AFTER THE FAILURE OF *PERTHARITE* IN 1652 AND A SUBSEQUENT SEVEN-YEAR RETIREMENT, CORNEILLE RETURNED TO THE THEATER TRIUMPHANTLY IN 1659 WITH *Oedipe*. WHEN HE PUBLISHED THE PLAY THE FOLLOWING YEAR, HE PREFACED IT WITH A LITTLE POEM THAT PURPORTS TO EXPLAIN THE GENESIS OF THE WORK. FOUCQUET, IT WOULD APPEAR, HAD URGED CORNEILLE TO RESUME HIS INTERRUPTED CAREER; AND THE PLAYRIGHT, ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE, HAD REPLIED IN VERSE. IN THE POEM HE BEGINS BY THANKING FOUCQUET FOR HIS CONFIDENCE AND REASSURES HIM THAT, BECAUSE OF HIM, THE POETIC FIRE THAT ONCE PRODUCED HEROES LIKE RODRIGUE, HORACE, POMPÉE, AND CINNA HAS BEEN REKINDLED. ALL THE POET NEEDS NOW IS A PROPER SUBJECT, AND HE ASKS THAT HIS NEW PATRON AGREE TO CHOOSE THE HERO FOR HIS NEXT PLAY:

Choisis-moi seulement quelque nom dans l'histoire
Pour qui tu veuilles place au temple de la Gloire,
Quelque nom favori qu'il te plaise arracher
A la nuit de la tombe, aux cendres du bûcher.
Soit qu'il faille témoin ceux d'Enée et d'Achille
Par un noble attentat sur Homère et Virgile,
Soit qu'il faille obscurcir par un dernier effort
Ceux que j'ai sur la scène affranchis de la mort:
Tu me verras le même, et je te ferai dire,
Si jamais pleinement ta grande âme m'inspire,
Que dix lustres et plus n'ont pas tout emporté
Cet assemblage heureux de force et de clarté,
Ces prestiges secrets de l'aimable imposture
Qu'à l'envi m'ont prêtée et l'art et la nature.

(*Oeuvres*, 6: 122–23, ll. 37–50)
These few lines provide an invaluable insight into their author’s aesthetic psychology, and a confirmation of things already seen. They tell us, for one thing, that Corneille is alternately proud (of his ability to make the past relive on the stage) and humble (inasmuch as he depends on a patron for inspiration). They indicate, moreover, that the poet does not think of inventing characters or situations, but only of re-creating heroes borrowed from the pages of history or earlier literature. Finally, they suggest that the goal of re-creation is somehow to improve on the past. Corneille is ready, if Foucquet is willing, to make a “noble assault” on Homer and Vergil and dim the glory that surrounds Achilles and Aeneas—or to give new luster to one of his own earlier creations. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, Corneille did not wait for Foucquet to set him to the task of trying to outdo Homer and Vergil; he had already organized a noble assault on their poetic redoubts and on Tasso’s, too, in the Roman trilogy. Nor did the playwright have to be told to borrow from himself; as we also know, he revised the Jason of Médée to produce the hero of the little tragedy in L’Illusion comique. The options offered to Foucquet are the same as those that Corneille had been entertaining for himself all along.

Corneille’s attitude here implies a constant vying with others and with oneself. The poet must not just do something different—that in itself would be difficult enough and, after a while, tiring—he must strive always to surpass or outshine the past, including his own. This obsession with pushing poetic achievement to ever-new heights produced in Corneille his original ambition to emulate Homer, Vergil, and Tasso and led to the creation of the group of plays by which, I have suggested, he hoped to prove himself their successor and their peer. It brought with it, however, a serious problem, to which there was really no solution. What nobler assault was there left to attempt once the assault of these giants of poetic history had been made? Corneille had reached so far so fast after the Quarrel that in a sense he had exhausted all further possibilities for still greater achievement in the future. After the tremendous effort of the trilogy, he must have felt left over, much like Horace in the aftermath of his supreme moment of glory on the battlefield against Alba. Or like Moses, once he had come down from the mountaintop. Some critics have denied that there is a falling off
of power in Corneille’s theater after *Polyeucte*. They are mistaken, I think. The next three plays show the playwright charting an essentially rudderless course. By his own admission he was writing not out of any strong inner drive but rather in response to various particular observations or proposals. He wrote *La Mort de Pompée*, he said, “pour satisfaire à ceux qui ne trouvoient pas les vers de *Polyeucte* si puissants que ceux de *Cinna*” (Epître for *Le Menteur*); *Le Menteur*, “pour contenter les souhaits de beaucoup d’autres qui ont demandé quelque chose de plus enjoué qui ne servit qu’à les divertir” (ibid.); and *La Suite du Menteur*, obviously, in order to exploit the success of *Le Menteur*. With *Rodogune* he was to launch a new phase of his career, but neither *Rodogune* nor *Nicomède* nor *Sertorius* nor any other later work was ever able to eclipse the achievement of *Horace*, *Cinna*, and *Polyeucte* or of *Le Cid*. One must face, as Corneille did, the truth of a relative decline in his theater after the triumph of the trilogy.

