,3)

Thomas intensifies the already sharp irony of this scene. As Collins observes, Laodice assumes that any son of hers would quite naturally inherit her perversions. She makes the observation about Ariarate:

Si j'immolai sa vie à l'ardeur de régner,  
 Pour régner à son tour voudra-t-il m'épargner?  
 C'est mon sang, et ce sang du trône est trop avide  
 Pour trembler à l'aspect d'un simple parricide.  
 (III,3)

Laodice, in attributing her own depravity to her son creates an ironic

hypothesis because Ariarate is such a paragon of virtue.<sup>16</sup>

Laodice, as evil as she is, is nevertheless moved by "Oronte's" virtue. "Oronte's" refusal to obey the queen's command and assassinate Ariarate ennobles him in her eyes:

Oui, telle que je suis, aux forfaits enchaînée  
Par le dur ascendant que prend la destinée,  
Je me vois, malgré moi, forcée à respecter  
Ce qu'un fatal penchant me defend d'imiter.  
(IV,1)

His virtue also inspires her love to grow:

Plus Oronte du crime a rejeté l'amorce,  
Plus mon amour pour lui semble avoir pris de force;  
Son refus m'a trahie, et, loin de l'en haïr,  
Je l'aurais moins aimé s'il eût pu m'obéir.  
(IV,1)

Finally, Laodice's love for "Oronte" dominates the depraved queen. After her assassination plan has failed, she tells "Oronte" that if he will marry her and share the throne of her small kingdom of Lycaonia, she will not threaten Ariarate's sovereignty over Cappadocia. Even after "Oronte" confesses that he is Ariarate, the queen cannot erase her love for him.

Quand il (mon coeur) veut vous haïr, il n'en a pas la force....  
Et quand à vous haïr tout semble m'animer,  
Arrachez-moi du coeur ce qui vous fait aimer.  
Otez-moi cette ardeur qui, quoique je l'abhorre,  
Me fait voir dans mon fils un amant que j'adore....  
(V,3)

The queen's final act before she commits suicide is to tell Axiane to marry Ariarate.

In conclusion, précieux love assumes a self-sufficient role in Thomas's early tragedies of hidden identity, and then in his later

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<sup>16</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 130.

identity plays précieux love shares the stage with other passions. In his early identity plays Thomas borrows from the heroic-gallant novels of the time and leads the spectators through the Carte de tendre in which his heroes and heroines exalt the intellectual game of love. Then in Pyrrhus, Thomas integrates the ambition to reign into the predominant love interest. Finally, in Laodice, although there is the presence of galanterie, the playwright subordinates précieux love to political intrigue and incestuous passion.

### CHAPTER III

#### VARIETY OF ROLES

The plays about to be discussed demonstrate the variety of roles which Thomas delegates to précieux love. Thomas shows his dramaturgical skill by treating love as the subject of some of his tragedies. In others he subordinates it to the political intrigue and uses it as an activating device which is essential to the development of the play.

#### La Mort de l'empereur Commode

After writing his first two romanesque identity plays, Timocrate and Bérénice, Thomas presented his tragedy, La Mort de l'empereur Commode (1657) which was fashioned after the type of play for which his brother had become famous. This heroic tragedy which was grounded in actual history and dominated by more noble passions than romantic love, had fallen out of favor during the Fronde, and no play representative of this genre appeared in the five years immediately following.<sup>1</sup> With Commode Thomas attempted to renew interest in heroic tragedy. In fact, according to Lancaster, "It is with this play and the ridiculous but well-intentioned Ostorius of the abbé de Pure that the

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<sup>1</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 167.



recrudescence of classical tragedy begins."<sup>2</sup>

Thomas based his Commode on Roman history, and he either went directly to the ancient historians like Cassius Dio or to an intermediary like Coeffeteau for his source.<sup>3</sup> In this play Thomas depicts the events which lead to the death of the tyrant Commode, "who brings about his own destruction through ineptitude in handling his courtiers, capriciousness, and a ruthless decision to assassinate all who oppose his desires."<sup>4</sup> Although Thomas subordinates the love interest to the study of Commode's character and to the political intrigue, he makes full use of its potential to enrich his character study and to further the action.

From the outset of the tragedy Thomas begins his portrayal of the tyrant Commode and lays the framework for the role which love and marriage will play. As the action begins, Pertinax's daughters Marcia and Helvie prepare the audience for the entrance of Commode, who is considering marrying Marcia in order to attach to the throne the support of their respected father. During the conversation between the two sisters, Thomas reveals to the audience that Marcia is ambitious and has asked Électus to wheedle an official marriage proposal out of Commode in order that she might be elevated to the throne of Rome. In contrast to Marcia's ambition Thomas portrays Helvie's disdain for the emperor and her tender concern for her sister's well-being in sharing the throne with him:

Je l'avouerai, ma soeur, c'est vous faire justice

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>4</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 93.

Que de vous élever au rang d'impératrice,  
 Tout paraît digne en vous des honneurs qu'on vous rend;  
 Mais, quoi que leur éclat ait d'illustre et de grand,  
 Tout mon coeur en tumulte et frémit et s'attonne,  
 Quand je viens à songer quelle main vous le donne;  
 Et malgré moi sans cesse une secrète horreur  
 Me fait trembler pour vous au nom de l'empereur....  
 Et l'on voit son destin, dans un rang glorieux...  
 Mais s'il en prit d'abord un orgueil légitime,  
 Il s'en est bientôt fait un appui pour le crime;  
 Et dans les cruautés qu'il nous fait éprouver,  
 Qui peut souffrir son choix semble les approuver.  
 (I,1)

Marcia, blinded by her ambition for the throne, is ready to justify any crime if she can become empress:

Il est vrai que Commode a d'injustes maximes;  
 Mais le trône, ma soeur, apaise bien des crimes,  
 Et peu dans les plus noirs verraient assez d'horreur  
 Pour y refuser place auprès d'un empereur.  
 (I,1)

During the rest of the scene, Helvie dwells on Commode's cruelty while her sister attempts to defend him. Helvie broaches the subject of the emperor's murder of his sister, but Marcia makes the excuse that she justly deserved to die because of her ambition. Helvie points out that her sister would not be safe living with the tyrant:

Mais qui perd une soeur peut bien perdre sa femme;  
 Et sur quelques soupçons, si j'en crois un bruit sourd,  
 L'impératrice même, eut un destin bien court.  
 (I,1)

However, nothing can dissuade Marcia from her ambition for the throne as she demonstrates in her reply, "Il est beau de périr au trône des Césars."

Thomas further reveals in the exposition that Helvie and Laetus are in love. Their love, however, has no hope for fulfillment because Commode wants Laetus to marry his sister. Thomas, still aiming at the précieux in his audience, portrays the exaltation of an omnipotent love

in the relationship of Laetus and Helvie. He also continues to underline the vicious nature of Commode through the words of Helvie, for although Laetus wishes to declare his love, she tells him that she prefers to live without him rather than see him killed by the despot:

Cet effort à mon coeur coûte plus qu'on ne pense;  
 Mais enfin du tyran je sais la violence;  
 Et j'aime encore mieux, dans un si rude sort,  
 Regretter votre amour que pleurer votre mort.  
 (I,3)

Then, having prepared the audience adequately for the cruel emperor, Thomas has Commode enter in the fourth scene with Électus. The emperor's first words support the previous testimony on his character; he is infuriated because he is expected to comply with the wishes of the people and marry Pertinax's daughter Marcia.

Quoi, Rome veut de moi cette indigne contrainte?  
 J'en dois fuir le murmure, et respecter la plainte;  
 Et dans vos sentiments c'est montrer un coeur bas,  
 Que de suivre un projet qu'elle n'approuve pas?  
 (I,4)

Finally, Électus persuades him to marry her because his position on the throne would be threatened if he does not marry her.

Immediately after Thomas discloses to the audience that Marcia and Électus are in love with each other, he shows how the ambitious woman has foiled her own plans by using Électus as an intermediary. Commode, who has already made the preparations for the marriage ceremony, informs Laetus that he wants to marry Helvie instead of Marcia. He explains that Électus' maneuvers for Marcia have made him aware of her driving ambition:

Déjà sur mes désirs prenant d'injustes droits,  
 Je vois que Marcia s'assure de mon choix:  
 Mais sans doute Électus pour plaire à son envie,  
 A m'avoir trop pressé, ne l'a pas bien servie,

Et n'a fait qu'exposer à mon aversion  
 L'impatient orgueil de son ambition.  
 Vaine d'un bel espoir et de ma complaisance,  
 Elle ose comme lui étaler sa prudence....  
 (II,5)

Laetus tries to dissuade him by using the argument that after Commode's treatment of Marcia, Helvie will be far from eager to accept his proposal. Laetus, who is already in a dilemma because of his love for Helvie, is placed in an even more awkward position when the emperor tells him that in order to dispel the fears of Helvie he should:

Dis-lui que c'est par toi que j'ai connu l'erreur  
 Qui m'a fait si longtemps lui préférer sa soeur;  
 Je l'avouerai moi-même, et veux qu'aucun ne doute  
 Que dans ce nouveau choix c'est toi seul que j'écoute.  
 (II,5)

Laetus, torn between his love for Helvie and his duty toward the emperor, informs Helvie that Commode wishes to marry her. Helvie, at the risk of losing her life, flatly refuses:

He bien, s'il est besoin, j'ai du sang pour l'éteindre,  
 Et faire voir à tous qu'aux malheurs les plus grands,  
 Qui peut oser mourir, peut braver les tyrans.  
 (II,8)

As Collins observes, this scene is crucial in the action of the play, for it sets off a chain reaction of events which lead ultimately to Commode's death.<sup>5</sup> After the emperor receives the news of her refusal, he sends **another** messenger to demand that she marry him; she rejects him a second time. With each scene the suspense mounts until finally it reaches its climax when Commode himself is affronted by her open defiance. The series of refusals leads the emperor to threaten Pertinax's life if Helvie does not become his wife. The threat in

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

turn prompts her to promise that she will marry him.

Helvie's acceptance directs the action to a strong, dramatic scene between the sisters. Marcia, jealous of Helvie, lashes out at her and accuses her of harboring ambitious lust for the throne. With this Thomas offers a touch of irony, for in truth this is the crime of Marcia and not Helvie. The playwright gives an excellent portrayal of Marcia. He directs her, infuriated, to solicit Electus to kill the emperor in order to save her honor:

Tu perds temps, il me faut ou son trône ou sa tête,  
Je vais songer à l'un; si tu veux m'obtenir,  
L'autre dépend de toi, tu peux me prévenir.  
(III,6)

Between Acts III and IV, Helvie, unable to face marriage to the tyrant, makes an unsuccessful attempt on his life. Thomas then continues to depict the shrewd, evil nature of Commode. In the midst of the hate-ridden atmosphere, the emperor is planning his revenge. Here Thomas underlines the despot's cunning. Commode knows that Laetus and Helvie are in love and he also realizes that Marcia is ambitious; moreover, he uses this knowledge to his advantage. He tells Marcia that Laetus and Helvie are responsible for his jilting her and that he intends to punish them in order to defend her honor; he then gives her hope of sharing the throne with him. By using this psychology, he veils his real plan of revenge which is to murder Électus, Laetus, Helvie, Marcia, Pertinax, and half of the senate too.

However, Commode has made the great error of writing down his scheme. Unfortunately for Commode, Marcia discovers the tablets between Acts IV and V. And all of the lovers he has ruthlessly antagonized make a pact to assassinate him. Until the very end of the play,

Thomas builds on the evil in the character of Commode; the emperor drinks from the poisoned cup, but when he realizes that he is dying, he demonstrates his despicable nature by stabbing himself.

Thus, Thomas uses the lovers in the play to underline the evil character of Commode. He also employs them as an activating device which triggers off events which lead ultimately to the death of the tyrant. Marcia's ambition for the throne causes her to use Électus as an intermediary to plead her case. This action prompts the emperor to disgrace her by jilting her and proposing to her sister. As a result of Helvie's refusal, Commode threatens Pertinax, which leads to Helvie's unsuccessful attempt on the tyrant's life. This effects his scheme to murder them all; finally, his plan results in his own assassination.

#### Maximian

For the source of Maximian (1662), the playwright again referred to Roman history, using either the ancient historians or perhaps a modern summary of them, such as Caussin offered in his Cour Sainte.<sup>6</sup> As in Commode and Laodice, Thomas relegated love to a secondary role.

In Maximian the dramatist focuses the audience's interest on the conspiracy of Maximian to usurp the throne from Constantin. One by one, Maximian uses the lovers as pawns in his crafty scheme. As the action begins, Sévère has returned from the wars only to find that in his absence his fiancée Fauste has been married to the emperor Constantin; Fauste's father, Maximian, forced her to marry Constantin for ambitious

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<sup>6</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 442.

reasons.<sup>7</sup> The emperor knows that Fauste still loves Sévère, so he plans to rid himself of a rival by marrying Sévère to his sister, Constance. However, this greatly displeases Licine and Constance because they are in love with each other. Maximian turns each of these relationships to his advantage in his plan to seize the throne.

As the play opens, Thomas shows Maximian's advantageous position. As Maximian himself tells Licine, the king respects him and often seeks his advice:

Depuis que Constantin en épousant ma fille,  
A remis, malgré moi, le trône en ma famille,  
Pour soutenir un rang que l'on m'a vu quitter,  
Il a cru presque en tout me devoir consulter....  
(I,1)

Hence, Thomas points out that Maximian is in the good graces of the emperor and can easily begin to carry out his conspiracy for the throne without the suspicion of Constantin.

Making full use of his background as a lawyer, Thomas skillfully presents Maximian's scheme as it leads step by step toward the overthrow of the government. His first act is to gain the support of Sévère. He plans to use Sévère's love for Fauste in order to win him over. The traitor tells his cohort Martian:

Pressons adroitement la douleur qui l'accable,  
Et l'aigrissons si bien qu'il se laisse flatter  
De voir ma fille à lui, s'il ose l'accepter.  
Par moi de son hymen ayant reçu parole,  
Montrons-lui qu'en effet c'est son bien qu'on lui vole....  
(I,3)

His psychology is that a despairing lover has an unwitting inclination toward crimes:

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<sup>7</sup>See Lancaster, Part III, p. 443, and Collins, p. 119, for a comparison of Polyeucte and Maximian.

Un amantt qu'en secret le désespoir anime,  
 Vient insensiblement sur le penchant du crime.  
 (I,3)

Thomas then uses Martian to underline the cunning of the protagonist. Maximian employs Martian as a liaison between his conspirators and himself. He has kept his identity hidden from his fellow conspirators in order to protect himself should the attempted usurpation of the throne be unsuccessful. In addition, Thomas emphasizes the planning that Maximian has put into his scheme by showing that he has the answers to any of the objections that Martian offers. When Martian argues that if Sévère does enter their conspiracy and does kill the emperor, he might claim authorship of the plan and seize the throne for himself, Maximian demonstrates that he has thought this out well in advance. He is certain that Sévère will keep his role in the conspiracy secret in order to retain the love and respect of Fauste:

Fauste étant le seul prix qui le puisse attirer,  
 Si le crime est connu, que peut-il espérer?  
 Croira-t-il de sa mort que le sachant coupable,  
 L'assassin d'un époux lui soit jamais aimable?  
 Et si ce doux espoir ne flatte ses souhaits,  
 Voudra-t-il embrasser d'inutiles forfaits?  
 (I,3)

Thomas then efficiently carries through the plan that he has the protagonist plot so well in advance. Before Maximian tells Sévère of his scheme, he touches his love and sympathy by claiming that the emperor sent him to the wars in order to eliminate him as a rival; then Maximian claims that the emperor forced him to sanction Fauste's marriage. Thus, Thomas has the traitor prepare Sévère by speaking of the dishonorable marriage, and thereby infuriating the hero. Maximian then systematically follows through on his planned approach to Sévère.



