Ulcerated Hearts: Love in
Voltaire's La Mort de César

Crains des cœurs ulcérés, nourris de désespoir (I,4)
One of Voltaire’s objectives in his early plays was to reduce the importance of love and to eliminate gal­lantry from tragedy. Believing with such critics as Rapin, Le Bossu, and Dacier that Racine’s emphasis on love had caused a general decadence in French tragedy—a decadence that had become more pronounced in the plays of Racine’s eighteenth-century imitators—Voltaire strove to invest tragedy with a dignity it had lost through excessive preoccupation with amour galant. Indeed, in his preface to Mariamne (1725) he argues fervently that the proper subject of a tragedy is “les intérêts de toute une nation.” Criticizing Racine, Vol­taire notes that even though the protagonists in Britannicus, Phèdre, and Mithridate are princes, “tout l’intérêt [de ces trois pièces] est renfermé dans la famille du héros de la pièce; tout roule sur des passions que des bourgeois ressentent comme les princes; et l’intrigue de ces ouvrages est aussi propre à la co­médie qu’à la tragédie.”

One year after the publication of Mariamne Voltaire fled to England. During his three years in exile, he assiduously at­tended performances at the Drury Lane Theatre. He soon realized that the famous tragedies of the English stage, espe­cially Shakespeare’s, treated a considerably broader range of subjects than did contemporary French tragedies, with their emphasis on amatory intrigue. Particularly impressed by Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and Addison’s Cato, Voltaire wrote one play, Brutus, and started another, La Mort de Cé-
sar, while in England; in both he attempted to adapt the di-
dactic tradition of the English Augustan theater to contem-
porary French theater.2

La Mort de César was not completed until June 1731, sev-
eral months after Voltaire’s return to France. It was published
in 1736 with a preface that Voltaire himself had written and
that opens with the resounding sentence: “Nous donnons cet-
te édition de la tragédie de la Mort de César de M. de Vol-
taire, et nous pouvons dire qu’il est le premier qui ait fait con-
naître les muses anglaises en France.” In a letter to abbé
Asselin written a year before the publication of his tragedy,
Voltaire clearly indicated what he considered to be the two
principal originalities of his play: “Cette pièce [La Mort de
César] n’a d’autre mérite que celui de faire voir le génie des
Romains, et celui du théâtre d’Angleterre.”3

However innovative Voltaire may have wished to be, he
was nevertheless acutely aware of the peculiar demands of
the French public, which remained hostile to changes in the
classical form of tragedy, but which expected ever larger
doses of pathos in the plays it attended. Despite his protests
against amour galant, he knew that tenderness, compassion,
and abundant tears were essential ingredients in a successful
tragedy. Years later, and with amused condescension, the ag-
ing Voltaire would even speak of the “Quinauderie” he had in-
troduced in his plays to satisfy the public’s insatiable appe-
tite for tales of unhappy love: “Le parterre de Paris et les loges
sont plus galants que moi: ils donnent la préférence à ma
Quinauderie.”4 Despite this patronizing attitude, Voltaire
had, as Ridgway and Vrooman, two of the most astute stu-
dents of Voltaire’s theater, have pointed out, a marked talent
for creating pathetic situations. “J’ai une envie démesurée de
vous faire pleurer,” wrote Voltaire to a correspondent in 1739
(Best. D1746), thereby suggesting an important characteris-
tic of his tragedies. Quoting the phrases “adoucir les carac-
tères désagréables” and “émouvoir la pitié” that Voltaire used
in his preface to Mariamne, Ridgway defines Voltairean trag-
ed in the following terms: "‘Adoucir les caractères désagréables’, n’oubliez jamais le public pour qui l’on écrit, ‘émouvoir la pitié’, peindre un amour qui inspire le repentir: voilà la clef de la tragédie voltairienne." Dealing with a subject as austere as the assassination of Caesar, Voltaire strove to “émouvoir la pitié” by developing Plutarch’s suggestion that Brutus was Caesar’s son and by shifting the interest of the tragedy away from the political intrigue to the pathetic love between a father and a son who are publicly committed to positions that pit them against each other.

Since there are no women in La Mort de César, several critics have stated flatly that there is no love interest in the play. Others have noted, without however pursuing the idea, that the tender but anguished relationship between César and Brutus replaces the more traditional love intrigue in contemporary tragedies. Indeed, one of the most striking features of La Mort de César is the way in which Voltaire introduces situations and language appropriate to a love story into the economy of his tragedy. “Personne,” wrote Voltaire in his preface to the play, “n’ose guérir le théâtre français de cette contagion [amour]”; nor did he. By eliminating women from La Mort de César he did not rid his tragedy of the contagion of love. The manner in which love, shooed out one door, slips back in through another deserves, I believe, a closer examination.