In his critical writing, Corneille often provides fascinating details on how he went about creating this or that desired dramatic effect. Like a magician explaining the tricks of the trade, he takes the reader into his confidence, shows what he started with, what adjustments he introduced, and finally the extent to which the ensuing theatrical spell succeeded. The persona of the kindly artificer who is willing to tell all is engaging, but it is sometimes as much of an artifice as the illusion that is supposedly being explained. A case in point is *Polyeucte*, in connection with which the playwright breathes not a word about its relation to the *Aeneid*. Another instance is *La Mort de Pompée*, his next play. In several early editions, Corneille not only identifies his ancient source—Lucan’s epic poem, the *Pharsalia*—but specifies a large number of verses that he either translated or closely imitated from the Latin poet. And he hints that the principal artistic problem he had confronted in working with the *Pharsalia* lay in the need to compress the epic’s sprawling subject: the play, he said in the Au Lecteur, was an “effort pour réduire en poème dramatique ce que [Lucain] a traité en épique.” In fact he incurred another debt in writing the play, a debt that goes unmentioned. For if the major incidents and characters derive from Lucan—ultimately from Roman history, since the *Pharsalia* does not greatly embellish the historical data—the perspective in
which he places them comes from the modern Christian epic, about which he says nothing. And what is most problematic about the play is certainly the resulting unstable mixture of contradictory elements. Critics, stymied by the work, have disagreed about such fundamental points as whether César's générosité is authentic or feigned or whether the denouement is didactic, on the one hand, or ambiguous, on the other. The playwright's remarks have not caused this confusion, but neither have they really clarified the play or prevented misconstruction. If we look at Pompée in the context of the author's emulation of Tasso, perhaps it will make more sense.

The message of the Pharsalia is a clear one, repeated over and over in every aspect of the poem, including its other title De Bello Civili. Civil war is an unnatural thing, a horrible thing. It represents a primal disregard for the sacredness of the most basic boundaries, those that separate brothers from one another only to ensure the individual freedom of all. When César crosses the Rubicon, he violates not only a geographical but also a political and a psychological barrier, igniting a war of brother against brother aimed at overthrowing the republic and putting in its place an imperial form of government with César at the helm. Incident after incident, image after image, points to the universality of the poet's condemnation, which extends even to those, like Pompee, who fight for the right cause. Civil war, the poet cries out, is an abomination, and it looses on the world a horde of other, like disorders. Pompee's murder at the hands of treacherous Egyptians has a special narrative significance: it marks the disappearance from the story of one of the two principal antagonists. But, ideologically, it is in no way a "privileged" crime; it is only another in a seemingly endless chain of disasters, traceable ultimately to the original outbreak of civil war in Rome.

This message is not the message—or at least not the main message—of Corneille's play. The theme of Pompée is quite different: the assertion of Roman greatness and unity in the face of the attack by the Egyptians. The earlier conflict, especially at Pharsalus, is not forgotten, and there are plans to continue the struggle elsewhere at a later date. But most important within the play itself are César's magnanimous gestures toward Cornélie—he gives orders for her to be treated like a head of state and
undertakes to punish her dead husband's murderers—and Cor
nélie's equally noble action in warning César of an Egyptian plot
against his life. Much of Pompée is in fact a kind of anti-Pharsalia.
The assertion of Roman greatness as opposed to Egyptian crimi
nality is the insertion of Roman greatness into Lucan's story of
Rome's decline into civil war. This reversal of thematic scheme is
of infinitely greater importance than the narrowing of epic
scope, and the change has nothing to do directly with passing
from one poetic genre to another.

Pompée eschews the dramaturgy of Horace, Cinna, and
Polyeucte, in which the action moved forward to a denouement
with reconciliation (Sweetser, Dramaturgie, p. 127). It sets up a
series of dichotomies of such rigidity as to preclude all possibil
ity of a complete solution. The five principal characters are all
illustrious historical figures. They are differentiated sharply,
however, by national origin and ethical persuasion. They are
either Roman or Egyptian, noble-or mean-spirited. Rome is the
seat of disinterested virtue; Egypt, the center of villainous crim
inality. There are two crossover characters: a turncoat Roman,
who is one of Ptolomée's evil advisers; and Cléopâtre, who
manifests a générosité in every way worthy of Rome. The di
chotomies persist, however, and never cease to govern the struc
ture of the dramatic conflict.²

