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Gender and Violence in the Tragedies and Tragicomedies of Seventeenth-Century French Female Playwrights

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Abstract

This study explores representations of gender and violence in the works of seventeenth-century French female playwrights and in the context of early modern patriarchal society. It analyses the ways in which hitherto understudied female-authored plays align with expected constructions of gender dynamics and, drawing upon New Historicist thinking, the extent to which their theatre interacts with ongoing debates surrounding the role of women in society. As the first study of its kind, I demonstrate how dramatic violence — a problematic aesthetic issue tied to growing concerns over theatre's ability to serve the socio-political agenda — provides fertile territory for examining contemporary power relations, and how close critical engagement with the theme in female-authored works enables a richer understanding of the tensions inherent to early modern sexual politics. Structured in three chapters, this thesis first sets out the climate in which early modern French female playwrights were operating. Given that the period was one in which the traditional status of women was being refined, I draw upon a wide range of cultural works to demonstrate how questions regarding the sexual (im)balance of power pervade all aspects of society, paying particular attention to the role played by theatre and the violence therein. Chapters II and III take as their focus the tragedies and tragicomedies of Françoise Pascal (*Agathonphile martyr; Sésostris*) and Madame de Villedieu (*Manlius; Nitétis*). Through close critical readings of their plays, I contend that these women exploit theatrical violence to subtly undermine the established gender hierarchy. I conclude that these works push against patriarchal systems and should be recognised as constituting an innovative and influential contribution to the seventeenth-century dramatic canon. In so doing, this thesis contributes new insights into our understanding of the construction of gender dynamics in early modern France, its theatre, and the evolutions of its dramatic aesthetics regarding gender and violence.

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Introduction

Overview

This study explores representations of gender and violence in the works of two seventeenth-century French female playwrights and in the context of early modern patriarchal society. Its overarching aim is to explore the ways in which female-authored tragedies and tragicomedies conform to or depart from expected constructions of gender dynamics and the extent to which these portrayals engage with contemporary debates surrounding the role of women in society. Through this research, I intend to demonstrate how close critical engagement with the theme of violence and gender in hitherto understudied female-authored works enables a richer understanding of the tensions inherent to early modern sexual politics.

This introduction is divided into three key sections. The first situates women in the context of early modern French theatre. Beginning by outlining early modern dramatic aesthetics — a subject already covered in considerable detail by others elsewhere — I examine expected and acceptable dramatic representations of gender before providing an overview of seventeenth-century French female playwrights.[1] This section concludes with my key arguments. The second section considers dramatic violence. Possessing great emotional and entertainment value, acts of violence can function as a powerful tool to seize and shock the audience whilst evoking the all-important tragic emotions of pity and fear. Yet as I show, dramatic violence is equally a problematic aesthetic and ethical issue closely tied to growing concerns over theatre's capacity to shape spectator conduct and engage with socio-political issues, including gender. Hence the theme stands as a particularly fruitful approach through which to explore a staged production's negotiation of contemporary power relations. Both sections also provide preliminary background for Chapter I.

[1] On the 'rules' of seventeenth-century dramatic theory, see, amongst others, Jacques Scherer, *La dramaturgie classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1950), René Bray, *La formation de la doctrine classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1966), John D. Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder: The Theory of Tragedy in France* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1999), Jacques Truchet, *La tragédie classique en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975) and Georges Forestier, *Passions tragiques et règles classiques: Essai sur la tragédie française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003).

Finally, section three will cover scope, methodology and structure, where I provide a summary of the chapters that follow. Where appropriate, each section will be contextualized with reference to pertinent and significant cultural frameworks. Key critical works will also be woven in throughout this introduction, forming an integrated literature review.

Women and the Theatre in Early Modern France

From the 1630s onwards, French theatre emerged as a cultural institution unequivocally implicated in the maintenance of societal power relations. Recognised by Cardinal Richelieu as a privileged site for shaping public opinion and influencing spectator conduct, the Chief Minister set out to ensure the stage serves the goals of the state, overseeing the production of influential dramatic works such as d'Aubignac's *La Pratique du Théâtre*.[2] According to the works of these seminal dramatic theoreticians (d'Aubignac, Chapelain and La Mesnardière to name but a few), the function of dramatic performance is twofold: theatre must both entertain and instruct.[3] Expected to reinforce the power relationships of everyday life, subservience to authoritarian structures is considered critical, with glorification of the King often required.[4] Disturbances to the status quo should be rejected; vice must always be punished, and virtue rewarded.[5] Taking inspiration from the Ancients, theatre is expected to follow a scrupulously structured aesthetic form, and the so-called 'Classical' imperatives of *la vraisemblance* (verisimilitude) and *la bienséance* (decorum) are considered central

[2] For an overview of Richelieu's involvement in the creation of these doctrines, including details of Richelieu's provision of finances for playwrights, see Georges Couton, *Richelieu et le théâtre* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1986), C.J. Gossip, *An Introduction to French Classical Tragedy* (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1981) and Timothy Murray, 'Richelieu's Theater: The Mirror of a Prince', *Renaissance Drama*, 8 (1977), 275-298.
[3] See, for example, François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac, *La pratique du théâtre*, ed. Hélène Baby (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), Hippolyte-Jules Pilet de La Mesnardière, *La poétique* (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville, 1640) and Jean Chapelain, *Opuscules critiques*, ed. Alfred Hunter, with introduction, revisions, and notes by Anne Duprat (Geneva: Droz, 2007).
[4] On reinforcing everyday power relationships, see for example, Michael Moriarty, 'Principles of Judgement: Probability, Decorum, Taste and the *Je ne sais quoi*' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 3, The Renaissance*, ed. George Alexander Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.522-528.
[5] In his criticism of *Le Cid*, for instance, Georges de Scudéry can be found demanding 'la virtue recomponsée, le vice toujhours puni'. Georges de Scudéry, 'Observations sur *Le Cid*', in *La querelle du Cid, pièces et pamphlets publiés d'après les originaux, avec une introduction,* ed. Armand Gasté (Paris: H. Welter, 1898), pp.71-111 (p.79). Similarly, Chapelain defines the aim of theatre as the 'purgation ou [d']amendement des mœurs'. Chapelain, 'Lettre ou discours en forme de préface à l'*Adonis* du chevalier Marino' in *Opuscules Critiques*, pp.185-221 (p.196).

to achieving theatre's supposedly desired didactic function.[6] Demanding the portrayal of plausible intrigues and characters to create the illusion of reality, *la vraisemblance* hopes to secure the full immersion of the spectator in the action, increasing the likelihood of the audience internalising the moral and socio-political foundations of a performance.[7] Meanwhile, *la bienséance* demands that the plot exclude elements capable of shocking its onlookers and that characters behave in a manner appropriate for their age, rank and sex.[8] This 'bienséance externe', as René Bray has described it, complements 'bienséance interne', requiring consistency and historical coherence to dramatic characters.[9] Crucially both verisimilitude and decorum should, at least for the literary critical elite, present an idealised vision of the world, even if this requires changes to the historical source text: 'La Scène ne donne point les choses comme elles ont été, mais comme elles doivent être et le poète y doit rétablir dans le sujet tout ce qui ne s'accomodera pas aux règles de son art comme fait un peintre quand il travaille sur un modèle défectueux'.[10] Seeking to create an illusion of reality that will ensure the stage reflects, reinforces and even shapes the prevailing socio-political order, aesthetic regulation in part functions as a mechanism for inculcating French subjects in the values that foster the regime's stability. However, as we shall see, these dramatic imperatives can also exist in tension and contradiction.

During a period in which, as will become apparent in Chapter I, the traditional societal and intellectual status of women was being refined, and with growing numbers of women attending,

[6] As Joseph Harris highlights, 'Classical' — alongside other generical labels — is recognised today as a problematic term. Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.1.
[7] Central to securing this outcome are the three unities of time, action and place, which stipulate that the plot should unravel within a twenty-four-hour timeframe, within one location, and with only one main intrigue.
[8] Chapelain, for example, demands that '[Les poètes] ont particulièrement égard à faire parler chacun selon sa condition, son âge, son sexe, et appellent bienséance non pas ce qui est honnête, mais ce qui convient aux personnes, soit bonnes, soit mauvaises'. Chapelain, 'Discours de la poésie représentative' in *Opuscules critiques*, pp.272-275 (p.274).
[9] Bray, *La formation de la doctrine classique*, pp.215-230.
[10] D'Aubignac, *La pratique du théâtre*, pp.113-114. This distinguishing of *vraisemblance* from historical truth was a contentious aesthetic requirement. See Gerard Genette 'Vraisemblance et motivation', *Communications*, 11 (1968), 5-21. It is also worth noting that d'Aubignac's remarks are made in relation to violence: he proceeds to argue that the death of Camille at the hands her brother Horace should not be permitted onstage.

critiquing, and even performing in dramatic productions, theatrical constructions of gender accordingly come under considerable critical scrutiny. Exposing underlying tensions regarding the evolving role of women in society, dramatic theorists and political leaders demanded that the theatrical form propagates a certain hierarchy of gender that reflects the patriarchal system of values underpinning early modern society. Just as Aristotle perceived the female sex to be without authority, and the dramatic portrayal of 'valour' or 'unscrupulous cleverness' in a female character to be inappropriate according to the laws of probability and necessity, so too should seventeenth-century French theatre present appropriate and credible models of gendered behaviour.[11] A period in which female subservience and inferiority is, at least by some, inherently valued and expected across all orders of society, 'good' dramatic women should, according to La Mesnardière's *Poétique*, be 'douces, foibles, delicates, modestes, pudiques, [et] courtoises'.[12]

In reality, practising dramatists are rarely found unswervingly adhering to such prescriptive dramatic demands.[13] Indeed debates abound throughout the century regarding the appropriate balance between moral instruction and entertainment, with playwrights at times defending pleasure as the primary aim of the poet.[14] Alongside plentiful portrayals of submissive women, early modern French theatre abounds with strong, outspoken and passionate female characters, and Racine himself famously reminds his audience that Phèdre 'n'est ni tout à fait coupable, ni tout à fait innocente'.[15] It is worth noting, however, that this formidable female character does of course meet her demise by the play's denouement: a fate, as shall become apparent, that is not uncommon for

[11] On women in society, see Aristotle, *Politics,* translated by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), notably p.23: 'The deliberative part of the soul is entirely missing from a slave; a woman has it but it lacks authority'. On dramatic portrayals, see Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by S.H. Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1985), notably p.12: 'There is a type of manly valour; but valour in a woman or unscrupulous cleverness is inappropriate'.
[12] La Mesnardière, p.124.
[13] As studies into early modern dramatic aesthetics have shown (see for example the abovementioned Scherer, Bray and Truchet), throughout the century, theoreticians and playwrights plunge into deep contradictions regarding their necessity and purpose.
[14] On these debates, see amongst others Henry Phillips, *The Theatre and its Critics in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: The University Press, 1980), notably pp.17-36, and Forestier, *Passions tragiques*, pp.48-63.
[15] See Racine's preface to *Phèdre.* Jean Racine, *Phèdre,* ed. Raymond Picard (Paris: Folio, 2015).

theatrical portrayals of unruly women. Failure to fully engage in this state-directed codification nevertheless left the playwright susceptible to potential criticism, with *La Querelle du Cid* serving as a somewhat extreme testimony to this.[16] In what can perhaps be deemed one of the most notorious literary controversies of the period and one that would shape dramatic aesthetics for decades to come, Corneille comes under fire for his 'fautes remarquables et dangereuses', making the work 'directement opposé aux principales Règles Dramatiques'.[17] The most notable 'fault' involves the characterisation of Chimène. Here, the playwright supposedly undermines decorum and verisimilitude by failing to stage a female protagonist adhering to the prevalent code of sexual ethics and who refuses to remain subordinate to paternal and patriarchal authority.[18] These literary *querelles* have been subject to extensive scholarly analysis, as has the handling of the dramatic dictates by prominent playwrights such as Corneille and Racine. Seminal publications on early modern dramatic theory, such as those by Jacques Scherer, René Bray, John Lyons and Jacques Truchet, rely almost exclusively upon these canonical (and male-authored) texts.[19] Likewise, the extent to which constructions of power relations interact with socio-political conditions in these works has been substantially studied. Paul Bénichou, Serge Doubrovsky, and Michel Prigent, for instance, offer detailed studies of Corneille's portrayal of the state, while Mitchell Greenberg, Claire Carlin and Vincent Depuis (amongst others) tackle the staging of sexual politics more specifically.[20]

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[16] As Mary Jo Muratore writes, 'a writer's aesthetic survival depended on the degree to which a text remained faithful to established literary protocols'. See Mary Jo Muratore, *Expirer au Féminin: Narratives of Female Dissolution in French Classical Texts* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2003), p.3. On the *Querelle du Cid*, see Gasté.

[17] Scudéry, *Observations*, p.81.

[18] On the actions and behaviour of Chimène as a threat, see Mitchell Greenberg, *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.37-65 and Serge Doubrovsky, *Corneille et la dialectique du héros* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp.116-132.

[19] For full references, see no.1.

[20] On politics, see Paul Bénichou, *Morales du grand siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), Serge Doubrovsky, *Corneille et la dialectique du héros*, and Michel Prigent, *Le héros et l'état dans la tragédie de Pierre Corneille* (Paris: PUF, 2008). See also, amongst others, Richard E. Goodkin, *Birth Marks: The Tragedy of Primogeniture in Pierre Corneille, Thomas Corneille, and Jean Racine* (Pennsylvania: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), John D. Lyons, *The Tragedy of Origins: Pierre Corneille and Historical Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) and Katherine Ibbett, *The Style of the State in French Theater, 1630-1660: Neoclassicism and Government* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008). On gender, see Greenberg, *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry*, Claire Carlin, 'The Woman as Heavy: Female Villains in the Theater of Pierre Corneille', *The French Review*, 59 (1986), 389-98, and Vincent Depuis, *Le tragique et le féminin: Essai sur la poétique française de la tragédie (1553-1663)*

With female passivity and modesty clearly idealised by certain influential figures in early modern French society and performance, a woman engaging in literary activity, but most notably drama (the highest of literary forms and one that is almost an exclusively masculine domain), itself signalled an act of defiance. As seventeenth-century writer François de Grenaille protests, 'la bienséance ne permettait pas à une honnête fille de réduire en pratique les connaissances qu'elle pouvait avoir en matière de poésie'.[21] Yet despite such apparent hostility towards women in the theatre, a considerable number of dramatic works were published by female playwrights in the seventeenth century, with many of their theatrical productions also being publicly staged and several achieving considerable literary success. Whilst Dorothée de Croy is the only woman known to have written for the stage in the first half of the seventeenth-century (with just the manuscript for her 1637 tragedy *Cinnatus et Camma* surviving), from 1650 onwards, female writers cultivate every dramatic form available.[22] Producing not only tragedy, the most prestigious form of French theatre, women could be found participating in genres such as the tragicomedy, dramatic proverb, machine play, comedy, pastoral, farce and martyr play. On occasion, female dramatists even engaged in generic innovation, with Françoise Pascal producing the sole tragicomic martyr play of the entire early modern French theatrical repertoire.[23] Choosing not to publish under a pseudonym, these women boldly enter the male-dominated world of theatre during a period of increasing socio-political turmoil.

(Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016). See also Derval Conroy, *Ruling Women, II: Configuring the Female Prince in Seventeenth-Century French Drama* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Mary Jo Muratore, *The Evolution of the Cornelian Heroine* (California: University of California Press, 1979), Véronique Desnain, *Hidden Tragedies: The Social Construction of Gender in Racine* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2002) and Josephine A. Schmidt, *If there are no more Heroes, there are Heroines: A Feminist Critique of Corneille's Heroines: 1637–1643* (New York: University Press of America, 1987).

[21] François de Grenaille, *L'honnête fille où dans le premier livre il est traité de l'esprit des filles*, ed. Alain Vizier (Paris: Champion, 2003), p.223.

[22] For an overview of early modern French female playwrights, see Cecilia Beach, *French Women Playwrights Before the Twentieth Century: A Checklist* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996). It is important to note that women were also writing theatre earlier than the seventeenth-century.

[23] See Françoise Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr* (1655) in Theresa Varney Kennedy, *Françoise Pascal's 'Agathonphile martyr, tragi-comédie': An Annotated Critical Edition* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2008), p.46. All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition of the play.

Despite this, the works of seventeenth-century French female dramatists have until recently been all but excluded from the literary canon. In contrast to the abundant and wide-ranging literature on early modern male playwrights, very little is known about the ways in which their lesser-known female counterparts negotiate the dramatic form. Critics such as Faith Beasley, Domna Stanton and Patricia Francis Cholakian have instead leaned towards the fiction and poetry produced by early modern female writers.[24] These studies provide insightful background into women's engagement with the broader literary sphere, notably the ways in which textual representations of gender dynamics were constructed by women beginning to occupy the literary sphere and how these engage with ongoing gender debates. Similarly, whilst existing research into women and the theatre has largely been confined to their role outside that of playwright, such studies nonetheless once again shed light on the turbulent relationship of the seventeenth-century woman with the dramatic form, and her treatment in society more broadly.[25]

Only in recent years have we seen an increased interest in the early modern woman's occupation as playwright. This is due in large part to a number of their works being made available in modern editions, most notably through the publication of a two-volume anthology by Perry Gethner, alongside a groundbreaking multi-volume project (four currently in print and a fifth in train) covering the entire *Ancien Régime* period and bringing to light the dramatic works of twenty-two women

[24] See Faith Beasley, *Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), Domna Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France: Women Writ, Women Writing* (London: Routledge, 2016) and Patricia Francis Cholakian, *Women and the Politics of Self-Representation in Seventeenth-century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000).

[25] Virginia Scott, Jan Clarke and Aurore Evain, for instance, trace the arrival of the actress in early modern France, whilst John Lough and more recently Véronique Lochert's groundbreaking work have explored women as spectators. See Jan Clarke, '"In the Eye of the Beholder?" The Actress as Beauty in Seventeenth-Century France', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 25.1 (2003), 111-127,Virginia Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France: 1540-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Aurore Evain, *L'apparition des actrices professionnelles en Europe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), John Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth & Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), Véronique Lochert et al (eds.), *Écrire pour elles. Dramaturges et spectatrices en Europe, Études Épistémè* [online], 42 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.15230> [Accessed 15th December 2023], and *Spectatrices ! De l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2022).

writers, edited by Perry Gethner, Henriette Goldwyn and Aurore Evain.[26] Several separate critical editions of female-authored plays have also appeared.[27] The seventeenth-century plays of Marthe Cosnard, Alberte-Barbe d'Ernecourt (Madame de Saint-Balmon), Françoise Pascal, Madame de Villedieu, Catherine Bernard and Antoinette Deshoulières are thus amongst those now readily available. The efforts of these scholars to bring women dramatists to the attention of a wider audience through the publication of anthologies and critical editions of individual plays (including English translations) have been invaluable, and these modern editions will be used throughout this thesis.[28] Whilst it is unclear whether all of the plays under consideration here were ever actually performed in early modern France, Aurore Evain has also improved awareness and accessibility of women's dramatic works through her theatre group *La Compagnie La Subversive,* which has been staging live performances of Madame de Villedieu's tragicomedy *Le Favori* since 2015.[29]

Those critical studies exploring early modern women's theatre tend to focus upon individual works or are limited to the dramatic productions of a specific playwright.[30] To my knowledge, only

[26] For the two-part anthology, see Perry Gethner, *Femmes dramaturges en France (1650-1750): Pièces choisies* (Tübingen: Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature, 1993) and *Femmes dramaturges en France (1650-1750): Pièces choisies, Tome II* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2002). For the multi-volume project, see Aurore Evain, Perry Gethner and Henriette Goldwyn: *Théâtre de femmes de l'ancien régime: Tome I, XVIe siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014); *Tome II, XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015); *Tome III, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, 2011); Tome IV, XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016).

[27] Alongside Kennedy's abovementioned critical edition of Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr*, Franco Piva has prepared a modern edition of the works of Catherine Bernard, including her two plays. See Catherine Bernard, *Oeuvres, II*, *Theatre et poésie* ed. Franco Piva (Paris: Schena-Didier érudition, 1999). Carmeta Abbott, Hannah Fournier and Jean-Philippe Beaulieu have also edited *Les jumeaux martyrs* by Madame de Saint-Balmon. See Alberte-Barbe d'Ernecourt, *Les jumeaux martyrs*, eds. Carmeta Abbott, Hannah Fournier and Jean-Philippe Beaulieu (Geneva: Droz, 1995). See also Fournier's edited edition of Cosnard's martyr play. Marthe Cosnard, '*Les chastes martirs'*, ed. Hannah Fournier (2001) <https://uwaterloo.ca/margot/sites/ca.margot/files/uploads/files/martirs.pdf> [Accessed 19th November 2023].

[28] For English translations, see for example Perry Gethner, *Challenges to Traditional Authority: Plays by French Women Authors, 1650-1700, Françoise Pascal, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, Antoinette Deshoulières, and Catherine Durand* (Toronto: Iter Academic Press, 2015).

[29] For more information on the theatre group, see their website, *La Subversive* (2020) <https://www.lasubversive.org/> [Accessed 7th August 2022].

[30] Edwige Keller-Rahbé, for instance, has devoted significant critical attention to Madame de Villedieu. This includes dedicating a website to the female playwright (https://madamedevilledieu.huma-num.fr) with hyperlinks to all of her original texts and an extensive secondary bibliography. See also the collection of articles on Villedieu's dramatic works that grew out of a conference on the playwright in Nathalie Grande and Edwige Keller-Rahbé, eds. *Madame de Villedieu et le théâtre: Actes du colloques de Lyon, 11* et *12 septembre 2008* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2009). On individual articles on specific playwrights and plays, see, for example, Henriette Goldwyn, 'Men in Love in the Plays of Mme de Villedieu', in *A Labor of Love: Critical Reflections on the*

three comprehensive comparative studies exploring the works of seventeenth-century French female playwrights exist. Ruth Vortsman provides useful context to seventeenth-century women's dramatic works by exploring the ways in which female writers adapt their source texts for the stage. Investigating the extent to which these modifications impact upon the portrayal of gender dynamics, Vortsman deduces that women playwrights enhance female roles in their works and, unlike their male counterparts, completely omit the figure of the wicked, cruel older woman.[31] Meanwhile, Elizabeth Rosalind Grist, addressing women's dramatic productions in the context of religious criticism, highlights the challenges women playwrights encountered from religious moralists eager to restrict their access to the stage, and women's ensuing resistance.[32] Most recently, Theresa Varney Kennedy has demonstrated how female playwrights question traditional early modern views on women through their construction of female protagonists.[33] Through the portrayal of what Kennedy deems the 'deliberative' heroine — an active, rational and determined female personage — early modern dramatists liberate their female characters from a history of traditional roles.

This study seeks to contribute to this growing interest in the dramatic works of seventeenth-century French female playwrights. Taking the representation of dramatic violence as my focal point, this thesis will explore the ways in which women's tragedies and tragicomedies conform to or depart from expected constructions of gender dynamics and the extent to which these portrayals engage with contemporary debates surrounding the role of women in society. As we shall shortly see, the staging of violence is interrogated in early modern dramatic theory. Closing interacting with debates

Writings of Marie-Catherine Desjardins (Mme de Villedieu), ed. Roxanne Decker Lalande (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), pp.64-83 and Francis Mathieu, 'Femmes, politique et loi salique dans "Nitétis" de Marie-Catherine de Villedieu: l'habilité au pouvoir par l'invraisemblance, *The French Review*, 90.4 (2017), 119-131. See also Derval Conroy, 'Tragic ambiguities: gender and sovereignty in French classical drama' in *Women in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Christine Meek (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 185-204, which includes several pages on the subversion of gendered codes of virtue in Nitétis.

[31] Ruth Vortsman, *Tragedies and Tragi-comedies by French Female Dramatists, 1640-1700: Adaptation of Sources and Presentation of Gender* (PhD: University of Oxford, 2009).

[32] Elizabeth Rosalind Grist, *The Salon and the Stage: Women and Theatre in Seventeenth-Century France* (PhD: Queen Mary University of London, 2001), in particular Chapter III.

[33] Theresa Varney Kennedy, *Women's Deliberation: The Heroine in Early Modern French Women's Theater, 1650-1750* (London: Routledge, 2018).

surrounding the role of theatre in serving the socio-political agenda, I argue that the representation of violence provides fertile territory for a study of sexual politics in female-authored works: a theme hitherto unexplored. It is my contention that female playwrights exploit theatrical violence for socio-political ends, subtly undermining dramatic regulations as well as the gender hierarchy that theatrical aesthetics ultimately aim to enforce. Through their theatrical productions and the violence therein, these women hint at alternative constructions of gender to those upheld by prescriptive ancient and early modern discourses of sexual difference.

Seventeenth-Century Dramatic Violence

Acts of violence and death are often considered integral to theatrical performance, notably the tragic and tragicomic genres.[34] For Aristotle, central to the tragic plot is the 'Scene of Suffering […] a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like'.[35] Likewise violence is typically deemed one of the few defining characteristics of tragicomedy.[36] It is not difficult to grasp why. Such incidents present an obvious means of inciting the tragic emotions of pity and fear, leading the onlooker to a catharsis, whilst the spectacular nature of violence renders the theme inherently theatrical, capable of tantalizing and entertaining the spectator. As Eric Bentley writes in his seminal book *The Life of the Drama*, 'if you wish to attract the audience's attention, be violent; if you wish to hold it, be violent again'.[37] Acts of aggression can take many different forms, from duels, battles and assassinations to suicides, martyrdom, rapes, abductions, and voyeurism, offering interesting and unique ways for playwrights to drive forward their plot. For tragicomic

[34] Whilst debates surrounding the necessity of violence and death to the theatrical genre long predate the seventeenth century, the fact remains that most tragedies and tragicomedies of this period do indeed feature bloody scenes and cruel deaths (albeit with such scenes increasingly taking place off-stage as the century progresses). On these debates, one only has to consider the controversy surrounding the genre of *Bérénice*, in which Racine famously declares in the tragedy's preface that 'ce n'est point une nécessité qu'il y ait du sang et des morts dans une tragédie'. See Richard Parish, 'Bérénice: Tragedy or Anti-Tragedy?', in *The Seventeenth-Century: Directions Old and New*, eds. Elizabeth Moles and Noel Peacock (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1992), pp.98-107.
[35] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p.9.
[36] On the characteristics of tragicomedy, see Chapter II.
[37] Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1965), p.9.

productions, flamboyant acts of violence — such as cross-dressed sword fights and hauntings from beyond the grave — ensure the plot is infused with the level of excess and exuberance expected of the genre. Such deeds do not necessarily need to take place during the action of the play; the mere threat of violence can effectively build dramatic tension, holding the spectator in suspense. Violent behaviour would also appear to offer the dramatist a seemingly clear-cut signifier of character. A protagonist willing to fight for his country epitomises the tragic hero, whilst his noble death or sacrifice can immortalize his heroic status. Meanwhile, a character engaging in or plotting an act of violence such as murder or abduction patently underscores his or her villainy. A deadly denouement can produce the catastrophic ending typical (although not necessarily required) of tragedy, whilst the avoidance of a bloody act can allow for the sudden reversal of fortune characteristic of the tragicomedy.[38]

At the end of the sixteenth century and turn of the seventeenth century, spectacular scenes of violence dominate the French stage. Dubbed an extraordinary period of ultra-violence, scenes of brutality are manifested in many different forms, from battles and duels to bloody decapitations and mass suicides.[39] Alexandre Hardy's *Scédase, ou l'Hospitalité Violée* (1624) offers perhaps one of the most shocking cases of theatrical violence of the period, featuring at least the partial enactment on stage of the rape and murder of the title character's two daughters, the disposal of their bodies

[38] Whilst not within the scope of this study, it is worth noting that the tragedy *à fin heureuse* remains a possibility within seventeenth-century aesthetics, being particularly popular in the 1640s. See Harold Knutson, 'Le dénouement heureux dans la tragédie française du dix-septième siècle', *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, 77. 4 (1967), 339-346.

[39] The excessive staged violence of the period has received much critical attention. See, for example, Christian Biet, *Théâtre de la cruauté et récits sanglants en France, XVIe-XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2006), Christian Biet and Marie-Madeleine Fragonard, *Tragédies et récits de martyres en France, fin xvie–début xviie siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2009), Michael Meere, *Staging Violence: Ethical Problematics in French Tragedy before Corneille, 1550-1630* (PhD: University of Virginia, 2010) and *Onstage Violence in Sixteenth-Century French Tragedy: Performance, Ethics, Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), Elliott Forsyth, *La tragédie française de Jodelle à Corneille, 1553–1640: Le thème de la vengeance* (Paris, Champion, 1994), Melanie Elizabeth Bowman, *The Spectacle of the Suffering Body: Seventeenth-Century Aesthetics of Violence* (PhD: University of Minnesota, 2015) and Jean Rousset, *La littérature de l'âge baroque en France* (Paris: A. Corti, 1953).

down a well, and their later retrieval.[40] The popularity of Seneca alongside the influence of the Baroque movement go some way towards explaining this abundance of violence.[41] More recently, critics have also sought to attribute this penchant for portraying excessive theatrical brutality to a re-enactment of the thirty violent years of religious wars that dominated the latter half of the sixteenth century.[42] Whilst these plays allowed spectators to rediscover the pleasure of theatrical performance and enjoy a social activity in relative calm, through such violent representation, the audience is simultaneously offered a 'new way of seeing, observing and commenting upon' their recent experience of bloody socio-political unrest.[43] We are already beginning to see the ways in which violent representation may interact with its socio-political backdrop.

At first glance, dramatic scenes of violence and death would appear apt mechanisms for satisfying the abovementioned increasing demand for a didactic stage under Richelieu. As René Girard suggests in his influential *La violence et le sacré,* through dramatizing the suffering of others, theatre functions to contain and manage violence and volatility in society.[44] Serving as a form of social stabilization, staged violence 'purgera les spectateurs de leurs passions, provoquera une nouvelle catharsis individuelle et collective'.[45] It could be argued that there is no better means for theatre to play a potential role in deterring societal discord than through displaying dissident behaviour as punishable by death. More specifically, and as we shall see in Chapter I, through

[40] The play has been subject to much critical analysis. See, for example, John D. Lyons, 'Tragedy and Outrage: Hardy's *Scédase*', *Philological Quarterly*, 93.1 (Winter 2014), 43-64.
[41] Whilst Senecan drama largely confines its excessive violence to discourse, the Baroque is all about its visibility. See Sandrine Berregard, 'Le spectacle de la mort et le problème des bienséances dans *L'hypocondriaque ou le mort amoureux* et *L'Hercule mourant* de Rotrou', *PFSCL*, 33.64 (2006), 193–206.
[42] See the abovementioned works of Christian Biet. See also Andrea Frisch, 'French Tragedy and the Civil Wars', *Modern Language Quar*terly, 67.3 (2006), 287-312, and Gillian Jondorf, *Robert Garnier and the Themes of Political Tragedy in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
[43] Christian Biet, 'French Tragedy during the Seventeenth Century: From Cruelty on a Scaffold to Poetic Distance on Stage', in *Politics and Aesthetics in European Baroque and Classicist Tragedy*, eds. Jan Bloemendal and Nigel Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp.294-316 (p.297). It is worth noting that Henry IV's *Edict of Nantes* (1598) sought to ban the representation of recent historical events and instead introduce a policy of forgetting, with tragic plots therefore taking a fictional detour. On this politics of 'amnesia', see Andrea Frisch, *Forgetting Differences: Tragedy, Historiography, and the French Wars of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). See also Bowman, pp.6-7. See also Chapter I of this study.
[44] René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1972).
[45] *Ibid.,* pp.402-403.

portraying active and passionate women as violent aberrations who reinforce well-worn gender associations and who are duly punished — i.e., meet their demise — by the play's denouement, these dramatic productions and the violence therein can be said to reinforce the prevailing hierarchy of gender.