However, Thomas reveals the flaw in the tyrant's reasoning which will eventually lead to his downfall. Maximian has made the error of not taking into account Sévère's honor. He is a gallant hero and feels duty-bound to Constantin; therefore, he does not readily enter the plot. In fact, in the following scene Sévère informs Fauste of the plan.

The second step of Maximian is to use the love affair of Licine and Constance to further the development of his plan. Licine is an obstacle which Maximian must eliminate in order to succeed. He is the emperor's faithful captain of the guards, and in order for Maximian's plan to work, he must substitute his own men for the emperor's guards. This time Thomas uses love to discredit Licine. Maximian tells Fauste that Licine is not to be trusted because he is infuriated by the emperor's wish to marry Constance to Sévère:

Mais Licine d'ailleurs adore la princesse,  
 Et ce qu'en son pouvoir son feu trouve d'appui,  
 Nous montre en sa fureur tout à craindre de lui.  
 Du palais à son gré c'est lui seul qui dispose,  
 La garde aveuglément suit les lois qu'il impose....  
 (III, 2)

In a coup de théâtre one of the conspirators complicates Maximian's plans by informing the emperor that there is a plot to usurp the throne; he also names a number of the conspirators, including Martian. Since Maximian has prepared for this event, he still remains above reproach in the eyes of Constantin. Martian names Licine as the leader; since the conspirators do not know the identity of their leader, they can neither deny nor support Martian's claim. Thomas continues to dwell on love to develop Maximian's conspiracy. The protagonist tells the emperor that Martian's testimony supports his distrust for Licine; he

reiterates his former story that Licine is not to be trusted because he will do anything to have the princess.

Thomas adds suspense to this scene through the character of Fauste. She is present throughout the confrontation of Martian and his accusation of Licine. The audience is anxious to see if she will disclose the secret of her father's involvement in the conspiracy. Thomas portrays her predicament as she is torn between duty toward her father and duty toward her husband. She feels that she must protect her father so she remains silent about his guilt; however, to foil the traitor's plan, she states that she will be responsible for her husband's safety. Thomas then uses Fauste to upset Maximian's scheme at every turn.

Maximian is not aware that his daughter knows of his plot, and he is perplexed by the obstacles she places in his path:

Toujours l'impératrice à cet espoir contraire  
 Détruit par ses conseils tout ce que je crois faire,  
 Et n'agirait pas mieux si, dans ce qu'on résout,  
 Pour en rompre l'effet, on l'instruisait de tout....  
 En vain les conjurés lui veulent tout apprendre,  
 Elle ne peut souffrir qu'il songe à les entendre,  
 Et rompt ce que par eux, les faisant écouter,  
 Nous pouvions être sûrs de voir exécuter.  
 (IV,2)

He is further perplexed by Constantin's conduct. Because Fauste is meddling in the affair, the emperor believes that she is involved in the conspiracy; he thinks that she wants to get rid of him in order to marry Sévère. Constantin laments:

Que la rage et l'envie  
 Par son seul ordre, hélas! attentent sur ma vie,  
 Et que d'un premier feu le souvenir trop doux  
 Lui fait tremper les mains dans le sang d'un époux.  
 (IV,3)

To compound the emperor's distrust of his wife, Thomas uses the conventional device of an intercepted note. Sévère has sent Fauste a note warning her that the conspirators have been armed; the note, which is worded ambiguously, is discovered, and the emperor is convinced that Sévère and his wife are members of the conspiracy. The playwright again uses the love of Sévère for Fauste to further the scheme of Maximian. The tyrant supports the jealous suspicions of Constantin, and even though Sévère protests and finally reveals Maximian's entire plan to usurp the throne, Constantin still believes the traitor. In this scene Thomas reveals the depth of Maximian's evil. Previously, the protagonist has made victims of friends and acquaintances, but here he readily sacrifices his own daughter to his ambition.

After Thomas exploits fully the love of Sévère, Licine, and Constantin to further the tyrant's conspiracy, he brings the play to a rapid conclusion. Maximian finally attempts unsuccessfully to seize the throne; he then kills himself. Since the fulfillment of Sévère's love for Fauste is impossible, there is only one suitable dramaturgical treatment for this character, and that is death. Thomas gives him an honorable end; the gallant warrior dies from the wounds he received protecting the emperor from the conspirators.

### Antiochus

In 1666 Thomas again used précieux love as the subject of the play. For the source of Antiochus Thomas went to the historians, Plutarch, Appian, and Valerius Maximus. However, as Lancaster points out, Thomas altered the historical sources so freely that very little

of its spirit remained.<sup>8</sup>

As the play opens, Thomas informs the audience that Stratonice and Antiochus are in love with each other. First, in one of Thomas's few monologues Antiochus speaks of his love for Stratonice and the pain that this love brings him:

J'y vois, j'y vois toujours une adorable reine  
Augmenter mon amour, et redoubler ma peine:  
J'observe avec plaisir ces merveilleux accords  
Des charmes de l'esprit, et des grâces du corps,  
Et, sans cesse, y trouvant mille sujets d'estime....  
Aimons donc, puisqu'enfin c'est un mal nécessaire,  
Mais aimons seulement pour souffrir et nous taire....  
(I, 2)

Then Stratonice speaks of her omnipotent love for Antiochus. In two lines she sums up the traits of the gallant hero:

L'air galant, l'âme noble, un courage élevé,  
Tout ce qui marque enfin un héros achevé.  
(I, 4)

In this play Thomas makes Antiochus' father, Séleucus, the obstacle to the fulfillment of the young couple's love. Stratonice and Antiochus cannot show their love for each other because Stratonice is the fiancée of Antiochus' father. Although the hero has tried to hide his love, he cannot; it is even reflected in his expression. Stratonice's confidante remarks about this:

Tandis qu'il vous parlait, ses timides regards,  
S'ils rencontraient vos yeux, erraient de toutes parts.  
Languissant, interdit, plein d'un désordre extrême,  
Si j'osais m'expliquer, je dirais qu'il vous aime....  
(I, 4)

Because Antiochus is unable to repress his love, he tells his father, the king of Syria, that he wishes to leave the kingdom.

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<sup>8</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 555.

Throughout the play Antiochus languishes under self-restraint.<sup>9</sup> Thomas emphasizes this time and again by putting the word "languueur" and its variations in the speeches of the characters when they refer to the hero; even Antiochus himself dwells on his languor. Thomas makes his self-restraint apparent in the scenes between the young couple; Antiochus is afraid that he will express his feelings to Stratonice, and he often appears tongue-tied in his effort to suppress his confession of love.

Antiochus' languishing along with his unexplained request to leave the kingdom result in his increased discomfort, for his father in an effort to find out what is troubling him, asks Stratonice to do what she can to talk him into remaining in the kingdom. Thus, the king in his attempt to help his son only succeeds in making matters worse.

Collins suggests that Thomas was attempting to "combine the sympathetic qualities of the impassioned lover with the luster of chivalric virtue in Antiochus."<sup>10</sup> In comparing Thomas's Antiochus with Quinault's Stratonice, Collins points out that the amorous martyr of Thomas is more credible than that of Quinault. In his "Au lecteur" it is suggested that Thomas was consciously attempting to differentiate his hero from Quinault's:

Je me suis particulièrement attaché à donner à Antiochus le caractère de ce profond respect, qui l'empêcha de recevoir personne dans sa confiance, et le fit résoudre à mourir plutôt de la fièvre lente qui le consumait, qu'à chercher quelque secours, en déclarant une passion qu'il voyait trop condamnable pour ne la détester pas lui-même.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 87.    <sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 88.    <sup>11</sup>Ibid.

A large part of the play is focused on two portraits which complicate the main line of action. It is in his use of the portraits that Thomas prided himself.<sup>12</sup> The complication involving the portraits begins as a mere trick of Antiochus' cousin Arsinoé. She has found a little portrait box which contains a likeness of Stratonice. Arsinoé substitutes her portrait for Stratonice's and leaves the box in full view. Antiochus sees it but will not permit her to open it; he thinks that it contains the portrait of Stratonice that ~~he has lost~~. He takes the case, and then in a précieux scene with Antiochus languoring under his self-restraint, he finally tells Stratonice that he loves the woman whose portrait is in the box. This leads to a series of quid pro quo the ultimate result of which is the king's preparation for the marriage of Antiochus and Arsinoé.

While the hero continues to languish, Arsinoé finally informs the king that Antiochus loves Stratonice. The king then magnanimously gives up his beloved Stratonice to his son.

This play is the lightest of all the dramatic pieces which Thomas classified as tragedies. The plot is simple, and centers completely on the love interest and the languishing hero. Although father and son are both in love with the same woman, there is no rivalry and no dramatic conflict between the two men. The play is noteworthy in that Thomas presents the subject of précieux love in a simple plot uncomplicated by hidden identity.

#### La Mort d'Annibal

In 1669 Thomas offered another conspiracy drama, La Mort d'Annibal.

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<sup>12</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 564.

According to Lancaster, Thomas used Livy for his historical source and also imitated his brother's Nicomède to some extent.<sup>13</sup> In Annibal, as in Thomas's other conspiracy dramas, love, although it does assume a secondary role, is essential to the development of the plot.

As the play opens, Annibal, who has been expelled from Ephesus by the Romans, has attained political asylum in Prusias' court in Bithynia; with him is his daughter Élise. There are three men rivaling for the hand of Élise: Prusias, his son Nicomède, and Attale, the prince of Pergamus.

Thomas devotes the first act to the disclosure of the three rivals and the problems that result from their love for Élise. In the first scene Attale announces his love for Élise to Prusias and asks him to act as an intermediary and plead his case to Annibal. Prusias withholds the promise to give aid and offers the weak excuse:

Mais il faut éviter en cherchant mon suffrage,  
Ce qui pourrait vous nuire, ou donner de l'ombrage.  
(I, 1)

In the following scene Thomas shows the audience that Prusias will not help Attale's suit because Prusias himself loves Élise.

... oui, je l'aime,  
Et par mille combats rendus jusqu'à ce jour,  
J'ai tâché vainement d'étouffer mon amour....  
Élise a tous mes vœux, Élise a tout mon coeur,  
Et pour moi, sans Élise, il n'est point de bonheur.  
(I, 2)

Prusias, however, realizes the political factors involved. He has already earned the distrust of Rome by harboring the enemy Annibal. If he were to reveal his love for Élise, he would have both Rome and Annibal

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 597.

to reckon with. First, Rome wishes to maintain Annibal in a weak position, and the ambassadors would be against a son-in-law who would offer him power. Moreover, if Annibal discovers that he loves his daughter, Prusias suspects that Annibal would take advantage of the situation and would scheme to show that he was an enemy of Rome:

L'abaissement de Rome étant ce qu'il souhaite,  
 Il formerait contre elle une ligue secrète,  
 Et m'en faisant l'auteur, me mettrait hors d'éat  
 De ne me pas montrer ennemi du sénat.  
 Tu vois que dans la paix jurée avec Attale,  
 Déjà son amitié m'a presque été fatale.  
 (I, 2)

When Nicomède confesses to his father in the following scene that he loves Élise, Prusias argues that the marriage would be against the wishes of Rome. Thus, from the opening of the play, Thomas demonstrates the importance of the love interest to the political situation.

Thomas gives even more importance to the romantic element as the play develops. Annibal intends to take advantage of the rivalry for his daughter, and he plans to marry his daughter to the man who will offer him the most favorable position from which he can regain his political power. Annibal personally prefers Nicomède to the other rivals, for he is very fond of the pupil to whom he has taught the art of war; moreover, Nicomède would be his daughter's choice because she loves him. Nonetheless, Thomas does not permit his portrayal of Annibal to become sentimental, so he does not allow Annibal to succumb to his personal wishes; the conspiracy remains of prime importance. Nicomède is not a favorable candidate in Annibal's eyes because the prince is already loyal to him; therefore, the marriage of Élise to Nicomède would not advance his plans. Annibal also discounts the



candidacy of Prusias, for he is too submissive to Roman rule to be trusted. The Carthaginian decides that Attale would be the best choice for a son-in-law, for he has just recently become the king of Pergamus, and he offers Annibal the most advantageous position.

Thomas complicates Annibal's plans with the actions of Prusias. First, Prusias sends his son to Rome on a trumped-up story that Nicomède is to represent him at a political meeting. Behind this action there are three good reasons: Prusias eliminates the one rival that Élise loves; he gains the respect of Rome by telling the Roman ambassador that he is sending his son away because Nicomède loves Élise; finally, he places Élise and her father in a weakened position because Nicomède is the only one at Prusias' court who supports Annibal's cause. Later, when Prusias discovers that Annibal and Rome sanction the marriage of Élise to Attale, he plans to have Annibal killed and place the blame on Attale, thereby ridding himself not only of a rival, but also of a threat to his political position. To safeguard himself from any future rivalry from his son, he tricks Nicomède, who has just returned from Rome, into joining the conspiracy. Again Thomas employs love to advance the plot; Prusias uses Nicomède's love for Élise as a subterfuge:

Viens savoir, et venger tout ensemble,  
Un crime dont encor l'horreur fait que je tremble.  
A l'amour d'un perfide on s'est enfin rendu,  
Flaminius triomphe, Annibal est vendu.  
Pour prix d'une si lâche et honteuse entreprise,  
Attale qui le vend reçoit la main d'Élise....  
A sauver Annibal l'honneur, tout nous convie....

(IV, 5)

Thomas further complicates the plans of Annibal and again uses love as the vehicle. Even the Roman ambassador, Flaminius, takes part in the auction of Élise. Rome has sent Flaminius to the court of Prusias

to make sure that Annibal does not make an advantageous marriage for his daughter. In a coup de théâtre in act IV Thomas informs the audience that Prusias is not the ruler of Pergamus, for the man he has succeeded has just been found alive; therefore, the marriage of Prusias to Élise would be propitious to Rome.

Until the very close of the play Thomas uses the love interest as a pawn for the political intrigue. He kills off the two rivals in their attack on Annibal, but he permits Nicomède to live. Nicomède has proven his allegiance to Annibal by protecting him against Prusias and his men; moreover, Nicomède is to succeed his father. Consequently, Annibal, who has poisoned himself, tells Élise before his death to marry Nicomède for the good of the cause:

C'est trop, il ne faut plus que votre amour se cache,  
Le prince vous mérite, il est enfin sans tache,  
Prenez-le pour époux, et, dans tous vos desseins,  
Ayez pour seul objet la perte des Romains.  
(V, 9)

The playwright's portrayal of Élise is noteworthy. As Lockert observes, Thomas presents a "striking realistic departure from the romanesque convention; the heroine is actually represented as refusing to admit to her confidante that she is in love (though she is) when her confidante taxes her with it."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, she is preoccupied with state policy and her father's political position, rather than with love. Her words reflect this attitude repeatedly; even when her romantic rivals confess their love, she states her position. Witness, for example, her answer to Attale's gallant confession of love:

Seigneur, que vous importe:

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<sup>14</sup>Lockert, Studies, p. 239.