Neither Lucan nor the earlier practice of Corneille himself
can account for this dichotomous view of the world in Pompée.
The view conforms nearly perfectly, however, to the require
ments set forth in the Discorsi for the plot structure of the ideal
epic poem. We have already seen that Tasso advises the modern,
Christian poet to choose a Christian hero, Charlemagne or Ar
thur, instead of Theseus or Jason, to ensure that the hero will
more naturally embody all the perfections expected of him. Op
posite this hero, representing "il sommo de le virtù," Tasso sets
an antithero who embodies, for his part, "l'eccellenza del vizio";
and the plot describes the clear-cut struggle that grows up be
tween them (pp. 98, 103). The ideal epic story involves the con	test of Christians against infidels: "a i nostri tempi le vittorie de'
fideli contro gli infideli porgeranno gratissimo e nobilissimo ar
gumento di poetare" (p. 98). It follows from Tasso's adoption of
a system of two extreme "conditions" that, much more insis
tently than Aristotle, he will repeat that the denouement must
involve a double reversal, whereby the “fideli” go from bad fortune to good and the “infideli,” conversely, from good fortune to bad. The insertion that Corneille makes into the Lucan story entails the assertion of a system of ethics and aesthetics that is clearly Tassoan. Rome and Egypt stand opposed to each other like Christendom and the Moslem world in the Discorsi (or in the Gerusalemme liberata). Corneille, we shall see in detail later, has ennobled the Roman figures that history and Lucan passed on to him. The Romans now embody—or are on their way to embodying—the highest of virtues, whereas the Egyptians—Ptolomée and his advisers—become the incarnation of vice. Each group meets, or tends to meet, the end it deserves. The king and his advisers die violently, whereas the Romans not only survive but survive by defending one another, and in so doing they reaffirm the heroic greatness that their internal dissension has called into question.

The denouement of Corneille's inserted story does not coincide with the denouement of the play, however; the play includes not only the inserted material but the original story as well. The critics' contradictory readings of the denouement probably derive in large part from a failure to see that the play gives us two plays—and thus two denouements—in one. The Tassoan play may be said to start with the deliberation scene, a favorite topos of the epic, and to end with the news of Ptolomée's drowning, whereas the Lucan play extends from the battle at Pharsalus to Comélie's departure for Libya to resume the civil conflict. Some critics argue that the ending of Pompée is didactic; but only the inserted, Tassoan part, which celebrates the superiority of Roman virtues over Egyptian vices, is in fact didactic. Other critics have stressed those passages of the play that bring the action back to historical fact and to Lucan—back, in other words, to a continuation of hostilities within Rome. For them, the denouement is "ambiguous," although the ambiguity often goes unexplained.3

Actually, we should understand the insertion of one story into another not as an isolated event but rather as a continuing process. Corneille does not start with Lucan, then stop abruptly to pick up Tasso, only to turn back mechanically to Lucan. All through the play he is constantly manipulating the Lucan (historical) material, trying to make it fit the Tassoan mold. Thus the
denouement presents only one of the problems of interpretation that occur throughout the play. Not a few interpreters have fallen victim to the temptation to assume a unity, or a kind of unity, that is not in the text and, in effect, resolve the existing ambiguities into either an optimistic, upbeat Tassoan reading or a more pessimistic, downbeat Lucan reading. We should bear in mind that both polarities exist in the play at almost every moment and that what we need is a sense of how the dramatic energy of the play flows between them.

The basic tension in the play is not resolved completely, nor could it have been. At several points—including, but not restricted to, the denouement—the historical facts simply cannot be adjusted or rectified to the Tassoan requirements. Corneille seems to have undertaken something that in some measure was doomed to failure. What remains to be seen, along with further details of how the play modulates between its two polarities, is whether Corneille intended *Pompee* to "fail."

For Voltaire as well as for a number of recent critics, *Pompee* has so little dramatic action that it verges on historical tableau. I shall return to this question later; for now, this criticism of the play suggests that the best initial approach may well lie through the characters rather than through the plot. We have seen, in general, what the dramatic framework of *Pompee* is and how it implies the juxtaposing of Lucan and Tassoan elements. Let us look at how the play's five principal historical figures take their places within this overall scheme. These figures are *Pompee* (who appears only through *récits*), César, Cornélie, Cléopâtre, and Ptolomée. Of these *Pompee* and Ptolomée have undergone the least substantial change in passing from the *Pharsalia* into Corneille's play. Since Lucan admired *Pompee* and despised Ptolomée, they already tended to fit into the pattern of the all-virtuous versus the all-wicked. Nevertheless, Lucan's admiration for Magnus, as he invariably calls *Pompee*, is by no means absolute; and in the poet's mind, *Pompee* shares with César the heavy responsibility for plunging Rome into its sickening conflict. Corneille suppresses virtually all mention of weakness of will, error of judgment, or doubtful motive, and by thus eliminating the shadows in Lucan casts the martyred hero in an especially bright virtuous light. One would expect in Ptolomée a counter-balancing intensification of evil, but Corneille complicates the
symmetry by depicting the young Egyptian king as more weak than wicked. It is Ptolomée’s advisers, on whom he is overly dependent, who most fully personify “l’eccellenza del vizio.” If Ptolomée had trusted to his own best instincts, Corneille suggests at several points, he could have avoided the ignominy to which he eventually falls. The conventions of the modern epic control Ptolomée, within the play, as an Egyptian; as a king, however, he reflects the prevailing ideology in France concerning providential support for the monarchy. Ptolomée’s Egyptianness is what finally dominates, and it is fitting that he should join his evil advisers in death.\(^5\)