However, it is in the context of these very same aesthetic developments and debates that dramatic representations of blood and violence, as well as physical action more broadly, emerge as problematic. In accordance with the dictates of *la vraisemblance*, how, for example, would a playwright stage a realistic murder or execution without placing the actor in actual mortal danger?[46] Such scenes, when visibly represented, risk becoming clumsy and comical, undermining the gravity of the act, shattering the theatrical illusion and distracting the audience from any underpinning moral and socio-political messaging.[47] As Castelvetro writes, 'l'expérience a montré que des choses cruelles et horribles ne peuvent se représenter vraisemblablement, qu'elles font rire plutôt que pleurer, et qu'elles produisent des effets de comédie, non de tragédie'.[48] Alongside these aesthetic and practical considerations, the depiction of bloody scenes threatens the audience's tragic response, carrying with it socio-political ramifications. This is a central concern of La Mesnardière, who describes in detail the ways in which the staging of certain types of violence and death risks inciting horror and disgust over terror, disengaging the spectator from wider didactic aims.[49] As Lyons observes, horror 'paralyzes the beholders', eliminating the possibility of audience identification and imitation.[50] There is also the possibility that staged murders and suicides may

[46] Actress mademoiselle Duclos was supposedly injured onstage when fleeing the sword-wielding male protagonist too hastily during a performance of *Horace*. See Joseph Sampson, *L'Art théâtral* (Paris: Libraire de la Société des Gens de Lettres, 1863), p.188.
[47] On the relationship between verisimilitude and staged violence, see Harris, *Inventing the Spectator*, notably pp.24-30.
[48] Cited in Michael Hawcroft, 'Violence et bienséance dans l'examen d'*Horace*: Pour une critique de la notion de bienséances externes', *Dix-Septième Siècle*, 3.264 (2014), 549-570. La Mesnardière similarly posits: 'On ne met point au Théâtre les épées, les gibets, les roues, le feu…il est très difficile d'imiter ces bourrelleries sans que la feinte en soit grossière, et par conséquent ridicule', *Poétique*, p.205.
[49] On La Mesnardière's lengthy and at times contradictory discussions on staged violence, see Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder,* notably p.64.
[50] *Ibid*.

incite pity in unpredictable (and undesirable) ways. Meeting with much condemnation at the time, Horace's onstage killing of his sister Camille (*Horace*, 1640), is frequently deemed to have incited compassion for the female protagonist whilst detracting sympathy from the male character, contributing to the tragedy's supposed disruption of conventional gender dynamics.[51] Corneille's own *Examen* (1660) of the play, in which he blames the actress for failing to flee, highlights the 'ideal' gendered expectation of women when faced with violence: 'Quand elle [l'actrice] voit son frère mettre l'épée à la main, la frayeur, si naturelle au sexe, lui doit faire prendre la fuite, et recevoir le coup derrière le théâtre, comme je le marque dans cette impression'.[52] For Fabien Cavaillé, Corneille's subsequent amendments to *Horace* — in which he makes clear that the murder should take place offstage — ensures Camille is restored to what early modern patriarchal society would consider her rightful place: 'Camille meurt dans la coulisse, c'est-à-dire dans l'ombre de la maison, entre les bras de son père, comme une bonne fille'.[53] Once again, we are seeing how violence, when constructed in a particular way, has the potential to reinforce the dominant hierarchy of gender.

In an attempt to reconcile the centrality of violence and death to the dramatic form with the demand from certain theorists for a decorous and verisimilar performance capable of serving socio-political aims, we witness a growing shift away from the visible staging of these scenes. With d'Aubignac recommending the playwright censures 'ces spectacles pleins d'horreur' and La Mesnardière deploring 'des spectacles horribles', acts of violence and death are instead increasingly confined to the domain of language.[54] Playwrights are found deploying their prefatory materials to

[51] On gender in *Horace*, see, amongst others, Mitchell Greenberg, 'Horace, Classicism and Female Trouble', *Romanic Review*, 74.3 (1983), 271-92. Pierre Corneille, *Horace* (Paris: Petits Classiques Larousse, 2006).
[52] On the gendering of flight, see Nina Ekstein, 'The Cornelian Ethics of Flight and the Case of *Horace*', *Romance Notes*, 56.3 (2016), 485-493. Here Ekstein's analysis of flight within Corneille's wider corpus finds no stigma attached to fleeing a confrontation provided the one who flees is a woman. On Corneille's *Examen* of the play, see, amongst others, David Maskell, 'Corneille's *Examens* Examined: The Case of *Horace*', *French Studies*, 51.3 (1997), 267-280.
[53] Fabien Cavaillé, 'Le malin plaisir: Les perversions de la vengeance dans la tragédie baroque française', in *Le théâtre et le mal*, ed. Catherine Naugrette (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2005), pp.89-100 (p.98).
[54] D'Aubignac, *La pratique du théâtre*, p.120 and Mesnardière, *Poétique,* p.200. Within the category of 'spectacles horribles', Mesnardière lists parricides and cruel murders. The abovementioned canonical studies on

signal their adherence to this more muted style of theatre. In the foreword to his 1659 *Œdipe*, Corneille attributes his decision to displace the infamous scene of violent self-mutilation from the visual to the spoken to ensuring compliance with the conventions of external decorum:

> J'ai reconnu que ce qui avait passé pour miraculeux dans ces siècles éloignés, pourrait sembler horrible au nôtre, et que cette éloquente et curieuse description de la manière dont ce malheureux Prince se crève les yeux, et le spectacle de ces mêmes yeux crevés dont le sang lui distille sur le visage, qui occupe tout le cinquième acte chez ces incomparables originaux, ferait soulever la délicatesse de nos Dames qui composent la plus belle partie de notre auditoire […].[55]

The anxiety regarding the female spectator expressed by Corneille here is noteworthy, appearing somewhat at odds with the fact that women were present at public executions and thus witnessing real-life violence. The playwright's apparent concerns could perhaps be read as an attempt to impose new moral standards on the stage, in which, as we shall see in Chapter I, women play a central role, as well as a nod to the increasing reluctance across society to use violence to uphold authority. Whilst there are of course notable exceptions to the dominant practices — some of which are deemed more aesthetically tolerable than others — by the 1670s, the seventeenth-century stage features extremely limited action.[56] Even swooning and the drawing of a sword are considered

dramatic theory (Scherer etc.) all also provide an overview of the removal of violence. Alongside aesthetic considerations, as Juliette Cherbuliez notes, the increase in printing may also have played a role in the reduction of staged physical action, with complex descriptions and footnotes not translating to the written page particularly well. See Juliette Cherbuliez, *In the Wake of Medea: Neoclassical Theater and the Arts of Destruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), pp.123-142.

[55] Pierre Corneille, *Œdipe: Tragédie* (Paris: Hachette Livre, 2012). Corneille's concern for the female spectator is of course noteworthy given the focus of this study. On women's influential presence in the audience, see Chapter I.

[56] Suicide is the most notable exception. As Jacques Scherer reminds us, it is 'le seul acte sanglant qui soit permis à un héros classique'. See *La Dramaturgie Classique en France*, p.418. Nuances and exceptions of particular relevance will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. For a succint overview of the removal of violence more broadly, see Marie Burkhardt, 'Quelles représentations du corps violenté chez Racine?', in *Anatomie du corps violent sur scène*, ed. Priscilla Wind (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2020), pp.51-66.

unacceptable. Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), defined in Marc Fumaroli's terms by its portrayal of violent emotions yet physical stasis, is often held up as the apogee of neoclassical theatre.[57]

This dismissal of violence from the stage may render it an unusual thematic choice for a study of gender dynamics in the tragedies and tragicomedies produced in the latter half of the seventeenth-century.[58] Yet as I hope to show, its visible removal does little to dilute its socio-political potential. Rather, its displacement onto poetic narrative has the potential to arouse more concentrated and controlled messaging. Reflecting in his 1660 *Examen* of *Le Cid*, Corneille articulates how his deliberate omission of visible acts of violence and careful choreographing of its reporting offers greater control over the impact of bloody representation on the spectator:

> C'est sur quoi je me suis fondé pour faire voir le soufflet que reçoit don Diègue, et cacher aux yeux la mort du comte afin d'acquérir et conserver à mon premier acteur l'amitié des auditeurs, si nécessaire pour réussir au théâtre. L'indignité d'un affront fait à un vieillard, chargé d'années et de victoires, les jette aisément dans le parti de l'offensé ; et cette mort, qu'on vient dire au roi tout simplement sans aucune narration touchante, n'excite point en eux la commisération qu'y eût fait naître le spectacle de son sang, et ne leur donne aucune aversion pour ce malheureux amant, qu'ils ont vu forcé par ce qu'il devait à son honneur d'en venir à cette extrémité, malgré l'intérêt et la tendresse de son amour.[59]

Whilst Corneille's aim here is simply to retain sympathy for his male protagonist through limiting both the staging and description of violence, as Mary Reilly demonstrates, in some cases, the tension and anxiety built up by the images created in the spectator's mind through verbal description are

[57] See Marc Fumaroli, 'De Médée à Phèdre: Naissance et mise à mort de la tragédie cornélienne', in *Héros et orateurs: Rhétorique et dramaturgie cornéliennes* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), pp.493–518.
[58] Indeed Constance Cagnat, in her comprehensive study of seventeenth-century representations of death in culture and literature, opts to exclude theatre in favour of less codified genres. See *La mort classique: Ecrire la mort dans la littérature française en prose de la seconde moitié du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Honoré, 1995).
[59] See '*Examen* du *Cid* (1660/1682) de Corneille', in *Le Cid*, eds. Myrna Bell Rochester and Eileen Angelini (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), pp.129-141 (pp. 139-140) (my emphasis).

more powerful and dramatic than the immediate effect of violence visually perceived on the stage.[60] The question of whether this shift from stage to page might also open up a unique site for subversion constitutes a key line of enquiry for this thesis.

Whilst comparatively few studies on early modern French theatre assess the theme of dramatic violence in considerable detail, its intricacies and nuanced potential have certainly not gone unnoticed by contemporary critics.[61] These works provide a wealth of context and thought-provoking information for this study, and, where pertinent, their findings will be reflected upon in subsequent chapters. Critical inquiries cover both the aesthetic and socio-political, ranging from the seeming paradox of permitting staged suicides in a highly religious context, to linking the removal of violence from the stage to the ongoing 'civilizing process' simultaneously taking place in contemporary society.[62] Studies that specifically address gender and seventeenth-century theatrical violence are considerably more limited and tend to be confined to a specific work or author, such as Mitchell Greenberg's *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry*.[63] It is Mary Jo Muratore's stance that perhaps aligns most closely with this study. In her *Expirer au Féminin,* Muratore explores

[60] Mary Reilly, *Racine: Language, Violence and Power* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), notably p.79.
[61] These tend to take the form of individual articles rather than substantial studies. In addition to the texts already cited, see Henry Phillips, 'L'art de bien mourir: Last Moments in Racinian Tragedy,' *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 22.1 (2000), 153-165, Mary Reilly, 'Infernal Visions: Death and the Afterlife in Racinian Tragedy', *Nottingham French Studies*, 42.2 (2003), pp.1-11, as well as the articles and chapters of Joseph Harris. See, for example, 'Vileness and Violence: The Cornelian Corpse', *Early Modern French Studies*, 39.2 (2017), 144-156. Longer studies on particular playwrights or specific aspects of violence include Tom Bruyer, *Le sang et les larmes: Le suicide dans les tragédies profanes de Jean Racine* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012). Studies exploring the passionate emotions often associated with tragedy also inevitably touch upon the theme of violence. See, for example, Elliot Forsyth, *La tragédie française de Jodelle à Corneille (1553-1640): Le thème de la vengeance* (Paris: Nizet, 1962).
[62] On suicide and religion, see Marion Monaco, 'Racine and the Problem of Suicide', *PMLA*, 70.3 (1955), 441-454, Bruyer, *Le sang et les larmes* and Philippe Ariès, *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en occident: du moyen âge à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1975). On the correlation between the removal of violence from the stage and its simultaneous decrease within society, see Katherine Ibbett, *The Style of the State in French Theater, 1630-1660: Neoclassicism and Government* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008). On violence in society more widely, see Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[63] Greenberg, *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry*. See also Philippe Bousquet, 'Le suicide féminin au XVIIe siècle: un acte héroïque', in *La femme au XVIIe siècle*, ed. Richard Hodgson (Tubingen: Narr, 2002) pp.183-200, Anna Menke, 'The Widow who would be Queen: The Subversion of Patriarchal Monarchy in *Rodogune* and *Andromaque*', *Cahiers du dix-septième siècle*, 7.1 (1997), 205-214, Nina Ekstein, 'Performing Violence in Rotrou's Theatre', *Neophilologus, 95*.4 (2011), 543-556, which includes a discussion of sexual violence, and Cherbuliez, *In the Wake of Medea*.

how, in the context of aesthetic mandates, the spectator is supposed to expect the subversive female character to be suitably punished.[64] Yet whilst we are indeed often met with her death, through close textual engagement with the works of Corneille and Racine, Muratore highlights how the playwrights often slant the reader's sympathy in the direction of the heroine and against the obedient hero, carrying clear socio-political implications. Throughout the study, however, no consideration is given to the handling of violence by female dramatists of the same period: a gap this thesis sets out to fill.

Outside of early modern French drama, the relationship between violent representation and gender has been awarded greater critical attention, and it is possible to draw parallels between these works and those under consideration here.[65] In her study of death in Greek tragedy, from which seventeenth-century French dramas typically draw inspiration, Nicole Loraux explores how types of deaths and weapons can be used to reinforce gender norms. Suicide through the use of feminine means such as handkerchiefs and scarves, for example, ensures women remain confined to the domestic sphere even in death.[66] Turning to portrayals of violence on the English stage, Kim Solga underscores the ways in which representations of sexual violence may feed into the oppression of women.[67] With the act almost always confined to discourse, narratives of rape often shift the focus from female suffering to its impact upon masculine honour, whilst simultaneously highlighting the extensive and 'performative' measures a woman must go to for her account to be

[64] Muratore, *Expirer au Féminin*.
[65] See, for example, Mara Wade, *Gender Matters: Discourses of Violence in Early Modern Literature and the Arts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), Lesel Dawson and Fiona McHardy, *Revenge and Gender in Classical, Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), Joan DeJean, 'Violence Against Women and Violent Women: Representing the "Strong" Woman in Early Modern France', *Signs,* 29.1 (Autumn 2003), 117-147, Susan Lord and Annette Burfoot, *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006), Derek Cohen, *Shakespeare's Culture of Violence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), and Karl S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[66] Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
[67] See Kim Solga, *Violence Against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

believed, reflecting social practices of the period. Throughout this thesis, I explore whether this runs true in the context of early modern French society and theatre.

As I show in Chapter I, through careful dramatic construction, violence and death can and often do reinforce gender norms. Yet in the chapters that follow, I explore how female playwrights carefully navigate this fundamental yet aesthetically and socio-politically complex theme to undermine the prevailing sexual hierarchy. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate dramatic violence to be a theme worthy of greater critical attention, capable of eliciting a deeper understanding of the construction of gender dynamics in early modern France both in the theatre and across society.

Methodology, Scope and Structure

It is useful at this point to define the forms of violence under consideration here. As Michael Meere has demonstrated, early modern conceptualisations of violence extend beyond the physical to the psychological, a distinction that holds particular relevance to drama given its focus on the very extremes of emotion and display of 'violent' passions.[68] Given the potential breadth of the theme, the forms of violence that fall in scope of this study are necessarily limited, and I am primarily interested in violent acts that involve a performative component and thus interact closely with the abovementioned aesthetic and socio-political considerations, as opposed to the purely psychological. Although the first comprehensive monolingual French dictionary is not published until 1680 — nearly two decades after the final play under consideration here is first performed — the earlier bilingual dictionaries of Jean Nicot (Latin-French) and Randle Cotgrave (English-French) provide helpful footings on which to build my own formulation of violence.[69] In his 1606 *Thrésor de la langue françoyse, tant ancienne que moderne*, Nicot defines violence first as *violentia*, meaning

[68] Meere, *Troubling Tragedies*, notably pp. 20-26. See also Meere, *Onstage Violence*, pp.10-15.
[69] The first monolingual French Dictionary was César-Pierre Richelet's *Dictionnaire françois, contenant les mots et les choses, plusieurs nouvelles remarques sur la langue française, ses expressions propres, figurées et burlesques, la prononciation des mots les plus difficiles, le genre des noms, le régime des verbes, avec les termes les plus communs des arts et des sciences: le tout tiré de l'usage et des bons auteurs de la langue française* (Geneva: Jean Herman Widerhold, 1680).

impetuosity, and second as *vis*, meaning force, strength or power.[70] Also aligning violence to the notion of force, Cotgrave's 1611 *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* incorporates an additional moral constituent. Violence is 'impetuousnesse; unjust force, or compulsion; wrong; rashnesse; fiercenesse; vehemencie'.[71] With these definitions in mind, my study explores dramatic acts of force as they bear on bodies, such as murder, abduction and rape; acts certainly entailing ethical considerations and, as set out above, often carrying with them the potential for gendered inferences. Yet I would question the extent to which violence is always represented as 'impetuous' and 'rash' on the early modern French stage, with, as we shall see, scheming and premeditation often spanning several scenes. Operating in this performative framework, my study also considers more figurative forms of violence and death, such as apparitions and voyeuristic activity: acts perhaps unsurprisingly not fully captured by Nicot and Cotgrave's definitions. Whilst not necessarily always violent in form, such acts, when constructed without consent, incorporate elements of force and immorality. As a widespread theme in tragedy and tragicomedy and one with significant aesthetic, moral and socio-political ramifications, representations of suicide will also be evaluated. Figures associated with death, such as the widow, are also captured in my definition. It is important to note that the acts of violence under consideration here may not take place on stage and/or during the action of the play. Whilst confining live violence to discourse, referring to earlier acts of force or threatening future brutality would all have been in line with evolving dramatic aesthetics, the absence of violence can equally carry with it socio-political implications, and as such will also be considered where relevant. Rather than a fixed or exhaustive definition of violence, this is very much a working definition, and the specific types of violence relevant to this study will be explained in further detail in subsequent chapters. What will become apparent is that each of the plays under consideration here feature aesthetically unusual and provocative forms of violence.

[70] Jean Nicot, *Thrésor de la langue françoyse, tant ancienne que moderne* (Paris: David Douceur, 1606).
[71] Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611). Early English Books Online Ebook <https://www.proquest.com/books/dictionarie-french-english-tongues-compiled/docview/2240870368/se-2> [Accessed 10th February 2023]. Unpaginated.

Violence functions as my chosen lens for undergoing an analysis of the staging of gender dynamics by two important early modern French female playwrights. But in exploring the ways in which these portrayals negotiate synchronous debates concerning the role of women in society, this critical perspective is broadly underpinned by a New Historicist methodology as applied to early modern French culture. This is a critical approach that encourages a reading of a literary text as part of the wider socio-political and historical conditions in which it was produced, which may not in itself appear particularly insightful or original. Indeed, at least some degree of contextualisation is inherent in many techniques of literary criticism.[72] Yet crucially New Historicism advocates an understanding of cultural artefacts and socio-political developments as complex and mutually reinforcing networks. Moving away from the idea that literature merely holds up a mirror to its contextual backdrop, representing a unified worldview of a particular moment in history, New Historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose reason that cultural materials must be recognised as political forces in their own right.[73] Capable of impacting contemporary behaviours and mentalities, texts of all kinds are socially and politically productive, playing a role in constructing a culture's sense of reality.[74] Tracing and probing relationships between texts, between texts and socio-political institutions, and remaining sceptical of traditional historical and literary accounts, New Historicists expose sets of narratives and patterns acting in parallel but also at times in contradiction to one another.[75] The approach reveals a space of intense negotiation and contest, bringing to light new (and multiple) meanings within and across texts that both enhance and

[72] A particularly notable exception to this being Formalism.

[73] Key New Historicist works include Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) and 'Towards a Poetics of Culture', in H. Aram Veeser, *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp.1-14, and Louis Montrose's 'Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture', in Veeser, pp.15-36. Other central New Historicist figures include Catherine Gallagher, Jean Howard and Stephen Orgel. In contrast, 'old' historical criticism tends to see literature as *reflecting* the social or historical background.

[74] John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998). On literature constructing reality, see Jean Howard, 'The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies', *English Literary Renaissance*, 16.1 (1986), 13-43.

[75] In the words of Greenblatt, New Historicists 'do not take for granted the existence of an autonomous aesthetic realm'. Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Representing the Renaissance (California, University of California Press, 1988),* p. vii.

challenge our understanding of literature and history, and the 'circulation of social energy' that takes place between the two.[76]

Early modern theatre certainly lends itself to such a reading. Renaissance and early modern drama clearly has the potential to influence collective beliefs as a literary form heavily reliant on particular conventions and generic forms and performed to large crowds during a period in which the concept of state and culture are undertaking a radical transition.[77] As Jonathan Dollimore suggests, the early modern conceptualisation of power itself as deeply theatrical reinforces Renaissance theatre as a prime location for the representation of power.[78] The fact that the early modern audience was frequently seated onstage only further blurs the distinction between art and reality. Whereas earlier works in this field have predominantly applied this socio-political perspective to English theatre, part of the originality of this thesis is that it extends New Historicism into seventeenth-century French culture, and as such it will help to establish its insights and limitations in this context.[79] It appears perfectly fitting to draw on this approach for a study of early modern French theatre. We have already begun to see the ways in which increasing aesthetic regulation forms part of an explicit attempt to harness the social power of the theatrical domain,

[76] 'Circulation of social energy' is the title of one of Greenblatt's essays (see Chapter I of *Shakespearean Negotiations)*. For Greenblatt, social energy manifests itself in the capacity of certain verbal and visual traces to produce and shape collective experiences.

[77] On the applicability of New Historicism to early modern theatre, see, for example, Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton, *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2016), Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) and H. Aram Veeser, *The New Historicism Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1994), notably pp.13-14.

[78] Jonathan Dollimore, 'Introduction: Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism', in *Political Shakespeare*, pp.2-17 (p.3). Whilst Dollimore is here referring to the theatrical nature of power within early modern England, we encounter a similar conceptualisation in early modern France. See also Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p.7.

[79] On the application of New Historicism in France (or rather lack thereof), see Line Cottegnies, 'The New Historicism: A French Perspective, in *Histoire et secret à la Renaissance*, ed. Francois Laroque (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1997) pp.73-80. Compared to the abundance of articles and books exploring and/or applying the concept of New Historicism in the English context, I have only been able to find a limited number of articles discussing and/or applying the concept in a French context. See, for example, Andrew J. Counter, 'Use, Value, Justification: On History and Historicism in Nineteenth-Century French Studies', *Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes*, 25.3 (2021), 329-344 and Sophie Victoria Harwood, *Women and War in the Old French Troy Tradition: Literary and Artistic Representations of Female Agency in the Romans d'Antiquité* (PhD: University of Leeds, 2017).

and we will see how Renaissance attitudes towards violence and gender are both increasingly moderated and challenged across society as well as by seventeenth-century French theatre prescriptions. It is worth noting, however, that New Historicism has at times faced criticism for its supposed lack of thorough historiography (a criticism with which I do not necessarily agree) and for paying insufficient attention to literary form and aesthetics; the latter of which holds particular relevance to an application of New Historicism to French theatre of this period.[80] Remaining mindful of these potential pitfalls, this thesis aims to do justice on both of these fronts. Firstly, Chapter I is dedicated to exploring the cultural specificity of the society in which seventeenth-century French female playwrights were operating, paying particular attention to where tensions and challenges to the prevailing powers emerge. Secondly, through situating my study of violence and gender in the context of wider seventeenth-century theatre aesthetics and focusing on stylistic features such as dramatic language and performativity, I show artistic form to be very much intertwined with the circulation of ideas and beliefs**.**

Another critique of New Historicism particularly pertinent to this study is the perceived idea that New Historicism subordinates or overlooks questions of gender. For feminist critics such as Judith Newton and Carol Neely, New Historicists all too often confine their approach to the study of powerful men, continuing to marginalize women through their focus on traditional literary canons and insistence upon the totalizing power of hegemonic — that is to say patriarchal — ideologies.[81] Whilst there may be a degree of truth to this assertion in that a significant proportion of practising New Historicists do indeed focus their attention on canonical male writers (despite New Historicism

[80] Recognising the importance of 'delving as deeply as possible into the creative matrices of particular historical cultures', I would argue that New Historicism does in fact encourage thorough historiography. See Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (eds.), *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.16. On these criticisms, see, amongst others, Peter Uwe Hohendahl, 'A Return to History? The New Historicism and Its Agenda', *New German Critique*, 55 (1992), 87-104.

[81] See Judith Newton, 'History as Usual? Feminism and the "New Historicism"', in Veeser, *The New Historicism*, pp. 152-167. See also Sara Lennox, 'Feminism and New Historicism', *Monatshefte*, 84.2 (Summer 1992), 159-170 and Carol Thomas Neely, 'Constructing the Subject: Feminist Practice and the New Renaissance Discourses', *English Literary Renaissance*, 18.1 (Winter 1988), 5-18.

advocating for a broadening of the field), central to a New Historicist approach is resisting the integration of all images and expressions into a single master discourse, and I would challenge the notion that New Historicism and feminism exist in contradiction or mutual exclusion.[82] My application of New Historicism seeks to bring to the fore some of the historical and cultural ruptures in the dominant gender hierarchy, and in so doing, will help to show its usefulness in this context. Through my focus on sexual politics in the hitherto understudied works of two significant female dramatists and against the backdrop of ongoing debates regarding the role of women in society, I hope to employ New Historicism as a useful tool for interrogating assumed hegemonic (that is, patriarchal) ideologies.

Integral to such an approach is an understanding of my own positionality as a researcher, and recognising, as New Historicism infers, that any criticism of a work is inevitably informed by the critic's own experiences. For Montrose, 'our analyses and our understandings necessarily proceed from our own historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points; that the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are, ourselves, historical subjects'.[83] Contemporary critics must recognise that their 'comprehension, representation, interpretation of the texts of the past always proceeds by a mixture of estrangement and appropriation'.[84] It goes without saying that the parameters of gender norms and expectations vary significantly over time, and it would be misleading and anachronistic to apply or 'appropriate' my own contemporary conception of gender to the works under consideration here. For instance, whilst modern society usually makes a distinction between 'gender' and 'sex', as we shall see, sex and gender are identified and represented as being both coterminous and 'natural' in seventeenth-century society. Likewise failure to consider broader early modern cultural developments, such as the rise of *galanterie*, when evaluating a particular literary work may lead the modern critic to incorrectly read a writer's decision

[82] Hardwood's thesis also argues that the two approaches should be considered complementary. Harwood, *Women and War.*
[83] Montrose, 'Professing the Renaissance', p.23.
[84] *Ibid.,* p.24.

to portray an 'effeminate' male hero or strong female personage as subversive in itself.[85] It is therefore critical that the gender dynamics present in the tragedies and tragicomedies of our two seventeenth-century French female playwrights are decoded in the nuanced context of their own specific social norms and as part of a much larger cultural narrative. To that end, alongside shedding new insights on previously understudied works, the approach also invites us to reconsider our current critical perspective of those (other) works long considered canonical. The relevance of my study to our wider understanding of seventeenth-century French theatre will be a point I return to in my conclusion.

It is important to state unequivocally here that the assumption in this thesis is not that women playwrights necessarily or automatically subvert gender norms or empower female characters simply because they are women: that would be as essentialist or reductive as the patriarchal norms imposed on women themselves in society and on stage at the time. Yet armed with a New Historicist understanding of all literature as a source of socio-political power, the potential for subversion nevertheless remains ever-present.[86] As Greenblatt posits, 'even those literary texts that sought most ardently to speak for a monolithic power could be shown to be the sites of institutional and ideological contestation'.[87] Operating amongst hegemonic socio-political powers and aesthetic ideals, the incorporation of subversive elements may not be immediately apparent, often existing in the 'margins' of an individual text as well as in non-canonical works.[88] Close scrutiny must however be paid to any seeming critique or opposition. The dominant order has the capacity to deliberately generate subversion in order to use it to its own ends; a technique New

[85] On *galanterie*, see Alain Viala, *La France galante: Essai historique sur une catégorie culturelle, de ses origines jusqu'à la Révolution* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).
[86] As Brannigan contends, 'literary texts are vehicles of power which act as useful objects of study in that they contain the same potential for power and subversion as exist in society generally'. *New Historicism*, p.6. As Cecilia Beach argues (and as we see with the abovementioned supposed departure from script by the actress in Corneille's *Horace*), theatre in particular as a live performance has the potential to undermine authority in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways. Cecilia Beach, *Staging Politics and Gender: French Women's Drama, 1880-1923*, (New York: Springer, 2005) p.3.
[87] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 3.
[88] *Ibid.*, p.4.

Historicists term 'subversion and containment'.[89] For Greenblatt, true subversion would appear unattainable: power produces its own subversion as the 'very condition of power', with 'actions that should have the effect of radically undermining authority turn out to be the props of that authority'.[90] This vision of inevitable containment would seem to me to be a potential limitation of Greenblatt's conceptualisation of New Historicism. Indeed, this totalising view has attracted much criticism, and is one that this thesis sets out to (con)test.[91] My own analysis will focus on close critical engagement with the dramatic texts in question in order to determine the ways in which two key female playwrights navigate the dominant gender hierarchy in which they were writing and feed into ongoing debates around the subordinate role of women. Careful consideration will be given to the ways in which these plays, whilst perhaps appearing on the surface to serve as the 'props' of an authority, in fact could be said to subtly elude containment by that same authority. The sublimation of violence from stage to page outlined above only further reinforces the need for close attention to discursive detail, as does the understanding that an overt distortion of established seventeenth-century literary protocols would potentially unleash a strong condemnation on aesthetic grounds.

To allow for such close readings, the scope of this study is accordingly limited to the works of four plays produced by two female dramatists. These are Françoise Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr* (1655) and *Sésostris* (1661), and Madame de Villedieu's *Manlius* (1662) and *Nitétis* (1663).[92] Spanning the mid-1650s to the early 1660s, this timeframe represents a curious period of flux from both a socio-political and literary perspective. As Joan DeJean reflects, a series of historical events

[89] The concept of subversion and containment is the focus of Greenblatt's essay entitled 'Invisible Bullets'. See *Shakespearean Negotiations*, pp.21-65. See also Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), notably p.8.
[90] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p.57 and p.53 respectively.
[91] See, for instance, Dollimore, who questions whether there are limits to these forces of containment, that is to say, slippages and sites of vulnerability that reveal something other than a monolithic power structure. See Dollimore, 'Introduction: Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism'.
[92] Françoise Pascal, *Agathonphile martyr* (Lyon: Clemont Petit, 1655); Françoise Pascal, *Sésostris* (Lyon: Antoine Offray, 1661); Madame de Villedieu, *Manlius* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1662); Madame de Villedieu, *Nitétis* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1664). To note that whilst the date on the title page of *Nitétis* is 1664, this is considered a minor discrepancy, with the play actually first published in December 1663.

mark these years as an 'extraordinary space of possibility' for women.[93] From the 1650s onwards, emerging social patterns begin to shift traditional customs and norms. Whilst images of the military Amazon woman, for example, are largely confined to literature in the first half of the century, during the civil wars of the Fronde (1648-1653), the *femme forte* transcends reality, marking a disruption in traditional social structures. As Ian MacLean highlights, literature during the regency of Anne of Austria abounds with positive glorifications of the female sex, which for political reasons met only modest opposition.[94] Women also increasingly turn their hand to writing, with the 1650s witnessing a significant increase in female literary engagement more widely. Salon culture proves central to this development, opening up a space for women to play a highly influential role in both shaping literary developments (including in the theatrical domain) and challenging reductionist views of the female sex. This period also marks the immediate aftermath of a period of female regency in France but is prior to the refinement of the absolutist rule of Louis XIV following the death of Mazarin in 1661. Dramatic aesthetics are arguably equally not yet fully polished. Indeed, early modern French theatre is often divided into two distinct periods: 1635-1650 showcases the heroic ethic of Corneille's protagonists, whilst Racine's theatre of the mid-late 1660s and 1670s is, as we have seen, held up as an exemplar of Neoclassical regulation.[95] The plays under consideration here are situated in a less studied socio-political and aesthetic interregnum between these periods.