Similar to Laodice, Thomas uses love to depict the character of Amalasonte, the ruthless queen of the Goths. Thomas presents the queen in love with her favorite courtier, Théodat. To complicate the queen's designs, the playwright offers a second love interest; Théodat loves Amalasonte's daughter Ildegonde who returns his love. Thomas then offers a third love interest which complicates matters further; he presents the rival Honoric who is also in love with Ildegonde. The dramatist then develops the complex love interests and focuses the spectator's attention on them. To this he adds the flavor of conspiracy by using the revolt of the people to cause the queen's death.

In the beginning of the play, the dramatist introduces the audience to the predominant love interest. In the second scene the queen tries to coax a confession of love from Théodat:

Je prends pour affront ce respect trop timide,  
 Qui balance à vous faire une gloire solide,  
 Et n'ose à mes bontés prêter assez de foi,  
 Pour voir que je vous ai rendu de moi.  
 (I, 2)

Théodat, however, attempts to divert the queen's passion and retain her respect. When the queen tells him that she knows that he loves Ildegonde, he announces that Honoric and the princess are in love, and asks that the queen permit their marriage.

Later, however, when the queen does announce the engagement of Honoric and Ildegonde, Théodat tries to postpone the marriage by suggesting that Ildegonde marry for the interest of the state rather than for love (III, 2). Théodat continues to dwell on the intended marriage of Ildegonde, and he offers the suggestion that Ildegonde have more time to think before marrying Honoric. He repeatedly speaks for

the princess in her presence, and angers both the queen and the princess. His weak attempts to postpone the wedding finally send him to prison. The queen realizes that Théodat really loves Ildegonde, and she is unable to forgive him for preferring her daughter's love.

Thomas then resorts to a rebellion of the people to free Théodat and prepare for the demise of the rival Honoric. The people admire Théodat and are infuriated that he is in prison. They threaten Honoric's life and they free their hero. The ruthless queen is ready to reap her vengeance; scorned, she plots to assassinate Théodat. To prevent the fulfillment of this heinous crime, Thomas resorts to the conventional switch of characters. Théodat frees Honoric and offers him protection in his room. As a result, the queen's men kill Honoric instead of Théodat.

Throughout the tragedy, Thomas parallels Ildegonde to her mother. Ildegonde too is directed by her vengeance. In the first act she believes that Théodat has jilted her for the queen, so she is intent on avenging his ignoble treatment of her. She permits nothing to divert her revenge, not even Théodat's confession of his love for her. Théodat, after trying to reason with the princess, finally says:

...Dites-moi donc comment il vous fallait aimer?  
 Est-il vœux, soins, devoirs, complaisances, services,  
 Dont vous n'aviez reçu les tendres sacrifices?  
 (II, 4)

Although Ildegonde is led by revenge, as her mother is, Ildegonde remains noble, for she does not revert to crime and bloodshed to reap her vengeance.

As Lancaster points out, Thomas failed to interest the audience with his depiction of the characters in the play. The dramatist does

not offer a strong enough portrayal of the queen. He presents Théodat and Honoric merely as submissive lovers, and he has Ildegonde prate about her "gloire" and "la honte d'aimer." Furthermore, the weakness of the structure of the play does not make up for his poor character portrayal. Even though the action in the fourth and fifth acts moves quickly, Thomas cannot regain the audience interest which he has sacrificed in the first three dull and empty acts.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the variety of Thomas's dramatic presentation of précieux love is apparent in the plays discussed in this chapter. He wrote plays involving the integration of the love interest with the political intrigue. In the three conspiracy plays based on Roman history, Thomas subordinated the love interest to the political intrigue and to the character study of a tyrant. Nevertheless, he did not relegate the love interest to the position of a secondary plot, but rather, he used the love interest as an integral part of the main action and also as an activating device. Then in Théodat, which was based on the history of the Ostrogoths, he attempted to do just the opposite; he subordinated the people's uprising to the love interest and used the rebellion to advance the main action. Furthermore, he offered the audience a journey through the Carte de tendre in his Antiochus; here, unlike the complex hidden identity plays, he offered a simple presentation of précieux love.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

### FATAL LOVE

Stilicon, Camma, and Persée et Démétrius have one striking similarity; the heroines cause the heroes' death. The précieux gallants of the previous plays discussed all vowed their willingness to die for their lovers, and they risked their lives in battles protecting their women and demonstrating their bravery. However, none of the amorous heroes died as a direct result of the actions of their lovers. Although the heroines were at times involved in the assassination of tyrannical despots who attempted to use their love as a pawn, Thomas never permitted his ladies to assume the responsibility of murdering their amorous suitors. In contrast, the heroines of the three plays in this chapter effect a fatal end to their précieux lovers.

#### Stilicon

The troupe of the Hôtel de Bourgogne received great applause for its presentation of Stilicon in 1660.<sup>1</sup> Thomas based his tragedy on Roman history but altered his source to such an extent that Lancaster found it impossible to discern the exact source that Thomas used. However, it is important to note that Thomas added the love interest

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<sup>1</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 440.

to his play, for it does not appear in historical data.<sup>2</sup>

Although Thomas focuses the audience's attention on the conspiracy of Stilicon to usurp the throne of Rome for his son Euchérius, the love interest has considerable significance. The amorous relationship which Thomas adds to his historical source involves Euchérius and Placidie, the daughter of the king of Rome; they love each other, but the haughty princess rejects his advances because she feels that his rank is not worthy of her. Thomas uses Placidie's refusal to marry Euchérius as an activating device that triggers the conspiracy scheme of Stilicon, which ultimately leads to the death of Euchérius.

The play opens with Euchérius' explanation of his frustrated attempts to win over Placidie. He speaks to his sister Thermantie who is now the queen of Rome. Thomas demonstrates at the very beginning that the difference in rank between Placidie and Euchérius is not really great enough to give Placidie legitimate grounds to refuse Euchérius; first, Honorius who is king of Rome has married Euchérius' sister, and then, Honorius is in favor of the marriage of his daughter to his wife's brother. The king even pleads Euchérius' case to Placidie. Nevertheless, Placidie remains firm in her refusal.

As Lancaster states, "Placidia is so devoted to her 'gloire' that she seems utterly lacking in feeling."<sup>3</sup> Collins offers a thorough description of the haughty princess whom he classifies as the epitome of the romanesque concept of complacent self-righteousness. Thomas exaggerates her iron will and the intransigent faith which she has in her own sense of propriety.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 438.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 439.



Her pride is more than the haughtiness resulting from a sense of social superiority, more than a conviction of personal dignity. She is egotistical to the point of posing her own sentiments as an objective standard by which to authenticate the feelings of others.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, in order to create a character of extreme proportions, Thomas omits any contests of generosity between the lovers which would counterbalance his depiction of the excessively haughty princess.<sup>5</sup>

Placidie exhibits her haughty nature to the audience repeatedly. When Stilicon pleads his son's case to Placidie, she again refuses:

Mais il est votre fils;  
Et si j'ose estimer ce qu'il mérite d'être,  
Je vois ce que le ciel l'a voulu faire naître.  
(I, 6)

It is this refusal that motivates Stilicon to plot for the usurpation of the throne for his son, for he is indignant that his son should be treated in such an ignoble fashion:

En vain j'ai voulu voir ma fille couronnée,  
Je n'ai vu que d'un fils l'indigne destinée,  
Et l'outrage éclatant que souffre son grand coeur,  
S'il demeure sujet des enfants de sa soeur.  
(I, 7)

Hence he schemes to assassinate the king and place his son on the throne.

As Collins observes, Thomas offers a legalistic framework for the succeeding action:

First a piece of evidence is introduced and evaluated (Zénon's letter revealing a conspiracy by persons anonymous); then a tentative supposition is made (Euchérius suspects Zénon); finally action is taken (Euchérius is dispatched to interview Zénon).

When Stilicon murders Zénon, Honorius knows that the murderer must be

<sup>4</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, pp. 109-110.      <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 107-108.

either Euchérius or his father. Thomas carries through the courtroom atmosphere that he has already created. The king attempts to eliminate one of his suspects and determine which is the killer. Stilicon in a shrewd maneuver argues that the king should execute him:

Il faut punir, seigneur, et, sans incertitude,  
 Votre courroux m'en doit la peine la plus rude,  
 Puisqu'armant contre moi sa plus fière rigueur,  
 Vous êtes sûr d'en perdre, ou la cause ou l'auteur.  
 D'une ou d'autre façon ma mort est nécessaire,  
 Je suis par moi coupable, ou le suis comme père,  
 Qui, détournant de moi l'attentat entrepris,  
 Ne puis être innocent des crimes de mon fils.  
 (III, 3)

Stilicon's confession receives the desired effect; the argument makes the king believe him innocent and Euchérius guilty. Thomas presents a good case of circumstantial evidence against Euchérius, and to "prove" his guilt, the playwright gives him a strong motive. Stilicon offers Euchérius' motive:

Qu'il périsse l'ingrat, dont la rage secrète  
 Par votre seule mort se peut voir satisfaite.  
 Voilà, voilà, seigneur, où l'amour l'a réduit,  
 De ses vœux, sans un trône il attend peu de fruit.  
 La princesse obstinée à dédaigner sa flamme  
 N'abaisse qu'à ce prix la fierté de son âme;  
 Et le lâche, aux transports d'un criminel espoir,  
 A laissé contre vous séduire son devoir.  
 (III, 3)

Thus, Thomas uses love to convict the innocent Euchérius.

The courtroom logic of this event is so convincing that the king has no doubts that Euchérius who was once so loyal to him planned to usurp the throne and killed Zénon in order to protect himself. Throughout Act IV the king seeks the confession of Euchérius. Honorius does not wish to punish Euchérius; he simply wants him to admit his guilt:

Va, si tu crains qu'en tout la vérité paraisse,  
 Que ton aveu trop loin étendit le forfait,  
 Confesse-toi coupable, et je suis satisfait.  
 Pour percer les motifs d'une telle injustice,  
 Je n'examinerai ni témoin ni complice,  
 Tu choisiras ta peine, et, pour t'en garantir,  
 Il ne te coûtera qu'un simple repentir.

(IV, 5)

The noble Euchérius refuses to confess to a crime that he did not commit. To the gallant-hero death is not as terrible as life without love:

Qui n'en peut être aimé n'est point digne de vivre;  
 Mais j'aurai moins de peine à renoncer au jour,  
 Quand je croirai par là lui prouver mon amour;  
 Et je ne craindrai point de voir ternir ma gloire,  
 Si je meurs assuré de vivre en sa mémoire.

(IV, 3)

Although the king is convinced of the guilt of Euchérius, Placidie is certain that he is innocent. Her reasoning is the antithesis of the courtroom logic that Thomas has presented to prove Euchérius' guilt. Placidie believes that Euchérius is innocent simply because he loves her:

Mais il est innocent;  
 Et de quoi que son coeur pour régner fût capable,  
 Quiconque ose m'aimer ne peut être coupable.

(IV, 1)

In the end Euchérius dies protecting the king from the assassination attempt of his father's men. He proves his noble nature and his love in his death speech:

"Je meurs..., et je meurs satisfait,  
 Puisqu'avant mon trépas j'ai fait voir à mon maître  
 Que je méritais peu l'infâme nom de traître.  
 J'aimais, et c'est l'aveu d'un insolent amour  
 Qui m'avait su déjà rendre indigne du jour.  
 Le ciel juste par tout fait plus qu'on osait croire,  
 Punissant mon audace il conserve ma gloire,  
 Et me souffre l'espoir d'un assez doux repos,  
 Pourvu que ma princesse..."

(V, 6)

After the récit of the hero's death speech, Thomas spells out the role that love has played in the tragedy. The king blames Placidie for the death of Euchérius:

Enfin un plein succès a suivi vos refus,  
 Vous triomphez, ma soeur, Euchérius n'est plus.  
 Ayant vu contre lui l'imposture soufferte,  
 Il a pour l'étouffer précipité sa perte,  
 Et cru dans les soupçons d'un crime lâche et bas  
 Un affront assez grand pour n'y survivre pas.  
 (V, 6)

Finally, Placidie admits her guilt:

Ce héros, dont toujours la vertu m'a charmée,  
 N'eût point été suspect s'il ne m'eût point aimée;  
 Et l'injuste refus d'avouer son amour,  
 A causé l'accident qui le prive du jour.  
 Je l'aimais toutefois; mais de cette victoire  
 Ma jalouse fierté lui dérobait la gloire.  
 Je le voulais au trône, et l'ardeur de régner  
 M'offrait dans ce défaut de quoi le dédaigner.  
 (V, 6)

Thomas then permits Stilicon to confess his part in the conspiracy. Throughout the play, Thomas skillfully portrays Stilicon's paternal affection; the motive behind Stilicon's every action is the elevation of his son. Ironically, however, Stilicon indirectly took part in the murder of the son he loved so deeply. Filled with anguish, the pitiable father kills himself.

#### Camma

Thomas turned to Plutarch for the essential material of his tragedy Camma which the Hôtel de Bourgogne presented in 1661. The dominant motive in this play is the desire for revenge although love does assume some importance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, pp. 440-441.

The subject of the play is Camma's attempt to reap her vengeance on the man who killed her husband. Again Thomas uses love as an activating device to begin the main action of the play. Before the play begins, Sinorix, who was engaged to Camma's daughter Hésione, fell in love with Camma; as a result of this love, Sinorix secretly poisoned Camma's husband, the king of Galatia, and then he assumed the throne. During the course of the play, Sinorix attempts to win Camma.

Thomas adds a second love interest to complicate the plot. Sinorix realizes that Camma and Sostrate, a prince of Galatia, are in love, so in order to eliminate the rival, Sinorix plans to marry Sostrate to Camma's daughter Hésione. The acrimonious Hésione, however, is ambitious for the throne, and the only way for her to attain it is by marrying Sinorix; therefore, she is contemptuous of Sostrate.

Camma attempts to murder Sinorix, for somehow she has discovered that Sinorix killed her husband. Thomas uses love as the vehicle to carry out the queen's vengeance. Camma tries to convince Sostrate that in order to make himself worthy of her love, she should kill Sinorix for her:

Si mon coeur est pour toi d'un prix assez insigne,  
 S'il remplit tes désirs, tu peux t'en rendre digne;  
 Mais aussi c'est un bien qui doit peu te flatter,  
 Si tes vœux incertains n'osent le mériter;  
 Car enfin, quelque espoir dont ma main t'entretienne  
 Tu ne peux l'obtenir sans faire agir la tienne;  
 Et je m'appête en vain à couronner ton feu,  
 Si Sinatus vengé ne m'en donne l'aveu.

(II, 5)

The noble courtier, however, is determined to retain his gloire, and to do so he subordinates his love to his loyalty to the king:

Ouvrez les yeux, madame et, sans trop vous en croire,  
 Jetez-les sur les soins que je dois à ma gloire.

Si j'aime Sinorix, il n'est point de bienfaits  
 Dont il n'ait jusqu'ici prévenu mes souhaits;  
 Ses bontés chaque jour se font pour moi paraître,  
 Je puis ce que je veux, c'est mon roi, c'est mon maître,  
 Et si j'ose sur lui porter de lâches coups,  
 Me souiller de son sang, suis-je digne de vous?  
 (II, 5)

The refusal that Sostrate makes out of loyalty does not deter the queen from seeking her vengeance; she merely makes the assassination attempt without his aid (III, 3). Sostrate's loyalty to the king does hinder the queen's vengeance, for just as the queen is about to stab Sinorix, Sostrate foils her plans and makes her drop the knife. In the darkness the king is unable to distinguish which of the two threatened his life. This time Thomas permits Sostrate's love to work advantageously for the queen. Out of love, Sostrate assumes the blame for the crime. Camma, directed by her vengeance, does not deny his confession, for she is determined to be free in order to try to kill Sinorix again.