As the play opens, César is the undisputed ruler of the greater part of the world. For forty years he has fought, conquered, and governed. Now at the zenith of his power, he is about to be crowned king before embarking on his last and most ambitious expedition. The first speaker in the play is Antoine, whose words celebrate César’s present grandeur and evoke the emperor’s even more glorious future: “César, tu vas régner; voici le jour auguste . . . ” (I, 1). Impatiently, César’s soldiers wait for their commander, who will join them immediately after his coronation. Soon the invincible legions will be on their way to the Orient, where they will vanquish
the few remaining peoples not yet subjected to Roman rule. The banners are unfurled, the ships are ready. The mood is ebullient and triumphant.

Suddenly, however, Antoine realizes that César does not share his own enthusiasm. Somber and despondent, César grieves over a pain so private that even Antoine, his closest adviser, cannot guess its cause. Interrupting his paeon of praise, Antoine anxiously interrogates the emperor:

Quoi! tu ne me réponds que par de longs soupirs!
Ta grandeur fait ma joie et fait tes déplaisirs!
Roi de Rome et du monde, est-ce à toi de te plaindre?
César peut-il gémir, ou César peut-il craindre?
Qui peut à ta grande âme inspirer la terreur?

To which César answers:

L'amitié, cher Antoine: il faut t'ouvrir mon cœur.

(I,i)

Indeed, he proceeds to open his heart, revealing his love for a son whose identity has been kept a secret even from the young man himself. As Antoine listens in horror, César confesses that Brutus, one of the most violent of the emperor's political opponents, is in fact the son he loves and admires. Brutus, too, once he learns that César is his father, is torn by inner conflict, for he has solemnly vowed to kill the tyrant César. Interwoven into the play's political texture (liberty versus tyranny, Jacobinism versus monarchy) is then the plaintive theme of two ulcerated hearts.

The elegiac music of César's love for Brutus significantly alters the martial melodies that open the play. The tenderness of paternal love overshadows the theme of political ambition that Antoine clearly enunciates in his first speech. Voltaire's César is essentially a troubled father, not an intrepid conqueror. Although he is about to engage in a grandiose en-
terprise designed to crown his long career, César is strangely passive and immobile throughout the entire tragedy. His overwhelming desire to win his son’s love impairs his political judgment and prevents him from punishing the conspirators. Preoccupied with his love, he seeks, unwisely, to win the affection rather than the fearful respect of his subjects. Thus love corrupts César’s sense of the political reality on which his authority rests, i.e., fear, and assures his ruin.

From the first scene of the play César the public man who wishes to conquer the world is thwarted by César the private man whose heart is full of amitié or amour—the words are used interchangeably throughout the play. Antoine’s opening speech, which evokes the emperor’s imperial persona, is counterbalanced by César’s first line, which suggests the emotional climate of his private world. The key words amitié, cher, and cœur, which appear repeatedly whenever César talks about Brutus or finds himself face to face with his son, circumscribe the emperor’s private world from which waft the “longs soupirs” that startle and dismay Antoine. Although he has subdued innumerable warring tribes, he cannot quell the bitter turmoil that rages in his heart. Speaking to Antoine, César declares: “Il n’est plus temps, ami, de cacher l’amertume / Dont mon cœur paternel en secret se consume” (I, 1). Antoine listens in astonishment as the emperor, weary, languid, and melancholic, reveals his secret. César’s confession of his love for Brutus is curiously reminiscent in tone, structure, and even vocabulary of Phèdre’s confession of her love for Hippolyte. With Antoine playing a role similar to that of Oenone, César finally discloses his “tendre amitié” for a son who was brought up by his enemies.

When Antoine remarks that Brutus does not resemble his father, César answers with an impassioned account of his love for his son. A secret bond, a “charme séducteur,” attracts the tender César to Brutus, who, like Hippolyte, is young, proud, and farouche. Indeed, farouche is the word most frequently used to describe Brutus.
Although Voltaire is here describing paternal love, he has couched it in the traditional language of erotic affection, the language his public expected to hear in a tragedy. Beginning quietly, César describes how his love for Brutus grew. Both irritated and pleased by his son's "superbe courage," César quickly succumbed to Brutus's seductive and irresistible charm. As he speaks, César becomes increasingly engrossed in his consuming passion for his son.

