A COEUR OUVERT: HEROIC AVOWAL IN CORNEILLE

Pauline a l’âme noble et parle à coeur ouvert.

POLYEUCTE

Entre, entre à son exemple au cabinet du coeur . . .

L’IMITATION DE JESUS CHRIST

Corneille was educated by Jesuits and remained in close contact with his masters of the Collège de Rouen throughout his life. His nephew, Fontenelle, in his “Vie de Corneille,” says of him: “Il a eu souvent besoin d’être rassuré par des casuistes sur ses pièces de théâtre” (25). Corneille himself seems to substantiate this image of an artist seeking the approval of religious authorities by his claim in the preface to Attila that he submits all of his work “à la censure des puissances tant ecclésiastiques que séculières, sous lesquelles Dieu me fait vivre” (712).1

Recently, Marc Fumaroli has studied in detail the lifelong moral and literary collaboration between Corneille and one of his teachers, Père Delidel, author of the anti-Jansenist Théologie des saints. Published in 1668, the book is prefaced by an “Ode au P. Delidel” in which Corneille credits the “savant et pieux écrivain” with his own artistic genesis and states his desire to follow his mentor’s spiritual lesson. By prefacing this theological tract, Corneille was clearly siding with the Jesuits in their dispute with the Jansenists over the question of grace. In a more self-serving vein, he was also lining up against the persecutors of the theater. At the time of the “Ode,” the poet had already replied to Nicole’s antitheatrical Traité de la comédie by taking the position, in the preface to Attila, that his own theater was capable of purging any wicked passion it might arouse. So on the questions of grace and the theater, Corneille took a “Jesuit” position. These public stances are signs of a deeper debt of Corneille to his teachers, conscious declarations pointing toward unconscious, structural affinities between teacher and pupil.
Corneille’s first experience of the theater was the Latin school plays staged by his teachers in Rouen. In these productions, the myths of classical antiquity became vehicles for Jesuit morality. Syncretism and interpretive ingenuity allowed the Christian humanists of Corneille’s age to read spiritual allegories into ostensibly pagan stories. Thus, as Père Rotrou explains, “Les furies d’Oreste, la roue d’Ixion, etc. . . . ne furent jamais autre chose que le remords d’une mauvaise conscience” (qtd. in Rivaille 473). This same interpretation turns up in an early play of Corneille’s. A similar eclectic attitude toward pagan culture can be found in the writings of Racine, who, interestingly enough, finds references to confession and attrition in Plutarch and Plato (2:1141).²

André Stegmann has called the Jesuit neo-Latin theater “Cornélien avant la lettre” in its emphasis on moral conflict and its similar choice of historical subject matter. He explains how Jesuit spirituality was adapted to the school plays: “L’ascèse toute spirituelle de St. Ignace est transposée en ascèse héroïque. L’individu accepte de se sacrifier à un ordre spirituel ou politique, préférable à son bonheur ou intérêt personnel” (Héroïsme 56). An ambivalent, secularized version of Ignatian asceticism and sacrifice can also be found in Corneille’s theater: Rodrigue sacrifices love to family honor; Horace transcends friendship, family, and even personal honor for Rome; Auguste learns to accept the ingratitude of friends and the solitude of power and forgives his enemies for the good of the state. Polyeucte carries the ascetic pattern to its logical conclusion by sacrificing all human values to his faith.

Psychologically, Corneille’s conception of heroism owes much to the asceticism of the new spirituality; his theater focuses less on the violent “geste” and more on the inner battles of heroic consciousness. The violent scenes of heroic action are kept off stage as much for formal reasons as for decorum. His subject is heroism in the first person, the discursive probing of the self, the moment before words give way to mute, ambiguous actions.

In the light of Lacan’s interpretation of baroque spirituality, Stegmann’s “ascèse héroïque” also suggests that asceticism in general and confession in particular can be understood as a certain historical form of the erotic. There is a sort of heroic jouissance that the protagonist derives from triumph over the self and verbal acknowledgment of the loss of the object. Confession situates the subject in the simultaneous enunciation and suspension of desire. Faced with the loss of the object, the hero’s heart swells with the same sort of ascetic pleasure that Lacan sees on the face of Bernini’s St. Theresa.
For Lacan, the mystics reveal the truth of human desire: the provisional obstacle to desire is permanent; the apparently external impediment represents a permanent interior distance between the subject and the object of his desire; jouissance comes from a rapport with the Other. For me, the confessional is the historical figure of this specifically Western and Christian experience of desire. It stages desire as a strange open-ended conversation with an unseen third party, and it inscribes the subject in a network of pastoral power.

This interpretation of the meaning of asceticism as, not the simple destruction of the passions, but their verbal revelation followed by masochistic pleasure puts me in the camp of those who emphasize libido and energy, not dispassionate reason, in Corneille. Octave Nadal is on the right track when he says: "C'est la sensibilité qui, chez Corneille, met l'homme debout, rassemble les activités spirituelles, les bande et les oriente" (22). The Cornelian ethic has more to do with the post-Tridentine appeal to the passions than with Stoic ataraxia.

A first look at a famous scene from Le Cid illustrates this idea of passion and asceticism. The love of Rodrigue and Chimène rises to a poetic pitch during the chamber scene when they are apparently lost to each other. Never is Rodrigue so crushed by despair at the inseparable distance between himself and Chimène; he invites death at her hand: "Le coup m'en sera doux"; yet never is he so insolent and full of defiant energy (936). He shows Chimène the sword with which he has killed her father; there is no possibility for the present that the two lovers could be reconciled. Yet out of this scene of mutual asceticism—avowal on the part of Chimène and an implicit penance by Rodrigue, who seeks punishment for his crime—the lovers draw a passionate energy that will sustain them.

Corneille's contemporaries were shocked and excited by this scene; in the Examen of the play, the author notes: "Il s'élevait un certain frémissement dans l'assemblée, qui marquait une curiosité merveilleuse et un redoublement d'attention." It is one of the most erotic moments in his theater because of the juxtaposition of the forbidden presence of Rodrigue in Chimène's apartment and the rhetorical restraint exercised by the two characters. Chimène and Rodrigue perform an ascetic duet that consecrates their physical separation but accomplishes something analogous to the heart-to-heart mystical union. Acknowledgment of the Other, the mise en discours of desire, is what is erotic, not just physical intimacy.

The subject of this study is the role of confession in this process,
and accordingly, I wish to examine further the links between our au-
thor and the main currents of confessional practices in his day. Of par-
ticular interest to us, in the general current of Jesuit influence upon
Corneille, is the Jesuit attitude toward confession. Jesuit moral teach-
ing was based on what Louis Rivaille calls a "culture de la volonté"
(468). Inspired by Molina’s confidence in "libre arbitre," Jesuit educa-
tors sought to inculcate a strong will and deliberative habits on the part
of their students by means of "sermons, allocutions de fin de semaine,
conférences morales; dans les hautes classes, méditations, examens de
consciences, ‘récollements,’ où les jeunes gens devaient trouver la
clarté de la décision et puiser la force de l’exécution" (468).

These procedures were based on certain principles of Scholastic
psychology, which taught that the human soul is composed of (1) an
intellect capable of ascertaining the truth, (2) a sovereign will, enlight-
ened by the intellect and capable of governing the third part of the
soul, and (3) the passions, which have a use in the execution of its de-
signs. The role of confession and “recollection” was to take stock of
the passions and eventually to put them to good use. Only when the
passions were antecedentes, when they circumvented libre-arbitre and
precipitated the subject toward pleasure instead of the truth, were they
evil. By correct moral training, the energy of an antecedens passio could
be transferred into a passio consequens, which followed upon the delib-
eration of the intellect and was supposed to arouse the soul to carry
out the orders of the will. The one area of their moral theology where
the Jesuits departed from the Scholastic model was in their insistence
on the primacy of the love of God in their spiritual vision: “La clé du
système n’est pas la raison mais l’amour” (Stegmann, Héroïsme
219). The Ignatian spiritual experience is directed less at the intelligence
than at the heart and the imagination. For example, Loyola says that
his novices should “practice the seeking of God’s presence in all things,
... in all that they see, taste, hear, understand, and in all their actions.
This kind of meditation, which finds God our Lord in all things is
easier than raising oneself to the consideration of divine truths which
are more abstract” (Counsels 43). In this they were in concert with the
Augustinian tendency of all moral philosophy during the first fifty
years of the seventeenth century (Bénichou 231).

Wherever the Jesuits extended their influence, confession was a hall-
mark of their strategy. It was a key to the formation of their own
priests. The Spiritual Exercises involve a twice daily “examen,” and a
general confession during the first week. Loyola’s description of a
spiritual warfare between the retreatant and the devil is derived from the monastic tradition, and he sees confession as the same sort of defeat for the demon which the Desert Fathers had imagined:

When the enemy of human nature brings his wiles and persuasion to the just soul, he wants and desires that they be received and kept in secret; but when one reveals them to his good confessor or to another spiritual person that knows his deceits and evil ends, it is very grievous to him, because he gathers, from his manifest deceits being discovered, that he will not be able to succeed with his wickedness begun.

(212, 13th Rule for the discernment of spirits)

The Jesuits required weekly confession of their novices. It was important in their schools, and it was vital to their political intrigues. In France, the Jesuits formed an unbroken succession of royal confessors from the reign of Henri III throughout the seventeenth century. They were a power behind the throne, deliberately bending the rules of morality to accommodate their royal clients. Mme de Maintenon complained of the pernicious influence of “confesseurs à l’eau douce” on Louis XIV (Grégoire 72). In his Histoire des confesseurs des empereurs, des rois, et d’autres princes, Abbé Grégoire cites this passage from a Jesuit manual which outlines how the laxists deliberately set out to, in H. C. Lea’s words, “conquer by yielding” (3:583): “Dans la direction de la conscience des grands nos confesseurs suivront le sentiment des auteurs qui font la conscience plus libre, contre le sentiment des autres religieux afin que les quittant, ils veuillent entièrement dépendre de notre direction et de nos conseils” (39). The Jesuits actively sought control over the consciences of the “grands” by the use of their casuistry. By offering easy absolution and accommodating arrangements between Christianity and the courtly aristocratic ethos, they sought to extend their influence over the elite. There is no need to renounce completely one’s worldly ways, they said, just confess them to a casuist. The repressive side of the law disappears, but power is still enacted by the obligation to confess. No need for remorse or guilt, just the necessity to avow. The Jesuits had doubtless understood that pastoral power need not be repressive to be effective; on the contrary, by appearing to suspend a restrictive law, they seemed to be extending liberty and freedom to those who entered their fold willingly. According to Foucault, this is the classic ruse of pastoral power, and it explains
why Western man has submitted so willingly to various practices of the self: because he sees in them an exercise of liberty, not implication in a power structure.

This is another area where we will look for analogies between Corneille's religious milieu and the functioning of confession in his plays. Does he use casuistical rhetoric to reconcile the criminal acts of his heroes with the principles of divine right monarchy, and does the hero sometimes conquer most effectively by appearing to yield?

I am not the first to see a parallel between Corneille and the casuists; several times in his reading of the *Lettres provinciales*, A. J. Krailsheimer mentions Corneille: "The *morale relâchée* imputed to the Jesuits is in many ways the theological counterpart of the ethical codes already seen in Descartes, Corneille, and Retz, and it is an open question how far the connection was causal" (102). And further: "Corneille's heroes 'dirigent l'intention' when they look back on their actions, and seek to make self-interest respectable by identifying it with the common good, as expressed in social demands" (108).

We will pursue these questions especially in *Horace* and *Le Cid*, where the notorious casuistical subjects of dueling and homicide receive the kind of lenient treatment that so incensed Pascal. Horace, after all, kills his brother-in-law and then his sister, yet is pardoned by the king of Rome and preserves his status as national hero. Rodrigue kills the count in a duel with no remorse other than over the loss of his mistress. Both of these acts were expressly forbidden by most orthodox moral theologians, but there were casuists willing to allow dueling and homicide in certain cases to preserve aristocratic honor. Corneille's similar favorable treatment of these issues will invite comparison with the science of his Jesuit masters.

The other model for asceticism and confession in Corneille's life is the *Imitation of Christ*. It was a favorite devotional work of the author's all his life, and he translated it into French verse between 1651 and 1656. One is struck in reading his translation by the similar language and atmosphere between this classic of *devotio moderna* and Corneille's theater. This is due in part to the theatrical style of Corneille's translation, but it also results from the fact that the author's theater is inspired by some of the same moral principles and mental structures to be found in the *Imitation*. Certain spiritual and psychological topoi found in the stage productions are extrapolations of the science of the cloister.

André Stegmann speaks of "profondes analogies" between the translation and the plays and of a similar "démarche intérieure du
héros"; he concludes: "C'est dans l'Imitation que l'on trouve la meilleure définition de l'héroïsme Cornélien" (Héroïsme 324). I have chosen a line from the Imitation as the epigraph for this chapter on Corneille because it uses the same sort of architectural metaphor for the spiritual life which underlies the invention of the confessional. The passage comes from book 3, section 38, dealing with methods for exercising free will and maintaining "le dedans vraiment libre et tranquille." The narrative voice, which is that of Christ, advises the reader, when faced with a moral dilemma, to retreat into the tabernacle like Moses. The tent in the desert is replaced by a recently invented domestic space, the "cabinet":

Entre, entre à son exemple au cabinet du coeur
Et pour tirer de moi le conseille nécessaire
Du zèle en tes besoins redouble la ferveur.