Not only Camma, but also her daughter attempts to use Sostrate as a pawn to achieve her goal. Hésione is not aware that Sostrate loves the queen, so believing that she is using his love to gain his support, she tells him that she will marry him if he will kill Sinorix for her. Hésione wants the king dead because he has become an obstacle for her rise to the throne; Sinorix has threatened her with exile unless she marries Sostrate. Consequently, when Sostrate is accused of attempting to kill Sinorix, Hésione believes that Sostrate was trying to carry out her orders. However, although Hésione erroneously believes that she has caused his guilt, she refuses to save him.

Collins describes the delicate role that Sostrate plays as he

tries to serve two masters. He is torn between his loyalty to Camma and his loyalty to Sinorix, but he makes a good attempt to fulfill his obligation to both of them. **Moreover,** although he is used as a pawn for the **vengeance** of Camma, the ambition of Hésione, and the love of Sostrate, he retains his respectfulness and self-control, and thereby provokes the audience's sympathy.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas permits Camma's love for Sostrate to take precedence over her vengeance for a brief moment, and Camma pleads for Sostrate's life. Thomas then intensifies the significance of the role of love by making Sinorix take advantage of her feeling for Sostrate. The king strikes a bargain with her: he is to free Sostrate, and she is to become his wife. However, on their wedding night when Sinorix is about to have his desire fulfilled, Camma and Sinorix drink from the nuptial cup which Camma has poisoned. Although she too is dying, Camma quenches her lust for revenge by telling Sinorix that she knows that he killed her husband and that she, not Sostrate, tried to stab him.

The portrayal of Sinorix is noteworthy. In spite of the fact that he has usurped the throne of Galatia before the play begins, he is neither despotic nor despicable. On the contrary, Thomas presents the hero as a man afflicted with pangs of guilt, who is unable to exercise the autocratic power which he has assumed with the throne. Sinorix expresses his guilt:

Ce sont là des tyrans les damnables maximes  
En qui l'impunité fait le pardon des crimes;  
Et qui d'un noir forfait espérant quelque bien,  
Après l'avoir commis ne se reprochent rien;

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<sup>8</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 122.

Mais las! Tu me plaindrais si tu pouvais connaître  
 Ce que dans un grand coeur le repentir fait naître.  
 Quand après un effort mille fois combattu,  
 Le crime, par contrainte, échappe à la vertu,  
 De son indigne objet sans cesse possédée,  
 L'âme entraîne partout l'épouvantable idée;  
 Un vif et dur remords n'est jamais banni,  
 Et coupable un moment on est toujours puni.  
 (I, 1)

Collins makes a thorough analysis of Sinorix. He suggests that Thomas made a well-developed study of incipient madness in this character. Collins points out that Sinorix follows no premeditated strategy in his effort to win over the queen; instead he always acts impulsively and reaches for the most immediate solution.<sup>9</sup> The queen's rejection of him coupled with his feelings of guilt increase his frustration and drives him into such a state that he sees hallucinations. He reports to his confidant:

Plus j'ai lieu de tenir mon bonheur assuré  
 Plus par de vifs remords je me sens déchiré.  
 Une secrète voix que leur rigueur anime,  
 De moment en moment, me reproche mon crime;  
 Et lorsque j'en frémis, pour me confondre mieux,  
 L'ombre de Sinatus se présente à mes yeux...  
 Ses yeux quoiqu'égarés, fixés sur le coupable,  
 Me lancent un regard affreux, épouvantable;  
 Et comme si c'était me faire peu souffrir,  
 J l'entends s'écrier, "Tyran, il faut mourir..."  
 (III, 1)

Furthermore, when Camma makes an unsuccessful attempt to kill him, Sinorix's imagination exaggerates the incident and magnifies it into a general conspiracy.<sup>10</sup> By Act IV his behavior has become so irrational that his confidant describes him in this way:

Jamais tant de fureur ne se peut concevoir  
 Qu'en tous ses sentiments Sinorix en fait voir.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 123-124.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 125.



Indigne de l'orgueil que montre la princesse  
 Il éclate, il foudroie, il s'empporte sans cesse.  
 (IV, 1)

Thus, Sinorix, whose only objective is to win the love of Camma, is driven to a state of madness by his love for the queen.

### Persée et Démétrius

Thomas again returned to Livy for the historical source of Persée et Démétrius, which the Hôtel de Bourgogne presented in 1662.<sup>11</sup> To the historical data he added the love intrigue which advances the action of the play and ultimately forces the hero to kill himself.

For the first time Thomas presents two brothers who are rivals for the hand of a woman; Persée and Démétrius are both vying for the hand of the princess Érixène. Persée is heir to the throne of Macedonia, but it is his brother Démétrius that the Roman senate favors. So in order to remove the threat to his power as well as to remove a rival for the princess's affection, Persée first tries to kill Démétrius, then he attempts to portray his brother falsely as an evil zealot of Roman expansionism. This is the dominant action of the play.

Thomas again gives love the role of an essential activating device. After hearing Persée's testimony accusing his brother of traitorous activities and Démétrius' testimony accusing Persée of attempts to kill him, their father Philippe tests Démétrius' loyalty by ordering him to marry Didas' daughter in the interest of the state. Although Démétrius tells his father that he is willing to marry Didas' daughter, his love for the Thracian princess Érixène prevents him from

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<sup>11</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 444.

heartily accepting the marriage.

Thomas uses Démétrius' love to set off a chain reaction of events which lead to his death. First, he tells Didas to refuse the marriage offer so that Démétrius will appear loyal to his father and so he will be free to pursue the love of Érixène. The plan backfires, for Érixène after hearing that it was Didas and not Démétrius who refused the marriage, is infuriated and she sets out to avenge his apparently ignoble treatment of her:

Ah! pour fléchir le mien  
Ne crois pas que jamais le remords puisse rien.  
Plus l'amant nous fut cher, plus son ingratitude  
Rend le coup qui nous blesse et surprenant et rude;  
Et sa peine, attirant nos plus ardents souhaits,  
Si l'amour n'en meurt point, il n'en guérit jamais.  
(III, 1)

In order to reap her vengeance, she accepts Persée's proposal of marriage. This is, in fact, all that the heroine does. Unlike Camma who tries to reap her vengeance by lying, soliciting help, and attempting murder twice, Érixène merely accepts Persée's proposal.

This one act, however, motivates Démétrius' threat to kill his brother:

Ou le public aveu de sa coupable adresse,  
Justifiant ma foi, me rendra ma princesse,  
Ou de mes tristes jours par lui précipités,  
Son sang, son lâche sang...  
(IV, 5)

This leads Persée to send a letter to his father with false testimony proving Démétrius' traitorous acts. As a result of the threat and the letter, the father decides to poison Démétrius. Although the innocence of Démétrius is revealed in the final scenes, it is too late, for the prince has killed himself.

Thomas offers love as the reason that Démétrius kills himself. In a récit of the hero's death speech, Thomas fully explains the power of love over Démétrius:

"J'exécute...l'ordre de ma princesse,  
Et la mets en pouvoir de donner une foi  
Qui n'aurait pu, sans crime, être à d'autre qu'à moi.  
C'est le moins que je dusse au beau feu qui m'anime,  
Que rendre par ma mort son hymen légitime....  
(V, 6)

Then he reiterates almost verbatim the words of Eucharis:

"Je l'aimais chèrement, mais malgré tant d'amour,  
Qui n'en est point aimé n'est plus digne du jour....  
(V, 6)

In the end Érixène, similar to Placidie, realizes her guilt in Démétrius' death:

Jalouse autant que fière aux dépens de mon feu,  
Je l'ai voulu punir d'un trop honteux aveu.  
Sa mort en est l'effet; et, quand j'en sens l'atteinte,  
N'attendez point qu'ici je m'arrête à la plainte.  
(V, 6)

Although Thomas chose a fine subject for his tragedy Persée et Démétrius, he did not exploit the possibilities of the subject, and he succeeded in writing only a mediocre play. He did present a sharp contrast between the ambitious Persée and the dashing young Démétrius.<sup>12</sup> However, his portrayal of Philippe and Érixène is weak. He endowed Philippe with some paternal feeling, but he does not sufficiently stress the king's patriotism; moreover, he permits the king to be too easily deceived into condemning Démétrius.<sup>13</sup> Finally, his portrayal of the princess is simply not striking enough, and she does not hold the audience's interest. "Érixène is too vengeful to win sympathy and

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 444-445.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 444.

her temporary acceptance of Persée is not in keeping with her character."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he does not present her with a sufficient degree of either haughtiness, as Placidie, or revenge, as Camma, to ultimately cause Démétrius' death.

In the three plays discussed in this chapter, Thomas demonstrates that the amorous suitors, who so often spoke of dying of their love in his other tragedies, actually did sacrifice their lives for their love. In Stilicon and Persée et Démétrius the refusal of the heroines to accept the love of their gallants eventually led to the heroes' demise. Camma, however, was more actively involved in the death of the man who wooed her, for she not only poisoned the king and attempted to stab him, but she also inadvertently drove him to madness while she was reaping her revenge on the man whose only fault was his excessive love for her.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER V

### THE HUMAN CONDITION

Thomas's last three tragedies, Ariane, La Mort d'Achille, and Le Comte d'Essex, demonstrate the development of the playwright's dramatic technique, as he turned away from the presentation of an artificial précieux code of behavior and substituted it with an analysis of human emotions. No longer do the heroines reject their young men because they have apparently insulted their gloire. And no longer do the heroes worship at the feet of their idolized ladies and submit to their every wish. Moreover, the characters are not entirely good, nor are they entirely bad. Rather, Thomas depicts figures who are human beings, and he portrays the inner turmoil of their passions.

#### Ariane

Ariane appeared for the first time at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1672, and is considered to be one of Thomas's best plays. For the starting point of his tragedy Thomas borrowed from Plutarch's Life of Theseus and also from the plays of Garnier and Hardy.<sup>1</sup> He then altered the sources considerably and succeeded in presenting an excellent drama.

Ariane marks a distinct change in Thomas's view of tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 599.

Instead of offering his audience a situation which changes from moment to moment as a result of external actions, he presents only one situation and analyzes the internal effects produced in the characters. Before the play begins, Ariane has saved the life of Thésée and has fled from Crete and her father's wrath to the island of Naxos with him and her sister Phèdre. Out of gratitude Thésée has promised his love to Ariane, but during their stay on Naxos, Thésée and Phèdre have fallen in love. During the play Thomas centers the audience's attention on the inner conflict of the heroine as she discovers that her beloved Thésée and her sister are in love. As Reynier points out: "Nous n'avons donc là ni intrigue ni péripéties, mais simplement une situation, qui aurait pu être expliquée en une seule scène...."<sup>2</sup> The simplicity of the plot contrasts sharply with Thomas's previous tragedies, for in his earlier works Thomas took every opportunity to complicate the action. Hidden identity, wars, assassination attempts, and récits which drastically change the direction of the action and leave the outcome in doubt are all absent in Ariane. Instead, Thomas creates a plot which is completely dependent upon the internal, psychological motivations of the people involved.

In Ariane Thomas no longer appeals to the audience's intellectual ability to follow the changing fortunes of his detective story plots, but rather he appeals to the spectators' emotions. The figure of the jilted heroine who has been betrayed by her own sister is filled with pathos. It is precisely this emotional appeal which earned the admiration of the French critics, Mme de Sévigné, Donneau de Visé, the

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<sup>2</sup>Reynier, Thomas Corneille, p. 179.

brothers Parfaict, La Harpe, Nisard, and Voltaire.<sup>3</sup> Reynier offers the eulogy:

Il n'y a pas, dans tout notre théâtre classique, de personnage qui inspire, plus qu'Ariane, une pitié complète, absolue, sans mélange d'autre sentiment. Plus sympathique que la Phèdre de Racine, parce qu'elle ne brûle pas d'un amour coupable et qu'elle ne se venge pas de celui qui la dédaigne; plus touchante qu'Hermione, trop violente, trop cruelle; plus misérable que Bérénice, qui "emportera dans la Judée tout l'amour de Titus", elle nous attache à elle par sa candeur, par sa confiance, par sa tendresse en pleurs, parce qu'elle connaît, dans un court instant, toutes les peines, et aussi parce qu'elle est sans force dans un tel excès de maux.<sup>4</sup>

Until recently literary critics, La Harpe, Reynier, and others, tended to view the seventeenth century as a monolithic period and classified all the dramatic works of the century according to their similarity to the tragedies of Corneille and Racine. They all agree that Ariane is a Racinian tragedy. Reynier so defines the play because in addition to being based on a Greek source it has the following qualities:

...la simplicité des situations, la conduite de l'intrigue, qui est réduite presque à rien et dont les rares péripéties sont amenées par les mouvements des passions plutôt que par les événements extérieurs....l'émotion...c'est non plus l'étonnement et l'admiration, mais l'attendrissement et la pitié...<sup>5</sup>

The new critics of seventeenth-century literature have a more just and realistic view of the period. Lancaster, for example, not only discredits this false notion, but demonstrates that the qualities that are credited to Racine already existed in many plays written before Racine's works. Concerning Ariane, Lancaster concludes: "Her appealing character and the simplicity of the plot have made some critics

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<sup>3</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup>Reynier, Thomas Corneille, pp. 189-190.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

suppose that the tragedy was written in imitation of Racine, but there is no proof that this was the case."<sup>6</sup>

Thomas opens the play with a conversation between Oenarus, the king of Naxos, and his confidant; here he offers the audience the background of the plot by recounting Ariane's rescue of Thésée, his victory over the Minotaur, their flight to Naxos with Ariane's sister Phèdre, the hero's delay of his marriage to Ariane, and the arrival of Pirithoüs in Oenarus' court. In the first scene the king describes his love for Ariane. Although Ariane was engaged to Thésée, Oenarus believed that he had hope for the fulfillment of his love because of Thésée's actions. First, the young man postponed the marriage for three months on the weak excuse that he was waiting for his friend Pirithoüs to return. Then, while he was at Oenarus' court, Thésée was not absorbed in his love for Ariane; instead, he paid attention to some of the other women, and gave the king the impression that he did not love Ariane:

Les plus charmants objets qui brillent dans ma cour  
Sembloient chercher Thésée, et briguer son amour.  
Il rendoit quelques soins à Mégiste, à Cyane;  
Tout cela me flattoit du côté d'Ariane;  
Et j'allois quelquefois jusqu'à m'imaginer  
Qu'il dédaignoit un bien qu'il n'osoit me donner.  
(I, 1)

Hence, Oenarus felt encouraged in showing his affection for Ariane. He confessed his love to her, but Ariane always remained faithful to Thésée. Oenarus then defines his overpowering and irrational love:

...ce n'est ni par choix, ni par raison d'aimer,  
Qu'en voyant ce qui plaît on se laisse enflammer:

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<sup>6</sup>Lancaster, History, Part V, p. 82.