The role of Cornélie has sometimes been looked on as a tedious exercise in rhetorical inflation. It was once a favorite of actresses, however, and on close examination proves considerably more complex than is generally thought. The role provides, for one thing, an excellent vantage point from which to watch the playwright rectifying Lucan (or history) to a Tassoan mold. Whereas history records that Cornélie arrived in Egypt with her husband, witnessed his murder from shipboard, then immediately set sail for Libya, hotly pursued by Ptolomée’s emissaries, Corneille has the pursuing Egyptians catch her, bring her back to court, and hand her over to César on his arrival. César delays her further so that she can see that he has adequately punished her husband’s murderers. In historical chronology this change has no great importance, since the delay lasts only a day. Within the play, however, which is limited to a single revolution of the sun, the change makes all the difference in the world. Through this alteration Corneille opens up in the Lucan story an interstice quite large enough for a whole other story to start to emerge, the story of Roman virtues reasserting themselves against the murky background of Egyptian intrigue; in short, the Tassoan epic story.

Within this overall scheme, Cornélie manifests three main aspects of character. Throughout the play she remains what she was in the *Pharsalia*, a pathetic emblem of the suffering brought on by civil strife. Devoted to Rome, she has seen it rent asunder by internal wars; devoted also to her husband, she has witnessed his dismemberment at the hands of the Egyptians. She is, then, first and last a widow; and at the beginning of act 5, Corneille, following Garnier, gives Cornélie a touching, ornate apostrophe (to her husband’s remains) that everyone remembers.
This widow also exemplifies stoic fortitude. She does not collapse under the burden of her misfortune but rather steels herself to continue alone from where her husband has left off. A recent editor of *Pompee* has remarked on the absence of a historical basis for Cornélie’s stoicism and has suggested that Cornélie may want us to assume that she learned her stoicism, in some unspecified way, through Cato, with whom Pompee had been associated politically (Barnwell, pp. 62, 162 n. to line 476). The link need not be left so vaguely defined as this, however. In book 9 of the *Pharsalia*, Cato plays a crucial role as designated successor to the fallen Magnus. Up to this point Cato has refrained from taking sides; but, since no one else is able to assume the leadership left vacant by Pompee’s death and since the Republican cause for which Pompee fought was after all the better of the two, Cato resolves to step into the breach himself. And in a moving speech in praise of the fallen leader and his cause, Cato offers himself as Pompee’s heir and rallies the Pompeian forces to continue the fight. Cornélie could not incorporate this action into the play directly without violating the unities; yet he had to establish that the war would be waged again after the Egyptian “interlude” came to a close. Cornélie introduces this idea indirectly, through Cornélie. It is she who resolves not to accept the defeat at Pharsalus as definitive, she who proclaims the firm intention to fight again another day on another field of battle. And she inherits Cato’s stoical character, together with his dramatic function.

If Cornélie is determined ultimately to get revenge against César, she is nevertheless willing, even eager, to suspend her efforts until the moment is more propitious. Cornélie is thus also gênèreuse. We see her gênerosité first in her acceptance of César’s magnanimity: “O ciel, que de vertus vous me faites haïr!” (l. 1072). We see it again, more dramatically, when she refuses to acquiesce in an Egyptian plot against César’s life and instead warns him of the danger. “O cœur vraiment romain,” says César, “Et digne du héros qui vous donna la main” (ll. 1363–64). Cornélie will pursue his downfall, but only in the open and by honorable means, and she scorns the idea of owing anything to the Egyptians.

We learn after the fact (in act 5) that when Cornélie intervened earlier to save César, she did so despite her doubts about
the genuineness of his magnanimity. Informed by Philippe of César's public concern for the physical remains of Pompee, part of which have just been recovered, Cornélie remarks that César's magnanimity toward her and toward his dead rival has cost him nothing and may indeed only cover his self-interest. His show of indignation against the Egyptians has strengthened his hold over Egypt and may have been calculated to that end. Cornélie cannot determine what César's real motives are. Nevertheless, she chooses to believe him:

\[
\text{Tant d'intérêts [personnels] sont joints à ceux de mon époux,}
\]
\[
\text{Que je ne devrois rien à ce qu'il fait pour nous,}
\]
\[
\text{Si, comme par soi-même un grand cœur juge un autre,}
\]
\[
\text{Je n'aimois mieux juger sa vertu par la notre,}
\]
\[
\text{Et croire que nous seuls armons ce combattant [= César],}
\]
\[
\text{Parce qu'au point qu'il est j'en voudrois faire autant.}
\]