All four dramatic productions selected for close critical examination belong to the tragic and tragicomic genres. Whilst Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr* adopts the unusual classification of a tragicomic martyr play, as I will argue in Chapter II, the role of religion in the production is minimal, with the substantial presence of violent actions typically associated with the tragicomic genre

[93] DeJean is here referring to roughly a fifteen-year-long period, beginning in 1647 and ending in the early 1660s. DeJean, 'Violence Against Women and Violent Women', p.121.
[94] Ian MacClean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610-1652* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
[95] Both Christopher J. Gossip and Helene Bilis divide the century in this way. See Christopher J. Gossip, *An Introduction to French Classical Tragedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1981) and Helene Bilis, *Passing Judgement: The Politics and Poetics of Sovereignty in French Tragedy from Hardy to Racine* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2016).

forming the focus of my analysis. It is nonetheless important to address the exclusion of 'pure' martyr plays from the scope of this study, not least because on the cusp of the time period under scrutiny here, we encounter two female-authored martyr tragedies: La Comtesse de Saint-Balmon's *Les jumeaux martyrs* (1650) and Marthe Cosnard's, *Les chastes martirs, tragédie chrestienne* (1650), the latter of which draws upon the same source text as Pascal's tragicomic martyr play.[96] This is perhaps hardly surprising: the theme of martyrdom constitutes a prominent theme in plays of the 1640s and 1650s, proving a particularly popular genre during periods of civil war and unrest, with Saint-Balmon and Cosnard writing here during the abovementioned Fronde.[97] Moreover, owing to their close involvement with the church and supposed openness to spirituality, religious drama emerges as one of the few theatrical forms with which women were authorised and even encouraged to engage.[98] The martyr play is undeniably violent; as Paul Scott posits, death is the only possible ending, for a martyr, by definition, only becomes so at the point of dying.[99] Yet unlike the wide-ranging forms of violence usually associated with the tragic and tragicomic genres, martyr violence is often limited in range and contained to the closing scenes of a play. As a death that is chosen and actively pursued as a supposed passage to eternal happiness, martyrdom is at odds with the force, immorality and absence of consent captured in my definition of violence above.[100] The

[96] La Comtesse de Saint-Balmon (Alberte-Barbe d'Emecourt), *Les jumeaux martyrs* (Paris: A. Courbé, 1650); Marthe Cosnard, *Les chastes martirs, tragédie chrestienne* (Paris: A. Courbé, 1650). There is no record of performance of either play. A third female-authored martyr play was also published in 1663 by unknown nun Soeur de La Chapelle. See *L'illustre philosophe ou l'histoire de sainct Catherine d'Alexandrie* (Autun: Blaise Simonnot, 1663).

[97] On the relationship between the genre and politics, see Paul Scott, *The Martyr-Figure in French Theatre, 1596-1675* (PhD: University of Durham, 2001); Christopher Semk, *Playing the Martyr: Theater and Theology in Early Modern France* (Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2017); and Ibbett, *The Style of the State.*

[98] On women writing martyr plays, see Kennedy's Introduction to *Agathonphile martyr*. See also Scott, *The Martyr-Figure*.

[99] Scott, *The Martyr*-Figure, p.6.

[100] As Scott remarks, 'choice is an important feature of the martyr-tragedy: the central character must have the clear opportunity to renounce the Christian religion and return to his or her previous high standing within the pagan community'. *Ibid.* Likewise, Jacqueline van Baelen, in their analysis of Rotrou's heros, brings out the absence of force associated with martyrdrom: 'Nous voyons un personnage choisir délibérément de mourir sans que ce choix ne lui soit dicté par aucune considération extérieure d'injustice ou d' affront à son honneur'. Jacqueline van Baelen, *Rotrou, le héros tragique et la révolte* (Paris: Nizet, 1965), p. 145. The fact that death is embraced in the martyr play also raises the question of whether the genre can ever truly be categorised as tragic.

exclusion of martyr plays from the scope of this thesis is not, of course, to suggest that the theme does not interact with questions of gender. In line with decorum, playwrights largely displace the violent denouement from the scene, emphasising instead the suffering of surviving characters. Where the martyr protagonist is male, the shift in focus from a staged act of brutality to the anguish of a wife or daughter opens up a site for allowing female characters to come to the fore. However, as Katherine Ibbett reminds us, adherence to aesthetics moderating visible violence could also be read as diluting socio-political underpinnings. 'Politics has been all undone, and in its place we valorise women who are given just enough subjectivity to stand around and mourn, but never enough to act on their grief. A quiet, stilled resignation takes the place of political resistance'.[101] Intrigues driven by a female martyr perhaps leave more scope for ambiguous interpretation. As a constant and chaste individual, she is disassociated from the vices of Eve; whilst as an outspoken and disobedient subject, she contrasts with the quiet, reserved and submissive model of the Virgin Mary.[102] Whilst Pascal offers a bold, astute and active female protagonist, she is executed primarily for her refusal to obey her father as opposed to her conversion to Christianity, and the role of martyrdom in *Agathonphile martyr* will thus be analysed insofar as it engages with broader themes relating to gender that emerge through my assessment of tragicomic violence. Cosnard's play will brought in as a source of comparison where relevant. Comedies are also excluded from scope. Whilst violence is certainly not absent from the comedic form, the theme is not usually considered a typical generic characteristic and tends to be less severe in nature.[103] Violence is certainly not a common feature in the limited number of female-authored comedies produced in the specific timeframe under consideration here.

[101] Ibbett, *Style of the State*, p.48.
[102] Scott*, The Martyr-Figure*, p.233.
[103] More generally, comedy does not come under the same extensive aesthetic scrutiny as the tragic and tragicomic genres, rendering an analysis of representations of comedic violence within this wider dramatic context challenging.

As set out above, it is only by thoroughly grasping the social, political and cultural climate in which Pascal and Villedieu were writing that we can proceed to assess the ways in which their four dramatic texts negotiate and possibly subvert early modern hegemonic ideas concerning gender hierarchy. Chapter I therefore examines seventeenth-century discussions on the role of women in society. As with this introduction, Chapter I draws heavily on primary and secondary sources to ensure thorough contextualisation. This chapter also considers a wider timescale than just the two decades in which Pascal and Villedieu were writing, in part to situate it fully in the extensive debates on sexual politics known as *La Querelle des Femmes*, which ran throughout the late medieval and early modern periods and beyond.[104] However, socio-political and aesthetic developments with particular implications for the period and plays under consideration here will be brought to the fore. As seventeenth-century French society is institution-based, I first explore two key institutions of particular relevance to the dramatic works and themes that form the focus of this study: the government and the household. What emerges throughout this chapter are numerous and at times opposing views regarding the role of women within these two domains. On the one hand, we encounter a dominant discourse that seeks to consign the female sex to a position of subservience in all areas of society. Relying upon age-old prescriptive and essentialist views concerning women's nature and capabilities, male dominance is often posited as the natural and fixed hierarchical order. Beginning with the government, I demonstrate how women's exclusion from the throne is founded upon deep-set cultural constructions regarding gender and power; allegedly innate female qualities (such as irrationality, lasciviousness, vindictiveness, poor judgement, and to some extent physical weakness) are deemed irreconcilable with the skills required for effective monarchical rule (prudence, self-control, clemency). With the family often considered to be a microcosm of the state, female subordination and passivity were likewise frequently expected and valued in the household.

[104] Although most often referred to today as 'la Querelle,' as Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin contests, this title risks giving the impression of one unified debate when it did in fact comprise numerous different 'querelles'. See Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin, 'La "Querelle des femmes" est-elle une querelle? Philosophie et pseudo-linéarité dans l'histoire du féminisme', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 35.1 (2013), 69-79.

The same 'natural' vices of the female sex are here shown to validate the need to confine women to the domestic sphere; unable to exist independently, she must pass from father to husband through an arranged marriage. Expected to display modesty and deter unsolicited attention to retain her virtuous reputation, owing to her beauty and innate lubricity, a woman is often held wholly responsible should extramarital sexual relations occur, with rape being a particularly problematic accusation for a woman to make. Yet in a period of significant social and political flux, we also encounter challenges to these dominant views concerning woman's nature, capabilities and status, and counterarguments to the prevailing sexual hierarchy are woven in throughout this chapter.

While the 'woman question' in early modern society has been explored in great detail by historians and critics such as Wendy Gibson, Ian Maclean, Julie Hardwick, Constance Jordan and Carolyn Lougee, in line with my New Historicist approach, this first chapter draws upon a wide range of cultural works to demonstrate how questions regarding the sexual (im)balance of power pervade all aspects of society.[105] The ways in which theatre interacts with these ongoing debates is of notable interest. These two institution-based discussions accordingly lead into an exploration of the ways in which dramatic productions in particular engage with contemporary debates on women. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the state interest and theoretical demand for a didactic stage, theatre in many ways appears to endorse and encourage female subordination, including through its portrayal of violence. As hinted above, theatrical scenes of aggression and death, when 'appropriately' constructed, can be said to propagate the need for a gender hierarchy based on Ancient and essentialist ideals. In presenting female characters as willing to use deadly force to gain or maintain political power or constructing violent male tyrants as effeminate (both common occurrences on the

[105] See Wendy Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York: Springer, 1989); Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman, A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Julie Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2010); Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminisms: Literary Texts and Political Models* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990); Carolyn Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

early modern stage), drama can be said to feed into contemporary fears surrounding women in positions of authority. Meanwhile, with female characters often the victims of gendered acts of violence such as abduction, voyeurism or sexual assault requiring rescue from the (putatively) male protagonist, dramatic intrigues fuel contemporary beliefs around women as the naturally weaker sex unable to exist independently of a male figure of authority. Even the type of death and weapon used can carry gendered implications. Poison and other 'diabolic' practices, as well as the dagger, are stereotypical weapons of female revenge; dishonourable, devious and unnatural.[106] Similarly, as Joseph Harris points out, dying of love is, for Corneille at least, an exclusively female phenomenon, confining women to the private sphere even in death.[107] By contrast, male characters often take up the sword to demonstrate their virile strength, valuing country and personal courage above all else.[108] Characters that fail to conform to their prescribed gender role are typically killed, demonstrating to the spectator the consequences that arise when these ideals are not met. These deadly denouements lean into the abovementioned New Historicist idea of 'subversion and containment'. By contrast, 'good' female characters — that is to say, passive, obedient women — are often permitted to survive.[109] Through their conclusions, notably their deployment of scenes of death and violence (or lack thereof), playwrights can thus be said to be promote certain gendered behavioural codes. As we shall see, however, the theatre establishes itself as one of the central sites in which counterarguments to the dominant hierarchy can and do emerge in public performance and

[106] For a discussion of the ways in which the sword and the dagger were 'gendered', see Jean Emelina, 'Les morts dans les tragédies de Racine' in *Dramaturgies: langages dramatiques*, ed. Jacqueline Jomaron (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.173-184. Within early modern society, poison was in fact the most common method used by women attempting to kill their husbands. See Lynn Wood Mollenauer, *Strange Revelations: Magic, Poison, and Sacrilege in Louis XIV's France* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2007). As we shall see, this is frequently reflected on the stage. This link between the female sex, poison and diabolic practices was exacerbated during the Affair of the Poisons, also reflected in dramatic performance. See Julia Prest, 'Silencing the Supernatural: *La Devineresse* and the Affair of the Poisons', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 43.4 (2007), 397-409.
[107] Joseph Harris, '"Dying of the Fifth Act": Corneille's (Un)Natural Deaths', *French Studies*, 69 (2015), 289–304 (p.291).
[108] As Greenberg posits, male characters should not see death in battle as death, but as their immortalization. *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry,* p.70.
[109] This outcome is frequently noted by critics. See, for example, Véronique Desnain, 'Les Faux Miroirs: The Good Woman/Bad Woman Dichotomy in Racine's Tragedies', *The Modern Language Review*, 96.1 (2001), 38-46.

discourse. This doctoral research explores the ways in which the works under consideration here belong to a repertoire of plays that run counter to the hegemonic narrative.

The final section of Chapter I turns to the relationship between women and literature more broadly, in order to bring to light the cultural context in which increasing female-authored dramatic writing arose. Here, I consider women's role as both readers and spectators of literary products, as well as their activities as cultural producers in their own right. Whilst early modern moralists tend to denounce female exposure to certain forms of literature due to the potential for corruption and distraction, and with women's formal education also largely restricted, the period nonetheless gives rise to a plethora of female-authored works. Although at times met with disdain, these works and their authors can be considered highly influential in early modern France, notably regarding contemporaneous debates on sexual politics. Particular attention will be paid to the role of salon culture in enabling women to hold powerful cultural influence. Opening up a 'feminine' site for intellectual and cultural exchange, and having a notable impact on the theatrical domain, the involvement of Pascal and Villedieu in this unique institution will be explored.

Chapters II and III turn to the dramatic productions themselves. For thematic and chronological purposes, these two chapters take each playwright in turn. Before undertaking close critical engagement with the theatrical texts, I provide biographical information on Pascal and Villedieu respectively as well as a summary of the plots and, where known, details of the critical reception of the plays under consideration. As mentioned earlier, to date, studies into early modern women's theatre have tended to focus on individual works or playwrights, and where relevant, their findings will be incorporated into the respective discussions in each chapter. However, it is worth noting that the focus of these chapters is very much on close critical readings of these works, and as such, references to secondary works are less extensive than those found in my Introduction and in Chapter I. Where fruitful, the works of male playwrights will also be drawn upon as sources of comparison.

Chapter II explores the tragicomedies of Françoise Pascal. A hugely popular genre in the 1630s, the tragicomedy is typically characterised by its irregularity, inversion, and exuberance, as well as its *fin heureuse*.[110] Spectators enjoy ludicrous intrigues safe in the knowledge that order will be restored by the close of the play. This extends to the application of violence. Usually avoiding fatal outcomes, tragicomedies of this period abound with *invraisemblable* acts of violence, ranging from farfetched shipwrecks, apparitions and lengthy battles to chaotic abductions and scenes of sexual violence infused with baroque excess. Greater aesthetic liberty even appears to be granted to what the playwright is permitted to visibly present onstage. As early as his 1636 tragedy *La mort de César*, Georges de Scudéry, one of the most vocal critics of Corneille in the abovementioned *Querelle Du Cid*, takes care to include the stage direction: 'La salle se ferme pour n'ensanglanter pas la face du théâtre contre les règles'.[111] Yet we find no such concerns over the sight of blood in *Orante*, his tragicomedy of the same year.[112] Seemingly irreconcilable with the increasing codification of drama, the production of irregular tragicomedies swiftly declines. By the time Pascal publishes *Agathonphile martyr* and *Sésostris* in 1655 and 1661 respectively, their generic denomination as tragicomedies would appear an unusual choice.[113]

In this second chapter, I go on to focus on the dramatist's use of what I term 'tragicomic violence'; irregular forms of violence frequently found in the genre at the height of its popularity. It is my contention that through her portrayal of tragicomic violence, Pascal exploits the regulatory freedom granted by her generic classifications to challenge early modern gender hierarchy. An angle hitherto largely unexplored, this forms one of the key original arguments of this thesis. Opening both

[110] For an excellent overview of seventeenth-century French tragicomedy, see Baby, *La tragi-comédie.*
[111] Georges de Scudéry, *La mort de César* (1636), IV.VIII. It is worth noting that earlier published versions of the tragedy do not include this stage direction. See Lise Michel, 'Régicide et dramaturgie dans la tragédie française, de "La Mort de César" de Scudéry (1636) à la "Rosemonde' de Baro (1651)', *Littératures classiques*, 67.3 (2008), 115–129.
[112] Here, the title character 'débande le bras' onstage, writing a farewell suicide message 'de son sang'. Georges de Scudéry, *Orante* (Paris: Hachette Livre, 2018), I.V. There are of course considerations beyond genre here, such as suicide being one of the few aesthetically permissible forms of staged death, and the staged assassination of a royal figure (even a tyrant) being generally prohibited.
[113] As the sole tragicomic martyr play of the era, the classification of *Agathonphile martyr* is particularly notable.

Agathonphile martyr and *Sésostris* with a scene of inverted sexual violence and menacing apparition respectively, I explore how Pascal's tragicomic-infused approach to dramatizing violence immediately disrupts conventional gender dynamics. Here, the playwright pairs powerful female characters with passive and vulnerable male characters. This inversion remains throughout the plays, and we encounter further strong female characters fully capable of instigating and challenging acts of tragicomic violence to achieve autonomy. With the 'rightful' order not restored by the denouement (despite their happy endings), these plays and the violence therein encourage the spectator to envisage an alternate world in which women refuse to remain subordinate to their male counterparts. Moreover, through close examination of the structural and discursive construction of tragicomic violence, I will expose how Pascal affiliates these scenes with wider seventeenth-century patriarchal practices discussed in Chapter I — notably the arranged marriage, male entitlement and reputational risk and discriminatory laws surrounding accusations of rape — to offer a subtle criticism of the societal mechanisms that seek to confine women to the domestic sphere. Chapter II also aims to demonstrate the tragicomic genre's potential to critique society more widely. This is a component of tragicomedy still often overlooked today, and another novel contribution of this thesis.

Chapter III turns to the dramatic productions of Madame de Villedieu. Whilst Pascal's productions are largely concerned with affairs of the private domain, Villedieu shifts the focus to the public sphere through the recurrent theme of tyranny that spans her theatrical corpus. Similar to Pascal's choice of genre, the dramatic portrayal of a despot may appear a somewhat unusual subject matter; an illegitimate and violent ruler would appear in many ways to run counter to aesthetic and socio-political demands from some for a staged glorification of monarchical government. Yet as we shall see, by following a series of prescribed conditions, the tyrant can and does emerge as both an aesthetically permissible and well-received topos. As hinted at above, and as will be set out in further detail in subsequent chapters, alongside the potential to interact with contemporary debates around absolutism, the theme and its associated violence may also resonate with early modern

discussions of sexual politics. In male-authored works, male tyrants are frequently shown to be effeminate: they are hypocritical, tyrannised by their own emotions, secretive and cowardly. Likewise, female rulers are often displayed as monstruous aberrations. Both of these constructions of a violent character type can be said to perpetuate concerns over women in positions of power.

In Chapter III, however, I argue that Villedieu exploits the theme of tyranny to challenge seventeenth-century gender hierarchy, notably the exclusively male prerogative to rule. With the violence and cruelty of her dramatic oppressors opening up a site for acceptable resistance to a formidable figure of authority, Villedieu ensures it is strong, astute female characters rather than the male 'hero' that come to the fore. Taking care to disconnect her tyrants from the 'effeminate' standard, Villedieu's female characters display courage, decisiveness, duty and honour when negotiating tyrannical violence, pushing against conceptual links between women and power. Moreover, by placing discussions of male entitlement and female objectification in the context of one tyrant's desire for his sister (*Nitétis*) and another's uncontrolled yearning for his son's beloved (*Manlius*), the playwright encourages the spectator to question the legitimacy of these broader patriarchal principles: that is to say, the ascribing of different qualities to different genders. Disparaging negative conceptions of female capacity advanced by those wishing to exclude women from rule, Villedieu effectively configures a space for imagining the possibility of female governance in seventeenth-century French society.

In the chapters that follow, I set out to demonstrate the ways in which Pascal and Villedieu deploy the two seemingly disparate forms of tragicomic and tyrannical violence respectively to the same socio-political end, destabilising traditional narratives of gender in both the conventional theatrical canon as well as early modern society. More widely, I show how their works and the portrayals of violence and gender therein enable a richer understanding of the tensions inherent in seventeenth-century patriarchal culture. My concluding chapter reviews the findings of this study and synthesises its key arguments as well as its limitations, including assessing the viability of my

application of New Historicism, before putting forward suggestions for future research. It posits that these works push against patriarchal systems and should be recognised as constituting an innovative and influential contribution to the seventeenth-century dramatic canon. It is my hope that this thesis will incite greater scholarship on the works of French female playwrights of the period, as well as catalysing further research into early modern dramatic representations of violence and gender.

Chapter I
Women and Society in Early Modern France

Introduction

The question of women's role in early modern French society encompasses a lengthy and tumultuous history. Spanning the different intellectual spheres of theology, anatomy, law, moral philosophy and politics, the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods give way to an influx of commentary concerning woman's nature, capacity, and status.[1] Commencing at the end of the thirteenth-century with Jean de Meung's *Roman de la Rose*, the ensuing four-hundred-year debates on sexual politics are known today as the *Querelle des Femmes*.[2]

Seeking to consign the female sex to a position of subservience across all strands of society, proponents of misogynist arguments draw upon Ancient authoritative works and Scripture to assert male dominance as the natural and therefore fixed hierarchy. Indeed, since antiquity, women have been depicted as inferior and held accountable for much societal disorder. For Aristotle, the female sex signifies the imperfect male; she is 'Other'.[3] According to the ancient Greek and Roman theory of the humours, men are opposed to women as mind to matter, reason to unreason, spirituality to carnality.[4] Within Judeo-Christian tradition, the characteristics of Eve also point to the perceived inherent weakness of the female sex. This construction of women as the source of Original Sin — capable of inciting desire, engaging in trickery, and distracting men from salvation — is counterbalanced in patristic texts holding up the unachievable ideal of the Virgin Mary, associated

[1] For an extensive study of Renaissance treatises concerning the 'woman question', see Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1956), which identifies nearly nine hundred texts dealing with the question of gender in the sixteenth century alone. See also Jordan, *Renaissance Feminisms* and Karen Offen's *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[2] On the *Querelle des Femmes*, see Joan Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and the "Querelle des Femmes", 1400-1789', *Signs,* 8.1 (Autumn, 1982), 4-28 and Lyndan Warner, *The Ideas of Man and Woman in Renaissance France: Print, Rhetoric, and Law* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).
[3] Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).
[4] According to the humoural system, men are hotter and drier, women colder and wetter. As heat rises upward towards the brain, men are considered innately more rationale and creative. For a succinct overview of the humours, see the introduction to Stanton's *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France*, notably p.9.

with modesty, chastity and charity.[5] Renaissance writers frequently invoke these essentialist conceptions of gender. In literary works, such as those of Rabelais, the female body is painted as wholly animalistic. Nature 'leurs [les femmes] a dedans le corps posé en lieu secret et intestin un animal, un membre [...] auquel quelquefois sont engendrées certaines humeurs salses (salées) nitreuses... acres, mordicantes, lancinantes, chatouillantes amèrement; par la pointure et frétillement douloureux desquelles [...] tout le corps est en elles esbranlé, tous les sens raviz, toutes affections intérinées [...] tous pensemens confonduz'.[6] The image of women as the lesser sex pervaded all aspects of society: a cultural constant underpinned by social, legal and literary practices.

Yet dismissive deductions regarding the capacity of women do not go unchallenged. According to Joan Kelly, 'feminist theorizing' arose as early as the fifteenth century with the ethico-didactic treatises of Christine de Pizan.[7] In her 1405 *La cité des dames*, Pizan seeks to counter the frequent defamation of women by representing her sex as capable of reason, virtue and intellect.[8] Other defenders of the female sex include Henri-Corneille Agrippa. In his treatise *Sur la noblesse et l'excellence du sexe féminin* first published in France in 1537, the German scholar proposes that although men and women are born as equals, the latter are limited by the socio-political tapestry of Renaissance society (that is to say, their restricted access to education and subservience to

[5] On the role of religion in shaping traditional cultural images of women, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998). See also Grist, notably pp.17-22. On women and religion in seventeenth-century France, see Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

[6] François Rabelais, *Le tiers livre*, ed. M. A. Screech (Genève: Droz, 1964), pp.453-454. For gender in Rabelais, see Lawrence Kritzman, *The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), notably pp.29-44. For other Renaissance literary representations concerned with gender, see Madeleine Lazard, *Images littéraires de la femme à la Renaissance* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

[7] Kelly, p.5. See also Lula McDowell Richardson, *The Forerunners of Feminism in French Literature of the Renaissance: From Christine of Pisa* [sic] *to Marie de Gournay* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1929) and Léon Abensour, *La femme et le féminisme avant la révolution* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1923).

[8] Christine de Pizan, *La cité des dames*, eds. Eric Hicks and Thérèse Moreau (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2021).

masculine authority).[9] Literary works such as Marguerite de Navarre's *L'Heptaméron* (1558) also endeavour to construct a more balanced portrayal of the sexes.[10]

As a period of flux and instability during which traditional social structures and orders are being challenged and revised, seventeenth-century France witnesses an amplification and extension of these earlier thoughts concerning the superiority, inferiority or equality of women, with there also being some evolutions in the intellectual and social framework. This chapter first sets out the complex and at times contradictory treatment and perceptions of women across two key seventeenth-century institutions: the government and the household. Forming part of the foundations of early modern society and holding particular relevance to the plays under consideration here, these two institutions embody seventeenth-century values and patterns of belief, with discussions of sexual politics being particularly prominent.[11] In line with certain central practices of New Historicism, I explore how ideas concerning gender across these two institutions interrelate with literature of the period, notably theatre. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which dramatic violence feeds into these contemporary debates regarding the sexual balance of power. The third and final part of this chapter focuses on women's role in the literary sphere, bringing to light the educational and cultural background from which female-authored dramatic writing arose. It is only through grasping the socio-political and dramatic fabric of seventeenth-century France that we can understand the context in which the two female playwrights under

[9] Henri Corneille Agrippa, *Sur la noblesse et l'excellence du sexe féminin, de sa prééminence sur l'autre sexe*, ed. Marie-Josèphe Dhavernas (Paris: Côté-femmes éditions, 1990).
[10] For an excellent study of *L'Heptaméron*, notably from the perspective of violence and gender, see Patricia Francis Cholakian, *Rape and Writing in the Heptaméron of Marguerite de Navarre* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).
[11] The following two general studies of early modern France likewise explore society from an institution-based perspective: See Robin Briggs, *Early Modern France, 1560-1715* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and William Beik, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Both texts provide overviews of French systems of governance in the period, and to a lesser extent the household.

consideration here were writing, as well as the gendered concepts and conventions with which they were engaging, or, in some cases, possibly subverting.

Women and Government

Female qualities vs princely virtues

A central component of the *Querelle des Femmes* relates to the role of women in government. Their right to succeed to the French throne emerges as a particular point of contention throughout the Middles Ages and early modern period, with Salic law invoked to officially prohibit a woman from becoming queen of France in her own right.[12] 'Queen' signifies only the wife of the male sovereign, having no meaning or ties to the state except in relation to king. Yet it has long been accepted that this legal justification originally had little to do with female exclusion from rule. As Sarah Hanley explains, the Ancient Salic Law Code (ca. 507-804) addresses only the inheritance of family land, containing no ordinance prohibiting women from dynastic succession.[13] With Philippe V having manipulated the decree to successfully exclude his niece from the throne during a disputed succession in 1316, however, French political writers continue to tamper with the document, purporting the male right to rule to be a founding law of the French Kingdom and one now supported by precedent.[14] The forgery of the document and the subsequent legitimacy of excluding women from the throne becomes a much-contested topic throughout the 1400s and 1500s, deliberated by writers such as the abovementioned Jean de Montreuil and Christine de Pizan.[15] Debates surrounding the validity of the legal jurisdiction prohibiting female succession continue into the seventeenth century. However, as Derval Conroy documents, constitutional justification for

[12] On Salic law, see Craig Taylor, 'The Salic Law, French Queenship, and the Defense of Women in the Late Middle Ages', *French Historical Studies*, 29.4 (2006), 543-64, Murielle Gaude-Ferragu, *La reine au moyen âge: Le pouvoir au féminin, XIVe-XVe siècle* (Paris: Tallandier, 2014), Derval Conroy, *Ruling Women, I: Government, Virtue, and the Female Prince in Seventeenth-Century France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), notably pp.15-44, and Fanny Cosandey*, La reine de France, symbole et pouvoir, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).
[13] Sarah Hanley, 'The Family, the State, and the Law in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Ideology of Male Right versus an Early Theory of Natural Rights', *The Journal of Modern History*, 78.2 (2006), 289-332.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*

maintaining women's exclusion from the throne is supplemented by a 'discourse of deep-set cultural constructions and configurations regarding gender and power', notably the assumed incompatibility of supposedly innate female qualities with those ascribed to a successful (and putatively male) ruler.[16] It is these debates that are of most interest and relevance to this study. The theory of the male right to rule, to borrow the language of seventeenth-century French lawyer Jérôme Bignon, 'c'est une Loi de Nature née avec les hommes, & de Droit non écrit, comme Aristote dit que tout le Droit de Nature & des Gens n'est point écrit'.[17] As we shall see, however, those on the other side of the argument challenge the apparent irreconcilability of female and princely virtues, seeking instead to demonstrate that women, by their very nature, should be considered suitable — or even ideal — rulers.

One biological argument derived from earlier centuries and deployed by those seeking to validate the continued prohibition of women from the seventeenth-century throne centres upon physical strength. For jurist Cardin Le Bret, author of what would become an important handbook on sovereignty under Louis XIV, preservation of state demands 'de Roys & de Princes guerriers & belliqueux'.[18] As the naturally weaker sex, being 'imparfaite, foible & debile, tant du corps que de l'esprit' and therefore unsuited to the 'maniement des armes', women are duly prohibited from succeeding to the throne.[19] Fortin de la Hoguette puts forth a similar argument in his 1663 *Les elemens de la politique selon les principes de la nature*. Salic law, founded 'sur celle de la nature,' rightfully excludes women from authority as their 'constitution naturelle est trop delicate pour tous les exercises de la guerre'.[20] Through his use of the term 'constitution', La Hoguette, in a similar manner to Ernst Kantorowicz's later theory of the King's two bodies, clearly identifies the monarch's body with the body of the state, and in so doing, he infers that a strong state therefore requires

[16] Conroy, *Ruling Women, I*, p.24. Disputes concerning the nature of women in relation to the throne start as early as Pizan.
[17] Jérôme Bignon, *De l'excellence des roys et du royaume de France* (Paris: Drouart, 1610), p.298.
[18] Cardin Le Bret, *De la souveraineté du roi, de son domaine et de sa couronne* (Paris: J. Quesnel, 1632), p.32.
[19] *Ibid.*, p.33.
[20] Fortin de la Hoguette, *Les élémens de la politique selon les principes de la nature* (Paris: Antoine Vitré, 1663), p.314.

male embodiment.[21] The origins of this widespread belief in the physical inferiority and accompanying political incompetence of the female sex can once again be located in Aristotle. Playing a passive and minimal role in the reproduction process, supplying the 'matter' but lacking the active (male) 'seed', the corporeal composition of women is defective; she is an 'imperfect' male.[22] Although capable of reproducing, the female sex, unlike her male counterpart, is unable to create an heir through seminal transmission. As Sarah Hanley reasons, this physical incapacity places women at odds with the supposed immortality of the French monarch, symbolised through Kantorowicz's theory and Jean Bodin's influential maxim *The King never dies*.[23] The unstated yet nonetheless implicit supposition *The Queen dies* hints at the potential demise of the state should a woman assume power.[24] As I show in Chapter III, however, through her dramatic construction of violence in *Nitétis*, Madame de Villedieu underscores the frailty of the male sovereign's body, and through her portrayal of his death, the playwright leaves no possibility for the transfer of power to a male successor, disrupting gendered conventions. Of course, those advocating for exclusion on the basis of physical ineptitude also conveniently overlook the numerous cases of contemporary women famed for their military exploits, with the *femme forte* being, as we shall see, a prominent and

[21] According to Kantorowicz, the King has two bodies; a Body Natural and a Body Politic. The King's Body Natural is his mortal body — a biological body that ages and eventually dies — whilst his Body Politic is invulnerable and immortal. The mortal body is bound to this symbolic body, with the notion of Kingship thus being eternal. See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

[22] For a discussion of Aristotle's views on the corporeal composition of women, see Aryeh Kosman, 'Male and female in Aristotle's Generation of Animals', in *Being, Nature and Life in Aristotle*, eds. James G. Lennox and Robert Bolton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.147-167. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

[23] Sarah Hanley, 'The Monarchic State in Early Modern France: Marital Regime Government and Male Right, 1500-1800,' in *Politics, Ideology, and Law in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Adrianna E. Bakos (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1994), pp.107-26.

[24] 'The Queen dies' is of course made patently explicit in Bossuet's famous funeral eulogy for Henriette d'Angleterre (1670, but published posthumously), where 'the king is dead – long live the king' is replaced with cries heard on Henriette's death of 'Madame se meurt, Madame est morte'. Whilst Henriette dies to show the vanity of human ambition in all mortals, the political implication here is that the female body appears less capable of transferring the sacrality of kingship between the mortal holders of the office. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet*, Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Ecriture Sainte*, ed. Jacques le Brun (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1967).

chiefly celebrated figure across different strands of early modern society, including on the contemporary stage. To this end, it is perhaps hardly surprising that physical capability (or lack thereof) rarely constitutes the sole justification for contesting female-led regimes, with corporeal weakness forming just one of many exclusionist defences.