D'un aveugle penchant le charme imperceptible  
 Frappe, saisit, entraîne, et rend un coeur sensible;  
 Et, par une secrète et nécessaire loi,  
 On se livre à l'amour sans qu'on sache pourquoi.  
 Je l'éprouve au supplice où le ciel me condamne.  
 Tout me parle pour Phèdre, et tout contre Ariane,  
 Et, quoi que sur le choix ma raison ait de jour,  
 L'une a ma seule estime, et l'autre mon amour.  
 (I, 1)

In the following scene Thomas underlines the love that Oenarus has for Ariane. While speaking to Thésée, Oenarus permits his feeling for Ariane to reveal itself to his rival.

Thomas devotes the third scene to the development of the situation which he has already presented, and points out that Oenarus' suspicion of Thésée's love had a good foundation. Thésée explains that although he has tried, he is unable to love Ariane because he loves her sister:

Ma raison, qui toujours s'intéresse pour elle,  
 Me dit qu'elle est aimable, et mes yeux qu'elle est belle,  
 L'amour sur leur rapport tâche de m'ébranler:  
 Mais, quand le coeur se tait, l'amour a beau parler....  
 (I, 3)

Here Thomas offers a completely different type of hero from those in his previous plays. The gallants of the earlier tragedies had only one depth, and their actions reflected their psychological motivations; the heroes courted the women they loved and demonstrated their worthiness by protecting the gloire of their women and usually by exhibiting deeds of valor. It was only the tyrants and the ignoble arrivistes who professed love to women for whom they had no deep affection. Thésée, on the other hand, is more human than Thomas's previous heroes. Out of gratitude rather than love, he courts the princess who is logically the best match for him. This is a definite breach of the chivalric code previously presented by the playwright; in fact, if

Thésée had appeared in an earlier tragedy of Thomas, he would not have been considered a worthy suitor because he did not possess an unstained, pure love. Also in contrast to Thomas's previous heroes, Thésée's turmoil is not caused by a superficial conflict between his love and his gloire or duty, it is rather a complex human struggle which involves his love for Phèdre, his debt to Ariane, and his concern for Ariane's feelings. He realizes that he owes Ariane his love out of gratitude for her saving his life and sacrificing her home and family for him, and he is ashamed that he cannot love her:

Touché de son amour, confus de son éclat,  
Je me suis mille fois reproché d'être ingrat;  
Mille fois j'ai rougi de ce que j'ose faire.  
(I, 3)

He then explains that he was trying simultaneously to discourage Ariane's love for him and give the king reason to pursue her by paying attention to the women at court. Then Thomas in order to emphasize the character of Ariane, has Thésée state just as Oenarus did, that Ariane remains faithful.

Thus, Thomas shows that Thésée has tried to ease himself out of the distasteful position, but he also points out that in doing so the hero has been careful to protect Ariane from being hurt. Through the expression of Thésée's lamentable dilemma and his emphasis on the hero's concern for the feelings of Ariane, Thomas draws the sympathy and pity of the audience for the hero. Even at the end of the scene when Thésée decides to reveal his lack of love to Ariane, Thomas shows that he attempts to avoid hurting her. Thésée asks his friend Pirithoüs to tell her:

...vous lui peindrez mieux l'embarras de mon coeur.

Parlez; mais gardez bien de lui nommer sa soeur.  
 Savoir qu'une rivale ait mon âme charmée,  
 La chercher, la trouver dans une soeur aimée,  
 Ce seroit un supplice....

(I, 3)

Phèdre then makes her entrance in the following scene. Before her entrance, however, the playwright has given the spectators enough information about her that they are well prepared for her introduction. In the first scene the king tells of her beauty:

Phèdre dans sa beauté n'a rien qui n'éblouisse;  
 Les charmes de sa soeur sont à peine aussi doux....

(I, 1)

Thésée then underlines her loveliness and reveals that she returns his love:

Sa beauté, pour qui seule en secret je soupire,  
 M'a fait voir de l'amour jusqu'où s'étend l'empire;  
 Je l'ai connu par elle, et ne m'en sens charmé  
 Que depuis que je l'aime et que j'en suis aimé.

(I, 3)

Having provided adequately for Phèdre's entrance, Thomas permits the audience to witness a love scene between Phèdre and Thésée. Again there is a sharp contrast between the combats de générosité in his previous plays and the natural love that the couple exhibits here. The young lovers here show absolutely no regard for protecting their gloire, nor do they lead the audience through a journey directed by the Carte de tendre. Their sole concern is the unadorned love that they have for each other and the anguish which it is causing them.

Thésée is straightforward when he asks her:

Eh bien! à quoi, madame, êtes-vous résolue?  
 Je n'ai plus de prétexte à cacher mon secret.  
 Ne verrez-vous jamais mon amour qu'à regret...?  
 M'aimerez-vous si peu, que, pour le retarder,  
 Vous me disiez encor que c'est trop hasarder?

(I, 4)

She is equally direct in her response:

Prince, je vous l'ai dit, il est vrai, je vous aime;  
Et, quand d'un coeur bien né la gloire est le secours,  
L'avoir dit une fois, c'est le dire toujours.  
(I, 4)

The lovers both demonstrate their human emotions without recourse to a précieux code, and hence, they are antithetical to the characters who inhabit his previous tragedies. Phèdre does not look upon Thésée with disdain because he has courted another woman, whereas her predecessors tortured their lovers by refusing their love, or in the case of Érixène, drove their lovers to their deaths when they merely suspected that the heroes were unfaithful. Phèdre, on the other hand, not only accepts Thésée's actions as natural, but she tells him that the only reason she has not eloped with him before is that she cares for her sister:

J'aurois de ces combats affranchi votre coeur  
Si j'eusse eu pour rivale une autre qu'une soeur;  
Mais trahir l'amitié dont on la voit sans cesse....  
Non, Thésée; elle m'aime avec trop de tendresse.  
(I, 4)

There is no question of honor involved; Phèdre is simply torn between her affection for her sister and her love for Thésée. In this struggle first her concern for her sister is dominant, and she tells Thésée:

Rendez-lui votre amour, cet amour qui sans elle  
Auroit peut-être dû me demeurer fidèle....  
(I, 4)

In the end, nonetheless, her love for Thésée is victorious:

Peut-être que sur moi la crainte a trop d'empire.  
Suivez ce qu'en secret votre coeur vous inspire;  
Et de quoi que le mien puisse encor s'alarmer,  
N'écoutez que l'amour, si vous savez aimer.  
(I, 4)

In order to draw the greatest degree of pity possible for the

heroine, Thomas postpones her entrance until the beginning of the second act. When the scene begins, Ariane provokes an even deeper sympathy from the audience, for the spectators know that although she does not realize it, the words she utters about the king are applicable to her:

Mais quand d'un premier feu l'âme tout occupée  
Ne trouve de douceur qu'aux traits qui l'ont frappée,  
C'est un sujet d'ennui qui ne peut s'exprimer,  
Qu'un amant qu'on néglige, et qui parle d'aimer.  
(II, 1)

Thomas presents the picture of a happy woman in love. Ariane asks her confidante:

Tandis que le roi vient, parle-moi de Thésée:  
Peins-moi bien quel honneur je reçois de sa foi;  
Peins-moi bien tout l'amour dont il brûle pour moi;  
Offres-en à mes yeux la plus sensible image.  
(II, 1)

Yet, with every word, she provokes more compassion from the spectators because they know that her happiness will soon be replaced by despair.

Ariane is proud of her fiancé, and compares him to Hercules:

De cent monstres par lui l'univers dégagé  
Se voit d'un mauvais sang heureusement purgé.  
Combien, ainsi qu'Hercule, a-t-il pris de victimes!  
(II, 1)

Because she loves Thésée so deeply, she wants to praise him, and she is distressed that her sister does not speak of him:

...je voudrais que tout ce que je voi  
S'en entretînt sans cesse, en parlât comme moi.  
J'aime Phèdre; tu sais combien elle m'est chère:  
Si quelque chose en elle a de quoi me déplaire,  
C'est de voir son esprit, de froideur combattu,  
Négliger entre nous de louer sa vertu.  
(II, 1)

Again, the audience knows the reason for Phèdre's actions and pities Ariane.

Later Thomas offers a scene filled with suspense as Thésée tries to tell Ariane that he does not want to marry her. When he enters, he interrupts Oenarus who is again proposing to her. When they are alone, Thésée's first words to Ariane are in praise of the king, for he still hopes that she and Oenarus will wed.

Il faut l'avouer sa gloire,  
Sa vertu va plus loin que je n'aurois pu croire.  
Au bonheur d'un rival lui-même consentir!  
(I, 4)

Ariane again frustrates his hopes:

L'honneur à cet effort a dû l'assujettir.  
Qu'eût-il fait? il sait trop que mon amour extrême,  
En s'attachant à vous, n'a cherché que vous-même;  
Et qu'ayant tout quitté pour vous prouver ma foi,  
Mille trônes offerts ne pourroient rien sur moi.  
(I, 4)

Throughout the scene Thésée's inner conflict is reflected in his verbal expression. He tries to tell Ariane that she should marry the king, but he is ashamed of the action he is taking. His turmoil prevents him from expressing his wish, demonstrated in his hesitant speech and his inability to express his thoughts. He makes his first attempt:

Tant d'amour me confond; et plus je vois, madame,  
Que je dois....  
(I, 4)

Then a second time:

L'offre de cet hymen rendra sa joie extrême:  
Mais, madame, le roi....Vous savez qu'il vous aime.  
S'il faut....  
(I, 4)

He is finally reduced to exclamatory expressions:

C'en est trop....Mon coeur....Dieux!  
(I, 4)

Thésée tries a total of seven times during the scene to reveal his

feelings to Ariane. At each new attempt the suspense heightens. The audience knows what he wants to say, and is anxious for him to speak and have done with it.

The scene is not only filled with suspense but also pathos which Thomas increases with the use of quid pro quo. Ariane believes that Thésée's hesitant speech is caused by his fear that the king will steal her away from him, and she tells him repeatedly that he has nothing to fear. Her reaction only augments Thésée's discomfort. Finally, he escapes further agony and exits as Pirithoüs enters. He leaves her with:

Adieu: Pirithoüs vous peut dire le reste,  
Sans l'amour, qui du roi vous soumet les états,  
Je vous conseillerois de ne l'apprendre pas.  
(I, 4)

Thésée's strange conduct and his sudden, unexplained exit pique Ariane's curiosity, but the spectators see that she has no grasp whatsoever of the grim situation as she poses the mild question to Pirithoüs:

Quel est ce grand secret, prince? et par quel mystère  
Vouloir me l'expliquer, et tout à coup se taire?  
(II, 5)

The vague reply of Pirithoüs makes Ariane jump to the conclusion that the Athenian people reject her as their queen. Thomas demonstrates that she does not have the slightest doubt that Thésée loves her, for she feels that the only threat to the fulfillment of her hopes lies in the Athenian people. Throughout the scene Pirithoüs tries to convince her that she should marry Oenarus. He never tells her directly that Thésée simply does not love her, but when she accuses him:

Dieux! quel étonnement seroit au sien égal,  
S'il (Thésée) savoit qu'un ami parlât pour son rival,

S'il savoit qu'il voulût lui ravir ce qu'il aime!  
(II, 5)

he replies:

Vous le consulterez; n'en croyez que lui-même.  
(II, 5)

Thomas has Ariane herself suggest that she has a rival, and he uses Pirithoüs' silence to show her that she is right. However, the woman refuses to believe this:

Non, non, Pirithoüs, on vous trompe, sans doute.  
Il m'aime; et s'il m'en faut séparer quelque jour,  
Je pleurerai sa mort, et non pas son amour.  
(II, 5)

When she begins to realize the truth of her situation, she fires questions at him hoping that he will tell her that she is wrong. As Reynier observes: "Lorsque enfin cette vérité lui apparaît brusquement, il lui semble qu'avec sa croyance elle a perdu aussi sa raison."<sup>7</sup>

Ariane reveals this herself in the following scene:

Dieux, contre un tel ennui soutenez ma raison....  
(II, 6)

Thomas then has her analyze the emotion that she is experiencing:

Elle (la raison) cède à l'horreur de cette trahison:  
Je la sens qui déjà....Mais quand elle s'égare,  
Pourquoi la regretter cette raison barbare,  
Qui ne peut plus servir qu'à me faire mieux voir  
Le sujet de ma rage et de mon désespoir?  
(II, 6)

The woman trusted in Thésée so much that since he has now proven himself unworthy, she has lost faith in everything:

N'attendez plus de foi, plus d'honneur: tout chancelle,  
Tout doit être suspect; Thésée est infidèle.  
(II, 7)

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<sup>7</sup>Reynier, Thomas Corneille, p. 185.



After her moment of hysteria, Ariane's anguish turns to vengeance. She expresses her notion of Thésée's indebtedness to her, which she will repeat time and again. She feels that he owes her his love because she has sacrificed so much for him:

Oui, ma soeur, après ce qu'il me doit,  
Me quitter est le prix que ma flamme en reçoit;  
Il me trahit....

(II, 7)

And her first thought is punishing him for hurting her:

Son sang devrait payer la douleur qui me presse.  
(II, 7)

However, Thomas proves that her love is still too strong to permit her to plot a course of revenge. Again, Ariane herself expresses this:

Mais quoi qu'à ma vengeance un fier dépit suggère,  
Mon amour est encor plus fort que ma colère.  
Ma main tremble; et, malgré son parjure odieux,  
Je vois toujours en lui ce que j'aime le mieux.  
(II, 7)

Thomas adds a touch of irony to the scene as Ariane tells Phèdre:

Hélas! et plutôt au ciel que vous sussiez aimer,  
Que vous pussiez savoir, par votre expérience,  
Jusqu'où d'un fort amour s'étend la violence!  
(II, 7)

The irony becomes even more biting when Ariane asks her sister to win Thésée for her:

Pour émouvoir l'ingrat, pour fléchir sa rigueur,  
Vous trouveriez bien mieux le chemin de son coeur;  
Vous auriez plus d'adresse à lui faire l'image  
De mes confus transports de douleur et de rage;  
Tous les traits en seroient plus vivement tracés.  
N'importe; essayez tout; parlez, priez, pressez.  
(II, 7)

Hence, during the second act, Thomas concentrates on the depiction of Ariane. At the beginning of the act, he portrays a cheerful woman who is about to have her dreams fulfilled by marrying the man she loves.

Then the playwright analyzes the sequence of her changing emotions as her joy turns to anguish at the discovery that Thésée rejects her for another woman. Moreover, by offering the audience insight into the pathetic situation in the first act, Thomas makes full use of irony to deepen the spectators' sympathy for the heroine.

The third act is devoted to the heroine's attempt to regain her former happiness. Having sent Phèdre to plead her case, Ariane demands to know the results of her sister's confrontation with Thésée which has occurred between acts. Here Thomas not only offers a récit of the scene which has taken place off-stage, but he also gives Phèdre's analysis of the emotional turmoil of the hero:

Madame, j'ai tout fait pour ébranler son âme;  
J'ai peint son changement lâche, odieux, infâme....  
Il connoît et son crime et son ingratitude;  
Il s'en hait; il en sent la peine la plus rude;  
Ses ennuis de vos maux égalent la rigueur....  
(III, 2)

She then removes the guilt from Thésée by placing the blame on fate:

Mais l'amour en tyran dispose de son coeur;  
Et le destin, plus fort que sa reconnoissance,  
Malgré ce qu'il vous doit, l'entraîne à l'inconstance.  
(III, 2)

Thomas contrasts Phèdre's justification of the hero's actions with Ariane's scorn:

Quelle excuse! et pour moi qu'il rend peu de combat!  
Il hait l'ingratitude, et se plaît d'être ingrat!  
(III, 2)

The playwright demonstrates the heroine's bitterness as she lashes out at her sister:

Vous avez oublié de bien marquer l'horreur  
Du fatal désespoir qui règne dans mon coeur;  
Vous avez oublié, pour bien peindre ma rage,  
D'assembler tous les maux dont on connoît l'image....  
(III, 2)

Although she apologizes to Phèdre, she remains deluded by her emotions. She is still convinced that once the hero is fully aware of her grief, he will marry her.