(5. 1. 1551–56)

Cornélie makes what amounts to a Pascalian wager. Her générosité takes her beyond stoical resolve to bear up courageously under the onslaughts of bad fortune; even when she cannot establish the facts with total clarity, she proves ready to commit herself fully. Her ethic is proud and aristocratic, and it acknowledges forthrightly the need to take risks. La Rochefoucauld, who was also well acquainted with bad fortune, knowing how bitter life’s disillusionments could be, wrote, “Il est plus honteux de se défier de ses amis que d’en être trompé” (no. 84). César is not a friend, but he is a fellow Roman; and Cornélie “elects” to believe the best of him. The leap of faith marks what is most admirable in Cornélie; it also reveals what is most modern and most nearly Christian.

The role is thus a complex combination of virtues: wifely devotion and stoical fortitude (both of which derive from Lucan, though the stoicism comes through contamination of the role with that of Cato) and, finally, a générosité that far exceeds anything in the Pharsalia. The sum of all these virtues makes Cornélie a true “sommo de le virtù”; and, opposite her, the Egyptians with their deep-seated fears and their panicky recourse to treachery cannot help but appear to the audience as both grotesque and contemptible, “l’eccellenza del vizio.”

Concerning César, it is important to note first of all that in
La Pharsalia there is no doubt at all about his motivations. Thus, when the Egyptians show him the severed head of Pompey,

Caesar did not turn away or reject the gift, but closely scrutinized the well-known features which had shrunk since death, until he could be satisfied that they were indeed Pompey's. When no doubt remained and he thought it safe at last to play the loving father-in-law [Caesar's daughter had been Pompey's first wife], he forced out tears and groans—his readiest means of disguising too obvious a joy. (9. 1036-41)

In Corneille's play Achorée gives a different account of the same incident:

... Par un mouvement commun à la nature,
Quelque maligne joie en son coeur s'élevoit,
Dont sa gloire indignée a peine le sauvoit.

.................................
S'il aime sa grandeur, il hait la perfidie;
Il se juge en autrui, se tâte, s'étudie,
Consulte à sa raison sa joie et ses douleurs,
Examine, choisit, laisse couler des pleurs;
Et forçant sa vertu d'être encore la maîtresse,
Se montre généreux par un trait de foiblésse.

(3. 1. 774-86)

The distance between Lucan and Corneille is substantial. The Cesar of Pompée is a man who struggles not to hide an ignoble emotion but to overcome it. Granted that the paths of self-interest and of générosité coincide, Corneille has nevertheless replaced Lucan's clear-cut but negative motivation in the Pharsalia with at least the possibility of true nobility of character in Pompée. If Cesar were characterized only by his (somewhat dubious) générosité, his would be a weak role indeed, totally subsidiary to that of Comérie. But beyond all question of générosité, he exemplifies two other distinct aspects of the heroic character, wrath and love. These, we know from chapter 3, above, represent for Tasso, respectively, the ancient and the modern heroic virtues par excellence; and Corneille has quite deliberately juxtaposed them in re-creating the figure of César. Ptolomée and Ptolomée's advisers look upon César as a constant embodiment of wrath and refer obsessively to his colère or his courroux. The king quakes
in his presence and ends up begging Cléopâtre to intercede for the lives of the advisers. When the Egyptians decide to try to kill César, they know that success will depend on opposing his wrath with an even stronger Egyptian wrath. They disastrously miscalculate their resources, but they have a clear picture of the grounds on which they must engage the combat. Even the Roman they have martyred returns and confounds their puny efforts to emulate true courage, for the severed head they present to César is said still to bear an expression of anger, directed beyond his Egyptian assailants to the gods in heaven who permitted such treachery. Wrath thus functions in the play as a “Roman” virtue, seen in both Roman leaders but especially in the survivor and avenger, César.

The playwright’s skills are tested more seriously when it comes to making César not only wrathful but also loving, especially with the new type of love that alone was deemed heroic. Vestiges of the historical, Lucan view of the liaison between César and Cléopâtre persist, particularly in the parting speech of Cornélie at the close of the play. Having once more assumed her role as avenger of Pompée, Cornélie rededicates herself to ensuring the eventual defeat of her great civil enemy, with or without the help of the gods. If all else should fail, she says, perhaps Cléopâtre with her entanglements may prove the instrument of his fall from power. The lovers take this prospect seriously after Cornélie exits, for César and Cléopâtre are much aware of Rome’s opposition to their love. But Cornélie’s desperate malédiction notwithstanding, that love, as we see it throughout most of the rest of the play, is quite obviously Tassoan. Cléopâtre, though in love with César, argues early in the play for granting asylum to his enemy Pompée. Because she owes a debt to Pompée for the help he gave her father, she cannot act otherwise and still merit esteem in her own and César’s eyes. Her love for César, like his for her, is thus no base passion but a product of mutually recognized nobility of will, in seventeenth-century terms *amour-estime*. The lovers’ one great scene together, delayed until act 4, is a celebration of their love as a source of strength for the hero, even in the military sphere. César proclaims that it is not ambition but the desire to merit Cléopâtre that ultimately motivates all he has done or plans to do on the battlefields of the world:
C'étoit pour acquérir un droit si précieux
Que combattoit partout mon bras ambitieux;
Et dans Pharsale même il a tiré l'épée
Plus pour le conserver que pour vaincre Pompée.