A recent compartmentalization of domestic life suggests a new spiritual reification, "le coeur" as a private chamber where God gives secret advice and rouses the emotions. For the Cornelian hero, this retreat into the private room of the heart is just as decisive as it is for the spiritual man, and it is rendered possible by a similar demarcation of space. For the translator of the Imitation, the stage figures the "cabinet du coeur." By the magic of the proscenium stage, the spectator is allowed to peer into the private confines of the hero's heart. Alone on stage, or in the company of a trusted confident, he reveals his inner being, unaware that his privacy is being violated.

The walls of the conventional palace setting enclose the hero and project the form of his inner space. The simultaneous presence of the spectators, separated by the invisible fourth wall, heightens the division between private meditations and public life. The "cabinet du coeur" as a moral space is replicated by the stage, and we become privileged witnesses to the inner and outer drama of the hero as he tries to mediate between the private certainties of conscience and the demands and truths of history.

The complement to this private watchfulness over the soul is the confessing of the noble heart to others: "Pauline a l'âme noble et parle à coeur ouvert" (463). Having attained interior illumination about the self, the hero must bare his or her inner soul no matter how trying the circumstances. The confession of the self is part of the process whereby the hero attains full self-knowledge and carries out his mission. The
others within the play must also become spectators of the heroic heart as private truth becomes transparent communication in the idealized community.

Among critics, Jean Starobinski has shed the most light on this drive of the Cornelian protagonist toward self-revelation. In his essay "Sur Corneille," he writes at length about the hero's desire to make a spectacle of his whole life, preferably at court. Ultimately this involves revealing the hidden struggles of his interior life and the private victories over the self. As with confession in the spiritual life, the actual process of avowal helps achieve heroic status. Emerging victorious in the trial of self-statement, the hero presents a glorious and seemingly unified spectacle of the ego:

Tout se passe comme si l'âme héroïque ne pouvait supporter à la longue la division du manifeste et du caché, comme s'il lui était intolérable de vivre en état de dédoublement; l'effort par lequel elle réprime ce qu'elle ne consent pas à laisser paraître culmine dans un acte à la fois destructeur et unificateur. Le héros peut alors à nouveau se montrer tout entier, une fois consumé en lui tout l'invouvable, c'est-à-dire tout ce qui était autre que son plus haut moi. Ainsi l'intériorité héroïque vise sa propre destruction et triomphe lorsqu'elle s'ouvre sur une extériorité totale. La conscience ne peut s'arrêter au déchirement secret; elle s'immole et livre son sacrifice en spectacle à l'univers. Dans ce spectacle où l'antithèse du dedans et du dehors est abolie, l'être et le paraître se réconcilient définitivement. (63)

For Starobinski, the hero achieves a semiotic resolution, the outside finally revealing and conforming to the inside. Confession would be the dramatization of the passage of the hidden signified from inside to out. Whether or not this process is seen as a successful closing of the gap between inner meaning and outside expression is open to further discussion. In the plays of Corneille, Racine, and Molière, there are heroic, tragic, and comic versions of this avowal. The recurrent Corneilian figure for this activity, "parler à coeur ouvert," suggests something other than Starobinski's abolition of an antithesis. In Corneille, the opening of the heart is rather a more violent process reminiscent of the monks' confessional "agon." It is expressed in images of combat, political struggle, medical purgation, and, finally, martyrdom. The coherence of the heroic self is bought at the price of a physical and
rhetorical opening up that suspends its meaning on the favorable reading of an omniscient spectator. Grandeur and illusion of the heroic self which, in its supreme act of self-revelation, defers meaning to those empowered to decide. Heroism turns out to be, not the imposition of private, conscious meaning, but rather an opening up to hermeneutic authority. Ultimately, the hero must become part of the Legend; he surrenders his private signification to the reading and writing of sacred or national History.

The paradox I am suggesting is that the hero's triumphant revelation of the heart conceals subjection to a preordained repertory of images that he will recognize as self, which ties the hero to a perpetual discursive self-creation where his only true integrated self, outside and inside, is a spoken self, where heroism is fully realized only when the act is completed by the verbalization of the heart. Like the founding proposition of Descartes's philosophical "je," similarly conceived in the privacy of the "poêle," Corneille's heroic "moi" exists only "toutes les fois que je la prononce" . . . and that they concur.

_MÉDÉE: "JE NE ME REPENS PAS DE VOUS AVOIR TRAHI"

In his _Discours de la tragédie_, written in 1660, Corneille prided himself on having invented a new kind of moralistic, didactic tragedy, unknown to the ancients, based on "la punition des méchantes actions et la récompense des bonnes" (832). For Corneille and many of his contemporaries, Aristotelian catharsis meant "la purgation des passions," and it was thought that this was best accomplished by the spectacle of the passions leading to crime and punishment. Most modern scholars have since concluded that _catharsis_ is a medical term meaning a homeopathic cure in which the ingestion of small amounts of a toxic agent or pathogen teaches the body to repulse a foreign substance. Applied to the theater, this modern view of the word means that during the course of a play the spectator indulges in his pathological instincts and is thereafter relieved of forbidden desires. But in Corneille's day, any suggestion that the spectator shared in the criminal passions of the dramatis personae was grounds for condemning the whole theatrical enterprise. It was inconceivable that controlled participation in forbidden impulses could serve the civilizing process. Those who made a moral defense of the theater adopted a line of reasoning like
Corneille's. Racine, for example, says in the preface to *Phèdre* that in his play "les moindres fautes sont sévèrement punies."

However, Corneille's first tragedy, *Médée* (1635), does not conform to this formula, since its eponymous heroine commits the repugnant crimes of fratricide and infanticide yet escapes unpunished. Already in the dedicatory comments of 1639, one senses Corneille's unease with the amoral content of the play as he tries to bring it within the scope of his moralizing conception of the theater. He contends that the spectator does not have to see Medea punished; a faithful representation of her crimes suffices to inspire "quelque horreur"; the audience understands instinctively that these horrendous acts "ne sont pas à imiter" (173).

However limited this didactic theory of tragic catharsis, Corneille's comments do point to the singularity of *Médée* within his oeuvre. It is my contention that this is not the result of unpunished wickedness but rather the failure of a fundamental moral mechanism in Corneille—confession. Neoclassical tragedy no less than ancient tragedy was not based on straightforward moral didacticism. It is not a melodrama in which the good triumph unproblematically over the bad. Ancient tragedy involved catharsis, properly understood as homeopathic cure, and neoclassical drama makes use of a similar morally ambivalent ceremony—confession—which legitimates the representation of criminal desire and allows for a more sophisticated adjudication of crime than "la punition des méchantes actions."

*Médée* stands apart from the rest of Corneille's plays because the criminal impulses of its main character are not mitigated by avowal, and the play conforms more to the ancient tragic model than to Corneille's Jesuitical sense of morality. There are other unpunished criminals in Corneille's theater, as we shall see, but they become morally acceptable by submitting to the civilizing process of confession. Medea stands in contrast to a number of confessing heroes and especially heroines: L'Infante, Chimène, Horace, Cinna, Pauline. She makes a *défiant* avowal or opening of the heart, but it is an anticonfession, a refusal to put her desire at the disposal of the city.

*Médée* is Corneille's only pure tragedy because it represents a total failure of society to deal with crime and guilt. The political structure of Corinth is destroyed because it cannot resolve the issue of the original sins of its would-be king, Jason. An attempt is made to purify Jason by dissociating him from his murderous wife and accomplice, Medea,
who alone as *pharmakos* is made to bear the guilt. But she appears at the end of the play, like an avenging demon, to administer poetic justice. Jason pays with the loss of his own children for betraying Medea and trying to avoid the guilt he shares for the murder and mutilation of her brother.

The attempted exile of Medea is based on the archaic concept of defilement and ritualistic purification. Paul Ricoeur says that defilement is the most primitive representation of evil, since "impurity is measured not by imputation to a responsible agent but by the objective violation of an interdict" (*Symbolism* 27). Exile is the characteristic expression of this system, since it removes the objectively "impure" element from the city. It also signifies expulsion from the legal space of the polis; outside the city, the banished criminal is no longer protected by the law and may be killed with impunity. The idea of exile contains within it the seed of a higher conception of justice, since it refers to human laws. But in *Médée*, responsibility is not fairly meted out. An attempt is made to separate Jason legally and ritualistically from the crimes committed on his behalf by dissolving his marriage with Medea and exiling her. The decree of banishment does in some sense succeed, since Medea will indeed leave the city, but not before exacting a terrible revenge and destroying the Corinthian dynasty.

Confession is the Judeo-Christian mechanism for dissipating evil. The cycle of crime and vengeance is interrupted by the verbal purification of the guilty. The community can reopen its gates to the soul exiled by sin. Unlike Oedipus's and Medea's exile, that of Jehovah's people can come to an end. A merciful God hears the confession of a contrite heart and relents. The verbalization of the heart gives man a second chance against the defilements of his past. The absence of this ritual contributes in a fundamental way to the anomalous character of *Médée* in Corneille's work. The play is a tragic prologue to a heroic theater founded on the mediating power of confession. Medea's unrepentant status at the end of the play, "Je ne me repens pas de vous avoir trahi," signifies the triumph of evil over the city and the failure of any confessional apparatus that might contain her.

In a sense, the spiritual voyage of the Cornelian hero begins, as Dante's did, in hell. Medea, the first incarnation of the tragic hero, would not be out of place in the Florentine master's *Inferno*. When she first appears on stage and we catch our first diacritical glimpse of her soul, we are in familiar spiritual company. In her famous opening speech, "Souverains protecteurs des lois de l'hymenée," she invokes
the powers of the Underworld to take revenge on Jason. The details of the portrait reveal a mixture of ancient and more recent Christian elements. Medea calls upon the torturing demonesses of hell, her “fières soeurs,” to leave momentarily their “cachots” where they “gênez les âmes” to come to her aid. Instead of the sacred “cabinet du coeur,” Medea’s psyche is a demonic “cachot.”

Where Euripides’ heroine invokes “Great Zeus, Lady Themis . . . Queen Hecate” (49), and Seneca’s sorceress details the recipe for Creusa’s poisoned robe, Corneille’s Medea invokes a more Dantesque cohort: “Filles de l’Achéron, pestes, larves, furies” (210). “Gênez” and “cachot” are fourteenth- and sixteenth-century lexemes, respectively, and the vision of demons at work on the souls of the damned is decidedly medieval, not Greek or Roman. “Larves” has a Latin origin and a venerable past in medieval demonology; “peste” entered the French language in the fifteenth century. Medea is as much the contemporary of the Loudun possession trials as she is the enchantress of Greek legend.

The one quality she possesses that marks her as a precursor of the hero is her “grande âme” and her ability to commit herself entirely to one cause. Medea is the heroic ego in its primitive, demonic form, powerfully narcissistic and full of the terrible fantasies of earliest childhood. The tragedy marks the painful discovery of self through the experience of the lost object. Before the betrayal, Medea had cathected all of her libido, powerfully represented as magical powers, to Jason. The tragic couple form a strange reversal of what Freud calls the “normal” type of relation between an “anaclitic” male overestimating the female object and impoverishing his own ego, and the “narcissistic” female seeking a lover who will mirror her own adoration of self. Here it is Jason who seduces female admirers by the power of his own narcissism.\(^5\)

Medea has totally surrendered her own ego-libido to Jason, but his betrayal triggers a powerful and painful return to herself. Like a stretched rubber band, object-libido snaps back into her own ego giving rise to the frenetic “Moi, dis-je et c’est assez” (321). Freud describes this furious return of libido to the ego as characteristic of schizophrenia and other excessively narcissistic states:\(^6\)

The question arises: What is the fate of the libido when withdrawn from external objects in schizophrenia? The megalomania characteristic of these conditions affords a clue here. It has doubt-
less come into being at the expense of the object-libido. The libido withdrawn from the outer world has been directed on to the ego, giving rise to a state which we may call narcissism. But the megalomania itself is no new phenomenon; on the contrary, it is, as we know, an exaggeration and plainer manifestation of a condition which had already existed previously. This leads us to the conclusion that the narcissism which arises when libidinal cathexes are called in away from external objects must be conceived of as a secondary form, superimposed upon a primary one that is obscured by manifold influences. (14:74–75)

Medea has been betrayed by the patriarchal “lois de l’hyménéée.” Hitherto content to leave her ego invested in the image of Jason and to play the role of perpetuator of that image as mother, her impending exile has forced her to reconstruct her ego, which she does by unleashing the demonic forces of primitive narcissism. Instead of normal ego development, which involves abandoning primitive narcissism in favor of “displacement of libido to an ego-ideal imposed from without,” the play represents a tragic destruction of the ego-ideal and an affirmation of the “megalomania” and “omnipotence of thought” of primitive narcissism and schizophrenia.

Freud says that normally the conscience watches over the ego and forces it to strive toward the ego-ideal: “For that which prompted the person to form an ego-ideal over which his conscience keeps guard, was the influence of parental criticism conveyed to him by the medium of the voice” (14:76). But from the beginning, the pact struck with Medea was not based on the repressive voice of conscience and the imposition of an ego-ideal. Jason is “sans conscience” (13); to secure the Golden Fleece he had to “cajoler Médée” (36), and elsewhere he says of his conquest, “Je conjurai Médée” (52). On the psychological and sociological level, civilization is founded on a solicitation of the passions, a “ conjuring up” as Jason says. The conscience hears not only the critical parental voice but also the call to desire: “Viens ça, vers le Père.” The problem is that Medea will not submit her desire to the regime of lack and the Father; her desire is immediate and productive.

Medea spells this out clearly enough to Créon, explaining how the force of her desire was necessary to carry out the Argonauts’ heroic task:

Si lors à mon devoir mon désir limité
Eût conservé ma gloire et ma fidélité,
Si j'eusse eu de l'horreur de tant d'énormes fautes,
Que devenaient Jason, et tous vos Argonautes?
Sans moi, ce vaillant chef, que vous m'avez ravi,
Fût péri le premier, et tous l'auraient suivi.
Je ne me repens point d'avoir par mon adresse
Sauvé le sang des Dieux et la fleur de la Grèce.