While Ariane awaits the arrival of Thésée, she has a moment of objectivity. She views his past actions and concludes in retrospect that her own feelings blinded her to his motivations. First, she takes the marriage postponement into consideration:

Et ne devois-je pas, quoi qu'il me fît entendre,  
Pénétrer les raisons qui vous (Pirithoüs) faisoient attendre,  
Et juger qu'en un coeur épris d'un feu constant,  
L'amour à l'amitié ne défère pas tant?  
(III, 3)

Her thinking becomes even clearer as she remembers the attention that he gave to other women:

Je faisais plus; j'allois jusqu'à voir sans alarmes  
Que des beautés de Naxe il estimât les charmes;  
Et ne pouvois penser qu'ayant reçu sa foi,  
Quelques vœux égarés pussent rien contre moi.  
(III, 3)

Her objectivity is short-lived, for once Ariane understands her position, her anguish magnifies Thésée's actions into a conspiracy to kill her:

Thésée avec le ciel conspire à me trahir:  
Rompre un si grand projet, ce seroit lui déplaire.  
L'ingrat veut que je meure....  
(III, 3)

However, her reason again takes over for a moment, and she plans her modus operandi for her confrontation with Thésée:

...il faut le satisfaire,  
Et lui laisser sentir, pour double châtiment,  
Le remords de ma perte et de son changement.  
(III, 3)

Ariane begins calmly to carry out her plan. As the hero approaches:

Le trouble dans les yeux, et la rougeur au front  
(III, 4)

she uses reverse psychology to increase his discomfort, she praises him and takes his blame upon herself:

Un héros tel que vous, à qui la gloire est chère,  
Quoi qu'il fasse, ne fait que ce qu'il voit à faire;  
Et si ce qu'on m'a dit a quelque vérité,  
Vous cessez de m'aimer, je l'aurai mérité.  
(III, 4)

Then quite naturally she asks him how she has changed to make his love for her die. Thomas uses Thésée's direct remarks to spark Ariane's rage and to augment it until she loses her self-control completely. When Thésée responds,

...Elle est toujours la même;  
Même zèle toujours suit mon respect extrême;  
(III, 4)

he awakens her wrath. And again she refers to his debt to her:

Et quand à votre foi cet amour s'abandonne,  
Des serments de respect sont le prix qu'on lui donne!  
Par ce soin de vos jours qui m'a tout fait quitter,  
N'aspirois-je à rien plus qu'à me voir respecter?  
Un service pareil veut un autre salaire.  
(III, 4)

Her fury mounts when he explains that he is unable to control his love. She compares his weakness to her courage, and she counters with:

Tu ne peux rien de plus! Qu'aurois-tu fait, parjure,  
Si, quand tu vins du monstre éprouver l'aventure,  
Abandonnant ta vie à ta seule valeur,  
Je me fusse arrêtée à plaindre ton malheur?  
(III, 4)

In her impassioned state she forgets her plan and assails his honor:

C'est là surtout, c'est là ce qui souille ta gloire:  
Tu t'es plu sans m'aimer à me le faire croire;  
Tes indignes serments sur mon crédule esprit....  
(III, 4)

As Ariane realizes that her cause is futile, her arguments become

unorganized and irrational. She constructs a completely fallacious comparison between her relationship with the king and Thésée's love for her rival:

Dans Naxe, tu le sais, un roi, grand, magnanime,  
 Pour moi, dès qu'il me vit, prit une tendre estime:  
 Il soumit à mes vœux et son trône et sa foi:  
 Quoi qu'il ait pu m'offrir, ai-je fait comme toi?  
 (III, 4)

She then arrives at the non sequitur:

Si tu n'es point touché de ma douleur extrême,  
 Rends-moi ton coeur, ingrat, par pitié de toi-même.  
 (III, 4)

Ariane continues to rant, telling him that she is better than her unknown rival and that he will one day regret his treatment of her. She reaches the point of hysteria and breaks into tears.

Thus, the playwright offers a penetrating portrayal of the scorned woman as she loses her power of self-control when she realizes that the man she loves rejects her. The relationship between the hero and the heroine is antithetic to all of Thomas's previous tragedies. The princesses of the earlier plays directed the actions of their gallants, and the heroes proved their worthiness by protecting their women and by performing courageous deeds. In Ariane, on the other hand, it is the heroine who repeatedly points out her merit by referring to her protection of Thésée. Moreover, similar to the prior heroes, Ariane speaks of the anguish that love has brought her. Furthermore, in contrast to the précieus princesses, the heroine does not care a whit for her gloire. Even after she has been told frankly that the man she loves does not return her feeling and is, in fact, in love with another woman, she grovels before him begging him to marry her.

Now that Ariane has no hope whatsoever of winning Thésée, she directs all her energy toward one goal: reaping her revenge. First, in hopes of unveiling the identity of her rival, she tells the king that she will marry him after Thésée weds. Phèdre is amazed at her sister's action. Then in a scene charged with irony Ariane discloses her plot to Phèdre. Secrecy is an essential part of her plan, yet she unknowingly informs her rival at the outset. She explains:

A ma honte partout ma flamme aura fait bruit,  
Et ma lâche rivale en cueillera le fruit!  
J'y donnerai bon ordre. Il faut, pour la connoître,  
Empêcher, s'il se peut, ma fureur de paroître:  
Moins l'amour outragé fait voir d'emportement,  
Plus, quand le coup approche, il frappe sûrement.  
(IV, 3)

Thomas augments the spectators' sympathy for the heroine by demonstrating her love for her sister:

Je vous connois, ma soeur.  
Aussi c'est seulement en vous ouvrant mon âme  
Que dans son désespoir je soulage ma flamme.  
Que de projets trahis! Sans cet indigne abus,  
J'arrêtois votre hymen avec Pirithoüs;  
Et de mon amitié cette marque nouvelle  
Vous doit faire encor plus haïr mon infidèle.  
(IV, 3)

The irony of the situation becomes even sharper as Ariane asks Phèdre to spy for her and help her disclose the name of her rival:

Sur le bruit qu'aura fait son changement d'amour,  
Sachez adroitement ce qu'on dit à la cour....  
Vous savez que l'amour aisément se trahit:  
Observez ses regards, son trouble, son silence.  
(IV, 3)

Ariane then asks her rival to judge the situation from her viewpoint:

Vous-même, jugez-en. Elle me fait trahir;  
Par elle je perds tout: la puis-je assez haïr...?  
Je n'avois que ce coeur que je croyois à moi.  
Je le perds, on me l'ôte: il n'est rien que n'essaie  
La fureur qui m'anime, afin qu'on me le paie....  
(IV, 3)

Phèdre draws out her sister to find out what is in store for her.

The heroine discloses her entire plan:

L'aller trouver, la voir, et de ma propre main  
Lui mettre, lui plonger un poignard dans le sein.  
(IV, 3)

Her sister makes a mild attempt to justify her actions, but Ariane remains firm:

Point de pardon, ma soeur; il falloit m'avertir:  
Son silence fait voir qu'elle a part au parjure.  
Enfin il faut du sang pour laver mon injure.  
(IV, 3)

As her last naive move of the act, Ariane tells Thésée:

...ma soeur, qui peut vous écouter,  
Saura ce qu'il vous reste encore à consulter.  
(IV, 4)

With this invitation from her sister, Phèdre reveals the entire scheme to Thésée, and they decide to flee together.

In Act V Thomas offers the audience another portrayal of the transformation of the heroine from a rational, controlled state into a frenzied condition. As the act begins, he continues his skillful use of irony. Ariane speaks to her confidante of the whispers accusing Cyane of being Thésée's lover. The confidante claims:

On la nomme à cause qu'il la voit:  
Mais qu'en pouvoir juger? il voit Phèdre de même;  
Et cependant, madame, est-ce Phèdre qu'il aime?  
(V, 1)

The naive heroine replies:

Que n'a-t-il pu l'aimer! Phèdre l'auroit connu,  
Et par là mon malheur eût été prévenu.  
De sa flamme par elle aussitôt avertie,  
Dans sa première ardeur je l'aurois amortie.  
Par où vaincre d'ailleurs les rebuts de ma soeur?  
(V, 1)

Only moments later Ariane discovers that both Thésée and her sister

are absent from the court, and she finally suspects the truth.

The playwright again makes the conventional use of the note as a vehicle to develop the action of the play. The letter addressed to Pirithoüs states that Thésée and Phèdre are in love and have fled together. Thomas's aim is not to shock the audience; on the contrary, he has prepared the spectators well in advance. His main purpose is to set off the metamorphosis of the heroine. At the opening of the fifth act, Ariane is self-controlled; she has gathered all of her emotional strength and directed it toward one objective, her revenge. That is, in fact, the reason that she is able to prevent an emotional collapse. The letter then not only robs her of the opportunity for revenge but also of the force to maintain her mental equilibrium.

Her first act is to rebuke the person available, just as she accused her sister in a previous scene of not painting a real picture of her anguish to Thésée. This time she assails Pirithoüs:

Laissez-moi; je ne veux vous voir ni vous entendre.  
C'est vous, Pirithoüs, dont le funeste abord,  
Toujours fatal pour moi, précipite ma mort.  
(V, 4)

Then she laments her despair:

Une rivale au moins pour soulager ma peine,  
M'offroit en la perdant de quoi plaire à ma haine;  
Je promettois son sang à mes bouillants transports....  
(V, 5)

Next, she views the situation in retrospect and discovers the culpability of Phèdre:

C'est Phèdre, cette Phèdre à qui j'ouvrais mon coeur!  
Quand je lui faisais voir ma peine sans égale,  
Quand j'en marquais l'horreur, c'étoit à ma rivale!  
La perfide, abusant de ma tendre amitié,  
Montroit de ma disgrâce une fausse pitié!  
(V, 5)



She finally understands that she has foiled her own plot for revenge:

C'est là mon désespoir. Pour avoir trop parlé,  
Je perds ce que déjà je tenois immolé.  
Je l'ai portée à fuir, et, par mon imprudence,  
Moi-même je me suis dérobé ma vengeance.  
(V, 5)

This final realization proves to be too great a burden for her emotional state. She rapidly sums up the present situation, and then loses her control entirely and lapses into the past:

Je ne m'étonne plus qu'il craigne de me voir:  
La honte qu'il en a lui fait fuir ma rencontre.  
Mais enfin à mes yeux il faudra qu'il se montre:  
Nous verrons s'il tiendra contre ce qu'il me doit;  
Mes larmes parleront, c'en est fait s'il les voit....  
(V, 5)

Thus, although she cannot forget her deplorable position, her mind returns to a point in time when she at least held some hope for regaining her happiness.

She then vacillates between the real world and the domain created by her imagination. She suddenly becomes aware of her irrational wanderings:

Mais à quel lâche espoir mon trouble me réduit!  
Si j'aime encor Thésée, oublie-je qu'il fuit?  
(V, 5)

However, her emotions are unable to bear the pressure of the dreadful facts, and consequently, Ariane takes refuge in the realm of her own creation. She imagines that she is speaking to Thésée and rejecting his love:

Non, parjure Thésée,  
Ne crois pas que jamais je puisse être apaisée;  
Ton amour y feroit des efforts superflus.  
Le plus grand de mes maux est de ne t'aimer plus....  
(V, 6)

She makes one final return to reality:

Mais quelle est mon erreur! Dieux! je menace en l'air.  
(V, 6)

But still refusing to accept the factual world, she tries to throw herself on Pirithoüs' sword. Thomas draws the pity of the audience until the very end; she is prevented by Pirithoüs from carrying through even her suicide attempt. To escape the horror of the truth, Ariane swoons as the play ends.

Thus, it is apparent that Ariane marks a distinct departure from Thomas's earlier tragedies. He makes a moving analysis of the psychological motivations of the heroine without resorting to a superficial précieux code. Moreover, he does not encumber his depiction with exterior complications. The entire action is focused on Ariane's inner turmoil. The role required the skillful interpretation of la Champmeslé, and it was her acting that contributed greatly to the success of the play.<sup>8</sup>

Because the starring role is so dominant, the rest of the cast are relegated to rather small supporting parts. Collins observes: "While Phèdre, Thésée, Pirithoüs, and Oenarus remain relatively static as agents of interest, Ariane evolves dynamically through a series of attitudes each of which claims renewed attention."<sup>9</sup> Through the years, the critics have offered varying opinions of the minor characters.<sup>10</sup> According to Voltaire, "Toutes les scènes où Ariane ne paraît pas sont

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<sup>8</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 602.

<sup>9</sup>Collins, Thomas Corneille, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup>See Lancaster, Part III, p. 601 and Collins pp. 148-156 for a complete discussion of critical opinion on the minor roles.

absolument manquée."<sup>11</sup>

However, it is necessary to take into consideration the aim of the playwright, which past critics have not sufficiently done. The function of the supporting cast is to arouse the audience's sympathy for Ariane. Thomas portrays the lesser characters and their turmoil adequately for his purpose. He depicts the love of Phèdre and Thésée, their subsequent guilt, and their concern for Ariane in the first act; he, therefore, prepares the audience for the heroine's ultimate despair. In the following acts he underlines the dire position of the young lovers and repeatedly uses the insight of the spectators to create dramatic irony. Moreover, he presents the human condition of the couple; in contrast to the superficial characters that inhabit Thomas's earlier plays, Phèdre and Thésée are neither paragons of virtue, nor are they evil tyrants. By depicting them as fallible human beings who do not wish to hurt Ariane, Thomas emphasizes the pathos of the situation. Instead of dividing the spectators' feelings between hate for the couple and pity for the heroine, he magnifies their sympathy for Ariane. Furthermore, he shows time and again that Ariane is responsible for her own fate; each time she views her actions in retrospect, she realizes that she has caused her plight.

The role of Oenarus also serves its dramatic function efficiently. Through the king, Thomas underlines the sincerity of the lovers. They do not wish to offend Ariane, so they promote the love of Oenarus, hoping that she will accept the king's proposal and then sanction their

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<sup>11</sup>Thomas Corneille, Chefs-d'oeuvre, Vol. XII: Oeuvres de P. Corneille (Paris: Chez l'éditeur, Rue de l'Arbre-sec, 1830), p. 75.

love. Again Thomas presents this information in the first act and constantly returns to it during the play. In fact, "marry the king" becomes a leitmotif as it is reiterated by all the characters, except Ariane.

As Lancaster suggests, Pirithoüs' part resembles that of a confidant.<sup>12</sup> He acts as an intermediary between Thésée and Ariane, and he tries to convince the heroine that she should accept the king's proposal. In addition, he provides the hero with an excuse to postpone the wedding. Finally, Thomas uses him to underline the pathetic naïveté of the heroine.