(4. 3. 1267–70)

Permettez cependant qu'à ces douces amorces
Je prenne un nouveau cœur et de nouvelles forces,
Pour faire dire encore aux peuples pleins d'effroi,
Que venir, voir et vaincre est même chose en moi.

(4. 3. 1333–36)

It is a misreading of these famous lines to say they are intended to "humanize" the hero by showing that he is subject to ordinary, human weaknesses. They are in the play to do precisely the contrary, to render the hero even more heroic, as Tasso specifies: "Laonde azioni eroiche ci potranno parer, oltre l'altre, quelle che son fatte per amore" (p. 106). César's military conquests are indubitably illustrious by any reckoning, including Lucan's. What Corneille adds here is the attempt to elevate them still more by attributing them ultimately to love. The scene fails, in that it does not realize poetically its enunciated ideological convictions. The tone is wrong. As Voltaire suggests, César sounds too much like a gallant wandered in from some seventeenth-century novel. There is too much, or the wrong kind of, wit. "Vous pouvez d'un coup d'œil désarmer sa colère," Ptolémée says to his sister as César arrives; and the latter excuses his tardiness with a too playful reference to heroic anger: "Et ces soins importuns, qui m'arrachpoient de vous, Contre ma grandeur même allumoient mon courroux" (ll. 1247–48). No, there is no trifling with heroic love. For all his genius, Corneille is not proof against occasional lapses in taste and judgment. His failure here to find the right mode of poetic expression should not, however, obscure his goal, which is to show a virtuous, "Roman" César in whom an idealized love joins with wrath and magnanimity to form a new type of epic hero, at least in the Tassoan part of the play.

Cléopâtre, the last character to be considered, has little to do in the play except love César and be loved by him. She refuses to take part in her brother's plot against Pompée, but she is in no position to hinder it. She desires her rightful share of the royal
power, resists Ptolomée’s attempts to divest her of her sovereignty, and ends up as the sole occupant of the throne, but her success in resisting Ptolomée results more from Ptolomée’s mistakes than from her own calculations. Her role could easily be dispensed with—except that she does add illustriousness to the play, and the Tassoan epic hero does require someone to love. There are two interesting aspects to her role, however: one is her générosité, which is much more important in the play than her ambition; the other is the impediment to her marriage with César. Cléopâtre is généreuse because as a royal personage she was born with an innate générosité, to which, unlike Ptolomée, she has elected to remain true. In addition, Corneille amends history, giving both Cléopâtre and her brother an earlier sojourn in Rome, when their father sought the help of the Roman senate against his rebellious subjects. It was during this time that César first caught sight of Cléopâtre and fell in love with her. Cléopâtre herself had come back to Egypt with a confirmed sense of her own greatness and deep admiration for Rome. In the play her générosité makes her Roman in spirit if not in fact; indeed, César could not love her with an amour-estime if she lacked this générosité. An ancient Roman law, however, with which the lovers and Cornelie are all familiar, forbids marriage between a ruler of Rome and a foreign monarch. So long as this law stands unchallenged, there can be little hope for the lovers’ happiness, no matter how much they love and “deserve” each other.

Contrary to what history and Lucan recount, Corneille’s lovers do not consider the possibility of an amorous liaison outside marriage. What César does propose is to try to change the law. Lucan sees César as totally lacking in respect for the traditions and institutions of Rome. Corneille presents the Roman leader in a different light. The play does not explore the political implications of the change in Rome from republic to empire, and César’s desire to strike the marriage law from the books consequently seems natural. The impediment to marriage is judged within the play primarily from the point of view of the lovers themselves, with Cornélie alluding only at the very end to the possibility of Roman resistance to such a move. The love between César and Cléopâtre is the equivalent of the love that one finds between a Christian hero and a Saracen princess in modern epic poems like the Gerusalemme liberata—with the important difference that
in *Pompée* there is no possibility of conversion, to be followed by marriage. César and Cléopâtre feel the injustice of a law that adheres to the letter and ignores the spirit of "Romanness" but have no clear plan of action for righting the wrong, other than reliance on César's persuasiveness in Rome:

CLÉOPÂTRE

Après tant de combats, je sais qu'un si grand homme
A droit de triompher des caprices de Rome,
Et que l'injuste horreur qu'elle eut toujours des rois
Peut céder par votre ordre à de plus justes lois.
Je sais que vous pouvez forcer d'autres obstacles;
Vous me l'avez promis, et j'attends ces miracles.
Votre bras dans Pharsale a fait de plus grands coups,
Et je ne les demande à d'autres Dieux qu'à vous.