When situated within the evolving framework of early modern political thought, the prohibition of female dynastic succession merely for reasons of supposed military incompetence loses further impetus. With the concept of power shifting away from what Foucault famously terms 'le spectacle de l'échafaud' — whereby a public execution serves an important juridico-political function — the coming to power of Louis XIV gives way to less discernible means of exercising authority.[25] As Louis Marin, Jean-Marie Apostolidès and Peter Burke have all demonstrated, the absolute rule of the Sun King operated primarily not through a visibly oppressive regime but through the careful construction and control of his public image, enabling state violence to draw its legitimacy as much from the king's unquestioned glory as from his punitive might.[26] As set out in my introduction, cultural practices and socio-political processes, in New Historicist terms, are mutually reinforcing: not only socially and politically produced, cultural forms are socially and politically productive.[27] By utilising the arts to create a pervasive triumphalist rhetoric of pomp and grandeur, challenges to royal authority and the ensuing need for overt displays of brute force should all but evaporate.[28] Alongside bellicose iconography, central to the 'self-fashioning' of Louis XIV was the

[25] For Foucault, whose work heavily influenced New Historicist thinking, the ceremonial display of a criminal's body being subjected to a violent punishment serves as a mechanism for restoring the authority of the sovereign. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). Whilst Foucault suggests that the concept of biopolitics emerges in the eighteenth century, as Katherine Ibbett demonstrates, ideas surrounding the management of the subject's body are already being articulated in the seventeenth century. See Ibbett, *The Style of the State,* pp.65-69.

[26] Louis Marin, *Le portrait du roi* (Paris: Minuit, 1981); Jean-Marie Apostolidès, *Le roi-machine, spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Minuit, 1981); Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*. For a broader interrogation of the aesthetic and intellectual underpinnings associated with the maintenance of power, see the more recent Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos and Nicole Jerr, eds., *Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[27] See Montrose, 'Professing the Renaissance'.

[28] As Burke notes, the number of statues and portraits of the King that emerged was remarkable by the standards of the time. See Burke, p.16.

construction of a father-like figure to be loved rather than feared.[29] As Nina Brière and Eric Méchoulan attest, the concept of *douceur* — the Neoplatonism-inspired practice of delicacy, clemency and gentleness including when handling matters of the state — becomes increasingly important, arousing consented obedience amongst early modern French subjects.[30] The perceived political utility of *douceur* is echoed in early modern handbooks on sovereignty. 'Il cherche plutôt à se faire aimer qu'à se faire craindre' writes Jean-Francois Senault in his *Le monarque ou les devoirs du souverain,* 'il regarde ses sujets comme ses enfans'.[31] Violent penalties should only be applied if unavoidable and not without great consideration; a mantra, as we have seen, that is equally applicable to the representation of violence on the dramatic stage in the second half of the century, and central to Corneille's 1641 tragedy *Cinna; ou la clémence d'Auguste*.[32] Becoming frequently associated with loss of control, physical force ranks so low amongst princely virtues that beasts are even said to exceed men in it more than men exceed women.[33]

Crucially, however, *douceur* (or being 'faoible' and 'delicate' to adopt the terminology of Le Bret and La Hoguette) constitutes a female quality within early modern virtue ethics, a coincidence certainly not missed by those advocating the benefits of female government. As lawyer Saint-Gabriel and others protest, women, associated with love, peace and delicacy, are particularly capable of

[29] As the title suggests, the concept of 'self-fashioning' forms the focus of Stephen Greenblatt's canonical work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). For a discussion of iconography under Louis XIV, see Peter Fuhring, Louis Marchesano, Remi Mathis and Vanessa Selbach, eds., *A Kingdom of Images: French Prints in the Age of Louis XIV, 1660–1715* (California: Getty Publications, 2015).

[30] Nina Brière, *La douceur du roi: Le gouvernement de Louis XIV et la fin des frondes (1648–1661),* (Québec: Presses Universitaires de Laval, 2011); Eric Méchoulan, 'La douceur du politique,' in *Le doux aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles: écriture, esthétique, politique, spiritualité*, eds. Marie-Hélène Prat and Centre Jean Prévost (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 2003), pp.221-37.

[31] Jean-François Senault's *Le monarque ou les devoirs du souverain* (Paris: P. Le Petit, 1661), p.290. See also Cardinal Richelieu, *Testament politique ou les maximes d'état de monsieur le cardinal de Richelieu*, ed. Arnaud Teyssier (Paris: Perrin, 2017).

[32] Pierre Corneille, *Cinna; ou la clémence d'Auguste,* ed. John Ernst Matzke (Boston: D. C Heath & Co Publishers, 2009). The tragedy centres on the generous forgiveness of Emperor Augustus when he discovers a conspiracy against him.

[33] For Marie de Gournay, '[les] forces corporelles' are 'vertus si basses, que la beste en tient plus par dessus l'homme, que l'homme par dessus la femme'. *Egalité des hommes et des femmes* (Paris: Libraire Droz, 1622), p.48.

exercising the empathy and clemency essential to good government.[34] Dedicated to Anne of Austria, *Le mérite des dames* envisages a peaceful and ordered world ruled by women, in place of the disorder caused by male rulers waging war**.** For lawyer and poet Gabriel Gilbert, women's delicacy is similarly deemed a sign of their value, with their beauty also unrivalled.[35] With beauty inspiring love, which in turn instils harmony, Gilbert's reference to outward appearances can be said to further align women to the notion of *douceur*.[36] At times perceived as an exterior manifestation of virtue, we shall see how beauty nonetheless emerges as an ambiguous trait.[37] Women are also considered to be particularly open to spirituality and charity, as highlighted in the 'Marian' literature that flourished throughout Europe after the Council of Trent.[38] Represented as pious and caring individuals, early modern religious discourse at times reinforces the link between women and *douceur.*[39] It could be contended that women's capacity for *douceur* relates only to the private sphere, where it is linked to the code of gallantry, or to the religious domain. However, as Conroy demonstrates, given the emphasis on private virtues in early modern constructions of rulership, it is possible to read this overlap of princely and feminine virtues as a 'chink in the exclusionist argument' applicable to the question of women in public office.[40] This coupling of queenship with peaceful and ordered rule undermines the common conceptual link between women and tyranny, a point of particular relevance to this study. As we shall see in Chapter III, Madame de Villedieu softens the end of her source text, presenting a tyrant who opts to show clemency to his son as opposed to ordering his violent beheading. With this outcome brought about by female characters, Villedieu not only demonstrates women's strengths in this arena: she also demonstrates her own capacity to align

[34] 'La douceur est si naturelle aux dames, qu'elles ne manquent jamais de compassion pour les malheureux et la clémence pour les coupables'. Antoine de Saint-Gabriel, *Le mérite des dames. III. édition. Avec l'entrée de la Reyne [Maria Theresa, Consort of Louis XIV.] &de cent autres Dames du Temps, dans le Ciel des belles Heroïnes, etc.* (Paris: J Le Gras, 1660), p.243. See also Conroy, *Ruling Women, I*, pp.50-53.
[35] Gilbert, Gabriel, *Panegyrique des dames* (Paris: A. Courbé, 1650), pp.10-11.
[36] Conroy, *Ruling Women, I*, p.50.
[37] On beauty as an indicator of ethical superiority, perceived at times as an exterior manifestation of princely virtue, see *ibid.*
[38] See Ian Maclean, *Woman Triumphant*. See also Gibson, *Women in Early Modern France*.
[39] As Ibbett argues, contemporary images of Saint Sebastian now clearly highlight the attendant women by his side. *The Style of the State*, p.29.
[40] Conroy, *Ruling Women, I*, p.42.

her work with contemporary discourses on sovereignty. This revision did however initiate a literary debate between critics d'Aubignac and Donneau de Visé (amongst others) regarding the role of plausibility and propriety on the stage as part of the *Querelle du Sophonisbe*.[41]

Whilst physical strength appears a somewhat tainted argument amongst those advocating for the prohibition of women from rule, exclusionists nevertheless maintain their reasoning for female omission on the basis of natural law by drawing upon a familiar repertoire of other, age-old, prescriptive views concerning women's characteristics.[42] Once again, allegedly innate female qualities are shown to be irreconcilable with the skills associated with monarchical rule: an argument that recurs throughout the century. Prudence, encompassing good judgement, wisdom and reason, is often cited within early modern 'mirror for princes' literature as the sovereign virtue *par excellence*.[43] Arguing in favour of an exclusively male crown, Richelieu claims that women are incapable of making rational decisions as they are all too frequently driven by unrestrained emotional responses: 'Elles sont fort sujettes à leurs passions, et, par conséquent, peu susceptibles de raison'.[44] Jacques Olivier, author of *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes*, one of the most reprinted works of the seventeenth century, further divorces female nature from sovereign virtues by linking women's lack of reason to their insatiable sexual desire. First reminding readers of their close ties to animality and bestiality by comparing female sexual desire to a blood-sucking leech, Olivier later deduces that her 'lascive' and 'insatiable' corporeal nature renders 'woman' 'moins judicieuse & moins capable de raison en tous ses comportemens'.[45] Unable to control her passions and driven by greed, the female sex would certainly be incapable of acknowledging the

[41] On the *Querelle du Sophonisbe*, see Bernard Bourque, *Jean Donneau de Visé et la querelle de 'Sophonisbe': Écrits contre l'abbé d'Aubignac* (Tübingen: Gunter Varr Nerlag, 2014) and Cinthia Meli, 'La critique dramatique à l'épreuve de la polémique: l'abbé d'Aubignac et la querelle de *Sophonisbe*', *Littératures classiques*, 89.1 (2016) 43-54.

[42] For an excellent summary of these arguments, see Eliane Viennot*, La France*, *les femmes et le pouvoir*. *Tome 2: Les résistances de la société*, *XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2008).

[43] See Le Bret, as well as Nicolas Faret, *Des vertus nécessaires à un prince pour bien gouverner ses sujets* (Paris: Toussaint du Bray, 1623).

[44] Richelieu, *Testament politique*, p.13. Richelieu concludes 'ce seul principe les exclut de toute administration publique'.

[45] Jacques Olivier, *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes* (Paris, Jean Petit-Pas, 1619), p.18.

limits of her power and subsuming personal desires to those of the state, therefore lacking the sovereign virtue of self-mastery: a quality fundamental to distinguishing king from tyrant as well as being a defining trait of the Cornelian tragic hero.[46] As touched upon earlier, a certain element of self-control also applies to the exercise of justice and punishment; to resist the urge for violence and apply forgiveness signifies mastery of the self. Women, who for Olivier are highly susceptible to sentiments of extreme *fureur* and the seeking of vengeance, lack the clemency required of the (male) ruler.[47] Whilst it is important to recognise Olivier's text as particularly misogynistic, it is nonetheless indicative of a broader reliance on traditional negative attributes that stem from Judeo-Christian tradition (unbridled passion, a desire for vengeance, capriciousness) to justify female exclusion from the throne, in which women's association with more positive traits is conveniently overlooked.

A further prerequisite for successful rule with particular relevance to the question of female government is that of political nous and intellect. For La Hoguette, women's lack of interest in and knowledge of public matters thus further distances them from ideal monarchic attributes such as prudence.[48] Louis XIV, when advising his son in the duties of kingship, reportedly warns against allowing women the freedom to speak on important matters, owing to their preference for frivolous interests.[49] Moreover, whilst fidelity to one's word is certainly indicative of virtuous rule, the deployment of artifice and ruse is nonetheless deemed acceptable — even desirable — in certain circumstances, and requires a certain degree of political acumen. Chapter III provides examples in which a staged king's engagement in the art of dissimulation is praised by theatrical characters and dramatic critics. Here, dissimulation within the political sphere is clearly considered to be utterly distinct from deceit and manipulation within the private sphere, of which women regularly stand

[46] Regarding the King's duty to serve the state, see the works of the abovementioned Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, an influential advocate of absolutism.
[47] Olivier, *Alphabet.*
[48] Hoguette, *Les élémens de la politique*. See also Richelieu, *Testament politique*.
[49] See Patricia Francis Cholakian's *Women and the Politics of Self-Representation*, p.29.

accused. With the political manipulation of others also requiring a certain level of self-control (that is, a sort of violence done to oneself which allows one to dupe others), a trait that the female sex, for Olivier and others, utterly lacks, women's inability to deceive strategically emerges as yet another justification for their exclusion from the throne. Many early modern political treatises also emphasise the importance of good counsel.[50] Yet as passive, silent and obedient beings with a weakness for flattery, the female sex is at greater risk of falling under the influence of a malicious counsellor: a character type not uncommon on the early modern French stage.[51] For Richelieu, failure to identify morally corrupt advisors poses a risk to the security of the state; one cannot 'garder un Serpent dans son Sein, sans s'exposer au hazard d'en etre piqué'.[52] Here, the Cardinal's choice of metaphor is perhaps far from arbitrary. With 'Serpent' and 'Sein' likely resonating with the early modern reader's familiarity with the story of Genesis, the unsuitability of women to power is once again subtly underlined.

These supposedly innate female characteristics are at times exploited on the early modern stage, often through the deployment of dramatic violence. However, as I will argue, the female playwrights under consideration here present an alternate viewpoint. In so doing, they form part of a wider set of voices that question and challenge female exclusion from the throne. These counter-arguments adopt numerous techniques, including the reinterpretation of the above-mentioned texts by Ancient and religious authorities. For Saint-Gabriel, for instance, Adam's submission to Eve indicates her original authority.[53] More commonly, these texts can be found reframing 'negative' female qualities in a positive way, as we saw with *la douceur*. Gilbert assures his readers that the benign temperament of the female sex ensures that they excel at listening to advice from their

[50] For an overview of royal counsellors in early modern France, see Nicole Reinhardt, *Voices of Conscience: Royal Confessors and Political Counsel in Seventeenth-Century Spain and France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[51] On this character type, see Valerie Worth-Stylianou, *Confidential Strategies: The Evolving Role of the Confident in French Tragic Drama, 1635*-1677 (Paris: Droz, 1999). See also Francisco Gómez Martos, *Staging Favorites: Theatrical Representations of Political Favoritism in the Early Modern Courts of Spain, France, and England* (PhD: John Hopkins University, 2018).
[52] Richelieu, *Testament politique*, p.260.
[53] Saint-Gabriel, p.192. See Conroy, *Ruling Women, I*, p.49.

counsel, taking on board only the most important pieces of information.[54] Women's receptiveness to advice is further reflected in *La femme genereuse*, published anonymously in 1643, with this being a skill that enables them to exercise prudence.[55] For Sieur de Gerzan, prudence is essential to effectively govern. In his 1646 *Le triomphe des dames*, he reasons that whilst prudence is a skill that men have to learn, women have prudence naturally.[56] It is thus precisely women's 'innate' qualities that render them suitable to government. This argument is further enhanced by the idea that both men and women possess equal capacity for virtue. In Jacques du Bosc's *La femme héroïque*, exceptional women from antiquity are placed alongside their male counterparts, where they are deemed 'capables des mesmes Vertus, & dignes du mesme honneur que les hommes'.[57] On closer examination, however, Du Bosc can still be found praising women for their more passive virtues, and he seemingly limits this equal capability to heroic women and/or women of exceptional status. Du Bosc's other texts are similarly ambiguous, with his *L'Honnête femme* praising women's intellectual capacity whilst nonetheless setting clear limits to the scope of their learning.[58]

Women in power / powerful women

Against the backdrop of these conflicting discourses, women were in fact able to wield authority within the royal domain at several junctures, and as we shall see, this is frequently reflected on the stage. Although barred from direct ascension to the throne, the King's widow could hold considerable power in the role of queen regent during the minority of her son. Three early modern women profit from this seeming paradox, with the female regencies of Catherine de Médicis (1560-63), Marie de Médicis (1610-14), and Anne of Austria (1643-51) being well-documented by scholars such as Eliane Viennot, Katherine Crawford and Fanny Cosandey.[59] Justified on the premise that

[54] Gilbert, *Panégyrique des dames*, p.41.
[55] Conroy, pp.51-53.
[56] François Du Soucy, sieur de Gerzan, *Le triomphe des dames* (Paris: Chez l'Autheur, 1646), p.169. See also *ibid.*
[57] Jacques du Bosc, *La femme héroïque, héroïque ou Les heroines comparées avec les heros en toute sortes de vertus* (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville & Augustin Courbé, 1645), p.29.
[58] Jacques Du Bosc, *L'Honnête femme*, *première partie* (Lyon: Gregoire, 1665)
[59] Viennot*, La France, les femmes et le pouvoir;* Katherine Crawford*, Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Cosandey*, La reine de France.*

women's natural maternal instinct supersedes any political ambition, the demands of maternal duty alongside the implications of Salic law guarantee a stable rule in which the interests of the heir (and by association those of the state) remain paramount and usurpation is quite simply inconceivable.[60] This realignment of female behaviour into a positive asset in the political sphere appears not just as a mechanism for justifying female regency but equally resonates within the above broader arguments in favour of the abolition of an exclusively male crown. Offering living proof of the capacity of the female sex to operate in the political sphere, Marie le Jars de Gournay, amongst others, praises the important and positive role regents have played in French history.[61] The period of Anne of Austria's regency gives rise to an influx of texts and images showcasing women's ability to occupy powerful positions, such as those discussed above, as well as royalist pamphlets. Whilst the latter could be read simply as a form of political propaganda, when paired alongside wider publications displaying a receptiveness to powerful women, it is clear that the reality of queen regents invigorates the argument for at least considering female government to be a viable possibility.[62]

In a similar manner to advocates for gynocracy, those seeking to suppress female empowerment also draw upon regency, notably that of Anne of Austria, but this time to reinforce the well-worn association of women, government and disorder. Acquiring the status of queen regent following the death of Louis XIII, the Spanish widow governs with the support of *confidant* and Chief Minister Jules Mazarin between 1643 and 1651, a period spanning the civil wars of the Fronde. The political pamphlets known as *mazarinades* that flooded France during the Fronde, comparatively small in number when considered alongside the large number of panegyric pamphlets, nonetheless exploit the queen regent's supposedly sexual relationship with Cardinal Mazarin to link the political

[60] See Fanny Cosandey, 'Puissance maternelle et pouvoir politique. La régence des reines mères', *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 21 (2005), 69-90. See also Harriet Lightman, 'Political Power and the Queen of France: Pierre Dupuy's Treatise on Regency Governments', *Canadian Journal of History*, 21.3 (1986), 299-312.
[61] Marie le Jars de Gournay, 'Egalité des hommes et des femmes', *Œuvres complètes, Tome I*, ed. Jean-Claude Arnould (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002).
[62] As Conroy deduces, the idea of government as an exclusively male prerogative is undermined by its failure to adequately accommodate the existence of female regency. *Ruling Women, I*, p. 34.

turbulence to women's innate passivity, unruly passions, insatiable sexual desire and poor judgement.[63] Although Anne of Austria's attorney general, Henri D'Audiguier, argued that regency is inherently unstable and thus prone to civil unrest regardless of the sex of the regent, for the *mazarinades*, the queen regent's failure to rule over herself (and consequently over the Kingdom) is unequivocally attributed to her sex.[64] At the end of one particularly rancorous attack, famous pamphleteer Claude Dubosc Montandre simply concludes that the only defence he can offer on behalf of the queen is that she is, quite simply, a woman.[65] Similar indictments are launched against Mazarin, the 'Serpent' by whom the widow of Louis XIII has allowed herself 'd'être piqué[e]'. According to the pamphleteers, who play upon his rumoured sodomy and insatiable sexual appetite, the Chief Minister possesses many of the faults and flaws typically attributed to the female sex, with his negative traits once again being framed within a discourse of sexual identity. Despotic and demonic — acting to satisfy his own personal pleasures and ambitions, dispensing cruelty rather than clemency and debilitated by his insatiable sexual appetite — the Cardinal is explicitly aligned to the female sex. One pamphlet goes as far as to depict Mazarin opening his robe to reveal an 'unambiguously female' soul.[66] Crucially, through their exaggerated depictions of despotism as effeminate — an analogy that can be traced back to Greek culture — the *mazarinades* further reinforce assumptions surrounding women, power and disorder. The association of tyranny with effeminacy is further exploited in the theatre of the early modern period. As I argue in Chapter III, Madame de Villedieu feeds into wider pro-gynocracy discourses in her endeavours to sever this link.

[63] That the political turbulence during this period was linked simultaneously and contradictorily to both women's innate passivity and unruly passions speaks to the multiple, conflicting ways women were demeaned. For a discussion of sexual identity within the mazarinades, see Jeffrey Merrick, 'The Cardinal and the Queen: Sexual and Political Disorders in the Mazarinades', *French Historical Studies*, 18.3 (1994), 667-99 and Lewis Seifert, 'Eroticizing the Fronde, Sexual Deviance and Political Disorder in the Mazarinades', *Esprit créateur*, 35.2 (1995), 22-36.
[64] Henri Mazet d'Audiguier, *Le censeur censuré* (Paris: n.p. 1652), p.96. See Conroy, *Ruling Women, I*, p.32.
[65] Merrick, 'The Cardinal and the Queen', p.693.
[66] Merrick, 'The Cardinal and the Queen', p.685.

Further speculation concerning women's unique capacity to govern can be found in representations of the *femme forte*. An ambiguous icon flourishing in literary, moralistic and artistic works most notably from the 1640s, the Amazon woman is characterised by her independence, honour, courage, religious devotion, chastity (a heroic virtue for women) alongside, at times, military aptitude.[67] Discussing painter Claude Dereut's 1620 *Mounted Woman with a Spear,* Joan DeJean deduces early representations of the strong woman to be indicative of a broader male infatuation with a limited number of seemingly acceptable constructions of the violent woman.[68] Presenting a partially clothed female warrior armed with a spear, hand resting on her hip whilst nonetheless fully in control of a wildly leaping horse, the *femme forte* here serves to appeal rather than menace. Inherently theatrical, utterly fantastic, and often sexualised, her impact on traditional societal order is deemed limited, with these exceptional Amazon women perceived by some, to use the phrase of La Hoguette, to be nothing more than an innocent 'conte de l'histoire fabuleuse'.[69] Yet the extraordinary woman is perhaps not quite so distinct from contemporary context as La Hoguette would have us believe. Coinciding not only with the regencies of Marie de Médicis and Anne of Austria, the real-life spectacular exploits undertaken by the female sex function as a further source of inspiration for novels and iconography, such as those of Madeleine de Scudéry and Pierre Le Moyne.[70] Madame de Saint-Balmon, for instance, a warrior-poet who, in the absence of her husband, regularly cross-dressed and successfully defended her property on horseback, is praised in Le Moyne's 1647 *Gallerie des Femmes Fortes* as 'la noble et sage Saint-Balmon'.[71] Dedicated to Anne of Austria, Le Moyne's portrait gallery presents images and descriptions of strong contemporary and

[67] As Ian Maclean summarizes, the *femme forte* is attributed with 'constance', 'fidélité', 'résolution', where women are accused of 'inconstance', 'instabilité', 'caprice' by traditional moralists; she is not indolent, but energetic; not 'molle', but 'forte'; not hypocritical and superstitious, but truly devout; she acts with heroic openness'. *Woman Triumphant*, p.86.
[68] Joan DeJean, 'Violent Women and Violence against Women', p.121.
[69] Hoguette, *Les elemens de la politique,* pp.314-315.
[70] See, for example, Georges and Madeleine de Scudéry's multivolume novel *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*, published between 1649 and 1653. For extracts, see Madeleine and Georges de Scudéry, *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus, extraits,* eds. Claude Bourqui, Alexandre Gefen and Barbara Selmeci (Paris: Flammarion, 2005).
[71] Pierre Le Moyne, *La gallerie des femmes fortes* (Paris: A. de Sommaville, 1647), n.p.

historical women exhibiting qualities counter to the traditional construct of the female sex. Whilst the inclusion of women engaging in homicidal acts of violence render a reading of the *Gallerie* as a defense of female leadership somewhat problematic, the author nonetheless hints at women's equal capacity to exhibit ideal monarchic qualities. For Le Moyne, 'l'esprit peut bien estre aussi fort, & la raison aussi vigoureuse & aussi adroite, dans la teste d'une femme que dans celle d'un homme'.[72] Echoing Du Bosc's earlier work, Le Moyne's examples are once again frequently praised for their more passive 'female' virtues of chastity, piety and modesty, with courage only demonstrated and/or permitted in circumstances of extreme necessity. As Elizabeth Rosalind Grist remarks, it is interesting to note that nearly all of these historical *femmes fortes* meet an untimely death, often by their own hand.[73]

Scudéry's *Femmes Illustres* (1642) offers what can perhaps be deemed a somewhat less ambiguous portrayal of women's ability to rule.[74] Written in the form of letters by famous mythical heroines, the publication focuses on women's moral virtues and capacity for prudence. Of particular relevant for the question of female rulership are the letters of Zenobia, Pulcheria and Amalasuntha. As Conroy argues, what distinguishes Scudéry's approach from others is the lack of comparisons between the sexes and avoidance of hyperbolic discourses often found in pro-woman texts, including those discussed throughout this chapter. In these three cases, the 'absence of a rhetoric of exceptionality, of "le monde à l'envers", of usurping virtues, or even of women governing "sur les cœurs" or by douceur or by beauty — favorable though these last can be — lends a force to these speeches that is lacking elsewhere'.[75] What emerges are female leaders who defy gender

[72] *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.
[73] Elizabeth Rosalind Grist, *The Salon and the Stage*
74 The work is assumed to have been produced by Madeleine, despite being published under the name of her brother Georges. [Madeleine et] Georges de Scudéry, *Les Femmes illustres, ou Les Harangues héroïques de Mr de Scudéry, avec les véritables portraits de ces héroïnes, tirez des médailles antiques* (Paris: chez Antoine de Sommaville et Augustin Courbé, 1642*); Les Femmes illustres, ou Les Harangues héroïques de Mr de Scudéry, Seconde partie* (T. Quinet et N. de Sercy, 1644).
[75] Conroy, *Ruling Women, I*, p.77. As Conroy notes, it is also notable that Scudéry steers away from physical descriptions of her heroines, given the ambiguity of beauty.

stereotypes and codes of sexual ethics, thus calling into question essentialist constructions concerning the nature of men and women.[76]

The *femme forte* transcends reality once again during the civil wars known as the Fronde, with popular iconography and literary works said to have influenced and enhanced women's involvement in the series of uprisings against the foreign influence of Mazarin and Anne of Austria.[77] The Duchesse de Longueville and Mlle de Montpensier, for instance, are renowned for donning male attire, leading men into battle, and settling negotiations. Although these images and realities open up a space of possibility and plausibility for placing women in positions of power, following the rise of an absolute monarchy, the literary *femme forte* becomes an increasing source of anxiety, dwindling in popularity before giving way to the *précieuses*, whilst attempts are taken to ensure the Fronde is all but expunged from public memory.[78] The plays under consideration here fall crucially at this juncture.

Theatre, women and power

Early modern cultural works, as we have seen, closely engage with and shape contemporary socio-political ideas surrounding gender and authority. As a dramatic genre concerned with the staging of characters of high social standing as well as with the representation of political intrigues, tragedy is particularly prone to an interrogation of monarchic practices. For Katherine Ibbett, the grappling of the seventeenth-century stage with governmental concerns emerges as inseparable from contemporary developments in tragic aesthetics. Drawing upon New Historicist ideas, Ibbett argues that the displacement of violence from the stage for reasons of decorum also has extensive political stakes, interacting, for example, with the aforementioned shift from public executions to a

[76] *Ibid.*
[77] For women's involvement in the Fronde, see in particular the studies of Sophie Vergnes, *Les frondeuses. Une révolte au féminin, 1643–1661* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2013) and 'The princesse de Condé at the head of the Fronde des Princes: modern Amazon or *femme prétexte*?', *French History*, 22.4 (2008), 406–24.
[78] As Brière documents, part of the Fronde pardoning process involved 'l'oubli perpétuel.' *La douceur du roi,* p.54.

preference for practising compassion and preserving life.[79] With theatre being more broadly a literary form encouraged to reflect the patriarchal interests of the state, early modern dramatic doctrines predictably leave little scope for the representation of decorous and verisimilar models of efficacious queenship. Playwrights are advised to avoid the contradictory creation of 'une Fille vaillante' and 'une *Femme savante'*, with d'Aubignac criticising the heroines of Corneille's 1663 *Sophonisbe* for conversing about politics instead of holding a far more appropriate discussion of 'les sentiments de tendresse, de jalousie, et des autres passions'.[80] As we shall see, the female characters found in Madame de Villedieu's plays of the same decade could be accused of the very same 'improper' behaviour. Indeed, despite being considered an immediate success, Villedieu's *Manlius* is criticised during the *Querelle du Sophonisbe* owing to the lack of love interest awarded to her invented female character, Camille.[81]

That a significant proportion of dramatic productions promulgate an agenda reinforcing female exclusion from the throne is therefore hardly surprising. Exploring the numerous plays in which female rule is constructed as synonymous with disorder, Conroy clearly establishes how theatrical works such as *Athalie, Rodogune, Rhodogune, Laodice* and *Theodat* amongst others echo much of the political and moralistic works of the period by staging indecisive female rulers, highly susceptible to love (including maternal affection) and utterly lacking in self-control. Framed within a gendered and essentialist discourse, the frequent pairing of signifiers such as 'femme' and 'fille' with adjectives such as 'jalouse' and 'cruelle' deflates women's authority; the chaos so often accompanying gynocracy is attributed to the presumed weaknesses of the female sex.[82] The innate predispositions of 'woman' render her unsuited to the political sphere. Nowhere is the use of sexual identity to denigrate female governance more blatant than in the oft-cited depiction of Athalie

[79] Ibbett, *The Style of the State*, pp.65-69.
[80] D'Aubignac, *Dissertations contre Corneille,* eds. Nicholas Hammond and Michael Hawcroft (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), *Première Dissertation*, p.10.
[81] See Bourque, *Jean Donneau de Visé* and Meli, 'La critique dramatique'.
[82] Conroy, *Ruling Women*, *II,* pp.32-34. Athalie and Josabet, for instance, are rarely mentioned by name alone but their positions and alleged qualities are constantly used to refer to them: 'cette reine jalouse' 'de Jezabel la fille sanguinaire'; 'une impie étrangère'; 'l'injuste Athalie'; 'l'implacable Athalie'; 'une reine cruelle'.

(*Athalie,* 1691): 'Elle flotte; elle hésite, en un mot elle est femme'.[83] As this alexandrine attests, the Classical rules of prosody requiring the alternation of 'strong' masculine rhyming couplets with 'weak' feminine rhyming couplets may be exploited by playwrights as a means of reinforcing the essentialist gendering of women as weak. Moreover, with the standard rhymes found for 'femme' being words such as 'blâme' and 'flamme', the association of women with disorder, frailty, unruly passions and wayward involvement in emotional intrigue could at times even appear to be a feature of language itself.

Whilst a decorous and verisimilar dramatic King would be expected to display clemency, operating a just and fair regime, staged female monarchs often abuse their power through violence. Motivated not by reason of state but by the insatiable need to satisfy personal desire, gynocratic regimes incorporate tyrannical tendencies and moments of extreme brutality. Infanticidal and other homicidal tendencies emerge as a particularly common theme across tragedies in which woman are driven exclusively by a longing for monarchic power.[84] The presentation of politically ambitious women as monstrous aberrations feeds into early modern fears surrounding women in authority, demonstrating the atrocities that occur when a woman strives to depart from her prescribed domestic role of mother and wife. The most overt portrayal of a power-seeking woman is perhaps found with Corneille's *Rodogune*, in which Cléopâtre, Queen of Syria, murders her husband, attempts to convince her two sons to murder the woman their father loved, stabs one son to death, and attempts to poison the other, all in an attempt to sustain power.[85] Meeting her demise by the close of the tragedy — a common outcome for women shown to have departed from their conventional role — the dramatization of a tyrannical woman utterly lacking in maternal instinct not only reinforces female exclusion from the throne, but equally undermines arguments in favour of queen regents, notably during the reign of Anne of Austria. In contrast, female rulers that act more

[83] Jean Racine, *Athalie*, ed. Georges Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), I.I.876.
[84] *Ruling Women, II*, pp.19-28.
[85] Pierre Corneille, *Rodogune: tragédie* (Paris: Droz, 1946). Médée is of course another example of female excess.