(431-38)

The heroine refuses to abandon the productive force of her desire; she envisages one last "chef-d'oeuvre" (253), which turns out to be the poisoned robe, the "don fatal" given to Créuse. This artistic work of primary process and primary production bursts into flames at the end of the play, consuming Jason's children, wife, and father-in-law—a final physical message of Medea's unrepentant desire, which would not deliver itself up verbally to the paternal order.

Créon had attempted to abrogate the pact with Medea's desire through exile: "Va purge mes Etats d'un monstre tel que toi" (380). And Jason displays tragic hubris by thinking he can conveniently dissociate himself from Medea's desire. The play attempts to draw a line between the criminal sorceress and the state. Immediately following Medea's defiant "Moi dis-je," her attendant counters with the image of society: "un roi fort de tant de sujets" (327). Medea rejects this association of subjects; she is the unrepentant, the unanalyzable schizophrenic who rejects the order of subjectivity and the king. The rulers of Corinth hope to save the state from its dangerous alliance with amoral desire. Créon hopes that marriage and exile will establish "et dedans et dehors une profonde paix" (520). But the plan backfires, and the play ends on the note of a futile witch-hunt as Jason dies, vainly hoping that the gods "peuvent de la sorcière achever le supplice" (1626).

The tragic sense of the play is compounded by the feeling that the catastrophic outcome might have been avoided if the crimes of the past had been acknowledged and guilt dealt with justly. Medea seems to have an intuition of how desire and guilt will be handled in the future. We sense that she might have been recuperated by a more subtle subjective apparatus. She protests the injustice of her bearing all the guilt and, arguing as a jurist, indicts Jason on the charge of conspiracy: "Tu présumes en vain de t'en mettre à couvert: / Celui-là fait le crime à qui le crime sert" (859-60).

Elsewhere in the play there is another incidental reference to confession, but here also it serves only to point out the questionable good faith of the characters involved. In a scene that is similar to Pauline
confessing to Sèvere, Créuse explains to an angry Aégée why she has chosen Jason over him: “Souvent je ne sais quoi qu’on ne peut exprimer / Nous surprend, nous emporte, et nous force d’aimer” (635–36). But unlike Pauline, Créuse has chosen passionate love over esteem, and the confession, instead of mollifying Aégée, only angers him: “Que me sert cet aveu d’une erreur volontaire?” (649). To which Créuse replies: “Je ne veux plus, Seigneur, me confesser coupable” (651). She then claims that political reason and a desire to remain close to her father were her real motives, but neither the spectator nor Aégée is convinced by these arguments, since she has already declared quite openly her passionate interest in Jason. On a smaller scale, this scene reflects the same dysfunction of confessional discourse which is a key factor in the tragic pattern of the play. Neither the original sins of the state nor the passions of a princess can be successfully mediated by confession in this play. Desire remains stubbornly attached to its immediate objects; Medea will not cease in the production of her violent desire, and Créuse will let nothing come between herself and Jason. Both refuse the discourse of confession, and both are fittingly united by the destructive masterpiece of Medea’s desire, the “présent déce­ptif” (997). Corneille takes pains to inculpate Créuse in this regard. Early in the play she is presented as coveting Medea’s robe as much as Jason himself as object: “J’en eus presques envie aussitôt que de vous” (588). In dying she speaks of “l’ardeur qui me dévore et que j’ai méritée” (1385). It is the same recalcitrant, unanalyzed female desire that unites the two rivals for Jason’s love and consumes itself on the tragic victims at the end of the play. Irrespective of the inconstant and narcissistic object, Jason, desire itself burns forth for the first and last time in Cor­neille’s theater in its immediate materiality; henceforth it will be medi­ated by confessional discourse as the burning flesh gives way to talking hearts.

**LE CID:** “RODRIGUE, AS-TU DU COEUR?”

The legend of El Cid (Arabic sayyid, “lord”) grew up around the figure of Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, an eleventh-century Castilian warrior who captured the Muslim city of Valencia. The first literary celebration of his exploits was the *Poéma de Mio Cid*, written around 1207 (Fletcher). Later, he became the model of chivalry and the patron of the Reconquest, despite the fact that he had fought with the Moors as much as against them (Kamen 2). Starting in the fourteenth century, a new
element appeared in the chronicles of the Cid: his marriage to Ximena, daughter of a man he had killed in battle, don Gomez de Gormez. In the early versions of the story, Ximena asks the king to order Rodrigo to marry her as recompense for the loss of her father. In the romances of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Ximena seeks justice from the king but accepts immediately and without protest his order to marry a man whose sword is practically still wet with her father's blood. As the role of women in feudal society began to evolve, the plot of the story was changed to attenuate the moral scandal of murder followed by marriage. In Guillén de Castro's Las Mocedades del Cid (1618), Rodrigo and Ximena are in love before the duel, so both protagonists are faced with a conflict between love and honor. As Reynier comments, Ximena is no longer "une fille résignée ou calculatrice" but "une personne morale" (78).

There are numerous colorful episodes from de Castro's version which Corneille suppresses: Rodrigo receiving his spurs from the infanta, the meeting of the council to choose a governor, the "test scene" in which Rodrigo's father bites his son's thumb to stir up his anger, the duel itself, which in the Spanish play is fought right in front of the distraught Ximena. De Castro also stages the battle scene between Rodrigo and the Moors, and his play contains a miracle episode, typical of medieval legends, in which Rodrigo gives his coat to a leper who turns out to be St. Lazarus. Corneille eliminates all of this superfluous material to focus on the interior disposition of Chimène and Rodrigue. He has recast the medieval epic as a heroic trial of passion and self-statement. Instead of the physical provocation of the Spanish play's father, the Cornelian father challenges his son with the fundamental heroic question: "Rodrigue, as-tu du coeur?" Literally he means "courage," but as he himself will learn, the force that inspires Rodrigue is more than warrior courage. Heroism is fueled by desire, which is produced in the heart and sublimated through speech. Don Diègue's question is at the origin of classical civilization: Can a rhetoric of the speaking heart be developed which exhibits and controls desire in a socially acceptable way? Will desire forgo its terrible immediacy as seen in Médée and learn the language of lack and displacement?

The first confessant we encounter in the play is the infanta. Being of royal blood, she can only marry a king, but the object of her desire is the mere nobleman, Rodrigue. The way she overcomes this conflict between duty and desire sets an example that will be followed throughout the play: she opens her heart to her lady-in-waiting,
Léonor. She seeks relief from the mounting pressure of a repressed conflict: “Ma tristesse redouble à la tenir secrète / Ecoute, écoute enfin comme j’ai combattu” (78–79). She then details the power of her passion (“mon coeur est embrasé”) and her generous overcoming of an unsuitable love by giving Rodrigue to Chimène. The same fiery metaphors for love are used here as were employed by Medea: “Et j’allumai leurs feux” (104), but these fires have been tamed by this cathartic opening of the heart and submission to the paternal order: “Et je me dis toujours qu’étant fille de roi” (99). The infanta’s love remains a metaphorical flame that has been safely constrained, and her self-statement situates her within the royal, genealogical chain. Her “je me dis” is the antithesis of Medea’s schizophrenic “Moi-dis-je, et c’est assez.” The opening exploration of the infanta’s heart also shows us that the fire that burns between Chimène and Rodrigue takes its source in this generous gift. It is a legitimized, frustrated fire of renunciation, the unconsummated desire of an other.

The next conflicts between desire and civilization to be mediated by confession are the twin dilemmas of Rodrigue and Chimène. Rodrigue has killed a man in an illicit duel, and Chimène continues to feel passionate love for her father’s murderer. But both of these issues will be resolved by the *cor ad cor* conversation between the lovers in act 3, scene 4, and finally by the “inquisition” of Chimène by the king at the end of the play.

Both illicit desires receive a favorable hearing. Rodrigue refuses to disavow the duel, and Chimène will not eradicate the scandalous love from her heart. By a laxist treatment of the issues involved, verbalization of the “crimes” provides an avenue for discovering meritorious motives behind apparent sins; evil is mediated and desire recuperated for the good of society.

As the scene begins, Chimène has just revealed to Elvire that she still loves Rodrigue: “Je l’avoue” (846) and that for honor’s sake she must seek his death. No sooner are these words out than Rodrigue suddenly appears. He has overheard the last words and only missed the avowal of love by seconds. Chimène gasps: “Rodrigue devant moi!” (852). For a moment, Rodrigue occupies the place of voyeuristic spectator, and the play seems to suggest my analogy between confessional and stage. The sudden appearance of Rodrigue sends a shiver through the audience and reawakens the fantasy of the unconscious being watched over by the conscience. The scene is set for an in-depth probing of the protagonists’ hearts.
The first issue to be dealt with is Rodrigue's murder of the count. Both ecclesiastical and civil authorities condemned the duel. At the insistence of Richelieu, Louis XIII had signed an edict against dueling in 1626 with the death penalty for offenders (Reynier 249). Twice in the play itself, the king takes exception to his subjects fighting without his authority and only forgives Rodrigue after his victory over the Moors (2.6, 4.5).

Among the casuists, the question of the duel received diverse treatment. The stricter among them condemned the practice: “Les peines de ceux qui se battent en duel sont: l’excommunication réservée au pape, l’infamie perpétuelle, la privation de la sépulture ecclésiastique . . . ” (Pontas). However, certain Jesuits found a way of justifying duels. Père Airault, one of Pascal’s targets in the Lettres provinciales, had this to say about the subject:

Si vous me voulez ravir l’honneur en me donnant un soufflet ou un coup de bâton, je puis l’empêcher par la force des armes; donc la même défense est permise, quand vous voulez me faire la même injure avec la langue, ne pouvant l’éviter autrement qu’en vous tuant . . . Il faudrait pourtant avertir le calomniateur afin de l’engager à cesser ses calomnies, et s’il ne le voulait pas, il ne serait pas à propos de le tuer publiquement, à cause du scandale, mais en secret. (qtd. in Amann 45)

Rodrigue follows this sort of reasoning—even the very words—in justifying the duel to Chimène: “Tu sais comme un soufflet touche un homme de cœur” (875). But to get beyond the impasse of the vendetta system and the “rigoureux point d’honneur,” Rodrigue delves deeper into his heart to explain his crime. By a process akin to the Jesuitical “direction of intention,” he re-creates his mental disposition at the time of the killing: “Je t’ai fait une offense, et j’ai dû m’y porter / Pour effacer ma honte, et pour te mériter” (895–96). This is not the same version of the event arrived at during the “stances,” where Rodrigue’s final motivation in fighting the duel was to preserve his “gloire” and save his family honor. Although in verse 324 he had realized that Chimène could not love someone unwilling to defend paternal honor (“J’attire ses mépris en ne me vengeant pas”), he certainly did not go into battle “pour te mériter,” as he now suggests to Chimène. In the “stances,” Rodrigue had made his decision by a logic of elimination: Chimène must be sacrificed, but “sauvons du moins l’honneur.” The
recourse to a fictional reconstruction of the event allows him to confess his love as an equal motive in the killing.

Is this pure bad faith on his part? Perhaps direction of intention anticipates the psychoanalytic concept of overdetermination. Acts are committed for a host of contradictory reasons, conscious and unconscious, and Rodrigue's casuistical confession allows the deeper, more paradoxical motivations for his act to come to the surface. At some level, desire for Chimènè did dictate his act. The surface appearance of submission to paternal law hides an equally powerful Oedipal design. It is by killing a father that Rodrigue shows himself worthy of Chimènè. Perhaps this is what is most authentic in Rodrigue's confession and what speaks most convincingly to Chimènè, provoking on her part a similar declaration of love. Among the primitive forces that Rodrigue's father invoked when he asked his son if he had a heart was this sentiment of violence against the father. Rodrigue's love is declared in the ambivalent language of transgression and submission to the paternal law.

In this confessional scene, a son and a daughter have reached an entente; while reiterating the paternal code of honor, each has revealed his heart to the other. Rodrigue manages to convey that his murder is a sign of his love, and likewise, Chimènè pledges obedience to the point of honor but also gives Rodrigue verbal confirmation of her love: "Va, je ne te hais point" (963). A first step has been taken in alleviating the tragic conflict provoked by the vendetta system.

The gruesome oracle of the father's talking wounds is superseded by the confessional discourse of the children. Before the encounter with Rodrigue, Chimènè had evoked the paternal body language that had her in its fatal thrall:

Son sang sur la poussière écrivait mon devoir;  
Ou plutôt sa valeur en cet état réduite  
Me parlait par sa plaie, et hâtait ma poursuite;  
Et, pour se faire entendre au plus juste des rois,  
Par cette triste bouche elle empruntait ma voix.  

(676–80)

This is the same sort of guilty writing and corporeal language that is used in the Judeo-Christian tradition as an image of man's birthright of sin in the flesh. Here, it is a sign of the cycle of violence and revenge. In the play, as in the tradition, guilty writing can be alleviated by ver-
balization. In the end it is not this "triste bouche" which the king hears but rather the mouth that avows love for Rodrigue.

"Avouer par la bouche"

It is Chimène's avowals that sustain the action of the play and ultimately resolve the tragic conflict. Her admission to Rodrigue gives him the inspiration he needs to defeat the Moors and earn his own forgiveness from the king. There is a similar forced confession of love before the duel with don Sanche. Faced with the emotional blackmail of Rodrigue, who threatens to let himself be killed, Chimène admits: "Adieu: ce mot lâché me fait rougir de honte" (1557). And, finally, at the end of the play, Chimène's unwilling confession to the king allows him to pass judgment and put an end to the tragic vendetta. The inquisition of Chimène is a structural constant in the play; it defines in an essential way the peculiar heroic erotic that Corneille has created, and it allows the king to intervene as arbiter of the truth and desire of his subjects.