CÉSAR

Tout miracle est facile où mon amour s'applique.

(4. 3. 1305–13)

The spectator knows that history will determine otherwise. Cléopâtre will await these miracles in vain; and it will take a god other than César to effect the new dispensation.  

We have seen that by detaining Cornélie in Egypt for a short while, Corneille is able to create, in the Lucan story of civil war, an interlude that he develops in an anti-Lucan way. New themes, new character traits—Cornélie's leap of faith, César's love (surpassing his heroic wrath), his desire to fight for Cléopâtre's right to be recognized as Roman—all turn the original story inside out. The "inserted" story, of Tassoan inspiration, is not brought to completion, however; and, as Barnwell has pointed out (pp. 201–3), frustration and failure lie at the heart of the play's action. César wants to prove his générosité toward Pompée, but the Egyptians deprive him of the chance. He wants to save Ptolomée, but an accident decides otherwise. He and Cléopâtre want to get married, but, as the audience knows, they will not be allowed to do so. The interlude in which Cornélie is free to admire the virtues of César must come to an end and give way again to the imperative to hate. History constantly acts in the play to impose limitations on the characters' noble impulses and so creates a pervasive air of inconclusiveness. The lack of dramatic incident that has been noted in *Pompée* arises, in all probability, not so
much from the failure of things to happen as from the failure of conflicts to be resolved, one way or another, with the accustomed sense of finality. The shifting tonalities of the play point up still further this strange incompleteness. The "negative" languages of irony, sarcasm, and cynicism are particularly strong in act 1, where Ptoloméê is the central figure, but they continue to be heard throughout the play, competing in constantly varying patterns with a range of more "positive" languages extending from stoical proclamation to amorous hyperbole to tentative expressions of faith or wishful thinking. Only Nicomède comes close to showing a like richness of tone but with a much greater tendency toward sustained passages of one kind or another. In its language as in its action, Pompée remains in a perpetual state of flux.

How to judge this absence of definite resolution is our final problem here. Were it not for L'Illusion comique and Polyéucte, one might posit the possibility of miscalculation on the author's part. That is, one could imagine that he set out to rectify the Pharsalia and discovered too late that the historical facts and characters were too well known to allow him to adapt them completely to a modern, Tassoan mold. Corneille's experience with the rectification of Médée and of book 4 of the Aeneid renders such a hypothesis untenable, however. He knew very well that unacknowledged rectification offered the only assurance of complete freedom to refashion an old subject. One must assume, accordingly, that the playwright deliberately intended to create the "failure" of Pompée and ask why he did so. The answer, I think, is that he wanted to convey the feeling of what it must have been like to live outside the realm of Providence. Dante, in De Monarchia, had broadened the idea of Providence to make it cover all of Roman history, the better to advance his own argument for the revival of the empire in Christian Europe. In the Commedia, however, he had recognized an unbridgeable gulf between the pagan and the Christian worlds and had shown Beatrice replacing Vergil as the pilgrim's guide. Closer to the time of Pompée, La Mothe le Vayer, in his treatise De la vertu des payens (1641), had again, but from a perspective totally different from that of the De Monarchia, raised the problem of the essential likeness or unlikeness of the pagan and Christian experiences. Corneille seems to have designed Pompée to reaf-
firm the importance of essential differences, perhaps in reaction to this treatise. From the orthodox Christian point of view (the view of Tasso and of the Commedia) a few pagans may have been privileged to play important roles in the slowly unfolding scheme of Providence; but for most pagans, no matter how illustrious, no matter how virtuous, history was less kind. They could strive to understand, happen on isolated spiritual insights, and come close to, but never really grasp, the ultimate truths. They were looking at the world as through a glass, darkly. The heroes of Pompee are exceptionally illustrious, but none of them enjoys the providential support of earlier Romans heroes in Horace and Cinna. We can admire Cornélie for her stoicism and for her desire to avenge her husband’s murder, but we admire her more for her leap of faith and wish only that her willingness to believe could be met by a world that somehow sustained her belief better. César and Cléopâtre we admire for their exercise of power (connected with wrath) and for their générosité, but still more for their groping toward a conception of justice unknown even in Rome, the center of all known virtue. These characters have good impulses that they are powerless to transfer into action. It is as if they were waiting for a revelation that they have no way of knowing is actually coming or longing for the new dispensation that would give full meaning to their lives. Pompee’s murder is as pathetic as Polyeucte’s, but it lacks illumination and transcendency; Pompee is a martyr without a faith that could give meaning to his martyrdom, and in death he still casts an angry look at the gods. Throughout the play the Tassoan elements in Pompee seem to imply possibilities about to be realized, whereas the historical framework borrowed from Lucan suggests instead, at every turn, the limited possibilities of a world before the Redemption.