'appropriately' may be permitted to survive. In Racine's *Andromaque*, the title character is held captive following the death of her husband Hector, leader of the Trojan force. She is faced with the tragic dilemma of marrying the odious King Pyrrhus in order to save the life of her son. Andromaque resolves to remarry, thus obligating Pyrrhus to care for her son, intending to then commit suicide in order to remain loyal to her late husband. Following a *coup d'état* in which both rival Hermione and captor Pyrrhus are killed, Andromaque survives to be crowned Queen, but only, it is inferred, until her son is of age. Shown to be rewarded for acting only within the confines of her prescribed role as mourning wife and devoted mother, her triumph can in some ways be viewed, as Sharon Worley advocates, as a 'function of the gendered patriarchal construct and not the assertion of female independence'.[86] Racine's Andromaque also runs counter to the notion of the early modern widow as a site of socio-political resistance, explored further below.[87] As we shall see in Chapter III, French theatre does, of course, abound with male rulers operating despotic regimes. However, male rulers are frequently shown to be effeminate; they are hypocritical, tyrannised by their own emotions, cowardly and violent. Through forging a link between the cruel male oppressor and stereotypical female vices, theatre may once again perpetuate concerns over women and/in power even when not directly presenting the spectator with a female sovereign.[88]

Exceptions to the affiliation of women with disordered rule can be found on the seventeenth-century stage. At times ambiguous in their degree of challenge to the male prerogative to rule, these plays reflect and feed into ongoing societal tensions on the subject. One such example is the staging of the warrior queen, a theme that, as we have seen, held widespread popularity across other genres. D'Aubignac presents cross-dressed warrior-ruler Zénobie in his 1647 play of the same name. A worthy and admirable leader, demonstrating extreme courage through her

[86] Sharon Worley, *A Feminist Analysis of Gender and Primogeniture in French Neoclassical Tragedy: The Literary Politics Behind the French Revolution* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), p.195. For broader discussions of the play, see the recent Nicholas Hammond and Joseph Harris, eds., *Racine's Andromaque: Absences and Displacements* (Netherlands: Brill, 2019). For a similar reading of *Andromaque* see Véronique Desnain, 'Les faux miroirs'.
[87] Menke, 'The Widow Who Would Be Queen'.
[88] This is a key argument made by Conroy. See *Ruling Women, II.*

willingness to die for her people, Zénobie is indicative of women's ability to occupy a typically masculine space. In line with contemporary debates, the dramatic theorist offers conflicting views regarding female military activity. Criticised by the Roman Emperor for engaging in war, we encounter the traditional perspective that the female sex is 'un sexe a qui la Nature n'a permis de faire des conquestes qu'avec les yeux' (IV.III).[89] Yet through the title character's bold retort, the legitimacy of female exclusion from the military domain (and by association from government) is thrown into relief: 'Mais cette authorité que les hommes s'attribuent de faire la guerre, est-ce un droict de la Nature ou bien une vieille Usurpation?' (IV.III).[90] In hinting at the role of men in female oppression, the queen airs views that resonate across other aspects of society, including the household and education. However like many of her *furieuses* counterparts above, d'Aubignac's Zénobie commits suicide, and the play closes with the image of a male character grieving not for the loss of an Amazon but for the woman he adores, realigning the title character with the private sphere. The play also at times brings out the warrior's physical desirability to the male sex, although this is limited.[91] Through the overt display of female courage and military aptitude, the spectator is nonetheless left with a far from clear-cut portrayal, and one in which the validity of a code of sexual difference is called into question. As Conroy shows, other theatrical depictions of the warrior queen display this 'behaviouralist androgyny', with the heroine of Jean Magnon's *Zénobie* (1660) defining historical female warrior-rulers as 'femmes par leur sexe, hommes par leur vertus' (II.III).[92]

Beyond the warrior woman, a number of plays present 'ordinary' queens displaying political acumen, with these productions offering a far more overt interrogation of female exclusion from the throne. Conroy identifies a total of seven plays that fall within this category: Du Ryer's *Nitocris* (1650) and *Dynamis* (1653), Corneille's *La mort de Pompée* (1644), *Sertorius* (1662) and *Pulchérie*

[89] François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac, *Zénobie*, *tragédie*, *où la vérité de l'histoire est conservée dans l'observation des plus rigoureuses reigles du poème dramatique* (Paris: A. Courbé, 1647), p.99.
[90] *Ibid.*
[91] As Conroy notes, beauty is only briefly mentioned three times. *Ruling Women, II,* p.81. For a discussion of d'Aubignac's tragedies, see also Bourque, notably chapter 2.
[92] See Conroy, *Ruling Women, II*, p.81. Conroy also explores Gilbert's 1647 *Semiramis* and Rosidor's 1662 *La mort du Grand Cyrus*. *Ibid.*, pp.82-86.

(1673), Racine's *Alexandre le Grand* (1666), and Bernard's *Laodamie* (1689).[93] These plays typically present stoic, prudent and intelligent female rulers capable of prioritising the political over the personal and of demonstrating moral integrity.[94] Though doing so in varying degrees, these women, all in positions of power, are shown to exercise good judgement, clemency and self-mastery (even at times refusing marriage) despite the supposed incapacity of their sex to do so. Not only undermining the idea that fundamental political virtues are unattainable by the female sex, these plays once again challenge the rationality of a code of sexual difference. They also exhibit some of the deep-rooted tensions circulating in society regarding women in government. *Laodomie, reine d'Epire* warrants specific mention, as the sole play in this category to be written by a female playwright.[95] Bernard's 1689 tragedy, which had a successful run at the Comédie-Française theatre, centres on Queen Laodomie, who at the outset of the play is obliged by her father's will to marry Prince Attale owing to the military aptitude a male ruler can offer. Despite being in love with exiled prince Gélon, who loves the Queen's sister Nerée, Laodamie obliges, offering an overt example of women's ability to prioritise the political over the personal. Following the death of Attale, the 'peuple' call for Laodamie to marry Gélon. This emphasis on the seeming necessity of a male ruler is shown by Bernard to be superfluous and ironic when she showcases a queen's ability to calm her people simply by appearing before them (reminiscent of the elimination of the need for overt displays of brute force to control subjects discussed above). When the Queen is accidentally murdered, her sister Nerée is immediately announced as her successor. However, we are left with the impression that it is Gélon who will in fact rule. Given that Gélon is a male character lacking any interest in politics and sense of duty, Bernard is perhaps once again hinting at the irrationality of the male prerogative to rule. In Chapter III, I contend that Madame de Villedieu contributes to this repertoire of plays.

[93] *Ibid.,* pp.93-130.
[94] *Ibid.*
[95] Catherine Bernard, 'Laodamie reine d'Epire', in Gethner, ed., *Femmes dramaturges en France (1650-1750)*, pp.183-244. See also Conroy, *Ruling Women, II*, pp.112-115.

Women and the Household

Marriage

The household is inseparable from affairs of the state in early modern France. Natalie Zemon Davis describes how 'in the little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the larger matters of political and social order could find ready symbolization'.[96] Assuring the growth of the population and the subsequent building of national power, subjects are encouraged to marry and produce numerous legitimate offspring.[97] As an ideological building block for the state, the familial structure should mimic and reinforce that of the kingdom: 'Une maison est un petit estat'.[98] Just as the king rules over his subjects, the father functions as head of household, exercising absolute control over the familial unit. Similarly, just as male heirs are privileged over their female counterparts for succession to the throne, young women face far greater restrictions within the private domain, where the birth of a male infant is once again significantly more desirable.[99]

One arena in which the father exercised considerable control over his children is that of marriage.[100] Whilst remaining celibate and dedicating oneself to the Church denotes the ideal *honnête femme*, marriage constitutes the event around which the lives of many young women are oriented and as the sole means through which to produce legitimate heirs to support the welfare of the state. As has been extensively documented, throughout the early modern period, the institution of marriage functions not just as a legal construct, but as a social product.[101] Through carefully selected conjugal unions, households stand to gain financially and advance in the social hierarchy.

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[96] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (California: Stanford University Press, 1975), p.127.

[97] Hanley explains how financial incentives were offered to encourage couples to have large families. See 'Engendering the State'.

[98] François de Grenaille, *L'honneste mariage* (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville, 1640), p.240.

[99] Elfrieda Dubois even tells of how one man threatened to kill his wife and infant should she not give birth to a boy. '«Votre sexe n'est là que pour la dépendance»: Women and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century France', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies Newsletter*, 4.1 (2013), 14-26.

[100] The 1639 edict, for instance, required priests to obtain written proof of parental consent from young couples wishing to marry. See Hanley, 'Engendering the State'.

[101] See, for example, Suzanne Desan and Jeffrey Merrick, eds., *Family, Gender and Law in Early Modern France* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009) and Julie Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy.* See also Gibson, *Women in Early Modern France* and Maclean, *Woman Triumphant*.

Equally, through misalliance, a family risks their material assets as well as their social standing and reputation. 'Biens' and 'lignage' subsequently typically weigh more heavily in parental deliberations over the future alliance of their child than the romantic suitability of the partner in question.[102] Mutual affection, although desirable, is far from a prerequisite to marital union.[103] With securing the wedding of a daughter also demanding the payment of a dowry, financial negotiations — often undertaken by a relative or family friend to avoid the embarrassment of fathers being directly involved in any unseemly haggling — govern discussions pertaining to the future of young women, highlighting the extent to which the female sex was considered a commodity to be exchanged between men.[104] Marriage marked a 'property transfer'.[105] For the dutiful daughter, her right of choice was all but non-existent, and she could find herself committed to a disagreeable union as early as the age of twelve.[106] A central topic of the *Querelle des Femmes*, the arranged, loveless marriage is much-debated within early modern culture and society, facing challenge in particular from the *salonnières* discussed below.

Alongside parental desire to utilise the marriage of their offspring to forge social and economic alliances, other defences for marrying off daughters irrespective of their wishes draw upon stereotypical negative attributes of the female sex, echoing arguments put forth by those seeking to justify the exclusion of women from public office. As the 'naturally' weaker sex, woman cannot exist independently; she must pass from one (male) guardian to another. For moralist Antoine de Courtin, 'qui dit femme, dit une chose dépendante'.[107] Pierre Nicole asserts 'elles ne sauraient se tenir debout, ni subsister par elles-mêmes; elles ont besoin d'un appui, encore plus

[102] Maclean, *Woman Triumphant*, p.89.
[103] As Lougee notes, 'an absence of hatred was to be desired.' *Le Paradis des femmes,* p.62.
[104] Cholakian remarks women were 'pawns in the battle to retain rank or gain ascendency'. Cholakian, *Women and the Politics*, p.25.
[105] Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy*, p.52.
[106] Cholakian notes that whilst women could not legally be married before the age of twelve, contracts between families were often signed earlier. Cholakian, *Women and the Politics of Self-Representation,* p.26.
[107] Antoine de Courtin, *Traité de la jalousie ou moyens d'entretenir la paix dans le mariage* (Josset: n.p., 1685), p.387.

pour leur esprit que pour leur corps'.[108] Owing to her propensity for insatiable sexual desire, the unmarried (and evidently undevout) woman clearly poses a threat to society. With women perceived as having 'the power of the devil in their loins', marriage, in seeking to confine the female sex to the home, goes some way towards regulating the problem of female sexuality and sexual promiscuity, as well as in some cases thwarting the birth of illegitimate children.[109] According to François de Grenaille, author of 1640 handbook *L'honneste mariage,* the institution offers the opportunity 'd'appaiser la concupiscence par des plaisirs qui ne sont point illicites, & de vaincre la chair en faisant semblant de la caresser avec un peu d'indulgence'.[110] The recurrent image of the coquette within treatises and literature reinforces the supposed need to control the unattached woman. Typically unmarried, the coquette is defined by her moral duplicity, lack of modesty, frivolous speech, desire for pleasure, and trickery and deception in her teasing of multiple suitors.[111] Particularly prominent in the 1650s and 1660s, coquettish behaviour appears in comedies such as those of Molière, where the liberal attitude of the 'loose' woman towards sexuality as well as her manipulative humiliation of men is shown to disrupt societal norms.[112] Iconography such as that produced by the celebrated seventeenth-century engraver Abraham Bosse further warns of the dangerous potential of unrestrained female duplicity. His *La Vraye Femme* depicts a being with two bodies: on one side, we encounter a beautiful woman delicately holding a fan, standing in a church setting in which a kneeling, submissive woman is clearly visible; to the other side is a muscular, animalistic monster yielding a whip and situated outside of the home.[113] Reminding the viewer of

[108] Pierre Nicole, 'Pensées Diverses', in *Essais de morale* (Paris: Desprez, 1755), 6 vols., VI, p.323.
[109] Lougee, *Le Paradis des femmes*, p.11. Gerber explains how men as well as women were often forced into marriages should illicit pregnancy occur. Matthew Gerber, *Bastards: Politics, Family and Law in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[110] Grenaille, *L'honneste mariage*, p.23. He proceeds: 'On leur dit de ne pas perdre leurs corps & leurs âmes par la volupté, mais on leur laisse la liberté de produire des enfans', p.24.
[111] Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender,* p.18. In his *Dictionnaire Universel*, Furetière defines the coquette as a 'dame qui tache de gagner l'amour des hommes, et ne veut pas s'engager'. Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel, contenant généralement tous les mots François tant vieux que modernes et les termes de toutes les sciences et des arts, tome troisième* (Paris: Arnout et Reinier Leers, 1690).
[112] For a reading of the coquette as subversive, see Andrew Jordan Gard, *The Rise of the Coquette in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century French Theater* (PhD: University of North Carolina, 2017).
[113] For an overview of Bosse, see Carl Goldstein, *Print Culture in Early Modern France: Abraham Bosse and the Purposes of Print* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). This one image acts as a case in point for

the ability of the female sex to be simultaneously enchanting yet equally deceitful and inherently carnal, such representations reinforce the perceived need to confine the undevout woman to the home, carefully managing her comportment through marriage.

Within the estate of matrimony itself, misogynistic diatribes as well as early modern law dictate that the married woman is expected to be utterly subordinate to her husband. A lexical field of female imprisonment dominates such texts.[114] 'Une femme doit être non seulement bonne et complaisante', posits Antoine de Courtin, 'mais aussi être soumise et obéissante à son mari, parce qu'il en est le chef'.[115] Likewise for Jacques Chaussé, Sieur de la Terrière, 'un mari doit être le Docteur de sa femme, pour lui apprendre ce qu'elle doit, ou faire, ou éviter'.[116] Subsuming her desires to those of her husband, the model married woman functioned solely to undertake domestic duties and bear and raise children.[117] The master of the house had the legal right to discipline his family should disobedience occur. 'Corrective' behaviour included the use of violence, but certain limits to the corporal exercise of authority existed. As Julia Hardwick outlines, legitimate spousal battery required a level of force proportionate to the misconduct committed, must be motivated by valid reasoning and not by vengeance or excessive alcohol consumption, and should occur infrequently.[118] Two images produced once again by Abraham Bosse, *Le mari battant sa femme* and *La femme battant son mari*, advocate for the deployment of male-female conjugal violence.[119]

Cholakian's deduction that within early modern culture, men present women as either virtuous and good, like the Virgin Mary, or wicked and evil, like Eve: 'Sometimes they represented them with sexual appetites and an unlimited talent for leading men astray; at other times they placed them on a pedestal as chaste goddesses who should be worshiped on a bended knee'. Cholakian, *Women and the Politics*, p.19.

[114] Grenaille for instance talks of women being placed in prison. See *L'honneste mariage.* For details of the numerous seventeenth-century marriage handbooks, see Claire Carlin, 'Perfect Harmony: Love and Marriage in Early Modern Pedagogy' in *The Art of Instruction: Essays on Pedagogy and Literature in Seventeenth-Century France*, ed. Anne Birberick (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp.201-24.

[115] Courtin, p.80.

[116] Chaussé, Jacques, Sieur de la Terrière, *Traité de l'excellence du mariage, de sa nécessité, et des moyens d'y vivre heureux où Von fait l'apologie des femmes contre les calomnies des hommes* (Amsterdam: Abraham Wolfgangh, 1685), p.252.

[117] On motherhood, see Lougee, pp.59-69.

[118] See Julie Hardwick 'Early Modern Perspectives on the Long History of Domestic Violence: The Case of Seventeenth-Century France', *The Journal of Modern History*, 78.1 (2006), 1-36.

[119] See Carl Goldstein, *Print Culture in Early Modern France: Abraham Bosse and the Purposes of Print* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.66-67.

Demonstrating the calamitous impact upon the order of society should husbands fail to control their wives, the latter painting depicts *le monde à l'envers*. Amongst a scene of chaos, a woman can be seen beating her kneeling, dishevelled husband. By contrast, *Le mari battant sa femme* presents an orderly domestic world in which a woman and her two children can be seen kneeling before their whip yielding master.

Violence was deemed a perfectly acceptable punishment for a wife accused of adultery, a crime that women's supposedly natural vices render them highly susceptible to committing.[120] Wendy Gibson even documents cases in which husbands were excused for brutally murdering their unfaithful wives.[121] Such leniency may in part be a response to the widespread seventeenth-century belief that an act of marital infidelity on the side of the woman threatened masculine honour.[122] In her study of early modern sexuality, Sara Matthews-Grieco argues that the cuckold was 'not only someone whose virility was in question because he was unable to "maintain" his property adequately (that is, sexually satisfy his wife) but he was also incapable of ruling his own household'.[123] Literature may have played some role in heightening this fear of cuckoldry. As Katherine Ibbett points out, the murders in Novella 36 of Marguerite de Navarre's *L'Heptaméron* and Tale 90 of Bonaventure Des Périers' *Nouvelles Récréations et joyeux devis* have an oddly feminine component. In Navarre's plot, the protagonist provides his adulterous wife with a salad containing poisonous herbs whilst Périers' character has the diet of a mule manipulated so that it would be so desperate for water that his unfaithful wife would drown. With both poison and drowning being viewed as fitting weapons for women, these works infer that being cuckolded causes a loss of 'all

[120] Gibson, pp.64-54. Alongside violence, an adulterous woman was deprived of her dowry and any property she might have and could be confined to a convent for two years, at the end of which time her husband could decide whether or not to take her back. Women were far more likely to be legally prosecuted, with the sin of adultery equating to a criminal offence. See Philip Riley, *A Lust for Virtue: Louis XIV's Attack on Sin in Seventeenth-Century France* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001).
[121] Gibson, p.22.
[122] It also raises the possibility of children born outside of wedlock and left in a socially precarious position; or children, born to other men, passed off as heirs to fortunes left by the cuckolded husband.
[123] Sara Matthews-Grieco, 'The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality' in *A History of Women in the West, vol. 3 of Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes,* eds. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.46-84 (p.82).

semblance of manliness; even their vengeance lacks masculinity'.[124] Extra-conjugal affairs of men, by contrast, are tolerated, notably within the legal sphere. Tears, prayers and patience are all that are recommended to women faced with an unfaithful husband.[125] Although marital separation was possible, judges tried at any cost to maintain a conjugal union.[126] Once again, responsibility falls to women to safeguard the marriage: 'Le malheur ou la félicité des mariages dépend bien souvent de leur (des femmes) conduite'.[127]

A growing rejection of matrimonial subjection and resistance to the institution of marriage emerges throughout the seventeenth century. Examples of influential women who decide to break with convention and refuse to wed include Madeleine de Scudéry as well as Françoise Pascal and fellow playwright Catherine Bernard. Others cause controversy through marrying outside of their social status, with Mademoiselle de Montpensier seeking a union with a man clearly her social inferior (prior to which she had advocated for the total abolition of marriage)**.**[128] As Lougee documents, seventeenth-century France witnessed 'a formal celebration of such misalliances' in certain spaces.[129] The promotion of a revised view of matrimony features heavily in the pro-women literature of the period**.** Contemporary novels, including those written by the above-mentioned unattached female writers, contend that marriage should be a matter of personal choice, based on love and a man's personal merit rather than his social standing. Conventional marriage is, according to Scudéry's fictional character Sapho, a form of slavery, whilst female friendship is highly valued.[130] Meanwhile Montpensier depicts a pastoral utopia in which the unattached woman is free to provide

[124] Katherine Ibbett, 'Deadly Sex and Sexy Death in Early Modern French Literature', in *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: De Gruyter, 2008), pp.811-836 (p.818).
[125] Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, p.64.
[126] For an overview of separation processes, see Julie Hardwick, 'Seeking Separations: Gender, Marriages, and Household Economies in Early Modern France', *French Historical Studies*, 21.1 (1998), 157-180.
[127] Jacques Du Bosc, *L'Honnête femme, 2ieme Partie* (Lyon: Grégoire, 1665), p.307.
[128] On Montpensier and marriage, see Sophie Maríñez, *Mademoiselle de Montpensier: Writings, Chateaux, and Female Self-Construction in Early Modern France* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), notably Chapter III (pp.104-151).
[129] Lougee, *Le Paradis*, p.49.
[130] See Leonard Hinds, 'Female Friendship as the Foundation of Love in Madeleine de Scudéry's "Histoire de Sapho"', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 41.3-4 (2008), 23-35.

medical care and vocational training for the poor and access to libraries and studies to further their literary skills, running counter to the coquettish behaviour associated with unmarried women discussed above.[131]

Widowhood emerges as a particularly problematic 'type' of the unattached woman in early modern France. Kathleen Llewellyn demonstrates how the widow exemplifies both the precarity of women's circumstances and the new opportunities for autonomy available during a period of such significant socio-political upheaval.[132] Whilst poorer women risked being left destitute, for those from a noble upbringing, widowhood and the accompanying status of head of household offered the possibility of financial and social independence. Freed from the constraints of marriage, widows were legally entitled to manage their own property, make contracts alone, and remarry without the permission of their families. Through the regencies described above, women visibly held positions of considerable power during widowhood, and several of the celebrated female writers referenced in this chapter were indeed widows. Liberated in theory from material concerns, as a 'destabilizing social force', arousing unease not least due to her sexual experience and lack of (male) *maître*, contemporary behavioural manuals unsurprisingly strive to contain the widow. In his chapter entitled 'Advis pour les vefves', François de Sales recommends against remarrying, advocating a pious and withdrawn existence.[133] The ideal widow should undertake a period of mourning before devoting herself to the care of her husband's children, the advocating of his memory and her own personal sanctification.[134] As we shall see, drama can also at times be found promulgating the need

[131] See Joan DeJean's excellent introduction to Anne-Marie-Louise d'Orléans Montpensier (duchesse de), *Against Marriage: The Correspondence of La Grande Mademoiselle*, ed. and trans. by Joan DeJean (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
[132] See Kathleen Llewellyn, 'Words to the Wise: Reappropriating the Widow in Early Modern Didactic Literature', *Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and Early Modern Studies,* 21.1 (2004), 39-63. See also Julie Hardwick, 'Widowhood and Patriarchy in Seventeenth-Century France,' *Journal of Social History,* 26.1 (1992), 133-48.
[133] François de Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote* (Paris: Chez François Muguet, 1609).
[134] Gibson, p.91. See also Roger Duchêne, 'La veuve au XVIIe siècle' in *Onze études sur l'image littéraire de la femme dans la littérature française du XVIIe siècle*, ed. Wolfgang Leiner (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1984), pp.221-242.

to control not only the widow but all women within early modern society.

Courtship

To ensure the preservation of her marital appeal, the seventeenth-century woman is advised to behave in a particular manner. Counter to her 'natural' vices, she must exercise modesty, display an absence of ambition, remain chaste, and avoid above all else the tarnishing of her honour, glory and reputation as a virtuous woman.[135] During the courting process, her romantic inclinations should never be publicly declared; a theme exploited to dramatic ends in early modern tragicomedy (including as we shall see those of Françoise Pascal).[136] As Bernard Bourque notes, a pronouncement of love gives 'cause to the most discreet [male] lover to take advantage of this disposition, and to try everything she must fear'.[137] For early modern moralists, unmarried women are held wholly responsible for occurrences of sexual depravity. Grenaille, for instance, whilst arguing that the male sex is incapable of exercising control within the realm of carnal pleasure, draws upon the age-old example of Adam and Eve to reason that it nonetheless remains the responsibility of the woman to avoid inciting temptation.[138] Similar advice is given by the father in d'Aubignac's *Conseils d'Ariste à Célimène* when discussing the preservation of the female protagonist's reputation.[139]

To this end, beauty emerges as a complex and ambiguous trait in early modern France. At times perceived as a sign of inward goodness and virtue, associated with moral worth and praised within literature, attractiveness is simultaneously tied to artificiality and deceit.[140] Beauty,

[135] According to Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel,* the 'honnête femme' is not only chaste, modest and prude but she gives no reason to talk about her or suspect her. For an excellent discussion of female honnêteté, see Rikka-Maria Polla, *Refashioning the Respectable Elite Woman in Louis XIV's Paris: Madame de Sévigné and Ninon de Lenclos* (PhD: University of Helsinki, 2017).
[136] See Chapter II of this thesis.
[137] Bourque, p.181.
[138] Grenaille, *L'honneste mariage* p.168.
[139] See Bourque, p.123.
[140] For an excellent discussion of the ambiguous nature of beauty in the early modern period, see Kathleen Llewellyn, 'Beauty and Belief: Attitudes towards female beauty in Early Modern French Discourse', in *Female Beauty Systems as Social Capital in Western Europe and the United States, Middles Ages to the Present,* eds. Christine Adams and Tracy Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp.106-24. As Llewellyn notes, Judith and other early modern literary women are often lauded for their beauty. See also Kathleen

particularly when enhanced through cosmetics, is sinful. Inciting lust, the beautiful woman is considered immoral. An exclusively feminine trait capable of ensnaring men and consequently affording women some measure of power, beauty threatens normative gender dynamics and warrants cautious treatment.[141] Grenaille warns 'Cléopâtre fera plus par ses charmes que l'autre par ses armées'.[142] The possibility of female empowerment through beauty could however be weakened through its deployment as a means of objectification. Stephen Greenblatt argues, 'identity and beauty in this period are distinct, even opposed. The smooth unblemished, radiantly fair and essentially featureless face and body is the cultural ideal'.[143] Within many dramatic productions, women are depicted merely as beautiful, having, under the scrutiny of the male gaze, no otherwise noteworthy traits. Françoise Pascal, however, inverts this ideal through her portrayal of the male hero as an unremarkable object of beauty, impacting upon the construction of gender dynamics within her tragicomic martyr play.

Owing to the onus placed on the female sex to deter unsolicited male attention, rape constitutes a particularly problematic accusation for the seventeenth-century woman to uphold. Historian Georges Vigarello outlines the extensive measures women were required to take when attempting to successfully bring about a charge of sexual assault, with rape rarely being prosecuted and having a low conviction rate. Given the privileging of male testimony, women must clearly present the 'material traces' of their assault.[144] Types of evidence include dishevelled hair, emotional distress, and visible cuts and tears, and she must adhere to a standard script to clear herself of any wrongdoing.[145] To communicate non-consent, she must shout or scream, alerting

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Llewellyn, *Representing Judith in Early Modern French Literature* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014). For an overview of what constituted beauty in the early modern period, see Rikka-Maria Polla, pp.246-300.

[141] As Christine Adams and Tracy Adams argue, women may self-consciously manipulate their bodily capital to achieve particular goals. *Female Beauty Systems*, p.3.

[142] Grenaille, *L'honneste mariage,* p.169.

[143] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p.38. Although Greenblatt is referring to England here, this objectification of women is equally applicable in the French context.

[144] Georges Vigarello, *A History of Rape, Sexual Violence in France from the 16th to the 20th Century,* trans. by Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp.38-42.

[145] Kim Solga explains how women were required to perform a certain narrative in order for their accusation to be considered valid. See Solga, V*iolence Against Women.*

others to ensure witnesses to her physical resistance. The later discovery of a pregnancy negated any accusation of force, viewed as an indication of female consent.[146] Cultural and literary artefacts do little to discourage sexual assault, promulgating the notion of male entitlement. As Anne Duggan and Diane Wolfthal note, the framing of rape in a positive light can be found in the pastoral genre and the 'heroic' images of sexual assault displayed in early modern paintings.[147] Here, the violence of rape is effaced. Instead, these depictions celebrate male virility through such 'conquests', allegorically conflating sexual and political power: 'Forcing a woman to submit sexually was viewed as parallel to dominating one's subjects politically'.[148] Echoing the idea that sexual assault encompasses a public component as both an affair of state and one holding broader political significance, David Clarke outlines the conceptual overlap between territorial invasion and sexual conquest in the early modern period. The rape of one's wife (or daughter) was an attack on masculine honour. In this respect, a wife who 'survived rape could never be more than present evidence of another man's contempt, remaining an enduring source of humiliation'.[149] Literary works can accordingly be found praising women who die, be it as a result of resisting rape, or committing suicide in an attempt to save not only their honour, but that of their family.[150] Theatre is a privileged site for shaping and reworking discursive codes surrounding consent and non-consent. Indeed as I argue in Chapter II, Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr* challenges these discriminatory expectations and laws surrounding accusations of rape. Through her female character 'performing' the very same discourse required to form an acceptable accusation of sexual assault, but illegitimately manipulating it to pursue her own desires, Pascal highlights the irrationality of current expectations for constructing a 'valid' accusation of sexual assault. Similarly, Madame de Villedieu,

[146] Garthine Walker, 'Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England', *Gender and History*, 10.1 (April 1998), 1-25.
[147] Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The 'Heroic' Tradition and Its Alternatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Anne Duggan, 'Rape and Sociopolitical Positioning in the *Histoire tragique*', *Early Modern Women*, 5 (2005), 137-65.
[148] Wolfthal, p.23.
[149] David Clarke, '"User des droits d'un souverain pouvoir": Sexual Violence on the Tragic Stage (1635–40)', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 18.1 (1996), 103-20.
[150] Lucretia, for instance, is lauded in French literature.

by having two utterly odious tyrants displace responsibility for their unbridled sexual desire onto the beauty of the female personages, encourages spectators to interrogate the legitimacy of such discourse.

Alongside the extensive scrutiny of female comportment prior to marriage, as the century progresses, increasing emphasis is placed upon the behavioural expectations of courting men, due in part to the emerging notion of the *honnête homme.* Inspired by seventeenth-century salon writing, explored further below, *honnêteté* encourages the refinement of manners, the art of conversation, and the cultivation of social graces, with the concept growing in prominence in the latter half of the century.[151] During romantic pursuit, it demands of the male lover chivalrous, self-effacing and controlled behaviour.[152] In her 'Carte de Tendre', Madeleine de Scudéry visually sets out a course in *honnête* conduct.[153] To win a woman's heart, a man may need to pass through the 'villages' of 'billet doux' and 'petits soins,' as well as 'sincérité', 'tendresse' and 'assiduité'. Shifting the focus from heroic ideals such as an aspiration for *gloire* and the defense of one's honour and that of the state through military activity, and aligning with Norbert Elias' theory of 'the civilizing process', the map also recommends exercising 'sousmission' and 'obéissance' during romantic endeavours.[154] Harmony, mutual respect and control of the passions between the sexes is encouraged, and the image of a male protagonist kneeling in front of his beloved emerges as a common literary trope, notably within the theatrical genre. The reciprocally amorous relations dominating the intrigue of earlier novels such as the multi-volume *L'Astrée* (1607-1627) become a plausible reality. In his

[151] For a comprehensive overview of the concept, see Viala, *La France galante* and Emmanuel Bury, *Littérature et politesse: L'invention de l'honnête homme, 1580-1750* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996). See also Rikka-Maria Polla, and Larry Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[152] As Norman notes, Molière's comedies mock those incapable of demonstrating a disciplined suppression of the self. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient,* p.126.

[153] The Carte is a map of an imaginary land called 'Tendre' depicting the path towards love, as well as possible dead ends, and first appeared in volume I of *Célie*.

[154] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The Development of Manners* (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 1994). Reflecting the reduction in violence, Louis XIV also attempts to ban the private duel, which is seen to be a symbolic way for male protagonists to deny the absolute authority of the King. See John Leigh, *Touché: The Duel in Literature* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Œuvres Galantes, L'Abbé Cotin even posits 'c'est aujourd'hui la mode que les femmes fassent les avances'.[155] With its emphasis upon love and the right of female choice, *honnêteté* reflects the views of those advocating against arranged marriages. Inverting normative gender dynamics, the behavioural code offers the potential to provide women greater freedom. As shall be demonstrated in the proceeding chapters, within the theatrical domain, the portrayal of passive male protagonists opens up a space of possibility for displaying strong female characters. However, as set out in my introduction, and in line with central New Historicist practices, it is important, as part of wider cultural and literary development, that we do not read the display of passive male protagonists as subversive in and of itself. As we shall see Pascal diminishes further from her male characters through her careful characterisation.

Women, Household Dynamics and the Stage

Love, and by association household gender dynamics, are ubiquitous on the early modern French stage. Comedy typically culminates with the promise of at least one wedding.[156] Archetypal tragicomic intrigues revolve around the attempts of a young couple to overcome an abundance of impediments to their union, such as parental disapproval, interference from a scorned love interest, or perceived misalliance resulting from a mistaken identity. Meanwhile tragedy, Racine explains, warns of the tensions and dangers inherent in uncontrolled passions.[157] Private love interests are often opposed to public duty, with theatre thus hinting at the extent to which the family and the state are utterly intertwined in seventeenth-century France. Women are undoubtedly central to an exploration of such themes.