Octave Nadal has commented on this aspect of the rapport between the two lovers: "Il [Rodrigue] joue le rôle de tortionnaire vis à vis de sa victime, qu'il tourmente jusqu'à ce qu'il ait obtenu de sa bouche l'aveu qu'elle est vaincue par l'amour. Ce procédé inquisitorial, conduit avec délice, n'est certes pas le fait de la tendresse, mais celui de l'amour propre et de l'égoïsme amoureux" (171–72). The methods used by Rodrigue and later by don Fernand are inquisitorial, but the effects that Nadal describes ("amour propre," "égoïsme") do not satisfactorily explain all of the nuances of inquisition.

By emphasizing Rodrigue's cruelty and egotism, Nadal is suggesting that the inquisition scene results in the same sort of egotistical victory as a duel—Chimène is "vaincue par l'amour." This is only partially true. One can conceive of Rodrigue's victory here as an erotic conquest akin to his military exploits, but the avowal of love that concludes it is not the same as a military defeat.

Let us first examine the similarities. Rodrigue does wage a sort of psychological and rhetorical warfare against Chimène. He appears suddenly in her apartment in a move similar to his nocturnal ambush against the Moors. To heighten the shock, he is carrying the murder weapon. He reveals that he was obliged to kill her father, that he would do it again, that his gesture was necessary to remain worthy of her. Is he suggesting that her high standards in some way contributed to her
father's death? Maybe. He then provokes Chimène by asking her to vent her hatred and kill him with the sword. He seems intent on pushing her to the limit just to make her show that she doesn't hate him and in fact conserves feeling for him in the bottom of her heart. She is tricked into admitting that she will seek his death, but not out of hatred. This is the tacit admission of love that Rodrigue has been seeking. He has overcome Chimène's resistance and forced her to verbalize her passion.

There is an undeniable element of aggression and pleasurable cruelty on the part of Rodrigue. The primitive version of sexuality as masculine conquest is referred to, but Nadal is wrong to say that it is all done for Rodrigue's "amour propre." Chimène's avowal is not the concession of a defeated duelist, and Rodrigue's reaction is not the vain exultation of a victor. To confess is not simply to concede.

The image of Rodrigue as cruel inquisitor is more suggestive, but Nadal does not explore all of the angles. He is certainly right to mention the potential for sadistic pleasure in such a scene. Here one is reminded of the auto-da-fé in Candide. Cunégonde is horrified to see Candide tortured publicly, but cannot deny the sensual appeal of the spectacle: "Je vous vis dépouillé tout nu; ce fut là le comble de l'horreur, de la consternation, de la douleur, du désespoir. Je vous dirai avec vérité que votre peau est encore plus blanche et d'un incarnat plus parfait que celui de mon capitaine des Bulgares" (153). This sort of pleasure is not entirely foreign to the inquisitional scenes in the Cid. Rodrigue as well as the spectator derives a certain pleasure in torturing the truth out of Chimène. It is also evident that Chimène is an accomplice in this game. She blushes, she protests, but where does shame end and pleasure begin? Corneille's critics were not completely off the mark in calling her a "fille dénaturée."

But cruelty and pleasure are not the only dimensions of a forced confession. Christianity has imbued avowal with a sacred aura. It is a special epiphany of the Truth and a promise of healing. Augustine says: "Thou art there in their heart, in the heart of those that confess to Thee" (65). When the lover's discourse invokes the ceremony of avowal, another register beyond cruelty and pleasure is attained. Love becomes the occasion of insight and healing. Chimène's avowal is a "miracle d'amour," not just a humiliating defeat or a sadistic spectacle for Rodrigue.

For the play to reach its conclusion Rodrigue must work out his
own restitution for the evil of the duel, and the king must sound the heart of Chimène. Like Rodrigue, don Fernand will subject Chimène to a veritable inquisition, and here the tactics he uses invite comparison with those used by the historical Inquisition. The king decides to test Chimène's real sentiments concerning Rodrigue, "Je vais l'éprouver" (1336). He lies to her by reporting that Rodrigue has perished at the hands of the Moors. She faints, and don Diègue tells the king that he has the proof of her love: "Sa douleur a trahi les secrets de son âme" (1345).

Such tactical lies were used by the Inquisition to pry the truth from heretics. As Francisco Peña writes in the Manuel des inquisiteurs (1578):

La ruse dont le seul but est de tromper est toujours défendue et n'a rien à faire dans la pratique du droit; mais le mensonge que l'on fait judiciairement et au bénéfice du droit, du bien commun et de la raison, celui-là est parfaitement louable. A plus forte raison, celui que l'on fait pour détecter les hérésies, déraciner les vices et convertir les pécheurs. Que l'on songe au jugement de Salomon! (133)

Chimène initially denies the evidence of her fainting, but another mistaken belief in Rodrigue's death produces the final avowal. Seeing the sword brought back from the duel with don Sanche, and assuming that her lover is dead, she declares: "Eclate, mon amour, tu n'as plus rien à craindre.... Sire, il n'est plus besoin de vous dissimuler / Ce que tous mes efforts ne vous ont pu celer" (1709, 1723–24). Don Diègue observes that Chimène has been forced to "avouer par sa bouche" (1742). The avowal is irrevocable; when she learns that Rodrigue is indeed alive, she can not retract her declaration.

The king passes judgment; his justice dispenses Chimène from the "point d'honneur" and the shame of loving Rodrigue: "Ma fille, il ne faut point rougir d'un si beau feu" (1763). Confession has discovered the truth, absolved guilt, and united the true hearts. He commands Chimène to accept Rodrigue as her husband at an indefinite future date. For the present, "possédant déjà le coeur de sa maîtresse" (1838), Rodrigue already enjoys the obscure object of his desire, the mythical heart that the king has tricked into confessing itself, the broken heart mourning its lost love: "Eclate, mon amour, tu n'as plus rien à craindre" (1709). Rodrigue will never receive a higher tribute nor possess a
richer treasure than the fragile declaration that he couldn't be present to hear and that the king received in his place. For a moment, death was love's ally, and Chimène's heart broke its honorable silence.

**HORACE AND CINNA:**
**ABSOLUTION AND ABSOLUTISM**

The recent work of Louis Marin has focused on the eucharistic formula as a cornerstone to both the theory of representation in the Port-Royal grammarians and the political praxis of the court historiographers and artists. In the *Grammaire générale et raisonnée de Port-Royal*, the joint work of Arnauld and Claude Lancelot, the sacramental enunciation "Hoc est corpus meum" is cited several times as an example of how signs fulfill their double role of designation and signification. For Marin, the eucharistic example is the only enunciation that can accomplish both missions of the sign. Only the miraculous divine words can found a theory of language capable of going beyond semiosis and breaking through to the designation of a real presence. For Marin, the consecration formula is the "exemple privilégié du point de vue de la théorie logico-grammaticale" in the *Logique* and the *Grammaire générale* which at the same time presents, accomplishes, and resumes the theory of representation (*Critique* 32).

Similarly, in the political domain, the entire strategy of royal propaganda was based on an analogy to the real presence in the sacrament. Marin demonstrates that the various portraits of the king were based on the eucharistic model. He calls the commemorative medals of Louis XIV "hosties royales" (*Portrait* 147–68).

I wish to show how the "Ego te absolvo" of confession was equally important to absolutism. In the *Instructions théologiques et morales sur les sacrements*, Nicole speculates about why God instituted the sacraments:

**D.** Pourquoi Dieu a-t-il voulu établir des Sacrements extérieurs pour nous communiquer ses grâces?

**R.** Parce qu'il a voulu qu'en même temps que les Chrétiens lui seroient unis par un culte spirituel, ils fussent aussi unis ensemble, en un corps visible de religion; & qu'il étoit pour cela nécessaire qu'il y eût de la dépendance entre eux, & qu'ils se communiquassent les uns aux autres par des signes extérieurs,
non-seulement les vérités de la foi, mais même la rémission des péchés & les grâces nécessaires à la vie chrétienne. (2)

For Nicole, the sacraments—and he specifically mentions confession here—were instituted to form a “corps visible de religion.” The theory of divine right monarchy was based on an analogous conception of society as a body, that of the king, held together by various rituals and image building.

Here it is the other capacity of the sign within the theory of representation that is valorized: “Figure porte absence et présence, plaisir et déplaisir,” Pascal says in Pensée 265. The efficaciousness of confession depends on the sign’s ability to truly “porter absence.” Here representation is invoked to hide the presence of sin. The confessional sign is called upon to stand as the sigillum of sin, the sign that seals and conceals. As Nicole says in his Instructions, “Tout ce qu’on découvre au Prêtre par un aveu sincère, sera caché à jamais à tous les hommes... et tout ce qu’on lui cache sera découvert à la face de toute la terre” (259).

For the Jansenist theologians, only grace could guarantee that the figure really did indicate absence. This is why they sought to delay absolution: “Que le pécheur qui cherche sérieusement le bien de son âme, ne doit pas souhaiter d’être absous de ses péchés sans délai” (Instructions 306). This is also why they continually worried if the formula had really worked: “N’y a t-il point de marques... qui nous puissent donner une juste confiance de la solidité de notre conversion?” (329). These apprehensions made them insist on the disposition of the penitent; Nicole is close to the Protestant position when he affirms, “L’absolution produit la grace dans les âmes à proportion de leurs dispositions” (311). He is at odds with the Council of Trent, which put the emphasis on the power of the formula itself and the authority of the priest to absolve sins. Absolution was important for both rigorists and laxists; the former stressed the need for grace to make it operative, whereas the latter were confident, if not presumptuous, about the performative power of the words.

As with the Eucharist, there were political analogies to the sacrament of penance in the real and imaginary practices of the divine right monarchy. There were times when it was just as important to undo and efface actions as it was to project a presence.

Our subject is the literary representation of confession and absolution, so we again return to Corneille, but, as I discussed in chapter 2, confessional discourse was also an important feature of court society
as it actually functioned. According to the laws of the ancien régime, by an act of "abolition," the king could declare the criminal action of one of his subjects as having not taken place. Legally, this is what happens at the end of *Horace* and *Cinna* (Couton 27). We also see historical instances of the king trying to use confession to rule consciences. Norbert Elias describes the following case:

In demanding subordination and confession of guilt, Henri IV was implacable. He had to be. For example, he first requested the Duc de Biron, who was planning an uprising, to confess his intentions in a confidential meeting between the two, promising him certain forgiveness if he confessed and repented. But when de Biron refused to confess, despite the latter's repeated reminders of services rendered to the king, he had him unceremoniously brought to justice and finally executed. (Court 183)

*Horace* and *Cinna* are dramatizations of the power of absolution. In the first play, the king intervenes at the end of the play to judge a case of homicide. He hears the various accusations and defenses of Horace as well as the accused's own verbal account of the murder; he then weighs the various arguments in casuistical fashion and delivers a verdict. In similar fashion to the *Cid*, a moral dilemma has been resolved by the king's confessing of his subject.

*Cinna* portrays the foundation of a permanent peace between an absolute king and his rebellious subjects brought about by a pardon of the conspirators and their subsequent repentance and submission to his rule. Confession and absolution are essential attributes of the "roi-prêtre." They are rituals that allow the state to dissociate itself from the evil of its constituent members. By the pronunciation of the royal *sigillum*, the mystical body of the state erases the sins of its heroes.

Confessional discourse also extends the link between monarch and subject to the depths of the subject's conscience. Corneille imagines a successful synthesis between royal power and pastoral power. It is a fragile balance perhaps achieved completely only in *Cinna*, where Auguste intervenes in time to prevent any crime. The emperor exercises true government by gaining access to his subjects' consciences and hearing their confessions. Rebellion is nipped in the bud, not by repressive force, but by a turning inward and an obligation to reveal
one's thoughts: “Apprends à te connaître, et descend en toi-même. . . . Parle, parle, il est temps” (1517, 1541).

The Case of *Horace*

Corneille had no great affection for the fifth act of *Horace*; he thought that the episode of Camille's murder was a breach of the Aristotelian unity of action and that the last act, “tout en plaidoyers,” was an anti-climactic if not dishonorable ending for both the play and its hero (*Examen*). However, he must have felt that the murder of the sister and the subsequent trial of Horace were integral parts of the Roman legend and that his audience expected these events to be treated in his play. His Spanish and Italian predecessors had both included the trial, although Lope de Vega, as concerned with dramatic interest as Corneille, dispatched the trial in a few stanzas. The growing prestige of the monarch in Corneille's plays and the subjective profundity of his theater required a longer and more detailed scene, which, however unsatisfactory from a dramatic standpoint, was necessary to resolve the moral dilemma.

Returning home victorious, carrying the armor of his vanquished brothers-in-law, Horace encounters his sister, the betrothed of Curias: “Ma soeur, voici le bras qui venge nos deux frères” (1251). Somehow, he expects his grieving sister to share in his glory. She is as devastated by Curias's death as Horace is drunk with victory.

Horace's tragic mistake is to start a rhetorical battle with Camille that ends in murder and dishonor. He doesn't respect the feminine prerogative of mourning, one of the few real liberties accorded women in a warrior society. Unlike Rodrigue, who offers Chimène the sword of reconciliation and sorrow, Horace ends up using his weapon in a disgraceful act of violence against a woman.

An instructive parallel can be drawn between Horace and Rodrigue returning victorious from battle to confront a grieving woman. One outcome is admirable and the other tragic. This is because Horace is capable only of a rhetorical duel with men that terminates in violence. Ironically, his dispute with Camille follows the same pattern as his face-off with Curias: tempers rise until Roman patriotism is insulted and violence ensues. Unfortunately, Horace has merely repeated the scenario of his combat with Curias, and one could legitimately ask whether, at the moment he stabs his sister, he is not somehow
reenacting the duel, because it is Curiace's name that is on his lips as he unleashes the fatal blow: "Va dedans les enfers rejoindre ton Curiace" (1320).