A kind of paralysis hangs over the action of the play, which is much more meditative than dramatic. To be sure, things happen, but, typically, by accident or in vain or counter to the “heroes’” expectations or desires. No one hero dominates the action from beginning to end; no single heroic will asserts itself fully and conclusively anywhere in the play. As if to emphasize the feeling of stasis, Corneille resorts to a number of long récits of offstage events and, in untypical fashion, makes no attempt to render them dramatic, does not have them delivered to a vitally inter-
ested party who will then react to, or act on, the information contained in the récit. The aim of the récits is apparently to induce, both in the onstage listener and in the audience, a grave reflectiveness, above all on the meaning of death. On this score, too, the play leads deliberately to an impasse. Pompée’s death, I have said, lacks transcendency. In act 5, when his earthly remains are brought to Cornélie, she tries desperately to infuse a higher meaning into the terrible happenings, all to no avail. She speaks of her slain husband as a demigod and wants to place victims on his altar; and in a grotesque parody of Christian symbolism, she hopes to inspire Pompée’s troops with the visible remains of his body:

Je veux que de ma haine ils [les soldats] reçoivent des règles,
Qu’ils suivent au combat des urnes au lieu d’aigles;
Et que ce triste objet porte à leur souvenir
Les soins de le venger, et ceux de te [= César] punir.

(5. 4. 1713–16)

The audience knows that the cross on which Christ died would in time succeed in lifting the hearts of men in battle, not for the satisfaction of personal goals, but for the reconquest of the Holy City. Cornélie, however, left to her own, purely human devices, cannot conceive of so magnificent an undertaking.

At the end of the play, on the other hand, the death of Ptolomée is recounted, very curiously, in almost providential terms. Cornélie and César at different times both refer to the king’s death as a sign of divine judgment:

Le ciel règle souvent les effets par les causes,
Et rend aux criminels ce qu’ils ont mérité.

(5. 2. 1594–95)

Prenez-vous-en au ciel, dont les ordres sublimes
Malgré nos efforts savent punir les crimes.

(5. 5. 1781–82)

Cléopâtre, for her part, had hoped in this case not for justice but for mercy:

Comme de la justice, il [le ciel] a de la bonté.

Souvent de la justice il passe à la douceur.

(5. 2. 1596–99)
Ptolomée is ennobled somewhat by the brave manner of his death and by these attempts to connect it to some higher cause. But neither his death nor that of the hero Pompee is in fact ever redeemed in the full Christian sense. In death as in life, both hero and antihero can only manifest the void of a world before the coming of Christ.

La Mort de Pompee is Corneille’s fourth Roman play in succession, but it is linked to the preceding trilogy only in the manner of an addendum. Horace, Cinna, and Polyeucte focus on the presence of Providence in the history of Rome, Pompee on its absence. Horace, Cinna, and Polyeucte utilize a dramaturgy that, at the denouement, opens onto reconciliation; Pompee shows a dramaturgy leading only to the sad persistence of original dichotomies. In the trilogy Corneille may have been drawn to the extreme synthetic views of Dante not so much because he meant to “correct” Tasso as because, under Tasso’s influence, he was involved in a poetical undertaking that demanded the utmost in the way of synthesis. He was, I propose, trying to create a kind of summum of all previous heroic literature. Dante’s summation of all Roman history under the auspices of Providence bespoke the same kind of extreme effort and, transferred into the plays, allowed Corneille to write about the same kind of high adventure that he himself was engaged in as he wrote.

Once the summation was done, there was obviously no point in doing it over, however. Corneille could only move on to something else, even though that something else would be bound to be an anticlimax. The sadness of Pompee probably reflects, in part, the playwright’s realization that the glory of his theater, the highest heroic moment in his creative life, already lay in the past. Like Horace, he had outlived himself; like the Romans of Pompee he was reduced now to experiencing an absence of the “right” (poetical) situation. One must not, however, dwell too much on this idea, for fear it will obscure other truths of equal importance. Pompee is not only reflective, even self-reflective, but also imaginative and innovative. Long before Beckett, Corneille discovered that one could write an absorbing play in which not much happens, in which the point is that nothing much can happen. And he again showed himself capable of emulating Tasso by going a step farther than Tasso and becoming even more a modernist that his great predecessor. Tasso had
implied that the modern poet had a choice between treating an ancient subject from the point of view of the Ancients—an exercise in literary archeology—or treating a Christian subject from the Christian point of view. Corneille found these alternatives too simple. In *Horace* and *Cinna* he had approached pagan Rome, probably through Dante, as a chapter in the history of Christendom. In *Pompée* he returned to pagan Rome to meditate, as a Christian, on the emptiness that lay at the center of its grandeur or, better, to contemplate its grave striving toward an illumination that only God could really provide. The Christian idea of Providence—through its presence or its absence—permitted him, he saw, to bring any subject into the domain of heroic Christian poetry.