[155] Charles Cotin, *Œuvres galantes en prose et en vers de monsieur Cotin* (Paris: Estienne Loyson, 1663), p.260.
[156] Nina Ekstein notes that the theme of marriage features in every single play of Corneille. 'Women and Marriage in Corneille's Theater,' in *La femme au XVIIe siècle: Actes du colloque de Vancouver, University of British Columbia*, 5-7 Octobre 2000, ed. Richard Hodgson (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2001), pp. 391-405.
[157] In the preface to *Phèdre*, Racine writes that 'les passions n'y sont présentées aux yeux que pour montrer tout le désordre dont elles sont cause; et le vice y est peint partout avec des couleurs qui en font connaître et haïr la difformité'. Racine, *Phèdre.*

In line with the emphasis being placed on the didactic purpose of the stage by certain theorists, and corresponding to the portrayals of queenship regimes outlined above, early modern dramatic productions largely appear to present and at times promulgate the oppressive legal and cultural ideas concerning the subordinate place of women within the domestic sphere. The tragicomedies of Georges de Scudéry offer a world in which normative gender roles, despite the momentary destabilisation of order consistent with the baroque underpinnings of the genre, emerge triumphant. In the opening scenes of *Le Prince Déguisé* (1636), parental authority appears absolute; the female protagonist acts as a dutiful daughter, observing the wishes of her mother (a widow, hence her authority) and remaining hesitant to publicly confess her love.[158] Likewise, throughout *Orante* (1636), the playwright has his female title character repeatedly objectified.[159] Persistently absent from the stage, Orante is discussed by secondary characters solely in terms of her beauty and societal function as an exchangeable entity through marriage.[160] Hinting at the notion of women as passive and weak, the female protagonist of *Le Vassal Généreux* (1636) is abducted and held captive. It is worth noting that all three of these tragicomedies include scenes of cross-dressing, a theme common to the tragicomic genre and one recognised as potentially disconcerting for seventeenth-century gender hierarchy. As an act practised and condemned in reality, theatrical cross-dressing reflects contemporary concerns about the stability of the social order, raising challenging questions about the capacity of women to overcome their 'natural' biological inferiority.[161] Crucially, however, the subversive potential of theatrical transvestism is to some extent mitigated by the generic

[158] Georges de Scudéry, *Le Prince Déguisé* (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1636).
[159] Scudéry, *Orante.*
[160] Being subject to a potential arranged marriage to a wealthy elderly man, the young woman is to her mother merely a piece of property to be disposed of for material gains: 'Son esprit est fort doux, j'en dispose absolue,/ Florange, elle est à vous, si j'y suis résolue/ […], Croyez (puisqu'il est vrai) que j'aurais le pouvoir,/ De la mettre en vos bras comme dans son devoir' (II.IV.203-210). Georges de Scudéry*, Orante* (Paris: Hachette Livre, 2018). Véronique Desnain points out that similar language is used by Racine. Véronique Desnain, 'At the Altar: Marriage and/or Sacrifice in Racine,' *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 18.1 (1996), 159-66.
[161] For discussions of the European practice of cross-dressing, see Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol's *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989). For details of the condemnation of transvestism in France more specifically, see Sylvie Steinberg, *La confusion des sexes: Le travestissement de la renaissance à la révolution* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

prerequisite for all role reversals to be restored by the denouement.[162] With the disguise of Scudéry's female characters also being motivated by what Georges Forestier categorises as the usual 'feminine' goals of 'escape' and 'love', these plays do little to threaten the patriarchy, closing with the promise of marriage and associated female subservience in what can perhaps be deemed exemplary of the New Historicist concept of subversion and containment.[163] Such a reassuring return is not offered by Françoise Pascal. A playwright who fails to present decorous female characters by close of curtain risks being the recipient of extensive criticism, as *La Querelle du Cid* attests. As touched upon in the introduction, it is principally Corneille's characterisation of Chimène that fuels this literary quarrel. Evading filial duty in the interest of passion, refusing to recognise complete subordination to state authority, and even engaging with her lover whilst he holds the sword covered 'du sang tout chaud' of her father, Chimène is denounced as a prostitute and hypocrite; a monster of sexual license and filial treachery.[164] Demonstrating the double standards inherent to early modern behavioural expectations concerning gender, the *Académie française* infer that Chimène's surrender to her love would be excusable in a man, but the fact that she is a woman 'exigeoit d'elle une severité plus grande'.[165]

Despite a growing doctrinal demand for female passivity, as we have seen, active women dominate the seventeenth-century French stage. Corneille offers several examples of powerful heroines operating within the public domain, such as Cléopâtre and Sophonisbe: portrayals for which he once again comes under critical scrutiny.[166] It is, however, with Racine that we perhaps encounter the most manifest representations of imposing female characters effective in the private

[162] See Chapter II.
[163] Georges Forestier, *Esthétique de l'identification dans le théâtre français (1550-1680): Le déguisement et ses avatars* (Paris: Droz, 1988). On gender and disguise specifically, see pp.132-36, 230-31 and 472-76.
[164] See Christopher Braider, '*Cet hymen différé*: The Figuration of Authority in Corneille's *Le Cid*', *Representations*, 54 (Spring 1996), 28-56.
[165] Chapelain, *Sentiments de l'Académie*, in Gasté, pp.374-375. Others defend her approach, see for example, the anonymously published 'L'innocence et le veritable amour de Chymene', in Gasté, pp.466-482.
[166] D'Aubignac, for instance, criticises the 'unfeminine' behaviour of Corneille's heroines in *Sophonisbe*, *Sertorius*, and *Œdipe* in his *Dissertations contre Corneille.* For a discussion of his characters, see Claire Carlin, 'The Woman as Heavy: Female Villains in the Theater of Pierre Corneille', *The French Review*, 59.3 (1986), 389-98.

sphere.[167] The decision of the Jansenist playwright to construct strong women may in part reflect the above-mentioned shift away from the heroic ideal of *gloire* so inherent to Cornelian aesthetic and epitomised in his 1640 tragedy *Horace*.[168] Indeed, Paul Bénichou situates his concept of the 'demolition of the hero' with Racine, and the 'feminoid' nature of his male characters has been noted by contemporary critics.[169] Yet the staging of strong women does not necessarily equate to a positive portrayal of the female sex. As we saw with the staging of female rulers, those who neglect their set roles as daughters, wives, and mothers are often depicted as horrific aberrations. Passion-driven and violent actions, when undertaken by a woman, are persistently grounded in a discourse of sexual identity.[170] Women who transcend the role ascribed to them by society are typically responsible for the tragic denouement, with closing scenes often involving their own demise. *Phèdre* offers perhaps the best-known seventeenth-century example: the uncontrolled illicit passion of the title character indirectly results in deaths of Hippolyte and Œnone, before the play culminates with Phèdre's 'feminine' suicide by poison. Acting on her love for her stepson in the belief that her husband has died, the tragedy reinforces early modern fears surrounding the widow. Llewellyn observes that the literary widow is 'often regarded as partly dead, as all but dead, as ought-to-be dead, as may-as-well be dead. But she is also often depicted in early modern French literature, as dead*ly*, as a real *femme fatale*'.[171] By contrast, 'good' female characters — that is to say, passive, obedient women — are typically permitted to survive.[172] Through their denouements, notably their

[167] See, for example, Desnain, *Hidden Tragedies*.
[168] Corneille, *Horace*.
[169] Paul Bénichou, *Morales du Grand Siècle* (Paris : Gallimard, 1990). See Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* and Richard Goodkin, 'Gender Reversal in Racine's Historical and Mythological Tragedies', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 49 (Winter 1999), 15-27.
[170] Véronique Desnain notes how when Pyrrhus threatens to kill the woman he loves and who refuses to yield to him in *Andromaque*, he is experiencing tragic passion, yet when Hermione does the equivalent, she is simply a woman. *Hidden Tragedies.*
[171] Kathleen Llewellyn, 'Death Defines Her: Representations of the Widow in Early Modern French Literature', in *Love, Death and Women's Lives in French and Francophone Literature*, eds. Eilene Hoft-March and Judith Holland Sarnecki (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp.214-40. See Introduction to book, p.14.
[172] This is frequently noted by critics. As well as Desnain, *Hidden Tragedies*, see Desnain, 'Les faux miroirs: The Good Woman/Bad Woman dichotomy'.

deployment of scenes of death and violence, playwrights can thus be said to be promoting certain gendered behavioural codes.

Several exceptions to the survival of the 'good' woman warrant further comment. The first, as already touched upon, is the widow. The mourning and distress expected of an abandoned wife is at times taken to extremes within the theatrical domain. Influenced by Ancient Greek and Roman drama in which the ideal bereft wife follows her husband to her death by committing suicide, several seventeenth-century women protagonists meet their demise in what is presented as the ultimate act of devotion and subordination.[173] Their suicide should of course be undertaken by 'feminine' means, such as hanging from a handkerchief or delicate scarf.[174] Another scenario in which an otherwise virtuous woman fails to survive the denouement is following sexual assault. In line with increasing dramatic regulation, the dramatic form departs from the visible staging of rape that we encounter in earlier productions such as Alexandre Hardy's *Scédase ou l'Hospitalité violée*, discussed in the introduction to this thesis.[175] The theme of sexual violence nevertheless remains a prevalent discursive theme, with this aesthetic shift resonating to some extent with its socio-political context. The elimination of the direct staging of the act of rape itself could be said to function as a reminder to the spectator that the act of sexual violence is less a crime against the material female body than an attack on the honour of her husband and his household. Corresponding to early modern legal and cultural discourses, references to the notion of male entitlement alongside an utter disregard for the woman involved reverberate in dramatic form. In Rotrou's tragedy *Crisante* (1640), the male protagonist views rape as a means of reasserting his authority, believing it to have been wounded by the power that the beauty of the female character exercises over him.[176] Similarly, following the false accusation of sexual assault in *Phèdre*, her husband shows little concern for the welfare of his

[173] According to Llewellyn, Montaigne writes of three 'good' women all of whom follow or precede their husbands in death, suggesting that the only appropriate widow is one who is dead. Llewellyn, 'Words to the Wise'. See also Loraux, *Tragic Ways* and Harris, 'Dying of the Fifth Act'.
[174] Loraux, *Tragic Ways.*
[175] See Introduction. For a discussion of sex more generally in the pre-classical period, see Nina Ekstein, 'Sex in Rotrou's Theater: Performance and Disorder' *Orbis Litterarum,* 6.74 *(*2012), pp.290-309.
[176] Clarke, 'User des droits'.

wife. Suicide, as *Andromaque* infers, is at times presented as the only means of saving family honour. However, as has been suggested by other critics, the act of death can in certain scenarios equally be read as a form of rebellion.[177] As will shall see in the following chapters, through their construction of violence, Pascal and Villedieu engage with and at times challenge the misogynistic ideas concerning marriage and courtship discussed throughout this section. In so doing, these two playwrights feed into broader seventeenth-century literary developments, a topic to which I will now turn.

Women and Literature

Alongside governance and the familial domain, another significant component of the *Querelle des Femmes* revolves around women's engagement with the literary sphere, both in their position as readers and spectators of literary products as well as their role as active cultural producers in their own right. Early modern moralists denounce female exposure to certain forms of literature as a dangerous stimulus of the passions; women risk becoming distracted from their domestic duties by tales of love and chivalry.[178] With the female spectator comprising a not insignificant share of the seventeenth-century French theatre audience, drama's ability to corrupt emerges as a particular source of anxiety.[179] For Pierre Nicole, for instance, there was a danger that women would identify with the heroines on stage and thereby become dissatisfied with their own lives.[180] Similar concerns of distraction and immorality can be found in discussions regarding women's role as actresses. As

[177] See, for example, Desnain 'At the Altar' and Philippe Bosquet, 'Le suicide féminin au XVIIe siècle: Un acte héroïque', in *La femme au XVIIe siècle*, ed. Richard Hodgson (Tubingen: Narr, 2002), pp.183-200.
[178] Concerns over the morality of the theatre prevail throughout the century and extend beyond the question of gender. Counter to the conviction of certain dramatic theorists that theatrical representation offers a didactic utility, theologians and religious moralists typically perceive the literary form as pernicious, promoting the moral degradation of the individual and society. Women were, however, encouraged to consume devotional literature, with Père François Dinet, for instance, seeing learning principally as a means of encouraging chastity. Père François Dinet, *Le Théâtre François Des Seigneurs et Dames Illustres* (Paris: Nicolas & Jean de la. Coste, 1642). On theatre and morality, particularly from the religious angle, see J.S. Street, *French Sacred Drama from Bèze to Corneille: Dramatic Forms and Their Purposes in the Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and Phillips, *The Theatre and its Critics.*
[179] Women are thought to have been part of French theatre audiences from the sixteenth century, attending in increasing numbers from the 1630s onwards. On female spectators, see Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences*; Lochert et al, eds. *Écrire pour elles* and Lochert et al., eds. *Spectatrices.*
[180] Nicole, Pierre, *Traité de la Comédie*, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1961).

Jan Clarke and Virginia Scott have shown, women are often chosen to play a particular role due not to their talent or skills but based solely on physical appearance.[181] Substantial attention is paid to an actress's 'charm' and ability to attract paying (male) spectators to the performance, undermining women's capabilities outside of domestic duties. As Jan Clark argues, the emphasis on physical appearance highlights once again the dual standard in operation. Whilst one appeal of the theatre was seen to be the attractiveness of its actresses, these very same women were concurrently criticised for arousing impure thoughts in the minds of male spectators.[182] As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the blaming of women, and conflicting expectations of women, are recurrent themes within early modern socio-political discourse and literary works. The fear surrounding both actress and female spectator is hardly surprising; both defy social convention by appearing and speaking in public. It is possible that the presence of female spectators and actresses may have in part contributed to the increasing number of women dramatists in the second half of the seventeenth-century, serving as one means for women to gain an understanding of ancient texts (purportedly required of the playwright) to which they otherwise would not have formal access.

Beyond the stage, the period gave rise to an outpouring of other literary production including poetry, novels and letters by women such as Madame de Scudéry and Madame de Lafayette, some of which are published anonymously or under a pseudonym.[183] The role of women as literary producers is tied up with broader debates around female education and knowledge. In conjunction with the value often accorded to female subordination in the public and domestic spheres set out above, motifs of constraint and restriction frequently underpin the formal education of women in seventeenth-century France. Centred upon the inculcation of domestic and social skills

[181] See Clarke, '"In the Eye of the Beholder?" and Scott, *Women on the Stage.* On actresses, see also Evain, *L'apparition des actrices.* Concerns over the immorality of the acting profession are not just limited to the actress, with the actor also coming under scrutiny. See Phillips, *The Theatre and its Critics*, pp.174-203.
[182] Jan Clarke 'Female Cross-dressing on the Paris stage, 1673-1715', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 35.3 (1999), 238-50.
[183] Joan DeJean goes as far as to term the novel a 'feminist creation'. Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1991), p.5

as well as moral appropriateness, the early modern approach to female instruction strives to limit her role within society. For Fénelon, education should ensure 'qu'elles [les femmes] sachent gouverner un jour leurs ménages, et obéir à leurs maris sans raison'.[184] Any awareness of worldly knowledge should remain hidden at all times (it is, after all, 'un peu honteux de s'être chargé d'une science inutile' according to Pierre Nicole).[185] Counter-arguments to restricting women's access to knowledge are widespread throughout the century. Marie le Jars de Gournay, writing in the 1620s, draws upon the notion that social upbringing, rather than sexual identity, determines individual nature. It is patriarchal prejudice alone that has caused the disparagement of women:

> Si donc les Dammes arrivent moins souvent que les hommes, aux degrez de l'excellence; c'est merveille que ce deffaut de bonne education, et mesmes l'affluence de la mauvaise expresse et professoire, ne face pis, et qu'elle ne les garde d'y pouvoir arrive du tout. S'il le faut prouver: se trouve-t'il plus de difference des hommes à elles, que d'elles à elles-mesmes: selon l'institution qu'elles ont receue, selon qu'elles sont eslevées en Ville ou village, ou selon les Nations? Et consequemment, pourquoy leur institution aux affaires et aux Lettres a l'égal des hommes, ne rempliroit-elle la distance vuide, qui paroist d'ordinaire entre les testes d'eux et d'elles? […][186]

Early modern pamphleteers similarly stress that should the same level of attention be given to the education of women as to the opposite sex, 'on verrait des merveilles', and this argument continues to be made by philosophers later in the century such as Gabrielle Suchon.[187]

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[184] Francois de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon*, De l'éducation des filles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1687) p. 9.
[185] Pierre Nicole, *Essais de morale contenus en divers traités sur plusieurs devoirs importans, vol. II* (Paris: Guillaume Desprez, 1682), p.81. For a discussion of women being required to hide their knowledge, see Cholakian, p.28.
[186] De Gournay, 'Egalit*é* des hommes et des femmes', pp.965-987 (p.971).
[187] Gibson p.17. See also the work of Chevalier de l'Escale, *Le champion des femmes* (Paris: M. Guillemot, 1618), who, amongst others, argues that unequal education is to blame for female inferiority. On Suchon, see Véronique Desnain, 'Gabrielle Suchon: De l'éducation des femmes'*, Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 26.1 (2004), 259-269.

The topic features in numerous literary works of the period. Several of Molière's comedies take as their focus women seeking to educate themselves. *Les Précieuses Ridicules* (1659), for instance, presents 'la préciosité; a notion in which men and women seek to distinguish themselves from that which is banal or common, including through their use of language. Known as '*les précieuses*' — a term initially considered derogatory — these individuals are both negatively presented as pretentious and prudish and/or positively associated with salon culture discussed below.[188] Meanwhile Madeleine de Scudéry stresses the pleasure and satisfaction women can find in learning and in writing.[189] Female-authored works were nonetheless at times met with much disdain. Criticised for daring to transcend gender boundaries by committing themselves to print, they face accusations of plagiarism and are mocked for their content and grammatical errors (due largely of course to their lack of formal education). References to such accusations abound in the paratexts of the dramatic works discussed in the following chapters. As we shall see, female playwrights draw attention to the sexual (im)balance of power, using their prefaces and paratextual apparatus to position themselves as cultural agents and justify, if implicitly, their education and knowledge base.

Against the background of these debates, the seventeenth century gives rise to a unique institution that opens up a specifically 'feminine' site for intellectual and cultural engagement: the salon.[190] Forging the above-mentioned notion of the *honnête homme* and fostering the ethos of gallantry, salon culture grows in popularity in the second half of the century, promoting the refinement of manners, the art of eloquent conversation, and intellectual discussion.[191] Created and run by (usually unattached) women, such as Madame de Rambouillet, the salon represents a site of

[188] Originally coined in 1650s to ridicule overzealous groups of women with arbitrary pretensions for learning, the salons initially distance themselves from the term. However, the term gradually loses its pejorative connotations and by 1661 the term was commonly applied to all women in Parisian salons. Lougee, p.7. See also Jan Clarke, 'Are the Précieuses only ridicules? Molière, salon culture and the shaping of France's collective memory', in *Molière in Context*, ed. Jan Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp 116-124.
[189] Scudéry's *Les femmes illustres.*
[190] Salon culture has been subject to extensive critical attention in recent years. See, for instance, Linda Timmermans, *L'Accès des femmes à la culture, 1598-1715* (Paris: Champion, 1993) and Beasley, *Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France*.
[191] According to Viala, gallantry is a code of good manners and controlled politeness but also an appreciation of art and entertainment. Viala, *La France galante*.

sociability and pleasure amongst the elite and one in which the female sex was highly influential. As Faith Beasley argues, salon conversation has the potential to function as a vehicle for the production of knowledge, aligning with the New Historicist idea that all cultural forms are socially and politically productive.[192] Those in attendance typically held liberal views on marriage and education. Alongside seeking relief from loveless marriages, with some even imposing on their suitors long periods of celibacy disguised as obedience to courtly ideals, a common topic in salon conversation was the advantages of a marriage based on romantic love rather than lineage.[193] As we have seen, the institution also led to an increase in inter-status marriages. The salons thus represented a threat to the established order.

Literature played a central role in the salons, bringing together writers to discuss literary works and debate ideas. With women supposedly endowed with greater imagination, sentiment, subtlety and delicacy (and thus considered better suited for appreciating and reviewing literature), the salon establishes itself as a site for men of letters to test out their works prior to publication, and one in which they were expected to meet high standards of taste if they wished to attract the patronage of influential women.[194] Alongside providing subject matter for discussion, the men gave instruction in subjects the women had never had a chance to formally learn, such as Latin.[195] The cultural institution also played a role in the advancement of women's own literary careers. As time went on, women participants were encouraged not only to provide their opinions on male-authored works but to write themselves and would have had the opportunity to gain access to male mentors and learn more about literary techniques through their contact with male writers. Salons shaped the entire cultural field but appear to have had a particularly overt influence on the theatrical domain.

[192] For Beasley, the political potential of salon conversation has hitherto been overlooked by critical commentators. See Faith E. Beasley, 'Changing the Conversation: Re-positioning the French Seventeenth-Century Salon', *L'Esprit créateur*, 60.1 (2020), pp.34-46.
[193] For an overview of the views on marriage expressed by those attending salons, see Cholakian, *Women and the Politics*, pp.32-34.
[194] On women's aptitude for literary appreciation, see Lougee, p.32 and Gibson p.178.
[195] Salon culture could thus be another reason behind increasing numbers of women writing for the stage, allowing them to gain access to the texts on which early modern dramatic doctrines are based.

Dramatists such as Corneille and Molière confess to attending salons to seek the opinions of its female organisers and attendees.[196] As Véronique Lochert has shown, the significance that playwrights (both men and women) awarded to female reception can be seen through the large number of prologues and dedications addressed to powerful patronesses.[197] Imposing a new sensibility on literature that coincides with the increasing demand for *la bienséance*, playwrights develop elegance and nobility in their style (both language and content) to appeal to this new audience.[198] Indeed, we have seen how dramatists take pains to emphasise the increased respectability of the stage, with Corneille attributing his decision to displace the violence of *Œdipe* to concerns over female reception.[199] The portrayal of eloquent and determined female characters who are treated respectfully by male characters can perhaps also be said to reflect the salon attendance of male dramatists and their awareness of the presence of educated salon women within the audience.

Enabling women to hold powerful cultural influence, the salon plays a central role in the lives and development of early modern French female playwrights, including the two dramatists that form the focus of this study. Born in Lyon, a city in which theatre and salons flourished, Françoise Pascal was closely involved in salon culture, where she adopted the pseudonym Palimène.[200] In Antoine Baudeau de Somaize's *Dictionnaire des Précieuses* (1660), she is depicted as: 'Une vieille pretieuse. Elle fait fort bien des vers, et l'on a représentée aux jeux du Cirque une pièce qu'elle a composée, et qui a este trouvée fort belle'.[201] Writing letters and poems as well as theatre, Pascal's literary works engage with the ideas and tastes promulgated by the salon society. Her poem, *La Belle*

[196] Roger Picard, *Les salons littéraires et la société française, 1610-1789* (New York: Brentano's, 1943), p.115.
[197] Lochert et al, eds. *Écrire pour elles.*
[198] As Perry Gethner and Melinda Gough note, salon women are often credited for the following seventeenth-century theatrical developments: the banning of overly vulgar language and gestures, the respectful treatment of women by male characters (at least the admirable males), the increasing importance of love plots and the frequent use of galant phraseology. 'The Advent of Women Players and Playwrights in Early Modern France', *Renaissance Drama*, 44.2 (2016), 217-232 (p.230).
[199] Corneille, *Œdipe:*
[200] See Kennedy's introduction to her critical edition of *Agathonphile martyr*, notably pp.22-28.
[201] Antoine de Somaize, *Le Dictionnaire des précieuses*, ed. Charles-Louis Livet (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1972), vol.1, p.273.

Stupide, offers a scathing criticism of a beautiful but stupid woman who makes no effort to acquire any learning and is incapable of intelligent conversation.[202] Her collection of letters, *Le Commerce du Parnasse*, published following Pascal's move to Paris, is clearly written in accordance with galant style, whilst her engagement with different theatrical genres also show an awareness of, and ability to play into, evolving tastes.[203] She is also the first woman to have her work performed by a professional troupe, perhaps benefitting from contacts made in salon circles. Through her paratextual materials, however, Pascal makes clear that she did not benefit from the support of a male mentor, defending her work as entirely her own and criticising formal educational restrictions placed upon the female sex.[204]

Madame de Villedieu, on the other hand, was known to have worked with the eminent dramatic theorist and writer Abbé d'Aubignac, at least for the production of her first play, *Manlius.* Having moved to Paris at the age of fifteen where she was discovered to have a talent for poetry, Villedieu became a prominent figure in the early modern French salon, developing a large network of patrons from aristocratic and high cultural circles, as evidenced through her dedications and substantial output of letters.[205] Best known for her novels and poetry, Villedieu's works align with salon interests, concerned with love, gallantry and bold female protagonists. Outspoken and controversial, the writer also demonstrates her familiarity with the 'précieux' style in her summary of Molière's *Les Précieuses Ridicules.*[206] Through their roles as influential literary critics and writers, Pascal and Villedieu challenge early modern reductionist views of the female sex.

It is as part of this wider social, political and cultural context that the plays under consideration in this thesis need to be read, and I will now turn to the ways in which the theatre of

[202] Françoise Pascal, *Diverses poésies de Mademoiselle Pascal où sont contenus La Belle stupide; Lysis malheureux dans la solitude; Sylvie dans le repentir; L'Amoureux extravagant; L'Amoureuse ridicule; Philis désolée; Plaintes Amoureuses; Stances sur une belle voix. Et autres ouvrages* (Lyon: Simon Matheret, 1657).
[203] Françoise Pascal, *Le Commerce du Parnasse*, ed. Deborah Steinberger (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001)
[204] See Chapter II.
[205] On Villedieu, see Keller-Rahbé and Worth-Stylianou.
[206] Despite writing a summary of the opening night, Villedieu was not in fact present at the performance.

Françoise Pascal and Madame de Villedieu engages with the ideas and arguments regarding the treatment of women in society outlined here. As sustained and detailed examinations of the theme of theatrical violence in individual works, which is shown to be closely related to contemporary socio-political agendas, the ensuing chapters contend that both playwrights deploy the dramatic form to challenge the physical and metaphorical violence inflicted upon women across all sectors of society.

Chapter II
Tragicomic Violence: Genre and Gender in Françoise Pascal's *Agathonphile Martyr* (1655) and *Sésostris* (1661)

Introduction

That early modern French tragicomedy is often overlooked as a genre capable of interacting with seventeenth-century socio-political anxieties is hardly surprising. Whilst precise definitions of the dramatic form remain somewhat sparse and inconsistent today, the baroque-infused chaos, disorder and 'l'exubérance et l'excès' underpinning tragicomic intrigue signals the prioritisation of audience entertainment and the spectacular over the creation of a verisimilar production concerned with contemporary debates.[1] Dominating the stage in the 1630s prior to the amplified integration of dramatic precepts, the tragicomic form characteristically portrays *invraisemblable* themes of magic, ghosts, narcotics, pirates, madness, and, in direct contradistinction to later regulations, regularly showcases 'a sizeable amount of violence'.[2] Distinguished from tragedy by its supposedly integral *fin heureuse*, the spectator revels in the portrayal of far from decorous scenes of disguise, mistaken identities and transvestism — acts with the capacity to threaten the need for fixed societal roles such as gender and certainly antithetical to the notion of theatre as a mirror image of a stable society — whilst remaining comfortably assured that all disorder will be swiftly reconciled.[3] Persistently aware of the greater theatrical illusion, the truth, as Marva Barnett observes, remains 'subliminally present'; prior to the denouement, the 'rightful' order is restored following a marvellous *anagnorisis*, with any earlier seeming inversions of roles proven to be merely illusory.[4]

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[1] Charles Mazouer, *Le théâtre français de l'âge classique: Tome I, le premier XVIIe siècle* (Paris: H. Champion, 2006), p.491.

[2] Perry Gethner, 'Toward the Classical Unities: How Mairet adapted d'Urfé for the stage', in *Intersections: Acte du 35e congrès annuel de la North American Society*, eds. Faith E. Beasley and Kathleen Wine (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2005), pp.37-44 (p.37).

[3] Truchet, *La tragédie classique,* p.186. For a discussion of the socio-political implications of such acts, see Derval Conroy, 'The Cultural Politics of Disguise: Female Cross-dressing in Tragicomedy, 1630-1642', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 24.1 (2002), 135-149. As highlighted in the introduction to this thesis, the tragedy *à fin heureuse* nevertheless remains a possibility within seventeenth-century dramatic aesthetics.

[4] Marva Barnett, 'The Inverse World of French Tragicomedy', *The French Review*, 55.3 (1982), 350-357. Wendy Gibson, when discussing the return to a specifically 'gendered' order within literature more broadly, echoes Barnett's views: 'Readers and spectators could safely enjoy by proxy, all the thrill of revolt, but no one cared to contemplate the problematic situation of the girl whose rebellion definitely placed her outside the family or the respectable social pale'. Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, p.51.

Whilst the content and structure of the tragicomic genre would appear to limit the staging of a production capable of promulgating a broader socio-political agenda, as an elusive form most consistently defined by its irregularity and 'freedom from rule', early modern tragicomedy nevertheless emerges as incompatible with the growing number of aesthetic imperatives.[5] As Brunetière concisely states, 'la liberté, c'est son domaine et aussi son moyen'.[6] During a period in which dramaturgical principles play a role in the state's desired advancement of drama as a socio-political entity, and given the anti-authoritarian nature of generic hybridity more broadly, tragicomedy's definition — or rather indefinability — indicates the dramatic form's privileged position for avoiding, disrespecting or even subverting both aesthetic and socio-political ideals.[7] Lacking any official Ancient authority at a time in which genres (notably tragedy) are assigned fixed characteristics in accordance with Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragicomedy instead appears to encapsulate the very disorder and instability that both the stage and state are at times seemingly striving to counteract.[8] It is perhaps as a result of the genre's discordance with these increasingly imposed aesthetic and concomitant socio-political underpinnings that the production of 'irregular' tragicomedies rapidly declines. Gradually absorbed into the more ordered and now officially regulated tragic form, the two genres are perceived as being utterly indistinguishable from one another by the end of the century: 'La distance [entre les deux genres] est si réduite qu'il devient parfois impossible de les distinguer'.[9]

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[5] Henry Carrington Lancaster, *The French Tragi-Comedy: Its Origin and Development from 1552 to 1628* (New York: Gordian Press, 1966), p.147.

[6] Ferdinand Brunetière, *Revue des Deux Mondes, VI* (Paris: A. Courbé, 1901), p.143. Nicolas Hammond confirms that tragicomedy's elusive status affords the genre a 'certain malleability' with the rules. See 'Highly Irregular: Defining Tragicomedy in Seventeenth-Century France', in *Early Modern Tragicomedy*, eds. Subha Mukherji and Raphael Lyne (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp.76-83 (p.80).

[7] Generic hybridity is, in fact, often deemed to be particularly well-suited to times of political unrest due to its anti-authoritarian nature. See Gary A. Schmidt, *Renaissance Hybrids: Culture and Genre in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). See also Michael Meere, 'The Politics of Transgenericity: Pierre du Ryer's Dramatic Adaptations of Jean Barclay's *Argenis*', *Studia Aurea,* 10 (2016), 313-334.

[8] For a discussion of tragicomedy and Aristotle, see Sarah Dewar-Watson, 'Aristotle and Tragicomedy' in *Early Modern Tragicomedy*, eds. Subha Mukherji and Raphael Lyne (Suffolk: DS Brewer, 2007), pp.15-27.

[9] Antoine Adam*, Histoire de la littérature française au XVIIe siècle: Tome II* (Paris: Domat, 1948), p.318.

Writing in the latter half of the century, however, Françoise Pascal curiously classifies three of her dramatic works as tragicomedies, with the playwright's tragicomic productions featuring several of the 'irregular' themes more commonly located within the genre at the height of its popularity, notably in relation to violence. This chapter will explore the implications of Pascal's troubling generic denominations for seventeenth-century socio-political considerations. By centring on the dramatist's deployment of now mostly obsolete acts of irregular violence within two of her three tragicomedies, it is my contention that Pascal exploits the putative regulatory freedom granted by the generic classification of her plays to challenge early modern gender hierarchy, displacing tragicomic drama not only on a temporal level but also to a seemingly subversive end. As well as demonstrating how Pascal's specific use of tragicomic violence destabilises supposedly fixed gender dynamics, this chapter also aims to draw attention to the theatrical genre's potential to critique contemporary society more broadly. This is a component of tragicomedy still too often overlooked in favour of tragedy and comedy today.