Rodrigue, on the contrary, symbolically offers the sword to Chimène and allows her to unburden her heart. The situation is different in that Chimène is not mourning an "ennemi public" and does not insult Rodrigue's patriotism. But both men have killed an object totally invested by the female egos they confront. For this reason, Horace's intransigent attitude can be meaningfully contrasted with Rodrigue's. The Castilian listens to the anguish of female desire, whereas Horace's only advice to Camille is "songe à mes trophées: / Qu'ils soient dorénavant ton unique entretien" (1277). In Le Cid, Rodrigue weathers the storm of Chimène's anger and eventually hears the secret of her undiminished love. A similar reconciliation between Horace and Camille never occurs because the vanquisher of the Curiaces demands that Camille suppress her sentiments: "Tes flammes désormais doivent être étouffées" (1275). When Camille does open her heart according to the Cornelian formula, "Je t'ouvre mon âme" (1279), it only provokes the further ire of Horace. The refusal to hear Camille's avowal of passion for Curiace is the sign of a tragic lack of communication.

What this scene really depicts is a total misapprehension of female desire on the part of Horace. He will not understand the depth of his sister's love for Curiace. The images of the play show us that Camille's love is as terrifying as a nightmare, as mysterious as an oracle, and, finally, as deep as the grave. Horace confronts this "en plus" of female desire as if it were another masculine rival, another "autre soi-même." As in the duel, he seeks to conquer an identity at the other's expense, to assure that only his "soi-même" emerges from the encounter. But what he really accomplishes is an ironic and belated victory for the tragic couple. By killing his sister, he tarnishes his honor and gives her what she really desires at this point: the status of martyr of love. By trying to extinguish his sister's love for Curiace and kill his rival once and for all, he really defeats himself and furnishes his rivals with the occasion to be gloriously united in death and in legend. Only the trial of the fifth act and the restorative power of King Tulle's diacritical judgment can save the hero from disgrace and preserve the play from a truly tragic ending.

After the murder, we are given at least nine different objective evaluations of Horace's act before the king arrives to assume proper authority on this "reserved case." The first qualification of the act is the
perpetrator's own words as he commits it; he speaks of "justice" and "raison." Next, Procule disapproves of Horace's excessive "rigueur" (1325). The elder Horace agrees that Camille merited death, but feels that his son has shamed himself by his action (1416). Horace himself then admits that his "lâcheté" has sullied his noble blood (1425–26). The king then arrives and, after calling Horace's action an "étrange malheur," allows Valère to begin, as it were, the prosecution's case.

"Crime," "coupable," "barbare vainqueur," "souillât la gloire," are some of the terms used by Valère. Then Horace is commanded to speak on his own behalf. He starts his plea by referring to the monarchical principle that the subject is always de jure guilty before the king:

\[\text{Sire, on se défend mal contre l'avis d'un Roi,}
\text{Et le plus innocent devient soudain coupable}
\text{Quand aux yeux de son prince il paraît condamnable.}
\]

(1538–40)

Louis Herland interprets these remarks as expressing "insolence" and "mépris de l'opinion du Roi" (201). André Stegmann, however, has more correctly identified these lines as being "un acte de soumission inconditionnelle" (\textit{Héroïsme} 396). The whole meaning of the trial is that the king, as incarnation of the law (\textit{lex rex}), is alone capable of making the correct judgment.

The monarch enjoys special charisma and powers of judgment which escape the ordinary mortal. \textit{L'Innocence justifiée}, one of many royalist tracts of the 1630s, speaks in these terms of the special graces that illuminated Louis XIII: "Par une présence d'esprit miraculeuse vous trouvez incontinent, sans tourner, le point principal, le centre du cercle et le remède aux affaires les plus épineuses, où vos Ministres, souvent quelque raffinés et consommés qu'ils soient en toutes choses, n'y vont qu'aux atteintes" (qtd. in Thuau 248). This is the sort of elevated insight that Corneille's roi Tulle possesses and that allows him to judge the case of Horace.

In the Roman legend, as recounted by Livy, the king disqualifies himself and allows the people to make the final decision. Corneille's play, however, explicitly rejects the notion that the people could have any insight into the hero's heart: "Horace, ne crois pas que le peuple stupide / Soit le maître absolu d'un renom bien solide," says Horace's father (1711–12). In Corneille's play, the judgment and pardon of Horace are part of the process of royal deification; Tulle indicates that by
rendering justice to men, "un roi se fait un demi-dieu" (1478). In the Roman legend, it is the elder Horace's rhetoric that sways the crowd and convinces them of the inhumanity of putting a national hero to death: Where could he be executed? Inside or outside the walls of the city? Everywhere bears witness to his glory. The hero himself and the king stand silent as the father makes his impassioned plea.

In Corneille, the father makes his speech, but it is to a small closed hearing. It is an opinion the king considers, but finally the decision will rest upon Horace's own words and the king's response to them. Corneille's acquittal depends, not on a public spectacle, but on the king's sacramental power to absolve Horace and, in keeping with the semiotics of confession, to hide the sin of the hero: "Qu'elles [les lois] se taisent donc; que Rome dissimule / Ce que dès sa naissance elle vit en Romule" (1755–56, emphasis added). As in the Roman legend, Horace's glory outshines his crime, but the rhetorical fashion in which this is established is quite the opposite. The crucial exchange in Corneille takes place in the verbalization of the fault by Horace and the reply to these words.

First the king commands Horace to speak: "Défendez-vous Horace." Here the purpose of confession is not to dispel a mystery or solve a crime but rather to examine the overdeterminations of an act and, by an interpretive tour de force, to direct the intention of Horace most advantageously.

What is also important here is for Horace to confirm the king's justice by his avowal. In both the civil and religious justice from this period, a condemned man would confess his crime publicly, "faire amende honorable," as part of his punishment, after the judgment of his guilt. This served to bear public witness to the righteousness of the king's justice and, in some measure, to redeem the condemned man who acknowledged his guilt. Finally, in a psychological sense, Horace must take an active part in the "talking cure" if it is to be effective and he is to be cured of his desire for suicide. The king will base his reply on the the very terms that Horace uses, thereby offering an interpretation and a solution to the hero's tragic impasse.

As I have already indicated, Horace starts his avowal by submitting entirely to the king's judgment and acknowledging his guilt. He invites the king to go beyond appearances and discover the hidden truth of his motivations:

Sire, c'est rarement qu'il s'offre une matière
A montrer d'un grand coeur la vertu tout entière
Horace declares that at the root of all of his actions are a "vertu" and a "grand coeur" which are invisible to the people but which the king alone can discern. There is a secret entente between hero and monarch which makes the king the only fit judge of this case. By this intimation, Horace surrenders his fate and his meaning to the king. He offers himself up as a sign to be read, a "figure" with its present "écorce" and its absent "coeur" which only the king can see.

Rhetorically, the gambit succeeds; the king takes the cue. He begins his interpretation by saying that all the testimony is taken into account, "toutes vos raisons me sont encore présentes," but his final decision is influenced most heavily by Horace's words, some of which he comments upon literally in his decision.

First, Tulle deftly turns aside the father's defense on the grounds of a "premier mouvement":

Un premier mouvement qui produit un tel crime  
Ne saurait lui servir d'excuse légitime;  
Les moins sévères lois en ce point sont d'accord.

(1735-37)

It is difficult to know exactly what Corneille means by "les moins sévères lois" here. In Livy, the archaic law of the Roman legend is indeed implacable; the parricide was condemned to be bound and beaten to death. But Corneille's vieil Horace invokes certain principles of jurisprudence that would be plausible in the seventeenth century, and Tulle addresses these issues. French customary law contained the notion that the will had to be fully engaged for commission of a crime: "Il n'y a point de crime là où manque l'intention criminelle" (Loysel, art. 791). As I have already mentioned, the casuists were willing to bend homicide laws: duels could be justified; anger and precipitation were legitimate attenuating circumstances. It is my contention that Tulle's judgment follows a pattern of moral latitude in political matters in Corneille which is based on a casuistical, accommodating adjustment between the sacred and raison d'État.

The king first declares that the "premier mouvement" argument is
not the relevant point. Horace is not absolved because the murder was an involuntary act, but by reference to three key notions that are contained in Horace's own speech:

1. The arm: “Je ne vanterai point les exploits de mon bras” (1573). By this allusion, Horace had called the king's attention to the debt the state owes him, and it is “le bras” that opens Tulle's justification of Horace: “Ce crime ... part du même bras / Qui me fait aujourd'hui maître de deux Etats” (1740). The synecdochical reduction of Horace to his arm allows the crime to be confused with his heroic exploits; how can one punish the same arm that saved the nation? Horace's victories have established the state itself; he is blessed with “dons que le Ciel fait à peu de personnes” (1752). Since the state owes its very existence to Horace, he is “au-dessus des lois” (1754). His gift is akin to charity; it is the total commitment that frees one from the law.

2. After this argument, Tulle pronounces the absolution itself: “que Rome dissimule / Ce que dès sa naissance elle vit en Romule” (1755–56). Georges Couton says that Tulle here avails himself of an actual provision in the laws of ancien régime France which allowed the king to pronounce the “abolition” of a crime, “une procédure qui permettait par raison d'Etat de considérer un acte comme non advenu” (27). To our way of thinking, Tulle goes beyond just effacing the crime. After initially stating that the murder “blesse jusqu'aux Dieux,” he systematically attenuates Horace's culpability, first, as we have just seen, by placing the hero prior to and above the law, and next by examining Horace's real motive.

This involves a reversal of the cause and effect relationship that the people see in Horace's behavior. The warrior had complained that the people consider only the “effet” of an action and make false assumptions about the motive for heroic actions, thus they would misunderstand the killing of Camille because they can't perceive the real “cause.” The king's interpretation establishes the correct cause and effect relationship:

\[
\text{Vis donc, Horace, vis guerrier trop magnanime:} \\
\text{Ta vertu met ta gloire au-dessus de ton crime;} \\
\text{Sa chaleur généreuse a produit ton forfait;} \\
\text{D'une cause si belle il faut souffrir l'effet.} \\
\text{\textit{(1759–62)}}
\]

The apparent crime is excused because as an “effect” it is derived from a virtuous “cause.” Again, a metonymic shift, this time by a substitu-
tion of cause for effect, allows the king to save Horace. First, the synec-
doche of the arm for the man had made it physically impossible to 
separate the hero from the criminal; now a metonymic reversal substi-
tutes a cause—"chaleur généreuse"—for an effect: sororicide, the 
over fact that the people would have seen, judging only from the 
outside.

3. This brings us to the third key notion in the decision: Horace's act 
was not the result of a rash act, a "premier mouvement," but rather a 
"vertu," which in the terminology of the Scholastics meant an acquired 
habit. Camille's death resulted from the virtue or habit of patriotism 
in Horace. He has trained himself to react in certain circumstances, 
and this is what produced the regrettable but understandable event.

Whether or not one is ready to excuse Horace on this account, and 
a modern audience is more likely to be repulsed by his conditioned 
behavior, Tulle's judgment does seem an accurate appraisal of Horace's 
act. In the murder of his sister, Horace does seem to be following a 
habitual pattern of behavior, and the key to it seems to be verbal. Hor-
ace has trained himself to react to certain words or formulas, when 
they are pronounced either by himself or by others.

At the center of this verbal constellation is the word Rome. When 
Curiaec separates himself from Rome, "Je rends grâces aux Dieux de 
n'être pas Romain" (481), Horace no longer sees him as a friend. The 
very fact that Rome has spoken blocks out all further considerations: 
"Rome a choisi mon bras, je n'examine rien" (598). Finally, the name of 
Rome's adversary produces a complete dissociation and denial of his 
friend: "Albe vous a nommé je ne vous connais plus" (502). Horace has 
trained himself to respond to verbal cues; this is the mechanism of his 
"vertu." When Camille provokes him with "Rome, l'unique objet de 
on mon ressentiment," she sets off a conditioned reflex of "vertu."

Horace's reliance on verbal cues to produce a "virtuous" pattern of 
behavior brings to mind Descartes's comments on language and the 
control of the passions. The control of the will is essentially an associa-
tive process that Descartes compares to the arbitrary yet habitual link 
between the phonetic syllables of words and the impressions they pro-
duce on the soul:

Encore que chaque mouvement de la glande semble avoir été 
joint par la nature à chacune de nos pensées dès le commence-
ment de notre vie, on les peut toutefois joindre à d'autres par 
habitude, ainsi que l'expérience fait voir aux paroles qui excitent 
des mouvements en la glande, lesquels, selon l'institution de la
nature, ne représentent à l'âme que leur son lorsqu'elles sont pro­férées de la voix, ou la figure de leurs lettres lorsqu'elles sont écrites, et qui, néanmoins, par l'habitude qu'on a acquise en pen­sant à ce qu'elles signifient lorsqu'on a ouï leur son ou bien qu'on a vu leurs lettres ont coutume de faire concevoir cette signi­fication plutôt que la figure de leurs lettres ou bien le son de leurs syllabes. Il est utile aussi de savoir qu'encore que les mouve­ments, tant de la glande que des esprits et du cerveau, qui repré­sentent à l'âme certains objets, soient naturellement joints avec ceux qui excitent en elle certaines passions, ils peuvent toutefois par habitude en être séparés et joints à d'autres fort différents. (Passions 65, emphasis added)

Descartes is confident that a person can train his response to a given sensation or passion in the same way the mind is trained to associate letters and sounds with the things they represent. By repeated training, for example, a soldier can be taught to associate the sensations of battle with courage instead of fear. Language is Descartes's example of what is most arbitrary and programmable in human behavior. Horace's behavior seems to bear this out if I am right in thinking that words provide the real explanation for his virtuous action.