#### La Mort d'Achille

According to de Visé's account in the Mercure galant, a reading of La Mort d'Achille in the presence of the duc de Richelieu provoked the admiration of the auditors; in fact, he stated that the duke thought so highly of Thomas's new tragedy that he declared it would surpass Ariane. However, in spite of this praise, the play was performed only nine times at the Guénégaud and once at Saint-Germain in 1673.<sup>13</sup>

The playwright turned to the Iliad and Dictys for his historical sources. He also referred to Benserade's Mort d'Achille in the preparation of his own drama. He altered the sources; and "he gave the story greater simplicity and unity than his predecessors had done."<sup>14</sup>

In the exposition the playwright informs the audience that Priam has been given Hector's body. Moreover, Polixene and Pyrrhus have fallen

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<sup>12</sup>Lancaster, History, Part III, p. 601.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., Part IV, p. 146.      <sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

in love with each other, and although Achille has promised to marry Briseis, he is planning to jilt her because of his love for Polixene. Thomas then takes four acts to inform the characters of Achille's affection for Polixene and his plan to grant peace to the Trojans if he is allowed to marry her. He then ends the tragedy with a coup de théâtre in which Paris slays Achille.

The action takes place during a truce between the Trojans and Greeks. The war is to continue the following day, and as the plot develops, the audience is made to feel the increasing uneasiness of the characters as they face the impending crisis. The entire situation takes on the appearance of a Cecil B. De Mille production as the off-stage actions of Hecuba, Paris, Helen, Menelaus, Ajax, Nestor, Hector, Patrocles, Troilus, Priam, Agamemnon, and Ulysses are discussed. Adding to the suspense-filled atmosphere is Polixene's repeated reference to Cassandre's forboding doom.

In addition to using the political situation as the background for the drama, Thomas employs it as a device to complicate the action. The characters attempt to further their love interest by manipulating the governmental forces: Achille forces Polixene to accept his marriage proposal by offering peace while Briseis and Pyrrhus solicit Priam and others to put a halt to Achille's plan.

However, although the personages move about in an atmosphere of imminent disaster, their main concern is their love. Moreover, in this play, as well as the others discussed in this chapter, there is an absence of galanterie. Instead, Thomas concentrates on the inner struggle of the four personages, and the psychological conflict of

each is distinctly different from the other: Achille struggles between his love for Polixene and his duty as a ruler; she in turn is torn between the opportunity to provide peace for her people by marrying a man for whom she has no affection, or permitting the carnage to continue by holding on to her beloved Pyrrhus; his discomfiture then centers on his love for Polixene and his rivalry with his father; finally, the distress of Briseis focuses on her tender affection for Achille and his sudden rejection of her.

Achille is the victim of the love which possesses him. He realizes:

...le coeur s'engage par surprise.  
 Sans prendre son aveu l'amour le tyrannise,  
 Et quand d'un bel Objet il se laisse charmer,  
 Il aime sans savoir qu'il a dessein d'aimer.  
 Le panchant qui l'entraîne en commençant de naître,  
 Est une aveugle ardeur dont il n'est pas le maître,  
 Et comme elle est contrainte, il en voit le retour  
 Quand le tems fait languir les forces de l'amour.  
 (II, 1)

He analyzes his emotions and explains that he feels friendship toward Briseis, but he is in love with Polixene. He distinguishes the two feelings:

L'Amour & l'amitié n'ont rien qui se ressemble.  
 C'est les connoître mal que les confondre ensemble,  
 Leurs droits son differens en durée, en douceur,  
 La raison cause l'une & l'autre vient du coeur;  
 Et comme la raison quand elle veut qu'on aime,  
 Contente de son choix est toujours elle-même,  
 On doit peu s'étonner que dans ses longs progrès  
 Une forte amitié ne se rompe jamais.  
 (II, 1)

The hero describes the change that has come over him as a result of his affection for Polixene:

Mon coeur, qu'ont asservi des charmes si puissans,  
 Se range tout-à-coup du parti de mes sens,

Et contre ces assauts mon courage inutile  
 Ne trouve plus en moi ce fier, ce fort Achille,  
 Qui du sort des Troyens Arbitre glorieux,  
 Maîtrisoit la Fortune, & tenoit tête aux Dieux.  
 Cedons, puis qu'il le faut; je suis lâche, infidelle,  
 Mais pour y renoncer, Polixene est trop belle.  
 (II, 5)

Directed by his omnipotent love, Achille, nevertheless, is obsessed with guilt:

A toute heure, en tous lieux, je l'entens qui s'écrie:  
 "Songe, songe, Tyran, quelle est ta barbarie.  
 Abusant du pouvoir qu'on te donne sur moi,  
 Tu m'arraches un coeur qui ne peut être à toi.  
 Tant que Pyrrhus vivra, quoi que tu te proposes,  
 Ce coeur sera le prix des maux que tu lui causes,  
 Et mon dernier soupir, pour flater son ennui,  
 Sera pour toi d'horreur, & de pitié pour lui."  
 (IV, 1)

As he is dying, the hero places the blame of his actions on destiny:

"...Le Ciel est juste...  
 ma mort punit mon crime,  
 Et vange Briséis de l'affront qu'à sa foi,  
 Par l'hymen qui me perd, je faisais malgré moi.  
 Di-lui que d'un mépris si dur, si peu croyable,  
 Plus que ma volonté le Destin est coupable,  
 Et qu'à l'ordre absolu qui me l'a fait trahir,  
 Un fatal Ascendant m'a forcé d'obéir...."  
 (V, 7)

The figure of Polixene underlines the role that fate plays, for she repeatedly refers to Cassandre's ominous prediction:

"Fui, Polixene, fui l'impitoyable Achille...,  
 tu prens un espoir inutile.  
 Vouloir donner ta main, c'est courir au tombeau.  
 Achille est destiné pour être ton bourreau.  
 (I, 3)

Of the four characters, the Trojan woman is the one who is most concerned with the horror that war brings to her people:

Je vois, sans respecter âge, sexe, ni rang,  
 Les Grecs presser le meurtre, & nager dans le sang,  
 Et la flâme par tout avide à se repandre,  
 Dévorer nos Palais & laisser Troie en cendre.

Quand par-là mon repos se pourroit acheter,  
 Voudroit-il les horreurs qu'il auroit su coûter?  
 (III, 4)

However, although Achilles offers her the opportunity to stop the carnage, she tries to dissuade him from his proposal because of her love for Pyrrhus. She attacks his gloire:

Mais puis-je également ôter de ma mémoire  
 Qu'en demandant ma main vous souillez votre gloire?  
 Je sais que Briséis a reçu votre foi;  
 Je lui dois les bontés que vous eûtes pour moi;  
 Et sur elle avec vous porter un coup si rude  
 C'est à la trahison joindre l'ingratitude.  
 (IV, 2)

She then tells him that she loves his son:

Pyrrhus, je le confesse, avoit de quoi me plaire,  
 Vous en avez trop su pour vouloir vous le taire.  
 Si le Ciel nous eût vus d'un oeil moins rigoureux,  
 Mon bonheur dépendoit de voir Pyrrhus heureux.  
 (IV, 2)

After Polixene finally consents to marry Achilles, she tells Pyrrhus:

Vous blâmez les frayeurs que vous me voyiez prendre.  
 Voilà, Prince, voilà ce qu'a prédit Cassandre.  
 Préparer mon hymen, c'est m'ouvrir le tombeau;  
 Je vais porter ma tête, Achilles est mon bourreau.  
 Si l'Oracle est cruel, au moins il vous éclaire  
 A voir qu'à cet hymen je ne survivrai guère,  
 Et que si de votre âme il fait l'accablement,  
 Vous n'aurez pas long-temps à souffrir ce tourment.  
 (V, 2)

To his literary sources Thomas added the rivalry of Achilles and Pyrrhus.<sup>15</sup> He was not successful, however, in presenting this relationship. There is no strong confrontation scene between father and son. Lancaster depicts him as a "colorless and respectful youth."<sup>16</sup>

Thomas's most impressive character portrayal in this play is that of Briseis, who is strikingly similar to Ariane. When the action

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<sup>15</sup>Lancaster, History, Part IV, p. 147.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.



begins, Briseis is engaged to the man she loves and she trusts him completely. She tells Pyrrhus:

Prince, n'en doutez point, je l'obtiendrai d'Achille.  
 Pour vous auprès de lui tout me sera facile,  
 Et quoi que mon amour veuille exiger du sien,  
 Son coeur est trop à moi pour me refuser rien.  
 (I, 1)

She feels so confident of her power over Achilles that she acts as Pyrrhus' intermediary and asks Achilles to sanction his son's marriage to Polixene:

Seigneur, de mon amour ne blâmez point l'audace....  
 Ma tendresse prend part au sort de Polixene...;  
 Et je sens que mon coeur ne s'en peut détacher.  
 Pour ne la perdre pas demandez-là pour Fille.  
 De son illustre sang par tout la gloire brille,  
 Et sa main pour Pyrrhus ne peut qu'être d'un prix...  
 (II, 2)

Moreover, similar to Ariane, Briseis is shocked when she is told that Achilles no longer loves her:

Son amour devant tous s'est fait cent fois entendre.  
 Qui l'auroit pu penser? Après tant de sermens,  
 Tant de soins, de devoirs, d'ardeurs, d'empressements,  
 Achille, cet Achille, à qui toute son ame  
 Sembloit un prix trop bas pour bien payer ma flâme,  
 Me quitte, m'abandonne, & violant sa foi,  
 Porte ailleurs ce qu'en vain je croyois tout à moi!  
 (III, 5)

Furthermore, she is so overcome by the news that she loses her power of reason:

Ah! Prince, à ce malheur toute ma raison cede.  
 (III, 5)

In addition, although she knows that Achilles rejects her, she continues to love him and then she entreats her rival to plead her case:

Quelque peu que j'espere, allez, pressez, Madame.  
 Essayez ce que peut la pitié sur son ame.  
 La fortune bien-tôt s'est changée entre nous,  
 Vous attendiez de moi ce que j'attens de vous.  
 (III, 5)

Similar to Ariane, Briseis explains:

Qui ne s'y fût trompé? Il me devoit sa foi,  
On m'avoit fait parler, j'expliquois tout pour moi.  
Tant de marques d'amour me rendoient fiere & vaine....  
(III, 6)

However, during the confrontation scene between Briseis and Achilles, the woman does not humiliate herself. From the beginning to the end of the scene she attacks his dishonorable action:

Ce honteux changement, encor qu'inexcusable,  
En tout autre du moins m'auroit paru croyable.  
La froideur, le dégoût, & l'oubli des sermens  
Ne font que trop communs aux vulgaires Amans.  
Mais qu'une ame élevée au dessus d'elle-même,  
Qu'Achille se resolve à trahir ce qu'il aime,  
Qu'il s'ose montrer foible, ingrat, lâche, sans foi,  
Qu'il renonce à l'honneur, c'est un monstre pour moi.  
(IV, 3)

Thomas offers an analysis of the human, inner struggle of the characters and does not resort to depictions based on an artificial code of behavior. However, his portrayal of the personages is weak. Although Achilles holds the pivotal position of the action, his emotional turmoil is not dominant. In fact, a likely reason for the mediocre reception of the play is that Thomas offers no strong central figure for the audience to focus their attention on. Moreover, although the playwright does analyze the emotions of his characters, he does not delve deeply enough into their psychological motivations to hold the spectators' interest. Finally, there is too much useless verbiage which neither adds to the development of the plot nor to the beauty of the drama. Nonetheless, it is quite possible that Thomas learned something from this play, for he avoided these errors in the next tragedy he presented; and he succeeded in creating a praiseworthy dramatic piece.

Le Comte d'Essex

In 1678 Thomas presented Le Comte d'Essex at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. For the source of his tragedy he referred to the historian Camden and also to La Calprenède's drama, Comte d'Essex,<sup>17</sup> which appeared in the 1630's. Thomas's play was well received by the seventeenth-century audiences, and in fact, it rivaled the success of Ariane.

Before the drama begins, Essex surrounded Queen Elisabeth's palace with his followers in order to prevent Henriette, the woman he loves, from marrying the duc d'Irton. When the tragedy begins, his enemies take advantage of his imprudence; they accuse him of plotting with the Irish leader, Tyrone, and of trying to seize the throne. Thomas then portrays the last day of the hero as he ultimately mounts the scaffold.

Love plays an important role in this tragedy, for it is the queen's love for Essex which can save him from death. However, the love relationship which Thomas portrays is unique. In all of his previous dramas there was hope of the fulfillment of love through marriage. Even in Laodice although the audience knew that the queen's love was incestuous, the queen herself was ignorant of this and held the expectation of wedding her young man. In Le Comte d'Essex, on the other hand, Elisabeth loves Essex, but does not wish to marry him. In order to understand the situation, it must be remembered that at the time of Essex's death the queen was some sixty-eight years old. Voltaire seems

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<sup>17</sup> See Lancaster, Part IV, p. 149 for a comparison of La Calprenède's Comte d'Essex and Thomas Corneille's tragedy of the same name.

to think that all amorous feelings pass with youth, and therefore, the queen's plight is humorous rather than tragic. He comments:

Une reine telle qu'Élisabeth, presque décrépète, qui parle du poison qui dévore son coeur, et de ce que ses yeux et sa bouche ont dit à son ingrat, est un personnage comique....S'il s'agissait d'une jeune reine, ce roman serait tolérable; et on ne peut attribuer le succès de cette pièce qu'à l'ignorance où était le parterre de l'âge d'Élisabeth.<sup>18</sup>

His remark is far from just. In fact, Voltaire overlooks completely the pathos in this situation. The queen is a lonely, old woman who, because of her royal position, is surrounded by ambitious men who use her to gain favors. Yet, she has been fortunate enough to discover a man who not only offers her friendship and companionship, but also sparks her affection. The fact that she is old does not alter her womanliness.

In the first act Thomas informs the audience through Essex that the queen loves him. Before the action of the play begins, she sent away Suffolk and his sister because she believed that the sister was her rival. In reality the count loved Henriette, but he feared the queen's wrath and pretended to show affection to Suffolk's sister in order to protect Henriette.

Élisabeth then appears for the first time at the opening of the second act and states her feeling for Essex.

...ne dis point qu'il ignore  
Jusqu'ou va le poison dont l'ardeur me dévore:  
Il a trop de ma bouche, il a trop de mes yeux  
Appris qu'il est, l'ingrat, ce que j'aime le mieux.  
(II, 1)

Thomas then underlines the queen's jealous nature by having her state:

...de ma passion il sait la violence;  
Mais l'exil de Suffolk l'arme pour sa vengeance:

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Corneille, Chefs-d'oeuvre, p. 165.

Au crime pour lui plaire il s'ose abandonner,  
 Et n'en veut à mes jours que pour la couronner.  
 (II, 1)

Élisabeth understands the count's desire for another woman, and she admits that she has little to offer him:

Ce qu'il faut qu'il espère? Et qu'en puis-je espérer,  
 Que la douceur de voir, d'aimer, de soupirer?  
 (II, 1)

In spite of her love, she refuses to marry:

Triste et bizarre orgueil qui m'ôte à ce que j'aime!  
 Mon bonheur, mon repos s'immole au rang suprême,  
 Et je mourrois cent fois plutôt que faire un roi  
 Qui, dans le trône assis, fût au-dessous de moi.  
 (II, 1)

Thus, Thomas clearly portrays the queen's love for Essex.