Françoise Pascal: Critical Reception

As the only playwright of the period to stage a tragicomic martyr production (*Agathonphile Martyr*, 1655), the sole female dramatist to attempt the machine play (*Endymion*, 1657), and one of the few writers to produce a 'pure' tragicomedy in the 1660s (*Sésostris*, 1661), genre certainly appears a pertinent lens through which to explore Pascal's works. Yet despite the Lyonnaise playwright's generic innovation and status as the most prolific seventeenth-century French female playwright, the dramatic works of Françoise Pascal remain largely unexplored today.[10] Unmarried and seemingly self-supporting, critics have instead focused upon the writer's extensive salon engagement, exchanges of laudatory letters and poems, successful painting career, and sudden move to Paris in 1667.[11] The notable exclusion of the writer's theatre from critical analysis may perhaps be due in

[10] Alongside three full-length works, Pascal also produced three farces.
[11] For an overview of Pascal's life, see Deborah Steinberger's introduction to her critical edition of *Le Commerce du Parnasse*, pp.v-xx, and Kennedy's introduction to her critical edition of *Agathonphile martyr*, pp.16-29.

part to the plays' negative critical reception; uncertainty surrounding when, where, and even if Pascal's tragicomic dramas were ever performed; and, of course, their problematic generic classifications. Those few scholars focusing exclusively upon Pascal's theatrical productions nevertheless offer interesting insights into the playwright's exploitation of tragicomedy's seeming malleability and reliance upon generic tropes more frequently associated with the dramatic form in the 1630s (such as magic and loss of consciousness), with these common generic signifiers often being considered in relation to the construction of gender dynamics.

The extent to which all — or indeed any — of Pascal's three tragicomic works can be said to effectively utilise the genre to challenge normative gender roles remains a problematic point of contention today, due, it would seem, to an apparent lack of consistency across her three works. Critics persistently deem *Endymion* — excluded here due to its official classification as a tragicomic *pièce à machines* (typically demanding the use of special effects), the spectacular nature of the myth and the fact that the plot is revealed to all be a dream, and its minimal tragicomic violence — to carry a greater seditious message than Pascal's tragicomedy and tragicomic martyr play.[12] Perry Gethner, for instance, finds that Pascal makes use of tragicomedy's transformation (from a genre expected to present heroic *guerriers,* to a dramatic form in which courteous and less daring male characters are deemed acceptable) to stage incompetent young male protagonists, before concluding that the presence of masculine weakness fails to be countered by female strength, most prominently in *Agathonphile martyr* and *Sésostris*.[13] Similarly, Ruth Vortsman focusses upon the ways in which the playwright exploits the typical tragicomic motifs of sleep and dreams in an attempt to present passive male characters alongside active female characters watching over, and gazing at, the objectified male lead, before later proceeding to distinguish between each of the

[12] For an analysis centred upon the powerful women portrayed in *Endymion*, see Ruth Vortsman, 'Diane as Beauty: Three Seventeenth-Century Examples' in *The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, eds. Amaleena Damlé and Aurélie L'Hostis (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), pp.151-166. On machine plays, see Perry Gethner, 'Staging and Spectacle in the Machine Tragedies', in *L'Age du théâtre en France*, ed. David Trott and Nicole Boursier (Edmonton : Academic Printing and Publishing, 1988), pp.231-46.
[13] Perry Gethner, 'Les jeunes premiers de Françoise Pascal: Un héroïsme de la passivité,' *Œuvres et critiques,* 35.1 (2010), 125-134.

plays' subversive effectiveness.[14] Deeming *Endymion* to carry the most dissident message, Vortsman reduces the dramatist's final tragicomedy to a conformation of expected seventeenth-century gender roles. The female lead of *Sésostris* 'sits uncomfortably' with the portrayals of women seen in *Endymion*, as Thimarette is a 'relatively static and powerless character, accepting the reversals in her fortune without complaint'.[15] Likewise, in his discussion of *Agathonphile martyr,* Paul Scott finds the dominance of romantic love alongside the emphasis placed upon the father figure of authority (more commonly associated with tragicomedy than religious drama) in the playwright's tragicomic-martyr production to empty the work of religiously subversive elements.[16] Yet it is precisely Pascal's disregard for religion until the concluding scene of the play — alongside its other tragicomic credentials — that justifies the inclusion of *Agathonphile martyr* within an examination of Pascal's tragicomedies here.[17]

Tragicomic Violence: Genre and Gender

No study touches upon the ways in which the violence underpinning these tragicomic tropes may interact with contemporary debates concerning gender dynamics. It is my contention that a consideration of what shall henceforth be termed 'tragicomic violence' (that is to say, violent acts frequently found in the genre at the height of its popularity) across Pascal's two supposedly less subversive tragicomedies *Agathonphile martyr* and *Sésostris* allows for a more universal reading of her theatre as challenging patriarchal norms. These acts of tragicomic violence include voyeurism, ominous apparitions, abductions, and sexual violence, but typically do not culminate in a death. Indeed, according to Guarini, the genre should incorporate danger but not death.[18] Within both

[14] Ruth Vortsman, 'Sleeping Heroes, Speaking Heroines: Performing Gender Roles in the Tragicomedies of Francoise Pascal', *Romance Studies*, 30.1 (2012), 2-13.
[15] Vortsman, *Tragedies and Tragi-comedies,* p.97.
[16] Scott, *The Martyr Figure in French Theatre*. It is important to note that Scott is exploring the play within the context of religion dissidence rather than gender dynamics.
[17] Scott himself remarks that the role of religion in the play is 'minimal'. *Ibid*., p.154.
[18] Battista Guarini, *Compendio della poesia tragicomica, tratto dai duo Verati* (Venice: G. B. Ciotto, 1603). See p.12: 'Gli affetti mossi, ma rintuzzati: il diletto, non la mestizia: il pericolo, non la morte'.

productions, Pascal deploys an opening scene of tragicomic violence that disrupts conventional gender dynamics, engendering a site for envisaging an alternate world in which women refuse to remain subordinate to their male counterparts. Although the inversion of conventional societal roles is, as we have already established, a quasi-characteristic of the genre, the gender disruption incited through the medium of violence pertains throughout Pascal's dramatic works: the 'rightful' order fails to remain 'subliminally present'. Beginning by addressing the playwright's tragicomic martyr production, this chapter contends that Pascal stages strong female characters, who, unlike the female protagonists typically shown to be at least partially reliant upon their male counterparts for their acts of violence within 1630s tragicomedies (such as those by Georges de Scudéry discussed later in this chapter), are fully capable of instigating and/or challenging acts of violence to achieve autonomy.

Within *Agathonphile martyr*, the initial scene of tragicomic violence takes the form of sexual assault. Irénée, a passion-driven female character attempts to seduce, rape and subsequently murder her own stepson. Despite commencing with what would appear to be a reinforcement of negative female stereotypes as set out in the previous chapter, it will be argued that certain 1630s tragicomic components are retained and carefully deployed to encourage the spectator to view the scene as mere entertainment rather than a true reflection of female behaviour. Whilst Irénée is repeatedly condemned and eventually seeks redemption, the passivity of the male character established via the opening act of sexual violence only amplifies as the play progresses. His weakness highlights the strength of the play's true protagonist, Triphine, who actively strives to liberate herself from an arranged marriage — once again through forms of tragicomic violence — by resisting her father and ultimately defying the patriarchal order. Finally, and in line with my New Historicist approach, close critical engagement with the play's language and structure throughout exposes clever parallels between Pascal's presentation of contractual marriage and Irénée's earlier condemned act of sexual aggression, enabling a reading of the play's violent opening as underscoring the abusive nature of the *mariage de convenance* for early modern women.

In contrast to *Agathonphile martyr,* in which sexual dynamics appear inverted from the outset of the play and whereby women are shown to be readily prepared to utilise violence to resist patriarchal norms, *Sésostris* seemingly offers a far more conventional portrayal of seventeenth-century gender roles. Our first encounter with the tragicomedy's two main protagonists, Sésostris and Thimarette, offers a brave yet modest warrior engaging with a passive, objectified female character. Through her application of the tragicomic trope of apparition, it will nevertheless be maintained that Pascal deploys forms of violence typical of the genre to challenge the subordinate role allocated to, and expected of, women within seventeenth-century French society. Centring upon the King's recollection of a dream in which he is haunted and menacingly condemned for usurpation by his dead wife, Ladice, the tragicomic construction first facilitates the staging of a weak, disturbed male protagonist suffering at the hands of, and unable to escape, a physically invincible female character. Mitigating the opening scene's traces of the contentious theme of tyranny and openly reinforcing the notion of dynastic succession, Pascal subtly underscores the moral superiority and greater intelligence of her living and deceased female characters. Ladice's revelation that she gave birth to a child just before her death drives the intrigue for the remainder of the play as first Sésostris and then Thimarette are purported to be Amasis' successor. Crucially, the ensuing confusion allows for the portrayal of analogous scenes in which neither sex is fully excluded from the possibility of power; both protagonists are given the opportunity to prove their capability to act autonomously. Whilst Thimarette's change in characterisation following her augmented status may lead one to view the play as interrogating authority rather than gender, the playwright presents yet another sub-plot. Introducing a covetous secondary male character who deploys acts of tragicomic violence in his pursuit of Thimarette's hand in marriage (and access to the throne), the female protagonist demonstrates her strength as she resists and deters his aggressive advances. The gender inversion found within the opening scene of tragicomic violence that takes place in a dream thus becomes reality. Closing both of her works with an ambiguous denouement in which patriarchal

norms are never fully restored, Pascal encourages the spectator to consider the potential for a reversal of gender roles beyond the tragicomic stage.

Agathonphile martyr

Overview

A tragicomic martyr play produced in 1655 and possibly publicly performed at the *Hôtel des gouverneurs* theatre, Lyon, the hybrid classification of *Agathonphile martyr* could in some ways be viewed as compliant with seventeenth-century gendered literary expectations.[19] As set out in the introduction to this thesis, owing to their close involvement with the church and supposed openness to spirituality, religious drama emerges as one of the few theatrical forms with which women were authorised to engage.[20] Similarly, since tragedy now required close critical engagement with Aristotle and plays of Antiquity (in which women were not formally educated), tragicomedy — often sourced from the 'inferior' genre of the novel — would seem to offer a far safer generic option for an aspiring female dramatist than its more serious and increasingly regulated counterpart. We know, however, that *Agathonphile martyr* garnered attention from critics, since the playwright states in the preface to her subsequent play *Endymion*, 'Mon cher Lecteur, puisque mon Agathonphile s'était autant acquis de censeurs, qui d'incrédules; je ne sais ce que je dois attendre d'Endymion.[21] Publishing without the aid of a male mentor, the playwright was forced to fend off insinuations that the work was not her own.[22] Through her prefaces, moreover, Pascal boldly challenges the highly-stratified nature of early modern society when she explicitly draws attention to the absence of dramatic regulation within her tragicomedies. Defending the irregularity of her dramatic works and the use of her native Lyonnaise dialect, the playwright reminds the reader that responsibility for

[19] For a discussion of possible performances of the play, see Kennedy's introduction in *'Agathonphile martyr, tragi-comédie': An Annotated Critical Edition*, p.22. As stated in the introduction, all subsequent citations will be taken from this edition of the play.
[20] *Ibid.*, p.12. See also Paul Scott, pp.121-149.
[21] Françoise Pascal, '*Endymion*', in *Femmes dramaturges en France, II*, ed. Gethner, pp. 27-92 (p.29).
[22] The playwright addresses these accusations in her dramatic prefaces.

these 'fautes' lies with the educational restrictions being placed upon her sex and resulting from her modest provincial background: 'Je ne te donne pas cette Pièce, comme une chose rare, & où toutes les règles de la Poésie de ce temps soient observées: Mon sexe, le peu d'expérience que j'ay dans cét Art, & la bassesse de mon esprit, ne me permettent pas d'avoir des pensées si hautes, & si relevées que ces Apollons' (*Agathonphile martyr*);[23] 'C'est un peché d'origine dont je ne suis coupable que parce que je suis Lyonnaise, et que la bienséance de mon sexe, ne m'a pas permis de voir l'Académie que sur quelques livres dont les Règles nous instruisent biens moins par les yeux que par les oreilles…' (*Sésostris*).[24] When placed within the wider seventeenth-century theatrical repertoire, it also becomes apparent that Pascal's very generic classification signifies almost deliberate noncompliance with generic and gendered expectations. As the sole tragicomic martyr play to emerge in the seventeenth-century, the innovative hybridity of *Agathonphile martyr* marks a complete departure from literary convention, once again indicating a far from cautious approach to writing and hinting at the play's potentially subversive content.

Whilst Christian drama typically confines violence (usually in the form of martyrdom) to the closing scene of the play and increasing regulation results in the decline of staged violence within drama more broadly, an overview of the action-filled violent intrigue of *Agathonphile martyr* signals its 1630s tragicomic underpinning. Pascal opens her play with a scene of sexual violence in which Irénée confesses her love for stepson, Agathon, to her maid, before approaching the sleeping *gentilhomme* armed with a sword, intending to commit murder should he fail to submit to her advances.[25] Rejected by her stepson, Irénée manipulates her husband, Sabin, into believing her to be the victim of Agathon's advances. The portrayal of sexual violence is hardly an exclusively tragicomic

[23] Pascal, '*Agathonphile martyr*', p.146. As Kennedy notes, the "modesty topos" was often exploited in dramatic prefaces written during the Classical period. *Ibid*.
[24] Françoise Pascal, '*Sésostris*', ed. Deborah Steinberger, in *Théâtre de femmes, II,* pp.83-172 (p.90). All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition of the play.
[25] Pascal's production opens in a distinctly different manner to that of Cosnard's martyr play of the same title, which commences with Agathon and Tryphine shipwrecked with their spiritual mentor 'Philargirippe' after having fled persecution in Rome.

phenomenon in and of itself. Yet Pascal aligns her scene more closely to 1630s tragicomedy through her decision to visibly stage the act; her reliance upon props during a period in which language is deemed superior to action; the inversion of gender dynamics often used to create a disordered world; the use of the tragicomic motifs of sleep and dreams; and Agathon's successful escape prior to the assault transpiring, maintaining the possibility of a *fin heureuse*. The play's tragicomic orientation is confirmed when the opening scene is revealed to be a sub-plot, secondary to another far more complex intrigue. Following the scene of sexual violence, the remaining acts revolve around Agathon's romance with Triphine, daughter of the Roman Senator. With the actions of Irénée having forced Agathon into hiding, the Christian *gentilhomme* encounters a further obstacle: Triphine's tyrannical father, Triphon. Troubled by his lower status and hopeful for the imminent demise of Triphon's choice of husband for his daughter, Agathon encourages his beloved to marry the wealthy and elderly Cevere. Triphine is subsequently left to independently orchestrate her own escape. Threatening disfigurement and feigning her own suicide, the female protagonist and Agathon flee by boat before being caught in a shipwreck in what can only be deemed a heavily tragicomic-infused series of events. Lost in a forest and believing his lover to have perished, Agathon contemplates suicide, before Triphine reappears miraculously "reborn". The happy reunion is short-lived, as the two characters are soon discovered by their begrudging relatives. Triphine declares her newfound faith to the crowd despite her father condemning her to death should she refuse to reconsider and marry Cevere. Inspired by her defiance, secondary characters follow Triphine's lead, with even Irénée converting to Christianity after seeking redemption for her earlier licentious actions. The converted characters are subsequently martyred; only Triphon and Cevere remain on stage for the final moments of the play.

The Irrational Woman? Theatricality, Remorse and Condemnation

Far from opening her production with the portrayal of a positive *femme forte,* Pascal's construction of a passion-driven female character initially does little to challenge the conventional early modern

image of woman as an irrational and devious being. Gripped by 'un feu si violent' (I.I.30), the tragicomedy commences with the revelation that Irénée intends to act upon her illicit desire for her stepson. Indicative of her utter loss of reason, she resolves to commit murder should Agathon refuse her sexual advances:

> Il vaut mieux le perir, que te perir toy-mesme,
> S'il refuse les dons de mon amour extrême,
> S'il méprise mes feux, qu'il les aye en horreur,
> Mon amour à l'instant se va mettre en fureur,
> Et je m'en vay chercher un fer pour cét office.
>
> I.II.254-258

Not content with plotting to silence the *gentilhomme*, Irénée exposes her conniving and deceitful nature when she voices her premeditated intent to manipulate her husband, presenting herself as the victim of his son's unwanted sexual advances: 'Que s'il ose vanter de le dire à son père/Je le veux prevenir en disant le contrêre/Je diray que c'est luy' (I.I. 201-203). Continually dismissing the sage advice of her maid to 'soyez plus raisonnable' (I.I.73) and faced with Agathon's resistance, Irénée vows to fulfil her selfish base desires through force: 'Tu me veux eschapper, mais non, non, je te tien [sic]' (I.II.386). Following Agathon's successful escape, the scene then openly reinforces the common analogy between the devil and the 'insatiable' female sex.[26] To avenge her rejection, Irénée calls upon supernatural forces: 'Demons, sortez d'Enfer ,venez me secourir' (II.II.401).[27] Through actively seeking to satisfy her own passion by appropriating a position of power yet showing little consideration for the repercussions, Irénée would appear to fall within the category of the 'irrational' woman identified by Kennedy in her study of seventeenth-century French heroines.

[26] Lougee, *Le Paradis des femmes,* pp.13-14.
[27] As Kennedy notes, Irénée's language here evokes Corneille's Médée (I.III), whilst the broader subject matter of the scene evokes the Biblical story of Potiphar's wife (Genesis 3:9). '*Agathonphile martyr*', p.41. This intertextuality arguably further heightens the sense of theatricality discussed below.

Despite challenging the concept of female passivity and inverting the prescribed hierarchy, as a character driven by lust and vengeance her role nonetheless perpetuates the notion that women are 'emotionally unstable'.[28]

Pascal's approach to dramatic representation, however, works towards negating the unfavourable gender stereotypes supposedly being reinforced through the portrayal of such an emotive female character. Boldly opting to visibly stage the act of sexual violence (a regulatory leniency perhaps taken in light of the play's tragicomic denomination), the playwright creates an inherently theatrical scene that serves not only to shock and entertain the spectator, but also acts as a means of shattering the dramatic illusion. Through the presence of the bed — a 'concrete onstage referent for sex' now prohibited within tragic performance — the spectator observes Irénée observing Agathon.[29] This double perspective enhances the violent voyeurism of the opening scene whilst introducing a crucial metatheatrical component. Fluctuating between the identity of infatuated lover and that of egoistic 'démon', the protagonist engages in an internal debate, playing out these two roles in front of an internal audience (both her other 'self' and the sleeping Agathon) and the external spectator:

Il faudra que tu m'ayme, ou bien que tu perisse.
Suis, allons maintenant, suivons nostre dessein,
Pour assouvir l'amour qui brusle le sein,
Ne perdons point courage, allons dedans sa chambre
[…]
Crois-tu bien que ce fer, que dans mes mains j'ay pris,
Execute le coup que j'avois entrepris ?

[28] Kennedy, *Women's Deliberation,* p.139. See also Chapter I.
[29] Ekstein, 'Sex in Rotrou's Theatre', p.3. For an excellent discussion of meta-theatricality and examples of the dramatic device being used to both social ends and aesthetic experiences, see Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner, *The Play Within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2017).

Non, non, j'ay trop d'amour, & suis trop pitoyable,

Pour deffaire si tost un objet tant aymable !

[…]

Criminelle Irénée, quitte, quitte ces armes.

I.II.260-281

As well as breaking the dramatic illusion and sense of verisimilitude by reminding the audience that what they are witnessing merely forms part of a broader theatrical performance, Irénée's inconsistent use of pronouns, focalising alternatively on the object (tu) and the subject (nous) and then 'Irénée', limits the potential for building dramatic tension, despite our awareness that Agathon could stir at any moment. At times verging on comical excess through the extreme emotional oscillations and repeated moments of hesitancy, we are encouraged to view the scene as entertaining drama rather than a true reflection of female behaviour, aligning the play to what early modern theorists deem to be the primary function of tragicomic productions.[30] Other props also prove capable of alerting the spectator to the falsity of the scene, with Irénée's choice of weapon taking on particular significance when considering representations of gender. Brandishing the phallic symbol of the 'virile' and 'guerrière' sword instead of the more secretive 'feminine' dagger used within the playwright's source text, and relishing the thought of burying the weapon in her lover, the prop and its sexual underpinnings serve as another visible reminder that the scene is unravelling within the inverse world of a tragicomedy, further shattering the dramatic illusion.[31] Since weapons were largely banished from the stage following the *Querelle du Cid*, Pascal's decision to visibly present the sword here is perhaps a licence taken in light of the play's generic classification. The

[30] James D. Matthews, 'The Tyrannical Sovereign in Pre-1640 French Tragicomedy: Political Statement or Dramatic Necessity?' in *Actes de Wake Forest: L'image du souverain dans le théâtre de 1600 à 1650, Madame de Villedieu*, eds. Milorad Margitic and Byron Wells (Paris: Papers on Seventeenth-Century French Literature, 1987), pp.147-158.

[31] On the gendering of the sword and dagger, see previous chapters. See also Emelina, 'Les morts dans les tragédies de Racine'.

resultant reversal of traditional gender dynamics (which persist throughout the play) hints at the possibility of deploying tragicomedy to dramatic and socio-political ends.[32]

Despite her inherent theatricality, Irénée nevertheless emerges as somewhat more morally ambiguous than the 'traditional' irrational woman. As Kennedy notes, the use of the first-person plural during the internal debate between two 'selves' demonstrates the extent to which the stepmother's continued attempts to conceal her passion induce insanity, with the *antanaclase* on the verb 'perir' (il vaut mieux le perir que te perir toy-mesme) pointing to her delicate state of mind.[33] Irénée's distress and desperation are apparent from the opening lines of the play: 'Mon cœur ne peut plus resister/Ha! Dieu c'est trop long-temps me faire violence' (I.I.23-24). Referring to her love as a 'maladie' (I.I.176), she repeatedly seeks advice and reassurance from her confidante: 'Soulage si tu peux le mal qui me tourmente/Et sois de mon amour l'unique confidente;/ Hé bien, que juges-tu d'un feu si violent?' (I.I.28-30); 'Rend mon esprit content/Approuve mon amour' (I.I.51-52). Unlike the secondary characters frequently offered by her male counterparts — such as Racine's Œnone (*Phèdre*, 1677) who inspires her mistress to act upon her illicit desires — Pascal's confidante provides a contrasting positive portrayal of female behaviour.[34] Celiane persistently opposes her mistress's actions throughout the opening scene: 'Estouffez ce brasier aveuglant' (I.I.32); 'Rejettez, rejettez ce brasier detestable/Reprenez vos esprits' (I.I.72-73); 'Quel amour horrible & furieux' (I.I.211). Serving as far more than a passive listener, she discourages and condemns her mistress by providing logical and coherent counterarguments to her desperate pleas:

Mais ne sçavez-vous pas que Sabin est son père ?

Encor il est Chrestien, Croyez-vous que les Dieux

[32] As we have already seen, the brandishing of a bloody sword was heavily criticised during the *Querelle du Cid.*
[33] Kennedy, p.74.
[34] For a discussion of the usually supportive role played by dramatic confidantes, see Valerie Worth-Stylianou, *Confidential Strategies: The Evolving Role of the Confident in French Tragic Drama, 1635*-1677 (Paris: Droz, 1999).

N'ayent pas en horreur cét amour odieux?

Croyez-vous qu'un garçon si prudent & si sage,

Qui ne regarde pas une femme au visage,

Aye d'amour pour vous […]

(I.I.83-88)

Quoy, ne craignez-vous point la colère des Dieux ?

N'apprehendez-vous point que par un coup de foudre

Leur Justice animée ne vous reduise en poudre.

(I.I.212-214)

An audacious and wise confidante, Celiane marks a departure from the conventional tragic servant. The character of the *suivante* in Cosnard's play similarly warns her mistress about the repercussions of her actions, but she is only ordered to be silent.[35] Pascal's female servant goes further, taking the initiative to abandon her mistress entirely. Mimicking the stage departures of her comic counterparts, Celiane then bravely warns Agathon's friends of his predicament. Through a characterisation that compounds tragic and comic elements, Pascal provides an example of a rational woman whilst nonetheless underlining the scene's *monde-à-l'envers* tragicomic theatricality. Irénée, too, later seeks to redeem herself, further contributing to her complexity of character. Confessing all and converting to Christianity, the supposed 'femme cruelle' (I.IV.505) reveals a complete reversal of character: 'Non, il est innocent, & moy je suis coulpable' (V.II.3151); 'Mais pour purger mon crime, en le reconnoissant/Je diray devant tous que je me fais Chrestienne' (V.II.3163).[36]

These three elements of theatricality, remorse and condemnation combine to minimise the negative female stereotypes otherwise being reinforced by the opening scene, whilst crucially

[35] Cosnard, I.V.

[36] Pascal, '*Agathonphile martyr*', p.39.

facilitating a subtler criticism of seventeenth-century patriarchal society. In her attempts to save Agathon, Irénée challenges Sabin's authority when she reminds him that he must draw upon external authorities when deciding Agathon's fate. Immediately followed in her conversion by her husband, Irénée's actions make an unexpected yet critical contribution to the play's resolution. Undermining and isolating the two remaining patriarchal figures, her character plays a role in encouraging the spectator to view Triphon and Cevere as the play's true antiheros, refuting the view that she plays a 'minor role' in the tragicomedy. Similarly, Celiane's unswerving condemnation of her mistress allows Pascal to stage a rational and bold female role, threatening not only the need for a fixed gender hierarchy, but equally calling into question the notion of status more broadly.

Most interestingly, in the closing moments of Act I, we find Irénée adopting yet another identity as she attempts to present herself as the innocent victim of her own crime in front of the all-knowing spectator. Here Irénée mimics the traditional rape narrative considered appropriate for women in early modern society, as set out in Chapter I. Stuttering and suitably hesitant, she pairs the feminine and virtuous 'weapon' of tears with the 'masculine' sword in order to form the visible evidence – or what Georges Vigarello deems the 'material traces' – considered necessary for a woman's account of non-consent to be believed: 'La chose est bien visible/Car ce fer, & mes pleurs peuvent bien témoigner' (I.III.471-472).[37] In deploying theatricality to ironically demonstrate the ease with which such a narrative may be fabricated to an audience presumably familiar with seventeenth-century laws and expectations surrounding accusations of rape, Pascal could perhaps be said to be highlighting the absurdity of current expectations for constructing a 'valid' accusation of sexual assault, challenging a system chiefly detrimental to the female sex. It is, of course, also possible to view this easy fabrication of a rape accusation as undermining any woman's appeal to sincerity and truthfulness, reinforcing male incredulity when rape accusations are made public when

[37] On the feminine weapon of tears, see Sheila Page Bayne, *Tears and Weeping: An Aspect of Emotional Climate Reflected in Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1981). On constructing representations of rape and rape within early modern society, see earlier chapters and Vigarello.

this moment is considered in isolation. However, Irénée's sudden transformation from aggressor to victim is not the only occasion in which the tragicomedy appears to use its commencing scene as a means of highlighting the double-standards inherent to early modern patriarchal society. Stressing her attempts to ignore her illicit desire, Irénée attributes her inability to resist Agathon solely to his beauty: 'Je ne puis résister à de si fortes armes/Sçais-tu pas qu'Agathon possède tand de charmes/Qu'on ne peut s'en deffendre?' (I.I.43-45); 'Plus je veux esteindre, & tant plus il s'alume (sic)' (I.I.102). In displacing the blame for her irrational sexual advances onto her stepson, we encounter a female role deploying a 'tactic' often utilised by male characters in their attempts to justify sexual violence (and one that we will encounter in the works of Villedieu). As we saw in Chapter I, writers such as d'Aubignac frequently held women wholly responsible should they be the recipient of unwanted sexual advances.[38] Consolidating the reversal of normative gender dynamics within the scene, Pascal's portrayal of an 'irrational' female character utilising this seemingly acceptable male justification for violence and force subtly encourages spectators to challenge the legitimacy of such discourse. That this critique is veiled behind a female character who otherwise largely aligns with negative gender stereotypes and is only exposed through a close critical reading of the text within the context of the socio-political conditions in which it was produced testifies to the benefits of a New Historicist approach to early modern French theatre**.** Institutional and ideological contestation may only exist, as Greenblatt reminds us, in the 'margins' of the text.[39]

Agathon: Chivalric Gentilhomme or Passive Observer?

Despite the grave undercurrents of the opening scene, Pascal's characterisation ensures that the spectator is instantly greeted by two bold women proficient at acting upon their own initiative, with one even demonstrating rational and intelligent thinking despite not only their gender but also their

[38] See also Bourque, *All the Abbé's Women*, p.181. A theatrical example can be found in Madame de Villedieu's *Manlius* and *Nitétis*; both male tyrants displace responsibility for their unbridled sexual desire onto the beauty of the female characters. See Chapter III.
[39] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 4.

lower social status. The same, however, cannot be said for the male 'hero'. Crucially, the portrayal of a female character threatening the rape of her male counterpart inverts the conventional gender disempowerment typically associated with a dramatic act of sexual violence. The hostile opening thus results in the portrayal of a physically subordinate and passive male protagonist atypical of both the 1630s tragicomic *guerrier* and 1660s tragic hero. Initially appearing in the vulnerable state of sleep, our first encounter with Agathon is through the skewed perspective of Irénée. With the spectator possessing a greater awareness of the female character's presence and intentions as she slowly approaches the sleeping and uninformed Agathon, the scene ignites a sense of complicity on the part of the audience. The repeated references to external appearance as she gazes at, and remarks upon, the sleeping character's facial features encourage the spectator to participate in the objectification of her target: 'Il est dessus son lict, cette douce merveille/Il dort, ce bel objet, il ferme ses beaux yeux/ […] Ha! qu'il est ravissant, Dieux que d'attraits nouveaux!' (I.II.268-278). Even Celiane, when attempting to dissuade her mistress from acting upon her desire, cannot help but remark upon the victim's 'soft' features, with her voice of reason perpetuating Agathon's status as a feminised object: 'Toutes le trouvent beau […] il est vray qu'il est beau, que ses charmes sont doux' (I.I.69-75). Principally an object of beauty, the male protagonist is awarded a 'power' typically encoded as feminine, with the consequences it brings about highlighting its ambiguity as a trait in early modern France. After awakening her stepson, Irénée continues to dominate the dialogue, with Agathon only capable of responding in a series of frenzied exclamations, interrogatives, and linguistic echoes: 'Ha bon Dieu! Que vois-je?' (I.II.300); 'Ha! Madame/Que pourriez-vous juger de mon peu de respect?' (I.II.308-309); 'O Dieu, le puis-je croire?' (I.II.371); 'Ô Ciel, quelle infamie!' (II.I.383).

Whilst the status of inversion as a quasi-trope of the tragicomic genre and the performative nature of the tragicomedy's opening render a socio-political reading of the male role within this scene somewhat problematic, Agathon's submissive characterisation continues throughout the play. The 'rightful' order remains persistently absent. After fleeing Irénée, the *gentilhomme* seeks refuge,

cowardly 'caché dans la maison d'Albin,' (II.I.650) before continuing his overtly passive responses during his first staged encounter with love-interest Triphine: 'Madame, j'obeys à vos commandements' (III.I.1086). Timid, he displays uncertainty when responding to her expressions of love: 'O Dieu, dois-je respondre, ou bien me dois-je taire' (III.II.1105). Here, Agathon's courtly approach to romance could of course simply be the result of his lower status.[40] Yet as we saw with the character of Celiane, status does not elsewhere appear to hamper a character's bold disposition. Equally, Agathon's seeming lack of confidence may be somewhat attributed to evolving literary norms; during the latter half of the century, *galant* literature embraces the romantic and modest male lover.[41] As New Historicists such as Greenblatt and Montrose remind us, it is important to consider a literary work within its wider cultural specificity.[42] Indeed, Ruth Vortsman views the protagonist's depiction as a 'selfless, chivalric hero' to reflect wider literary developments, with his courteous behaviour thus hardly carrying overtly negative implications in itself.[43] Distancing himself from the bellicose male character of the 1630s tragicomedy, Agathon can be found admirably deterring Albin from seeking vengeance against who he perceives to be his unfaithful lover (I.IV).[44] Likewise, upon believing his own beloved to be dead, the protagonist's woeful and poetic discourse arguably wins the spectator's compassion:

> Puisque mon beau Soleil s'est éclypsé dans l'onde,
> Je ne souhaitte plus de vivre dans le monde,
> Où sont donc ces beaux yeux tout remplis de clarté
> Ces beaux astres d'amour qui m'avoient enchanté?
>
> V.I.2665-2668

[40] Their differing social backgrounds are made explicit: 'Songez que je ne suis qu'un Simple Gentil-homme/Et que vous estes née d'un Senateur de Rome' (III.I.1121-1122).
[41] As we saw in Chapter I, it was the 'fashion' for women to be the instigators.
[42] See the Introduction to this thesis.
[43] Vortsman, 'Sleeping Heroes, Speaking Heroines', p.7.
[44] Significantly, Albin's suspicions are later proven to be false, ensuring the intrigue is steered away from the portrayal of an inconstant female character (III.V).