The final note in Tulle's judgment is an appeal to Horace's vital forces: "Vis guerrier trop magnanime" (1759). Let us not forget that Horace was near suicide after his crime, and that without the expedi­ent of the king's absolution, there was no hope for him. He was locked in the private world of his own justifications and intentions; only the king's inquisition can legitimize his intentions and bring him back into the fold. Horace was ready to immolate himself to his egotistical honor, but by the king's intervention the tragic impasse of heroic subjectivity is overcome in favor of the social body. As was the case at the end of Le Cid, an initially criminal passion can be absolved and put to good use through the process of confession.

In the section entitled "Loi figurative" of the Pensées, Pascal attacks the Jesuits and other laxists in these terms: "J.-C. selon les chrétiens charnels est venu nous dispenser d'aimer Dieu, et nous donner des sacrements qui opèrent tout sans nous" (538). Fragment 254 from the same section simply reads: "Parler contre les trop grands figuratifs." What we have just witnessed in the trial of Horace would certainly have elicited similar remarks from Pascal. Tulle and his court are indeed "grands figuratifs" in their rhetorical reconstruction and absolu-
tion of Horace's crime. The original sins of the absolutist state are
glossed over by a deliberate poetics of confusion. Pascal speaks at
length on the figure to show the difficulty if not the impossibility of
discerning the truth without the paradoxical truths of Revelation,
whereas the laxists deliberately operate within the ambiguities of lan­
guage to achieve their political ends: "Encore qu'on ne puisse assigner
le juste, on voit bien ce qui ne l'est pas. Les casuistes sont plaisants de
croire pouvoir interpréter cela comme ils font" (729). By clever inter­
pretation and charismatic powers, analogous to the "sacrements qui
opèrent tout," the king resolves the case of Horace.

**Cinna: "Le maître des coeurs"**

Absolution remains at the center of Corneille's political reflection in
his next play. Both tyranny and tyrannicide are averted by acts of self-
analysis and absolution. The monarch and his conspiring subjects are
saved by examinations of conscience and pardon. The tyrant Octave
enters his own heart and renounces the cycle of violence and ven­
geance. Faced with the prospect of killing yet another set of political
rivals, Auguste pauses. He admonishes himself, "Rentre en toi," and
admits that he has governed through murder and fear. Inspired by "le
Ciel," he then interrogates and forgives Cinna, thereby completing his
metamorphosis from the tyrant Octave into the emperor Auguste, "le
maître des coeurs." Like the emperor, Cinna must examine his own
conscience; Auguste orders him: "Apprends à te connaître." And in
similar fashion to Auguste, he discovers a guilty heart. Ingratitude,
treachery, and personal glory are his guiding sentiments, not the salva­
tion of the state. Cinna is a desperate lover, not a civic hero. The be­
trayal of Auguste's adoptive daughter, Emilie, is the final challenge to
the emperor's tolerance, but in a moment of self-conquest and political
insight, he pardons his enemies instead of killing them. The divinely
inspired act of absolution signifies both the indemnity of Auguste for
his past crimes and the redemption of the conspirators, who are trans­
formed into loyal subjects. The tragic impasse of tyranny and tyranni­
cide is resolved by absolution. Instead of another writing of guilt, a
"proscription," the play concludes in effacement, the magnanimous
"oubli" of the emperor.

All of Corneille's oeuvre, and *Cinna* in particular, has been studied
many times for its political lesson. The dramatist, who once collabo­
rated with Richelieu, is variously portrayed as the artistic spokesman
of absolutism and *raison d'Etat*, and *Cinna* is considered the most successful idealization of the absolute monarch. Bernard Dort, for example, calls Corneille an "écrivain d'Etat, poète de la légitimité, sujet convaincu des vertus de l'absolutisme" (18) and qualifies *Cinna* as a "vision presque mystique ... en équilibre dans l'Histoire" (54). More recently, Michel Prigent has chosen to study Corneille's characters as "héros ou victimes de la raison d'Etat" (4).

The various characters in the play express at different moments the main tenets of the monarchical doctrine of an all-powerful state, a divinely sanctioned coalition of subjects under the figure of the king. Cinna expresses this idea of the integrity of the state guaranteed by the royal presence. Advising Auguste, he says, "Sous vous, l'Etat n'est plus en pillage aux armées; / Les portes de Janus par vos mains sont fermées" (553-54). The king prevents the state from fragmenting into rival factions, and he puts an end to the disordered state of war, symbolized by the closing of the gates of Janus. A few lines earlier, Cinna gives his view of the unstable tendency of democracy: "Mais quand le peuple est maître, on n'agit qu'en tumulte: / La voix de la raison jamais ne se consulte" (518-19). The power of the king to consolidate the state by binding the anarchical mob together is evident in this exposé of the "Etatist" doctrine. What has so far escaped the attention of political readings of *Cinna* is another principle of the nascent state: pastoral power.

Once again, my theoretical reference is the work of Michel Foucault. In his essay "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason,'" Foucault argues that the modern state, from its origins in the seventeenth century, was founded on two kinds of rationality: (1) *raison d'Etat*, which is the science of forming a lasting coalition of subjects united by the monarch, and (2) pastoral power, which is a power exercised through knowledge of individuals. Hence the title of the essay, "Omnes et Singulatim," since the modern state functions by simultaneously forging the group and cultivating the individual subject.

Since *raison d'Etat* has already received much critical attention, Foucault dwells on the second, unsuspected aspect of state rationality. He calls it pastoral power because it developed around the figure of the shepherd-leader discussed in Greek, Hebrew, and Christian texts. The shepherd-ruler cares for each individual member of his flock, and he must know his sheep on an individual basis. In Greek mythology, the shepherd-ruler belonged to an ideal Golden Age when men were
guided by gods. "The deity being their shepherd, mankind needed no political constitution" (Plato, Statesman, qtd. in Foucault 234). In the ensuing real historical period, politics set itself the task of binding citizens together to form the city-state.

The pastoral ideal, relegated to a mythical past by Greek political thought, was actively developed in Christianity, acquiring the specific features of spiritual direction, obedience, and self-renunciation which I have analyzed in the preceding chapters. Foucault characterizes the modern state as borrowing both civic and pastoral rationalities for its purposes:

We can say that Christian pastorship has introduced a game that neither the Greek nor the Hebrew imagined. A strange game whose elements are life, death, truth, obedience, individuals, self-identity; a game which seems to have nothing to do with the game of the city surviving through the sacrifice of the citizens. Our societies proved to be really demonic since they happened to combine those two games—the city-citizen game and the shepherd-flock game—in what we call the modern state. ("Omnes" 239, emphasis added)

Cinna is the representation of both "games" mentioned here by Foucault—the state as both unitive, civic project and problematization of the individual subject and his or her desires. My reading emphasizes the pastoral aspects of state power in Cinna, since this is an area where I find other critics' explanations unsatisfactory. Most readings resort to seventeenth-century moral concepts like "générosité" or "magnanimité" to explain Auguste's pardon, which appears to be a gratuitous, "inspired" gesture. I maintain that the concept of pastoral power can provide a more systematic explanation of the events portrayed in Cinna and make them more relevant to the historical moment of their transformation from Roman legend into reflection on the modern state.

Auguste's first words give us a clue as to the novelty of the political themes Corneille wishes to explore. Unaware of the conspiracy brewing against him, the emperor seeks the counsel of Maxime and Cinna. He asks his presumed friends which is the better form of government, monarchy or republic. This is a scene not to be found in Seneca's version of the legend, but borrowed from Dio. But just before asking the conspirators' advice, the emperor bares his soul in a truly confessional
revelation of the disappointments and anxieties of power. This passage is not to be found in Corneille's sources; the dilemma and its poetic expression are strikingly modern:

L'ambition déplait quand elle est assouvie,
D'une contraire ardeur son ardeur est suivie,
Et comme notre esprit, jusqu'au dernier soupir
Toujours vers quelque objet pousse quelque désir
Il se ramène en soi, n'ayant plus où se prendre.

(365–69)

Auguste has discovered the same truth about desire and dissatisfaction in the political sphere that Molière's Dom Juan experiences in erotic life. There is no such thing as “possession”; desire itself has become problematical at this moment in history. One can comically celebrate this state of affairs, abandon oneself to the serial succession of new objects, and accept the dispersion of the self symbolized by the final rendezvous with the commandant. After much subjective probing and the unfolding events of history, Auguste will discover an alternative path of self-preservation based on the denial of desire and mastery over the instincts.

He considers for a moment a total renunciation of power and all of its wish fulfillments. He asks his counselors to speak freely and to advise him whether to continue on as king or abdicate in favor of a republic: “Traitez-moi comme ami, non comme souverain” (399). This invitation to informality is seen by many critics as a sign of weakness and indecision. Doubrovsky speaks of “Auguste en perte d’autonomie héroïque... On ne peut établir en même temps des relations de supériorité et de réciprocité” (195). Prigent comments: “Auguste se trouve ici au plus bas degré de la politique. Il déclenche lui-même le processus subversif en renonçant au titre de ‘souverain’ pour celui ‘d’ami’: est-ce au roi d’abaisser la monarchie?” (59). But for us, knowingly or not, Auguste has spread a net of confession and confidentiality into which the rebels will fall.

This scene begins the process of disarming Cinna from within. The resolute republican who had eloquently defended the cause of Roman liberty will be touched by the emperor's openness and will find himself burdened with “remords” and “conscience,” unable to carry out the assassination. Viewed strictly from the perspective of classical political power, this scene does seem to constitute a moment of weakness, but
as an exercise in pastoral power, this maneuver by Auguste is extremely efficacious. He invokes the concept of “ami,” which he will repeat again triumphantly at the end of the play: “Soyons amis.” This might appear as a derogation of monarchical power, but it turns out to be the other, pastoral face of the state through which Auguste triumphs.

A look at some contemporary texts on “amitié” can confirm the powerful connotations of this word in seventeenth-century court society. In general, La Rochefoucauld is severely critical of what passes for “friendship,” calling it “un commerce où l’amour-propre se propose toujours quelque chose à gagner” (52). But there are rare exceptions that confirm the rule: “Un véritable ami est le plus grand de tous les biens” (106). Real friendship is based on mutual truth obligations; total confidentiality reigns between true friends: “On doit ne leur rien cacher de ce qui ne regarde que nous, se montrer à eux toujours vrais dans nos bonnes qualités et dans nos défauts même” (117).

Mme de Lafayette’s La Princesse de Clèves also reveals the close associations between friendship, confidentiality, and power at court. When the queen, Marie de Medicis, recruits the vidame de Chartres as her confidant, she must first “confess” him. As the vidame tells the story: “Elle souhaitait de s’assurer de mon secret et elle avait envie de me confier les siens.” The queen tells him, “La manière dont je vous parle vous doit obliger à ne me rien cacher. Je veux que vous soyez de mes amis . . . mais je ne veux pas, en vous donnant cette place, ignorer quels sont vos attachements” (104, emphasis added). The queen here uses almost the same words as Auguste to offer the vidame a privileged place at court; he has access to power, but the queen’s friendship also imposes obligations of truth and loyalty.

Finally, we must remember that in court society rank was denoted by degree of intimacy with the king. To be present at the royal lever or meal, to be the valet or écuyer of the king, was a mark of distinction, an inclusion in the power structure. The offer of royal “friendship” carried with it none of the connotations of equality or merely private conviviality we might assume in modern society, where friendship and public life are more clearly demarcated.

Unconsciously, the same bond of “friendship” is played out in the first scene of act 2 when Auguste reveals the secrets of his own heart and asks for honest political opinions from his newly initiated “friends.” As monarch, he will soon be entitled to their gratitude and their consciences. For the moment, Auguste is deluded in saying to
Cinna and Maxime: “Je vois trop que vos coeurs n’ont point pour moi de fard” (628). But the words express the ideal relation between an absolute king and his subjects, the “discernement” mentioned by Cinna in line 506.

There is thus a sort of prophetic logic in the advice Cinna offers. The ardent republican finds himself defending the royalist position; he defends the superiority of the monarchy and advises Auguste to stay on the throne. He later explains to an astonished Maxime that the move was a cynical ploy to keep the emperor in power just long enough to carry out plans for a vengeful coup d’état. But in an ironic way, Cinna’s adherence to the royal ideology is consistent with his being enclosed in the pastoral embrace of friendship by Auguste.

After the meeting, he seems opposed to the idea of tyrannicide and tries to convince Emilie of the gravity of such a crime:

```
Le Ciel a trop fait voir en de tels attentats
Qu’il hait les assassins et punit les ingrats,
Et quoi qu’on entreprenne, et quoi qu’on exécute,
Quand il élève un trône, il en venge la chute.
                        . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
De pareils châtiments n’appartiennent qu’au foudre.
(1003–10)
```

Unlike some Jesuit casuists, Cinna disapproves of tyrannicide as a means of political action; the just subject must suffer the abuses of the tyrant, leaving it to divine intervention to remove him. But on this question he flip-flops maddeningly throughout the play. In the beginning, he qualifies Auguste as a “tyran” (145), and a “tigre altéré de tout le sang romain” (168). His assassination will be glorious: “Avec la liberté, Rome s’en va renaître” (226). But even after his interview with the emperor and his attempts to persuade Emilie as to the divine inviolability of kings, he still feels bound by the “serment” (993) he has pledged to his mistress and the conspirators. He is again ready to justify tyrannicide: “Il faut sur un tyran porter de justes coups” (1051), although, significantly, he now sees his action as a “crime” (1064) and intends to punish himself immediately by suicide.