The external events of the political intrigue take place off-stage. The enemies of Essex join forces against him; there is a formal accusation of treason, a trial, and ultimately the verdict for his death. While these incidents occur, the playwright focuses on the queen's inner turmoil. She is torn between her sovereign duty and her love. She is in such a quandary that she changes her mind no less than eleven times in the course of three acts. In II, 6 when Élisabeth meets with the count, she offers him freedom if he will confess; during this scene alone she vacillates between his execution and his pardon three times. After she hears of his arrogant behavior at his trial (III, 1), she again decides on execution; then in the following scene (III, 2) she confirms her order for his execution and afterwards decides to pardon him. Her indecision continues: III, 3, execution; III, 4, execution, pardon; and V, 1, execution. Again in V, 3, after he has been secretly taken to the scaffold, she decides to pardon him.

In his depiction of the queen's indecision Thomas offers a sound psychological analysis of her quandary. He portrays Élisabeth as she goes "over and over the same ground, as tortured people who do not know too clearly their own minds are wont to do."<sup>19</sup> Although the foundation of the action is the queen's struggle between her duty and her love, Thomas emphasizes her feminine nature. In her first appearance Elisabeth attacks the woman she believes to be her rival:

Suffolk me l'a ravi, Suffolk qu'il me préfère  
 Lui demande mon sang, le lâche veut lui plaire.  
 Ah! pourquoi dans les maux où l'amour m'exposait  
 N'ai-je fait que bannir celle qui les causait?  
 (II, 2)

Then after Essex's trial Henriette discloses the fact that the count really loves her and not Suffolk's sister. And the queen cries out:

Ai-je bien entendu? Le perfide vous aime,  
 Me dédaigne, me brave, et contraire à moi-même,  
 Je vous assurerais, en l'ôtant secourir,  
 La douceur d'être aimée et de me voir souffrir!  
 (III, 4)

However, Élisabeth soon forgets her jealousy because she is concerned with the more important matter of saving the count's life:

Duchesse, c'en est fait: qu'il vive, j'y consens.  
 Par un même intérêt vous craignez et je tremble:  
 Pour lui, contre lui-même unissons-nous ensemble,  
 Tirons-le du péril qui ne peut l'alarmer,  
 Toutes deux pour le voir, toutes deux pour l'aimer.  
 Un prix bien inégal nous en paiera la peine:  
 Vous aurez tout son coeur, je n'aurai que sa haine;  
 Mais n'importe, il vivra, son crime est pardonné.  
 (III, 4)

The playwright's treatment of the queen's royal stature is weak. He omits an important quality which leaves the character lacking. Although she is told time and again that Essex's enemies have falsified

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<sup>19</sup>Lockert, Studies, p. 246.

the evidence against him, she never shows the slightest interest; she is not even curious. When Salsbury tells her:

On parle de révolte et de ligues secrètes;  
 Mais, madame, on se sert de lettres contrefaites:  
 Les témoins, par Cécile, ouïs, examinés,  
 Sont témoins que peut-être on aura subornés.  
 Le comte les récuse; et quand je les soupçonne....  
 (III, 3)

Elisabeth replies:

Le comte est condamné; si son arrêt l'étonne,  
 S'il a pour l'affaiblir quelque chose à tenter,  
 Qu'il rentre en son devoir, on pourra l'écouter.

In spite of the fact that the queen is in a confused emotional state, it would seem that as the ruler of the country she would wish to know whether or not a political intrigue existed, and as a woman in love she would grasp at any information to prove the innocence of her lover.

As Voltaire comments:

Il est bien étrange que Salsbury dise qu'on a contrefait l'écriture du comte d'Essex, et que la reine ne songe pas à examiner une chose si importante. Elle doit assurément s'en éclaircir, et comme amante, et comme reine. Elle ne répond pas seulement à cette ouverture qu'elle devait saisir, et qui demandait l'examen le plus prompt et le plus exact; elle répète encore en d'autres mots que le comte est trop fier.<sup>20</sup>

Since the queen shows no real concern for the evidence in the case against Essex, there is the question of what she really wants. She seeks his confession, and apparently his innocence or guilt is not an important point. Throughout the play, she accuses him only of being too "fier". Thus, in the final analysis, she wishes Essex to humiliate himself before her.

Thomas demonstrates clearly from the outset that Essex is

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<sup>20</sup>Thomas Corneille, Chefs-d'oeuvre, p. 165.

incapable of satisfying the queen's wish, for the great warrior is arrogant and proud. At the opening of the play, Essex himself states:

Mais enfin cent exploits et sur mer et sur terre  
M'ont fait connoître assez à toute l'Angleterre,  
Et j'ai trop bien servi pour pouvoir redouter  
Ce que mes ennemis ont osé m'imputer.  
Ainsi, quand l'imposture auroit surpris la reine,  
L'intérêt de l'état rend ma grâce certaine;  
Et l'on ne sait que trop, par ce qu'a fait mon bras,  
Que qui perd mes pareils ne les retrouve pas.  
(I, 1)

Moreover, in contrast to Élisabeth's fluctuating nature the hero remains consistent. He insults his enemies, demonstrates his haughtiness at court, and refuses to confess to a crime he did not commit. Furthermore, the count boasts time and again of his valor. When the captain of the guards demands that he give up his sword, the hero replies:

Prenez.  
Vous avez dans vos mains ce que toute la terre  
A vu plus d'une fois utile à l'Angleterre.  
Marchons: quelque douleur que j'en puisse sentir,  
La reine veut se perdre, il faut y consentir.  
(II, 8)

Thus, Thomas points out that it is not in Essex's nature to humble himself. Henriette, Tilney, and Salisbury all entreat the count to yield to the wishes of the queen. Nonetheless, Essex remains firm, arguing that his plea for grace would be an admission of guilt:

Et par mon lâche aveu, l'univers étonné  
Apprendra qu'ils m'auront justement condamné...?  
J'ai vécu glorieux, et je mourrai de même;  
Toujours inébranlable, et dédaignant toujours  
De mériter l'arrêt qui va finir mes jours.  
(IV, 3)

The playwright dwells on the touching pathos of the situation as the noble warrior awaits his death. Because he made the tragic error of surrounding the palace in order to prevent his beloved Henriette



from marrying someone else, he has been accused of treason. Therefore, he is about to be hanged for a crime that he did not commit. Moreover, because he is an honorable hero, he cannot free himself from his dilemma. Furthermore, his fate is left in the hands of a woman who is incapable of deciding whether or not she should pardon him.

By exhibiting the hero's last thoughts before his death, Thomas arouses the spectators' pity. "Un grand seigneur qu'on va mener à l'échafaud intéresse toujours le public; et la représentation de ces aventures..., fait le même effet à peu près que la vérité même."<sup>21</sup> In one of the playwright's rare monologues Essex expresses his emotions:

O fortune! Ô grandeur! dont l'amorce flatteuse  
 Surprend, touche, éblouit une âme ambitieuse,  
 De tant d'honneurs reçus c'est dont là tout le fruit!  
 Un long tempt les amasse, un moment les détruit.  
 Tout ce que le destin le plus digne d'envie  
 Peut attacher de gloire à la plus belle vie,  
 J'ai pu me le promettre, et, pour le mériter,  
 Il n'est projet si haut qu'on ne m'ait vu tenter;  
 Cependant aujourd'hui (se peut-il qu'on le croie?)  
 C'est sur un échafaud que la reine m'envoie!  
 C'est là qu'aux yeux de tous m'imputant des forfaits....  
 (IV, 2)

According to Voltaire, this monologue is partly responsible for the success of the play, for "Ces réflexions naturelles sur la fragilité des grandeurs humaines plaisent."<sup>22</sup> Thomas then emphasizes the wretched condition of the count as he laments his love to Salsbury:

Elle (Henriette) m'aima, sans doute;  
 Et sans la reine, hélas! j'ai lieu de présumer  
 Qu'elle eût fait à jamais son bonheur de m'aimer....  
 Nulle félicité n'eût égalé la nôtre:  
 Le ciel y met obstacle, elle vit pour un autre....  
 (IV, 3)

Then before he leaves for the scaffold, his pitiful position is

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

magnified as he speaks to Henriette of a future that he will not live to see:

Je n'ai pas mérité le revers qui m'accable;  
 Mais je meurs innocent, et je vivrois coupable.  
 Toujours plein d'un amour dont sans cesse en tout lieux  
 Le triste accablement paroîtroit à vos yeux,  
 Je tâcherois d'ôter votre coeur, vos tendresses,  
 A l'heureux....Mais pourquoi ces indignes foiblesses?  
 (IV, 5)

The characters of Salsbury and Henriette add to the poignancy of the tragedy as they first entreat the queen to be merciful to Essex and then they beg the count to confess so that he might live. Through the figure of Henriette, Thomas offers an additional depth to the deplorable situation. Although she and Essex were in love, she gave him up and married another man; she was aware of Élisabeth's affection for the hero, so she sacrificed her own interests out of respect for the sovereign.

Thomas's last tragedies mark a change in the playwright's view of the genre, as he dwells on the depiction of the human condition rather than on an artificial code of behavior. Not only did seventeenth-century spectators enjoy Ariane and Le Comte d'Essex, but literary critics have singled out these two plays as Thomas's best tragedies. The skillful portrayal of emotions presented in a well developed dramatic structure offer universal appeal.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Thomas Corneille demonstrates his dramaturgical virtuosity in his manipulation of love. It is, at times, the principal subject in his tragedies, while at other times it plays a secondary role. Nonetheless, no matter how great or how small the part, love is an essential ingredient in Thomas's dramas, for it always acts to further the plot and to lead the action toward the denouement; the playwright never uses it as a mere embellishment.

Love is the dominant subject of the plays of hidden identity. Timocrate, Philoxène, Darius, and Pyrrhus step from the pages of the contemporary heroic-gallant novels and direct the spectators through a journey in the Carte de tendre. Dramatic mirrors of their romanesque counterparts, they reflect the précieux code of love. The heroes' sole concern is their affection for the lovely princesses, whom they try to please at any cost, even at the risk of losing their lives. The gallants prove their prowess in battle in order to win the respect of their idolized ladies, and they demonstrate their love by submitting to their beloveds' every wish. Timocrate, the epitome of the romanesque hero, sacrifices his homeland and his royal position, enters the enemy camp incognito, and ultimately offers his life in the name of love. The

action of Thomas's first four identity plays centers on the plight of the young lovers. The playwright further dwells on the expression of love in scenes of galanterie and combats de générosité as the heroines, paragons of précieux virtue, are torn between their gloire and their love.

Laodice is the only identity play in which Thomas focuses on the conspiracy to usurp the throne. Of paramount importance is the dramatist's depiction of the evil character of Laodice. Essential in his portrayal is her incestuous passion for her son whose identity is hidden. Throughout the tragedy, Thomas magnifies the wickedness of the queen by contrasting her ambition with the noble attitude of Ariarate.

The skill of Thomas's treatment of amorous relationships can be seen in the variety of roles that it plays. In three of the conspiracy dramas, La Mort de l'empereur Commode, Maximian, and La Mort d'Annibal, the playwright subordinates the love interest to the political intrigue. Nevertheless, he does not offer it as a mere diversion for the précieux in his audience. On the contrary, the romantic element is an essential activating device in these tragedies. The dramatist makes full use of its potential to further the action and direct the plot toward the denouement. Commode's jilting of Marcia and his subsequent proposal to her sister bring about his own assassination. During the course of the play the tyrant succeeds in antagonizing the lovers so that when they discover his plot for revenge, they are prepared to murder him. Maximian, on the other hand, employs the lovers as pawns to carry out his attempt to usurp the throne. He tries to win the support of Sévère by appealing to the warrior's frustrated love for Fauste. He then uses

Licine's affection for Constance to discredit the emperor's captain of the guards. Finally, he eliminates his daughter's obstacles to his scheme by magnifying Constantin's jealous suspicions of his wife. In La Mort d'Annibal, the suppressed ruler uses the affaires de coeur in an attempt to gain political power by offering his daughter's hand to the rival who can give him the most advantageous position. Thus, although the love interest is not dominant in these conspiracy plays, it is an integral part of the main action.

Thomas takes the opposite approach in Théodat. Here love is the subject while affairs of state assume the subordinate position. The action centers on the conflict between the queen's love for Théodat and his affection for her daughter. The rebellion of the people supports the plot and ultimately resolves the dilemma by causing the queen's death.

The versatility of the playwright's dramatic representation of romance is further demonstrated in Antiochus. Here, in contrast to the romanesque imbroglio of the identity plays, Thomas offers a very simplified rendition of the Carte de tendre. The hero and heroine are similar to his previous précieux couples. However, the author offers an additional facet to the hero, his languishing under self-restraint.

In the plays just discussed Thomas presents superficial heroes and heroines whose actions and verbal expression are preordained by an artificial code. Time and again the playwright introduces variations of the same character types. The noble gallant-hero enters the stage and permits his haughty princess to direct his actions. Chivalric to a fault, the gentleman elevates his love to a deific position and

sacrifices his will to his lady. His promise to die for his beloved is serious indeed, for in Stilicon and Persée et Démétrius the heroes prove the truth of their avowal by giving their lives for their women.

The omnipotence of love in Thomas's tragedies reflects the strong influence of women on seventeenth-century French society. In the salons it was common practice for the playwrights to read their works before presenting them to the acting troupes. Here the assemblage assumed the role of literary critic and passed its judgment. Thomas ceaselessly pleased his feminine audience by offering them the excitement of participating vicariously in his heroines' adventures. In his characters he infused the luxury, the decorum, and the manners of his illustrious spectators. Moreover, he dramatized the conversations of his spectators. Thus, the viewers were able to relate to his personages and hear some of their own ideas expressed on stage.

The amorous relationships in Thomas's tragedies are dramatic representations of the salon discussions. Love to the précieux reached the level of an intellectual parlor game. Instead of expressing deep, personal emotion, the elite society cleverly debated the rules and regulations inherent in a proper romantic association. Thus, Thomas's static lovers speak about their love in a sterile, cold manner as they reiterate the same ideas of their predecessors.

Toward the end of the century, the playwright's audience finally began to tire of the artificial code of behavior and turned toward a more real depiction of human passions. Thus, in Ariane, La Mort d'Achille, and Le Comte d'Essex, Thomas endows his personages with complex emotions which he analyzes in the course of the plays. No longer does he portray

his characters as mere parrots of the précieux doctrine. Rather, he presents individuals with human qualities who are directed by their inner turmoil.

Of Thomas Corneille's numerous tragedies, Ariane and Le Comte d'Essex are the two that might appeal to a twentieth-century audience, for the dramatic structure and the plot of both are verisimilar. Above all, the psychological conflict of the main characters is extremely interesting. An artistic leading lady could easily elicit the sympathy of the audience for Ariane as she attempts to maintain her power of reason. Moreover, any skillful actor and actress in the starring roles of Le Comte d'Essex would succeed in arousing the spectators' pity as the queen struggles between her love for the count, her sovereign duty, and her pride, while Essex mounts the scaffold.

Although most of Thomas's plays lack universal appeal and would not be acceptable by the spectators of today, the writer's merit as a playwright is not diminished. His main purpose in writing tragedies was to entertain his spectators. He accomplished his aim by dramatizing the manners of the elite society that frequented the seventeenth-century theatre. Furthermore, by presenting the love expressed by his viewers, he gained the approval of the women who had become so influential. Thus, Thomas Corneille was a clever playwright who earned his success by fulfilling the desire of his contemporary audience.

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