The technique Voltaire here uses is similar in intent and dramatic purpose (if not in poetic power) to that used so cunningly by Racine in act II, scene 5 of Phèdre. Unable to contain her desire to establish a bond between herself and Hippolyte, Phèdre slips into the conditional perfect verb tense and imagines a hypothetical past in which she and Hippolyte...
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were once joined. Similarly, César identifies himself with Brutus by affirming that when young he, too, thought and acted as Brutus now thinks and acts. For a fleeting moment he slips from behind his public image as emperor and tyrant; he joins Brutus in an imaginary world where liberty reigns and tyrants are stifled. Strangely divided against himself, César momentarily agrees with the political views of the conspirators and with their demand for liberty. His love for Brutus has so sensitized him to the ideal for which the conspirators are struggling that he wishes to deserve their admiration by an act of bonté. But, as Antoine tells him, “la bonté . . . détruit l’ouvrage de ta grandeur” (I, 4). Long before the conspirators put an end to César’s dazzling career, love has already undermined the emperor’s greatness, for it has eroded the political principles on which his authority rests. Even more than the conspirators, it is César’s love for Brutus that conspires against the emperor’s tyrannical rule. The conspirators administer the coup de grâce, but it is love that topples César from his seat of power.

In his intense desire to be loved by a son he loves, César entertains the false hope that Brutus will be tempted by “l’éclat du diadème” (I, 4). Like Phèdre, who believes that she can tempt Hippolyte by holding before him the crown, César believes that Brutus, for personal advantage and gain, can be enticed into abandoning his fervent wish to restore republican rule at the expense of César’s life. Both Phèdre and César are deceived by their own desires.

If César secretly admires Brutus’s fermeté farouche and his implacable thirst for liberty, Brutus on the other hand admires and even loves César, although he hates and indeed has vowed to kill the tyrant. At the end of act I Brutus does not yet know that he is César’s son. When the emperor confronts the conspirators and accuses them of plotting his destruction, Brutus tells him not only that the accusation is true but that the conspirators prefer death to life under a tyrant. Awaiting César’s anger, he expects to be struck a mortal blow. “César,
qu'à ta colère aucun de nous n'échappe; / Commence ici par moi: si tu veux régner, frappe” (I, 3). But César cannot strike his son.

After learning the identity of his father, the unhappy Brutus (“malheureux” is used to describe Brutus almost as frequently as is “farouche”) confesses to his fellow conspirators that although he deplores César’s tyranny he esteem César the man:

Je vous dirai bien plus; sachez que je l’estime:
Son grand cœur me séduit, au sein même du crime;
Et si sur les Romains quelqu’un pouvait régner,
Il est le seul tyran que l’on dût épargner.

When in the following scene Brutus is alone with César, he uses even stronger language, and confesses to the emperor his deep affection for him:

César
Mais peux-tu me haïr?

Brutus
Non, César, et je t’aime.
Mon cœur par tes exploits fut pour toi prévenu,
Avant que pour ton sang tu m’eusses reconnu.
Je me suis plaint aux dieux de voir qu’un si grand homme
Fût à la fois la gloire et le fléau de Rome.
Je déteste César avec le nom de roi;
Mais César citoyen serait un dieu pour moi;
Je lui sacrifierais ma fortune et ma vie.

(III,4)

Once again the verbs are in the conditional tense, suggesting a wish that will not be realized, for an impossible condition (the elimination of César’s tyranny) would have to be fulfilled before the desire could become a reality. In an empyrean of impassioned rhetoric, both César and Brutus affirm their devotion to each other. Each then pleads with the other, urging him to abandon his most cherished political views. In a tab-
leau worthy of Greuze, the weeping Brutus throws himself at his father's feet; calling himself "un fils qui frémit et qui t'aime," he urges César for the last time to renounce the royal crown in the name of republican liberty. When César rejects his son's entreaty, the two men part, sorrowfully. Brutus does not reappear in the play; César meets his death at the hands of the conspirators.

From the standpoint of political ideology, *La Mort de César* contains a discussion of two forms of government. Several competent critics have studied in detail the play's political content. But Voltaire, eager to satisfy his public's taste for "le pathétique," charged the play with an affective as well as an intellectual content. The dramatic quality of the play is ultimately derived not from the confrontation of two opposing political ideologies but rather from the hopeless love of a father and a son who, because of circumstances and public commitments, must needs be adversaries. Voltaire's critical statement concerning Racine's *Britannicus*, *Phèdre*, and *Mithridate* could well apply to *La Mort de César*. Although César and Brutus are glorious political figures, "tout l'intérêt est refermé dans la famille du héros de la pièce. . . ."6

3. Best. 90.
4. Best. 13562.