Cinna’s ideology is at the mercy of his love life. He would appear to be a royalist at heart and sincere in his preference for this form of government in his speeches to Auguste and Emilie, but his passions have led him to espouse the republican cause. He and his fellow con-
spirators have not even made detailed plans for the sort of government that will follow their revolt. Perhaps Cinna’s political confusion is also the sign of the dialectical struggle that accompanies the emergence of absolutism. In France, the divine right monarchy asserted itself at the expense of the great feudal barons, and in Cinna’s royalist speeches he blames the nobles for perpetuating civil war. On the other hand, his republican sentiments are perhaps expressions of bourgeois and parliamentary aspirations to power. During the first part of Corneille’s career, the king pursued an alliance with the bourgeoisie against the great noble houses. The paradox of Cinna’s republicanism and absolutism could well reflect the dynamics of political developments in Corneille’s day. One can see that absolutism paved the way for the bourgeois prise de pouvoir by destroying the grands and allying itself with the robe class.

Critics such as Couton and Stegmann maintain that Corneille condemned the violent overthrow of kings: “Le tyranicide reste toujours à la fois un régicide et un parricide, le pire des crimes. On ne peut détrôner un usurpateur que pour rendre le trône à l’héritier légitime” (Couton 98; Stegmann, Corneille ed. 268). The dramatist went so far as to falsify history in Nicomède to spare his public the spectacle of “une catastrophe si barbare” (Corneille, Oeuvres 520).

The intended lesson of Cinna was doubtless that tyrannicide was an unthinkable political option in the seventeenth century, but within the space of Roman history it remains a tragic possibility until the tyrant Octave is converted into the magnanimous divine right emperor. Auguste himself, in a long confessional passage, considers that the conspirators are justified, even by the gods:

Rentre en toi-même, Octave, et cesse de te plaindre.
Quoi! tu veux qu’on t’épargne, et n’as rien épargné!
Songe aux fleuves de sang où ton bras s’est baigné,
De combien ont rougi les champs de Macédoine,
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Leur trahison est juste, et le Ciel l’autorise.

(1130–45)

Until heaven endows him with the aura of pastoral power, the cycle of tyranny and tyrannicide will continue. Until Auguste assumes both objectively and subjectively the sacred place of the monarch, political murder will remain the order of the day.
Auguste’s meditation on his own guilt in the passage above is a key moment in the emergence of pastoral power. He reiterates the themes of dissatisfaction and moral disgust with the exercise of power in the world. He is searching for an end to political crimes and relief for his own conscience. The solution will come with the idea of pardon, first suggested by his wife, Livie: “Essayez sur Cinna ce que peut la clémence” (1210).

Auguste’s first reaction is to retreat to the logic of raison d’Etat:

\[
\text{Tout son peuple est blessé par un tel attentat,} \\
\text{Et la seule pensée est un crime d'Etat,} \\
\text{Une offense qu'on fait à toute sa province,} \\
\text{Dont il faut qu'il la venge, ou cesse d'être prince.}
\] (1251-54)

The emperor could well be following the advice of a famous étatiste manual, Richelieu’s Political Testament, in which the king is advised to be implacable with conspiracies:

\[
\text{With regard to crimes of state it is necessary to close the door to pity, ignoring the pleas of interested individuals and the clamor of an ignorant populace, which occasionally condemns what is most useful and even indispensable to it. Christians ought to forget their personal injuries, but magistrates must not forget those which affect the public interest. In fact, to leave them unpunished is as likely to invite their repetition as to pardon and remit them.}
\] (88)

According to a pure reason of state position, Auguste should show no mercy. But the play eschews an exclusively political rationality; it goes beyond political reason to demonstrate the superior principle of the king as pastor, as master of the heart.

Dramatically, Corneille arranges the last act of the play so that the decision to pardon the conspirators arrives as a sudden inspiration from heaven. Livie had suggested the alternate route of clemency, but Auguste had refused this advice and moved toward another proscription or “supplice” (1662). Suddenly, as the emperor learns that even his adoptive daughter has betrayed him, he receives an insight that
resolves simultaneously his own subjective malaise and the political crisis:

\[\text{Je suis maître de moi comme de l’univers;}
\text{Je le suis, je veux l’être. O siècles, ô mémoire,}
\text{Conservez à jamais ma dernière victoire!}
\text{Je triomphe aujourd’hui du plus juste courroux}
\text{De qui le souvenir puisse aller jusqu’à vous.}
\text{Soyons amis, Cinna, c’est moi qui t’en convie.}
\]

(1696-1701)

According to the monarchist logic of the play, the king’s conscience is the source of political wisdom. As was the case with Horace, he personally solves the problem of crime and punishment; his words of forgiveness and the reiteration of the term “ami” provide a synthesis and a solution for the entire development of guilt and remorse throughout the play. Cinna and Emilie, who had refused to show remorse, suddenly find the words of guilt and pardon on their lips:

\[\text{Emilie: Je connais mon forfait . . .}
\text{Je sens naître en mon âme un repentir puissant,}
\]

(1717-19)

\[\text{Cinna: O vertu sans exemple! ô clémence qui rend}
\text{Votre pouvoir plus juste, et mon crime plus grand.}
\]

(1731-32)

Both the monarch and his subjects are delivered from their guilty consciences, the conspirators by the pardon, and Auguste by the sudden realization that he is the king and as such free from the crimes of the past. By vanquishing his own personal inclination to revenge, he has subjectively attained the monarchical position, becoming “maître de moi comme de l’univers.” Livie had already exposed this part of the royalist doctrine:

\[\text{Tous ces crimes d’État qu’on fait pour la couronne,}
\text{Le ciel nous en absout alors qu’il nous la donne,}
\text{Et dans le sacré rang où sa faveur l’a mis,}
\text{Le passé devient juste et l’avenir permis.}
\]

(1609-12)
But Auguste has to realize this subjectively. By performing an absolution himself, he establishes the precedent of pardon within the state. He operates as both celebrant and recipient of this sacrament of forgiveness.  

Auguste’s gesture has been variously interpreted by critics and even emperors. Napoléon understood the pardon as a cynical maneuver: “Une fois, Monvel, en jouant devant moi, m’a dévoilé le mystère de cette grande conception. Il prononça le ‘Soyons amis, Cinna,’ d’un ton si habile et si rusé, que je compris que cette action n’était que la feinte d’un tyran, et j’ai approuvé comme calcul ce qui me semblait puéril comme sentiment” (qtd. in Doubrovsky 213).

Jacques Maurens explains it as an example of “la vertu des Païens,” and stresses the historical fidelity of Corneille: “Il serait absurde d’imaginer que Corneille ait voulu montrer Auguste bénéficiant réellement de la grâce” (274). For us, Corneille has overlaid the Roman legend so heavily with Christian elements as for it to be totally reconstructed. The drama of the conspirators’ guilty consciences, the Christian theme of the morbidity of human desire, and the heroic trial of self-statement are entirely of Corneille’s making. They transform the story of a political truce into one of a sacred pardon. They propose a new kind of heroism and power in which self-depreciation and confidentiality are not political blunders or evidence of weakness but rather new dimensions of power relations. The king must undergo his own subjective analysis of guilt, but he emerges as a broker of consciences, “le maître des coeurs.”

Serge Doubrovsky interprets the gesture as an instance of aristocratic arrogance: “Auguste ne pardonne pas par charité ou par magnanimité, au sens moderne, mais par ‘générosité’ au sens du XVIIème siècle, c’est-à-dire par orgueil aristocratique, pour prouver, à ses yeux comme à ceux des autres, sa propre supériorité” (214). This interpretation stems from the author’s existentialist concept of a “projet de maîtrise” based on the aristocratic hero’s struggle to conquer an “existence” against the adversity of other men and the forces of history. A key moment in this Hegelian power game is the recognition of the master by the slaves, and this is apparently the real significance of Auguste’s pardon.

Religion is brought into the discussion of Cinna, but it is interpreted as a projection of the master mentality: “Le projet monarchique, en dernière analyse est la forme extrême que prend le projet humain d’être Dieu” (218). The movement toward theology in the play would be
simply an attempt to deify the master who tries to “escape history” (217). Doubrovsky uses the key existentialist categories of “essence” and “existence” to explain how the emperor attempts to canonize his existence and reduce the other masters to a dependent state of essence: “On s’aperçoit qu’il y avait une certaine justification à la révolte anarchique et anachronique d’Emilie, à son refus de laisser son Moi se resorber dans l’Histoire, de troquer une Maîtrise, originellement jaillie du mouvement même de l’existence, contre une essence aristocratique, octroyée d’en haut, par le Ciel et par le Roi” (220). Religion in Cinna is simply a transparent expression of the emperor’s will to power.

I would agree that religion creates power relations and that Cinna, in its exploration of political and religious power, could be considered a “proléromène à tout Etatisme futur” (220). But Doubrovsky’s analysis fails to appreciate the specificity of the two rationalities that combine to form the modern state, the pastoral and the civic. His account of religion as a pure exercise in aristocratic mastery is a misrepresentation of the Christian mentality. If Auguste really had pardoned by “orgueil aristocratique,” would Emilie and Cinna have thrown themselves at his feet? If power is enacted by the Hegelian recognition scene of the master by the slave, what is the meaning of the many appeals to introspection throughout the play? Auguste’s power is based on religion, but it involves a reversal of the Hegelian model: the slave’s discourse is no longer simply acknowledgment of the master but analysis of himself as well, and the master himself takes on the identity of the shepherd.

What is missing from Doubrovsky’s account is an appreciation of the “slave” essence of Christianity. To the idea of a “projet de maîtrise” and religion as transparent expression of the noble will to power, one must oppose the historical lesson of Nietzsche: “The masters have been disposed of; the morality of the common man has won” (36). This was a process that took many centuries, but by Corneille’s day, I contend, the aristocratic ethos had already absorbed certain “ascetic” values. In fact, Corneille’s work traces in exemplary fashion the evolution from the feudal ethic of “meurs ou tue” to the arrival of conscience and guilt as part of the master mentality: “Je sens au fond du coeur mille remords cuisants” (803), “Je connais mon forfait . . . ” (1717), etc. The Nietzschean idea of a radical difference between “noble” and “priestly” values, and of the Western soul as a “battleground” between the values of “Rome and Judea,” is a necessary antidote to the one-sided presentation of the “projet de maîtrise” (Genealogy 52).
Christianity is opposed to the knightly-warrior ethic; the will to power subsists, but it has allied itself with the "ascetic ideal." In the Nietzschean scheme, the phase of "artists of violence and organizers who build states" gives way to another creative project, the ascetic making of the self, the "secret self-ravishment, this artists' cruelty, this delight in imposing a form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material" (87). In a passage that doubtless inspired Foucault's whole idea of pastoral power, Nietzsche describes the ascetic ruler as a shepherd: "He [the shepherd] must be sick himself, he must be profoundly related to the sick—how else would they understand each other?—but he must also be strong master of himself even more than of others, with his will to power intact, so as to be both trusted and feared by the sick, so as to be their support, resistance, prop, compulsion, taskmaster, tyrant, and god" (126). However one interprets Nietzsche's characterization of the ascetic as "sick"—and there are dialectical reversals and epistemological valorizations of the sick elsewhere in his philosophy—this passage does seem relevant to the emergence in Cinna of the paradoxical "maître des coeurs," who explores his own guilt and subjectivity before becoming the master. Like a Freudian analyst who first undergoes the didactic analysis, Auguste develops his own unconscious as a tool for understanding and governing others. He goes against the grain of orthodox politics; he appears to abandon power and descend to equality: "Traitez-moi comme ami, non comme souverain" (399). He forgives where all of the theorists of raison d'Etat advise severity, yet he triumphs completely. The masters have been disposed of. The stole is mightier than the sword.

POLYEUCTE: "A COEUR OUVERT"

We end our study of heroic avowal in Corneille with Polyeucte because structurally and thematically this play carries to its conclusion the ascending pattern of confession and heroism in the "grand Corneille" of the years 1635–40. Confessional discourse follows the fortunes of the hero throughout the rest of Corneille's career. Confession remains a major component in the elaboration and resolution of moral conflict, although the solutions become more and more tenuous as the political order degenerates. The last play, Suréna, marks the eclipse of the hero and his open heart. Suréna inhabits a tyrannical world where there is no longer a "roi des coeurs." Instead, the hero must defend the truths of his heart against a predatory state. As Suréna tells Pacorus,
"L’empire des coeurs n’est plus de votre empire" (1310). This development is beyond the scope of my work, however, as I have chosen Racine to illustrate the tragic possibilities of confessional discourse.

Structurally, the plot of *Polyeucte* develops as a series of personal revelations. A single event, the return of Sévère, sets in motion a series of subjective examinations and determinations to resolve the crisis by self-revelation. There are no fewer than six avowal scenes that carry the play forward.

Thematically, confession appears in a Christian context, which allows Corneille to examine the whole scope of its meaning. Primarily, the word signifies verbalization of sin, but it can also mean confession of faith. There is a natural progression from one meaning to the next, as avowal of sin prepares the soul to receive and confess the divine truth. The theme of immolation is attached to confession because public proclamation of the faith leads to martyrdom, the ultimate forum for the Christian declaration of the self. The martyr is a witness (Gk. *martur*) to the sacrifice of the body in favor of the transcendental truth of the heart; he confesses simultaneously man’s sinfulness and its overcoming by signification. His body becomes a steadfast sign of the truth of his faith, a proof that God sustains him in the ordeal. As we recall, the first ritual of confession was a public chastisement of the body directly modeled upon martyrdom. In the Christian tradition, self-statement always gravitates toward masochistic and persecutory scenarios. To state the truth about the self is to suffer and die.

In *Polyeucte*, the heroic trial of self-statement follows out this logic of confession to the end. The pattern of avowal and renunciation stretches from the beginning to the end of the play. From the first issue of Pauline’s mysterious dream to its final revelation as Polyeucte’s martyrdom, there is a constant recurrence of confession: Pauline confesses her adulterous passion first to Sévère himself and then to her husband as a means of defending her honor but also of perpetuating a form of admirative, sublimated love. Polyeucte, in turn, confesses his faith, thereby sacrificing both his wife and his life, as if heroic self-statement finally coincided with self-destruction: “Qu’on me mène à la mort, je n’ai plus rien à dire” (1313).

The process leads the hero beyond the political and sexual arrangements that Corneille celebrates in his previous plays, namely, the state and the family. Polyeucte smashes the idols of the Roman Pantheon to proclaim a single ethical God and surrenders his wife to his former rival, Sévère. A revolutionary event safely distanced in Roman history
but not without significance for Corneille’s period, a warning that the sacred is always a dangerous ally of ideology because it formulates the dreams and demands of mankind and projects them outside of history into eternity. In Polyeucte we see conjugal eros fatally attracted to death and imperial Rome forced to admit higher allegiances on the part of its subjects: “Je dois ma vie au peuple, au prince, à sa couronne, / Mais je la dois bien plus au Dieu qui me la donne” (1211–13). Polyeucte must give up the physical pleasures of his recent marriage as well as his attachments to the political order.

To an extent, religion is the “opium of the people,” and the divine right monarchy certainly tried to exploit the quasi-sacramental aura that surrounded the king, but discourses are polyvalent. The formation of conscience and the impulse to confess are processes that could threaten absolutism. Polyeucte’s Christian dream contains a theology of liberation, an egalitarian vision of a future in which “les rois et les bergers sont d’un même rang” (1529). In Polyeucte, the allegiance between the throne and the altar is only saved by the dubious conversion of Félix, who, as monarch, is reduced to the role of admiring spectator of heroic consciousness.

The Obligation to Reveal

Polyeucte’s first dialogue with his wife reveals that he is hiding something from her: “Quel est donc ce secret?” (112). The secret turns out to be his newly found faith, and martyrdom will ultimately ensue because of the fundamental obligation of the Christian to reveal his or her heart: “Un chrétien ne craint rien, ne dissimule rien: / Aux yeux de tout le monde il est toujours chrétien” (1549–50). The believer uses verbalization to combat sin, to strengthen his resolve, and, finally, to buy the crown of martyrdom. The process of speaking the truth about oneself furnishes the “grace” necessary for heroic action. This idea is illustrated many times throughout the play.

When Pauline is troubled by a dream, Stratonice invites her to deal with it through avowal: “A raconter ses maux souvent on les soulage” (161). The confessional principle is immediately recognized and affirmed by Pauline, who replies with a formula of her own: “Une femme d’honneur peut avouer sans honte / Ces surprises des sens que la raison surmonte” (165). Before giving the details of the dream, she explains to Statonice how she once loved Sévère but bowed to her father’s preference for Polyeucte; then she recounts her nightmare vision
in which her husband is murdered by the combined efforts of the Christians and her father. Various characters offer their opinion of the dream: Pauline is worried, Polyeucte unaffected but deferential to his wife's feelings. Néarque, acting like a monastic director, offers his diacritical advice: “Ainsi du genre humain l'ennemi vous abuse . . . / Et ce songe rempli de noires visions / N'est que le coup d'essai de ses illusions” (53, 59–60). The dream comes from the devil because it is delaying Polyeucte's conversion. But the demon's efforts are defeated in part through revelation of the dream. Polyeucte knows the motive behind his wife's fears, and these resistances can be dismantled by Néarque.

The spectator, however, senses that the dream is premonitory and the whole play in a sense a kind of Traumdeutung. As the events of the dream are fulfilled one by one, starting with the return of Sévère, the viewer begins to doubt Néarque's authority. Was the dream just a "noire illusion"? Are the Christians "impie et sacrilège," as Stratonice suggested (257)? To the extent that the dream retards Polyeucte's conversion, it is "diabolical." From a psychoanalytical perspective, its details could also express unconscious, repressed wishes: continued erotic attachment to Sévère, revolt against the paternal law counterbalanced by images of castration, as the father rushes in to stab Polyeucte. But by the play's end, these tragic scenes from the family romance are transformed into a beatific vision.

"Avouer sans honte"

In scene 2 of act 2, Pauline is sent by Félix to mollify Sévère. Lacking the courage to confront the emperor's new favorite, whose marriage to Pauline he had thwarted, he hopes that she can save him from Sévère's wrath. It is an ignoble maneuver that puts Pauline in a difficult position. Sent by her own father to exploit an old passion for political purposes, she must preserve her honor.

The tactic she chooses is avowal, beginning the interview with a straightforward declaration that she is married and loves Polyeucte. She then announces her intention to open her heart fully to Sévère: "Pauline a l'âme noble et parle à coeur ouvert" (463).

She exploits the power of confessional discourse by taking the high ground morally. By covering herself with the "nobleness" attached to confession, she shields herself from the consequences of admitting her love. The performative, redemptive power of confession can outweigh
the facts of the case. The self-assurance of one who initiates confession bespeaks a mastery that cannot be disarmed.

She first admits that she would have chosen Sévère over Polyeucte: “Si le ciel en mon choix eût mis mon hyménée, / A vos seules vertus je me serais donnée” (465–66). Sévère presses for concessions: “Est-ce là comme on aime, et m’avez-vous aimé?” (496). But unlike Chimène, Pauline avoids the role of inquisitional victim. She retains the initiative; she confesses that she still loves Sévère violently: “Le dedans n’est que trouble et que sédition. / Un je ne sais quel charme encor vers vous m’emporte” (504–5). However, she is firmly resolved to follow her duty and remain faithful to Polyeucte. Sévère is told that he must honor and preserve Pauline’s virtue because this is why he loves her in the first place. This is the strange paradox of passion and denial in Corneille; virtue itself becomes eroticized, and the passions conspire with their own refusal.

The key moment in this process occurs in the middle of Pauline’s avowal when the troubling, unspecified passion, “Un je ne sais quel charme,” is brought under control by a metonymic shift from “vers vous m’emporte” to an aspect or quality of Sévère: “Votre mérite est grand, si ma raison est forte, / Je le vois encor tel qu’il alluma mes feux” (506–7, emphasis added). Pauline confines her passion to “merit,” which both she and Sévère can increase by honoring the paternal laws of marriage. A chaste ecstasy of denial and mutual admiration may continue: “Adieu, trop malheureux et trop parfait amant” (572).13

Pauline remains consistent in her use of confession to extricate herself from a difficult situation. Like the princesse de Clèves, she combats her adulterous inclination by admitting it to her husband:

Et pour vous parler avec une âme ouverte,
Depuis qu’un vrai mérite a pu nous enflammer,
Sa présence toujours a droit de nous charmer.

(614–16)

Polyeucte seems ravished by this exercise in openheartedness: “O vertu trop parfaite, et devoir trop sincère” (621). We do not know exactly all the sentiments that Pauline’s confession arouses in Polyeucte’s heart. Certainly, he must feel the pangs of jealousy. There is a hint of ironic cruelty in his verbatim citation of this passage when bequeathing Pauline to Sévère: “Puisqu’un si grand mérite a pu vous enflammer, / Sa présence toujours a droit de vous charmer” (1589–90).

The wound of jealousy pushes Polyeucte farther along the ascetic
path of confession and sacrifice; immediately following Pauline's confession, he announces his plan to destroy the idols and bring about his own martyrdom: “Allons mon cher Néarque, allons aux yeux des hommes / Braver l'idolâtrie, et montrer qui nous sommes” (645–46). Polyeucte is inspired by his wife’s confession to make his own admission, which will in turn win back the heart of Pauline, “seduce” her to the highest form of the erotic of virtue.

Le combat de la chasteté

“O combat que surtout j’appréhende . . . ” (1082). In his prison cell, Polyeucte learns that Pauline will visit him and try to dissuade his zeal for martyrdom. To prepare for the “combat” of her visit, Polyeucte first engages in a spiritual and rhetorical battle with the temptations of the flesh. The noble Pauline, the perfect wife, becomes “un obstacle à mon bien” (1144). Like the famous anchorites, Polyeucte must wage the solitary struggle against the “honteux attachement de la chair et du monde” before he can merit the crown of martyrdom (1107).

He first seeks the intercession of Néarque in heaven to help him in his struggle; then he sends a guard to bring Sévère to his cell, as he plans to give his wife away to his former rival. The other guards retire, and Polyeucte is left alone on center stage to conduct his battle for chastity. This is not an eroticism of immediate physical presences, like that of Dante’s Paolo and Francesca, but a baroque, “obscene” representation of passion where temptation and jouissance, whether spiritual or carnal, are not the meeting of two bodies but solitary internal encounters between a subject and his pleasures. This is the modern subject of sexuality alone in the confessional:

Source délicieuse en misères féconde,
Que voulez-vous de moi, flatteuses voluptés?
Honteux attachements de la chair et du monde,
Que ne me quittez-vous quand je vous ai quittés?
Allez, honneurs, plaisirs, qui me livrez la guerre:
Toute votre félicité
Sujette à l’instabilité
En moins de rien tombe par terre,
Et comme elle a l’éclat du verre
Elle en a la fragilité.

(1105–14)
What he confronts are not the unclean spirits, the literal temptresses of the Desert Fathers, but the abstract qualities of Counter-Reformation spirituality, "flatteuses voluptés," "honteux attachements de la chair," "honneurs, plaisirs." They are personified and engaged in an imaginary dialogue, "Que ne me quittez-vous quand je vous ai quittés?" Since they persist in tormenting Polyeucte, they are invited to show what they really have to offer. But he is not seduced by the spectacle: "Vous étalez en vain vos charmes impuissants" (1116). This is because God reveals to him the real spectacle of human history: "Il étale à son tour des revers équitables / Par qui les grands sont confondus" (119–20). The passions are bested in a theatrical contest with God, as Polyeucte's soul becomes the discerning spectator of his own desires. In the end, he turns aside human love, the masochistic "source délicieuse en misères féconde," and opts for a spiritual jouissance beyond death:

Saintes douceurs du ciel, adorables idées,
Vous remplissez un coeur qui vous peut recevoir;
De vos sacrés attraits les âmes possédées
Ne conçoivent plus rien qui les puisse émouvoir.
Vous promettez beaucoup et donnez davantage.
Vos biens ne sont point inconstants
Et l'heureux trépas que j'attends
Ne vous sert que d'un doux passage
Pour nous introduire au partage
Qui nous rend à jamais contents.

(1145–54)

Here, desire satisfies itself in an imaginary "en plus" in which "adorables idées" overfill the heart. Polyeucte's wife is superfluous because in his mystical vision he has transcended human sexuality; his mystical pleasure is feminine as well as masculine, figured by the heart, which can be active or passive—here passively filled in ecstasy, later to eject its blood in martyrdom and convert Pauline. A "doux partage" puts an end to the division of human sexuality. Images of eternity and overflowing contrast with the earlier metaphor of human desire as a fragile mirror that "en moins de rien tombe par terre" (1112). The flesh is comparable to "l'éclat du verre": fleeting illusions and broken glass. This threatening imagery of the passions as dangerous and sharp was also present in the "glaives" that God suspends over the heads of the wicked (1121).
Polyeucte's personal vision concludes with a shift to the communal “nous.” This signifies that he has projected himself forward into a community of saints and abandoned his worldly attachments. Thus he can deal impassively with Pauline. He has come to the point of not seeing, not knowing Pauline: “Et mes yeux éclairés des célestes lumières / Ne trouvent plus aux siens leurs grâces coutumières” (1159–60). He has been delivered from her visual charm and is only interested in her as a potential member of his new sect. Like Horace, he can cut his personal ties of affection in one verse: “Je ne vous connais plus, si vous n’êtes chrétienne” (1612).

Nothing More to Say

Polyeucte's confession is complete; he has nothing more to say: “Qu’on me mène à la mort, je n’ai plus rien à dire” (1312). One last time he tries to explain the mysteries of his faith. He declares the ethical superiority of his own God over those of the empire:

La prostitution, l’adultère, l’inceste,
Le vol, l’assassinat, et tout ce qu’on déteste,
C’est l’exemple qu’à suivre offrent vos immortels.

(1667–69)

It is significant that Polyeucte ranks the Tridentine sins par excellence, those of the flesh, before crimes of violence. The real locus of Polyeucte’s conversion is his passionate heart, which has ascended from the primitive gratifications of prostitution, adultery, and, of course, incest to a spiritual, postgenital stage, figured by the androgynous heart.

The words of Polyeucte continue to meet with incomprehension, and he betrays a certain impatience at trying to explain his religion: “Mais j’ai tort d’en parler à qui ne peut m’entendre” (1663). Even his final exchange with Pauline ends on a severe note of admonition, not total accord:

Pauline: Je te suivrai partout et mourrai si tu meurs.
Polyeucte: Ne suivez point mes pas ou quittez vos erreurs.

(1681–82)

The full performative power of Polyeucte’s confession will only be realized by the spectacle of his death. The final signifier that carries out
Polyeucte’s confession and converts Pauline is his dismembered body. The folly, the horrid spectacle of martyrdom, is seen and understood: “Je vois, je sais, je crois, je suis désabusée” (1727). Heroic confession concludes with the destruction of human beauty and form. An antithetical, antitheatrical moment concludes the representation of the self. The martyr scene occurs offstage. Polyeucte is beyond classical representation; he has pronounced his last phrase and stepped into infinity, the vanishing point that orders perspectivist representation but remains beyond.