In certain scenes, Pascal however has her male protagonist stutter, disconnecting him from the eloquence of salon culture that was growing in popularity. It is also worth noting that Agathon engages in trickery, deceiving another of his lover's admirers, Polydore, into believing that his messages of adoration are being received and reciprocated by Triphine; behaviour that can hardly be deemed chivalric.[45]

Alongside calling into question the gallant nature of the male protagonist, the introduction of the character of Polydore also disrupts the conceptual link between women and uncontrollable desire. At the start of Act II, Polydore echoes the play's opening when he declares his love for Triphine as an all-consuming passion, deploying language undeniably comparable to that of Agathon's stepmother cited above:

Qui ne seroit charmé de ses divins regards ?
Qui peuvent allumer des feux de toutes parts,
Au moment que je vis cette belle Triphine,
Je fus ravy des traits de sa face divine
[…]
Allez tristes souspirs, allez voir cette Belle,
Et luy faites sçavoir que je brusle pour elle.

II.II.691-710

Just like Irénée's 'maladie', Polydore seeks relief from the symptoms of love: 'Ne peux-je pas trouver quelque meilleur remede/Pour soulager un peu le mal qui me possede' (II.II.717-718). Both male and female roles are shown to be equally susceptible to their emotions under the powerful influence of love.

[45] L'amoureux Polydore […] Hé le pauvre garçon/Je m'en vay l'abuser d'une estrange façon' (III.III.1424-1427).

Given the urgent and desperate nature of the situation, Agathon and Triphine's exchanges extend far beyond typical romantic encounters, with the male protagonist's responses subsequently being framed as more pitiful than endearing. Much to Triphine's frustration, when faced with the challenge of an opposing father figure, Agathon immediately complies with the patriarchal system, resigning himself to defeat:

> Vos parents, bon Dieu que diroit on? […]
>
> Cela ne se peut pas, la chose est impossible […]
>
> […] vous sçavez bien qu'un père
>
> Vous pourroit empescher.
>
> III.I.1127-1148

Rather than offering to help her to escape, in a seeming act of cowardice Agathon instead advocates Triphine's marriage to the wealthy Cevere, in the hope that the couple may soon reunite following the elderly man's demise, hinting at the greater freedom accorded to the early modern widow: 'Vous voyez que Cevere est chargé de vieillesse […] La mort luy ravira la lumiere du jour […] alors vous serez libre' (III.IV.1922-1931).[46] Following their capture, Agathon allows Triphine to take full responsibility for their attempted flight, marking a sharp contrast to other trans-status tragicomic relationships. Whilst Pascal's male protagonist remains silent, Georges de Scudéry, for example, has his Princess Argénie and gardener 'Policandre' (*Le Prince Déguisé*, 1635) both claim accountability for initiating their relationship in heroic resolves to save their lover's life. In Act III, we are made aware that despite acting surprised at Irénée's confession, Agathon had suspected her growing passion for several years:

> Car du [sic] depuis huict ans,
>
> Qu'elle est avec mon pere, elle m'a fait paroistre,

[46] For an analysis of the power accorded to the dramatic widow, see Menke, 'The Widow who would be Queen'. See also Chapter I.

Son impudique amours, [sic] & me faisoit connoistre,

Dans tous ses mouvements le secret de son coeur,

Je voyais tous les jours augmenter sa langueur,

La voyant près de moy, je fremissois de crainte,

Qu'elle me découvrist un amour si contrainte.

III.V.1717-1723

By informing the spectator of Agathon's failure to intervene prior to the attempted act of sexual violence and in staging its subsequent repercussions, Pascal deflects any remaining sympathy away from the male protagonist. Rather than a positive portrayal of the *amant parfait*, the playwright emphasises his shortcomings, offering, as Perry Gethner rightly states, a character who 'ne mérite pas le titre de héros'.[47] Ironically saved by Irénée's confession in the closing moments of the play, Agathon continues to fail to act.

Triphine: Femme Forte and Tragicomic Violence

In light of Agathon's characterisation, Triphine alone must initiate action should she wish to evade her *mariage de convenance* and provide an effective example of a woman defying the patriarchal order in pursuit of her own desires. Yet as the daughter of a wealthy and tyrannical father, resistance proves challenging. Promising his daughter's hand in marriage to the elderly Cevere, Triphon parades his perceived authority over Triphine in language dominated by references to duty, power and female subordination:

Monsieur, asseurez-vous,

De ce que j'ay juré, et croyez que Triphine,

Se sousmettra tousjours

[...]

[47] Gethner, 'Les jeunes premiers de Françoise Pascal', p.125.

En fin, dès maintenant je vous donne sa foy,

Quand bien elle en feroit un peu de resistance,

Vous sçavez bien qu'un père a beaucoup de puissance,

Sur l'esprit d'un enfant

[…]

Croyez que je sçauray la mettre à son devoir

[…]

Je vous asseure,

Que Triphine est à vous, puis que je vous le jure.

II.VI.980-1016

Viewing Triphine as a piece of property to be owned and exchanged, Triphon and Cevere demonstrate the extent to which women were considered 'tokens' in the economic gain of upper-class marriage, regardless of their wishes: 'Encor que je souhaitte en estre possesseur' (II.VI.1010).[48] Pascal however explicitly encourages the spectator to associate the arranged marriage with an act of violence and force, with Cevere setting limits on the measures he is prepared to take to secure a spouse: 'Gardez-bien, toutefois d'user de violence; J'aymerois mieux mourir que de lui faire offense' (II.VI.1008-1009). It is also significant to note that their dismissive remarks concerning Triphine's unwillingness to engage in the arranged marriage are immediately followed by yet another reminder of the opening scene of violence. The act closes with Celiane dwelling upon the repercussions of her mistress's own violent approach to love, warning the two male characters (as well as the early modern spectator) of the dangers of forcing a union without consent (II.VII).

From the outset of the play, the female protagonist deploys discursive resistance in her efforts to establish herself as more than a mere item of beauty and as a means of undermining

[48] Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France*, p.110.

Triphon's authority. Faced with her father and his choice of husband, Triphine incessantly interjects with her objections to the contractual marriage:

Triphon: Enfin le favory/De l'Empereur Decie, il sera ton Mary.

Triphine: N'est-ce pas ma pensée?

Triphon: […] En fin, qu'allez-vous dire?/Vous voudriez refuser Cevere ?

Triphine: Un tel Espoux !

Triphon: […] Prepare-toy ma fille, & demeure en ton lustre/Pour paroistre agreeable à cet Espoux Illustre.

Triphine: Mais, Seigneur !

III.II.1285-1315

The first to declare her love for Agathon — a detail she publicly announces in the closing scene — the Senator's daughter resolves to marry her choice of lover: 'Je veux dire que c'est moy-meme, qui vous ay fait l'object de mon affection/Et qu'on ne peut changer mon inclination (III.III.1174-1176). Presenting Agathon with a ring and a romantic sermon in which she proclaims her eternal love, the female protagonist betroths herself to her beloved in a display of utter disregard for patriarchal tradition. Her outspoken nature does not go unnoticed. In line with much of the pro-woman and salon literature of the period, Triphine's eloquence is framed by Agathon as an attractive trait for a woman: 'Mes yeux & mes oreilles/sont ravis à l'aspect d'une telle beauté' (II.V.927-928). Language also distinguishes Triphine from the other female characters in the play. Refusing to confide in her maid and dismissing her a total of four times, the isolation of the female protagonist renders her defiance all the more courageous and indicates women's capacity to act completely autonomously: 'J'ayme la solitude' (II.III816).

Whilst the maid-mistress rapport sets Irénée and Triphine apart, the two women are nonetheless similar in their outspoken nature and eagerness to pursue their own desires. Further analogies can be found in their (self) portrayal as female victims, with these parallels once again

pushing the spectator to critically consider the arranged marriage within the same arena as the overtly condemned opening act of sexual assault. Just as Irénée theatrically constructs herself as the victim of rape through her use of tears and the emphasis placed upon her supposedly semi-conscious state ('toute effrayée, quand il parloit ainsi/j'estois demy pasmée'), similar mechanisms are deployed to demonstrate Triphine's genuine distress and function as a means of creating sympathy for her character.[49] Repeatedly depicted in tears, Triphine faints on-stage when her father refuses to release her from her engagement to Cevere: 'O Dieux, ells se pasme!' (III.II.1371). Whilst Irénée's feigned victimisation is accepted without question, it is fair to assume that the spectator would feel a sense of injustice and frustration at Triphine's honest objections being so readily dismissed; a rejection that Pascal draws to our attention a total of nine times.[50] For Triphon, his daughter's anguish is secondary to the wealth and status offered by the arranged marriage: 'Cevere & ses thresors sont encour plus puissants' (III.IV.1462). That other male characters such as Euple express sympathy for her character further consolidates the construction of Triphine as a victim — rather than a 'traistre' (IV.IV.2494) or 'rebelle' (IV.II.2298) — of the patriarchal order: 'Que sa douleur me touche' (III.II.1340).[51] The play's structure once again serves to align the arranged marriage with the earlier act of sexual violence. Immediately following the portrayal of Triphine's distress at her father's resolve, we encounter Agathon reflecting upon Irénée's attempted violation, echoing his female counterpart with his remarks about his own father's cruelty and his physical frailty: 'Je n'ay fait que trembler depuis l'heure funeste/Que cette Infame osa me descouvrir ses feux […] ha pere inexorable' (III.III.1405-1416).

Failed by the 'feminine' weapon of tears, Triphine recognises that she must resort to more physical acts, with her reference to 'toucher' hinting at this transition to deploying (tragicomic)

[49] I.III.458-459.
[50] See, for example, 'Ce père inhumain/qui regarde mes pleurs avec tant de dedain' (III.IV.1642-1643) ; 'Que feray-je bons Dieux dans ce malheur extrême/Ha ! Seigneur, si mes pleurs ne vous peuvent émouvoir' (III.II.1348-49).
[51] Her brother Euple later also claims that he tried to change their father's mind: 'Je me suis à ses pieds trois fois jetté en vain' (III.IV.1522).

violence: 'Mes larmes, et ma douleur ne le peuvent toucher' (III.IV.1455). Crucially, these scenes once again invert conventional power dynamics, resulting in the portrayal of an active female protagonist unafraid of deploying extreme measures to achieve autonomy. Take, as a comparative marker, Georges de Scudéry's *Orante;* a 1635 production with close thematic parallels to *Agathonphile martyr* and a play that perhaps best represents the gender dynamics conventionally accompanying tragicomic violence in the first half of the century. Desperate to avoid an arranged marriage to the elderly and wealthy Florange, Orante writes letters to her beloved Isimandre in which she solicits his help to escape. After a failed suicide attempt, Orante plots her 'abduction'; a violent act driven solely by her desire to marry the male hero. Supplying 'des habits, le moyen, l'apparence' (III.VI.793) and even 'les Chevaux' (III.VI.802), the practical provisions for the successful implementation of her 'abduction' are all provided by Isimandre, with secondary characters confirming the central role played by the male character in her successful disappearance: 'Isimandre l'emmène' (IV.XI.1131). Absent until the closing scene of the play, Orante returns only to express shame at her actions and to re-affirm her subordinate role within society; the 'rightful' order prevails.

Far from relying upon her male protagonist, Triphine orchestrates her entire escape, marking not only an inversion of typical tragicomic 'abductions' but signalling another departure from Pascal's source text.[52] At first contemplating her own disfigurement (III.IV.1475-1479) — a violent motif common to 1630s tragicomedy and one that highlights the extreme measures deemed necessary to avoid objectification — before turning to other possible means of evading the contractual marriage, Triphine showcases her autonomous and logical character, with the playwright shifting violence away from the irrationality of Irénée's act of aggression. Overtly asking Agathon for his assistance but receiving little support or backing, Pascal's protagonist devises a plot for the two lovers to flee by boat.[53] Pointing to the rarity of staging such a resourceful female character, Perry

[52] Pascal, '*Agathonphile martyr*', pp.36-46.
[53] As usual, Agathon resigns himself to defeat: 'L'on nous fera chercher, & l'on nous trouvera' (III.VI.1919).

Gethner remarks, 'les lecteurs de l'époque ont dû sourire en voyant la femme faire tous les projets pour son propre enlèvement et obliger son amant timide à l'accompagner'.[54] Instead of mimicking Orante's resistance by attempting an act of suicide, the female protagonist cleverly feigns the 'feminine' death in a farewell letter to her father as a tactic to delay the search party. Further irony emerges when it is revealed that Triphine pretends to have chosen the 'feminine' death of drowning, after contemplating the more masculine death of the sword: 'Je m'estois resolue à perir par les armes/Mais les ondes me font mourir plus doucement' (IV.II.2243-2244). Unlike Orante, the motives of Pascal's protagonist extend beyond the 'feminine' goals of escape and marriage. Doubtful of Agathon's commitment to their joint escape, the Senator's daughter resolves to depart without him should he fail to appear, indicating a wider desire for autonomy and countering Kennedy's view that Triphine is acting 'primarily upon romantic inclinations': 'Si vous ne venez/Vous ne me verrez plus' (III.VI.2041-4042).[55] Upon discovering his daughter to be missing, Triphon immediately presumes her to be responsible, further underscoring her bold nature: 'La meschante qu'elle est, elle a quitté ces lieux. Et s'est allée cacher?' (IV.II.2218-2219).[56] Caught by their relatives, Triphine accepts full responsibility for her violent actions, continuing to defy her father until her death.

Finally, although Pascal's approach to tragicomic violence establishes Triphine as a resourceful and active female character unafraid of challenging social constructs in pursuit of her own desires, the protagonist's death — and the tragicomedy's denouement more generally — raise questions concerning the play's subversive potential. Executed primarily for her refusal to obey her father as opposed to her conversion to Christianity (which Triphon offers to overlook should she marry Cevere), the ending could, as Kennedy finds, be read as promulgating the notion that a transgression of social boundaries may never be fully realised within early modern society. In New Historicist terms, the play could thus be read as an example of subversion and containment. As a

[54] Gethner, 'Les jeunes premiers', p.126.
[55] Kennedy, *Women's Deliberation*, p. 101.
[56] Upon discovering Agathon's involvement, he does later suspect his daughter to have been abducted, leading to the insertion of more violence as possible means of punishing the male protagonist are discussed.

brazen heroine whose conduct does not go unpunished, *Agathonphile martyr* may point to the presence of 'patriarchal forces tragically beyond their [women's] control'.[57] Yet, as we have seen, the earlier acts function as an effective means of establishing sympathy for Triphine. Failed by the inactivity of her male counterpart and having her distress repeatedly overlooked, the protagonist's bold and violent actions against the patriarchal order are presented as rational and necessary whilst also showcasing women as strong and resourceful. Through the structural and discursive alignment of the *mariage de convenance* with the opening scene of sexual violence, the tragicomedy constructs Triphon and Cevere as the play's true antiheros, necessitating resistance, as well as presenting men and women as equally susceptible to love. Echoing the *mouvement précieux* with which Pascal was closely associated, *Agathonphile martyr* offers a subtle criticism of the abusive nature of seventeenth-century patriarchal social practices. With martyrdom representing a supposed passage to eternal happiness, Pascal's choice of genre and associated denouement further challenges Kennedy's view that Triphine does not triumph. Despite the minimal role of religion in the play, this closing scene of martyrdom (on which Pascal's generic classification depends), does however risk the critique of sexual politics being obscured by a religious message. The playwright nevertheless ensures the focus remains on Triphine's refusal to renounce her love and succumb to the patriarchal order rather than on her religious beliefs. The concluding lines of the production, in which the deaths are not mourned and the martyred characters are not shown to suffer, alongside the play's generic delineation, confirm that the protagonist's death should be viewed as a final act of defiance (and one that is to be admired) in which Triphine has, against all odds, exercised her right to choose:

> Venez-donc, malheureux, venez souffrir la mort,
> Puis que vous le voulez, c'est le dernier ressort.
>
> V.II.3318-3319

[57] Kennedy, *Women's Deliberation*, p.101.

Departing from generic hybridity for her next play, Françoise Pascal classifies *Sésostris* simply as a tragicomedy: a genre celebrated for its supposedly integral *fin heureuse*.

Sésostris

Overview

Despite its somewhat outdated genre, *Sésostris* is today considered Pascal's most successful dramatic work. First performed in Lyon in 1660, the playwright's only 'pure' tragicomedy demonstrates 'considerable progress' from her earlier dramas, receiving, according to Pascal herself, '[un] applaudissement universel'.[58] Inspired by an episode of Madeleine de Scudéry's *Artamène, ou le Grand Cyrus* (published in ten volumes between 1649 and 1653), the 'often highly improbable and sometimes not clearly explained' plot immediately aligns itself to 1630s tragicomedy.[59] A convoluted tale of misidentification, revelations, and reversals of fortune, the dramatist intertwines scenes of *invraisemblable* tragicomic violence with other common generic signifiers such as sleep and dreams, doubling, excessive props, the privileging of love and action, and two young protagonists faced with seemingly endless obstacles.

Yet closer thematic inspection will reveal a plot underpinned by questions of gender, identity and status. The tragicomedy opens with Amasis, King of Egypt, recollecting a dream in which he is haunted and condemned by his dead wife Ladice for his earlier usurpation of the throne from King Apriez (I.II). The ghost reveals the birth of a child before her death, as well as announcing the survival of Apriez's son (and rightful heir to the throne). A non-consensual interaction and one in which Ladice is constructed in a menacing manner, this opening scene of tragicomic violence sets in motion a series of misidentifications.[60] Unaware of the sex of his child, the King endeavours to locate his successor, promising his son or daughter's hand in marriage to two secondary characters, siblings

[58] See Pascal's 'Avis au Lecteur' to the play in *Théâtre de femmes, II*, p.90.
[59] Grist, *The Salon and the Stage*, p.232. Pascal's storyline is taken from Part VI, Book II.
[60] Pascal's incorporation of such a haunting is more far-fetched and ominous than typical tragicomic apparition scenes, in which usually a character only *believed* to be dead returns. Perry Gethner, 'The Resurrection Experience in Rotrou,' *Cahiers du dix-septième: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 15.2 (2014), pp.156-169.

Héracléon and Lysérine respectively. His search brings him to the valiant Sésostris and beautiful Thimarette, two young lovers brought up under the care of Traséas, a local shepherd. The military valour of Sésostris, alongside Traséas' influence, convince the King that the play's title character is his son. Despite Sésostris' objections, lack of ambition, and desire to remain with his beloved shepherdess, plans are set in motion for Sésostris to abandon Thimarette and wed Lysérine at court. Héracléon, however, driven by both his desire to be King and his attraction to Thimarette, remains unconvinced of Sésostris' royal status. Deducing Traséas to be hiding the rightful heir for his own personal gain, he convinces the peasant to confess all: Thimarette is instead revealed to be Amasis' child, with Sésostris regaining his lower status. The initial misidentification and ensuing reversal of fortune allows for the staging of analogous scenes. It is now Thimarette who is shown to resist her impending marriage to Héracléon and who strives to act independently in her newly found royal role. Of course, neither protagonist (regardless of sex) is afforded the opportunity to choose their spouse, with inter-status marriage being depicted as 'un désir criminel' (II.IX.681). Following several additional encounters between Amasis and his dead wife, the transgression of social boundaries is nevertheless mitigated as Sésostris is exposed as King Apriez's son. The plot veers towards its generic happy denouement. Sensing he is about to lose his means of attaining royal power as well as his beloved Thimarette, the vindictive Héracléon attempts to abduct the Princess. Swiftly caught, only his confidant is killed in the ensuing battle. Having avoided 'la mort des héros' and showing Héracléon to be truly repentant, the drama concludes in typical tragicomic fashion with the promise of a marriage between two equal lovers, Thimarette and Sésostris.[61]

'Vivre en Faux Monarque' (I.IV.212): Haunting Violence and the Inversion of Gender Dynamics

In a similar manner to *Agathonphile martyr*, *Sésostris*' initial scene of tragicomic violence (I.II) serves to disrupt conventional gender dynamics. Centring upon the King's recollection of a dream in which he is haunted and condemned for usurpation by his dead wife, the theatrical construction facilitates

[61] Baby, *La tragi-comédie*, p.76.

the staging of a weak male role. Commencing immediately following the sinister vision, we encounter a now troubled and insecure King Amasis dwelling upon his illegitimate rise to power some sixteen years earlier:

Hélas ! Héracléon, ce n'est plus mon dessein
De cacher le remords qui me ronge le sein :
Ce trône si brillant où l'on me considère,
Ne paraît à mes yeux que comme une chimère,
Voyant que tous les jours ceux qui m'ont couronné,
Ne cherchent qu'à m'ôter ce qu'ils m'avaient donné :
La Thèbes qui semblait être la plus fidèle,
Et l'Héliopolis qui montrait tant de zèle,
Lorsque cruellement, et sans savoir pourquoi,
On les vit [se] révolter contre leur propre roi :
Ces peuples insolents massacrènt ce prince,
Me rendant souverain de toute sa province.

I.I.9-20

Confessing that he was driven solely by ambition in his pursuit for power — an act for which he was deserted by his wife Ladice (who instead opts to remain loyal to the murdered King Apriez's spouse) — the spectator is nonetheless left with the impression that Amasis has been a pawn of the people as opposed to a strong, independent ruler. The dream triggers an admission that both isolates and establishes the male character as morally inferior to his female counterpart:

Elle [Ladice] conçut pour moi tant d'horreur et de haine,
Qu'elle ne voulut point abandonner la reine,
Se résolvant alors de franchir tous périls,
Pour suivre sa fortune aux plus fâcheux exils

[…]

Je confesse pourtant que mon ambition,

Me fit bien consentir à cette élection.

I.I.23-30

Proceeding to recollect the violent encounter with his wife in detail, the tragicomic dream construction allows for the showcasing of a subservient male character. Trapped in the vulnerable state of sleep, Amasis is forced to remain passively silent as the ominous Ladice — accompanied by another 'fantôme sanglant' (the equally mute King Apriez) — eerily approach.[62] The absolute power of the King is undermined by the all-knowing nature of the female apparition; his wife reveals Sésostris, Apriez's son and rightful heir to the throne, to be alive, then announces the birth of a child before she died.[63] In failing to inform Amasis of the sex of his child, Ladice is afforded a position of superiority over both the internal characters and the external spectator. With the King still unable to respond, the gender dynamics remain inverted as the apparition gives orders to her quivering husband: 'Alors qu'elle a crié d'une voix menaçante:/ "Rends, Prince ambitieux, le sceptre que tu tiens/Au fils qui doit régner sur les Egyptiens"' (I.I.64-66). Despite reassurances from his subjects, the King enters a frenzied state, with his wife's revelation driving his actions for the remainder of the play. Directly addressing Ladice to express his remorse, Amasis immediately sets about finding their lost child: 'Il est vrai, chère épouse, il est vrai que j'ai tort/Que mon ambition est cause de ta mort' (I.IV.225-226).

The initial scene of tragicomic violence thus immediately highlights the male character's rule as weak and disordered, whilst women emerge as a powerful force capable of manipulating authoritative powers in a very manifest manner. Alongside moral superiority and influential powers, within this tragicomic world, the strength of Amasis' wife extends to the corporeal, further

[62] I.I.49. From a gendered perspective, it is interesting that only Ladice is afforded the opportunity to speak.
[63] It is, of course, the seventeenth-century King who should be presented as all-seeing and all-knowing.

disrupting traditional gender dynamics. In contrast to the King's shaken state, the menacing depiction of Ladice's spectral and unmoved form hints at physical invincibility[64]:

Elle semblait sortir de son cercueil,
Ayant pour se couvrir un long manteau de deuil,
Mais ses yeux, où jadis brillait tant de lumière,
N'étaient plus animés de leur grâce première:
Si l'amour autrefois en guidait les regards,
J'y voyais aujourd'hui la mort de toutes parts.

I.I.57-62

The decision to depict rather than visibly portray the supernatural appearance here as well as the placement of the entire recollection within a dream creates an imaginary component that perhaps allows for an even more extreme reversal of gender norms.[65] The association of the Queen with strengths typically encoded as male continues throughout the play; she infiltrates the 'masculine' domain of war when a necklace featuring her image is awarded as a prize to a heroic soldier (I.III.189-192). Alongside this symbol of victory, the deployment of additional props, notably a plaque revealing the birth of a child supposedly written by Ladice (I.IV), creates layers of credibility to a plot that is at times far-fetched although not completely absurd by seventeenth-century tragicomic standards. As Hélène Baby notes, tragicomedy often relied upon 'le discours écrit' for the provision of a 'statut d'authenticité'; it is 'l'objet seul qui persuade' the spectator to engage with such surreal representations.[66]

[64] Pascal can perhaps also be said to be playing upon the idea that the King's body — not his wife's — should be shown to be immortal.
[65] Pascal's approach to apparition marks yet another departure from earlier supernatural manifestations. As Perry Gethner notes, mid-century machine plays frequently staged ghosts using costumes and makeup. They were often 'far from menacing'. Perry Gethner, 'The Staging of the Sinister in Machine Plays', *Cahiers du dix-septième: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, VI,2 (1992), 113–122.
[66] Baby, p.215.

References to Ancient Greek and Roman figures consolidate the dead Queen's powerful status. During the haunting, Ladice is depicted as commanding enough to summon a statue of the God of the Underworld and the Afterlife: 'En croyant d'implorer le secours d'Osiris/Par miracle, Seigneur, cette riche statue/A paru devant eux tout d'un coup abattue' (I.I.134-136). Pascal's choice of figure can hardly be deemed coincidental; the Ancient Greek myth centres upon the murder of Osiris, King of Egypt, by his brother Set, who usurps the throne.[67] Osiris's wife, Isis, magically restores her husband's body and revives him long enough to posthumously conceive their son, Horus. In a similar manner to Sésostris, the existence of a rightful heir to the throne is revealed. Seeking to avenge his father, Horus and Set engage in violent battle, with the former emerging victorious. An intrigue concerned with family loyalty, dynastic succession, and ambition, the reference serves as a warning to Amasis whilst binding Ladice to gifted male and female characters capable of giving and taking life. Likewise, through an explicit reference to the Parcae — the female personifications of destiny — the Queen aligns herself with strong mythical women: 'Amasis, je sens que je meurs/Et mes maux finiront par ce coup de la Parque' (I.IV.209-210).[68] Crucially, the inclusion of references to Ancient texts also proves Pascal's own aptitude for writing for the seventeenth-century French stage, with knowledge of Greek and Roman sources being deemed a prerequisite for dramatic production and women's lack thereof often being used to justify their exclusion from the literary domain. These references can be said to be hidden in what New Historicists term the 'margins' of the text, once again demonstrating the value of close critical engagement with seventeenth-century dramatic texts alongside their wider socio-political context.

Pascal's bold engagement with contemporary dramatic motifs further hints at an aptitude for stage writing. Through the opening scene of tragicomic violence, the playwright intertwines the

[67] For a discussion of gender roles within the tale, see Ashley Dawson, 'Reversal of Gender in Ancient Egyptian Mythology: Discovering the Secrets of Androgyny', *Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 1.1 (2013), 1-9.

[68] The Fates of Antiquity both spin and cut the thread of life. For a discussion of their literary mentions within a gendered context, see Guthke, *The Gender of Death.*

question of gender with that of tyranny; a contentious and inherently dramatic theme in 1661 with the potential to overshadow more implicit socio-political resonances, and one, as we shall see in the following chapter, explored in detail by Madame de Villedieu. Care is taken, however, to ensure that the character of the tyrant fails to dominate the remaining plotlines of the play, enabling any potentially gendered undercurrents to remain manifest. Owing to Sésostris' year of production, shifting the focus away from the contemporary motif of tyranny takes on particular significance. Given that Pascal composed her play not long after the Fronde and in the year of Louis XIV's marriage to a Spanish princess, her marginalisation of sedition and regicide may well be due to a reluctance to feature overt challenges to the monarchy.[69] Alongside the abovementioned construction of Amasis as a weak yet truly repentant ruler — traits possibly capable of igniting sympathy from the spectator — Pascal modifies her source text to portray a man who truly adores his wife.[70] Likewise, as the intrigue unravels sixteen years after the act of usurpation, the King is temporally distanced from his crime.[71] Additional emphasis is placed upon the fact that Amasis played no role in Apriez's murder and now faces little objection to his rulership: 'Tous vos ennemis/Par ces derniers combats, sont ou morts, ou soumis' (I.III.153-154); 'L'on vous élut, Seigneur, pour prince légitime/Vous l'êtes en effet, et vous l'êtes sans crime' (I.I.107-108).

The omniscient presence of his dead wife, moreover, serves as a palpable reminder to the spectator that usurpation is not without its repercussions. Repeatedly expressing his 'remords éternel' (I.II.118), the opening act stresses Amasis' anguish: 'Je ne sommeillais pas, et mon âme agitée/En ces cruels moments était bien tourmentée' (I.III.143-144). Not only figuratively blinded by

[69] Gethner interprets the production's representation of a more amicable leader as a possible 'patriotic gesture.' See Perry Gethner, 'Lyon as Theatrical Space: The Case of Françoise Pascal's Tragi-Comedies', in *Lieux de culture dans la France du XVIIe siècle, eds. William Brooks, Christine McCall Probes and Rainer Zaiser* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), pp.11-22 (p.20).

[70] Pascal removes any reference to Amasis being low-born and courting Ladice solely to benefit from the political favour she could bring. See Vortsman, *Tragedies and Tragicomedies by French Female Dramatists*, p.91. For an example of the King's adoration for his wife, see I.IV.229-230: 'Cette rare beauté, dont les attraits charmants/Faisaient dans cette cour soupirer mille amants!'

[71] Nina Ekstein, 'Staging the Tyrant on the Seventeenth-Century French Stage', *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, 36 (1999), 111-129, (p.114).

his own ambition and clear preference for a male successor (leading him to initially completely overlook the possibility that Thimarette may in fact be his daughter), he is later shown to be physically blinded as an apparent form of punishment for failing to return the throne to its rightful heir. Explicitly recalling Ladice's threat that his eyes 'vont perdre la clarté' (I.I.78), he progressively loses his vision the longer he refuses to restore power to Apriez's child: 'Tous deux [Ladice et Apriez] me menaçaient d'un grand aveuglement/Je perdais la clarté de moment en moment' (IV.I.1061-1062); 'Je perds encor la vue:/ Mes esprits sont troublés, ma force diminue!/ Je n'en puis plus, je meurs…' (IV.VI.1279-1281). Loss of sight, from Sophocles onwards, is of course a classic trope of castration and impotence in tragedy, with Pascal subtly underscoring her warning against tyranny with gendered references: a link, as we will see in Chapter III, Madame de Villedieu makes far more explicit. Unlike the male characters of Amasis and Héracléon who are shown to be repeatedly blinded by their own ambition (figuratively, and, in one case, physically), Ladice and the living female roles are consistently portrayed as astute and self-aware. Whilst Héracléon encourages the King to dismiss his concerns by reminding him of his army's brute force, Lysérine remains somewhat more cautious, rightfully recognising that Amasis should fear his past wrongdoings: 'La crainte du roi n'est pas sans fondement […]/ De telles visions ne sont pas ordinaires/ Et ne s'adressent point à des âmes vulgaires' (I.II.97-100).[72] The secondary female character is also the only character to acknowledge the significance of Ladice's revelation that Apriez's son survives: 'Crois que ma fortune est encore incertaine […] Si Sésostris n'est mort , il faudra qu'il succède' (I.V.296-319). Conversely, even upon learning that an unknown soldier bears the same name as the usurped King's successor, Amasis naively proclaims it to be a mere coincidence: 'Dans toute cette terre/Ce nom est fort commun' (II.VII.584-585). It is worth noting that a total of thirteen references to women's eyes can be counted throughout the tragedy, ironically all of which are made in relation to their physical appearance.[73]

[72] Lyserine's maid suspecting Sésostris' regal origins is a further example of female astuteness.
[73] See, for example, V.V.1502; II.VIII.620; II.IX.624; II.IX.632; and III.I.766

Alongside directing the focus of the plot away from tyranny by minimising the criminal nature of the King's usurpation and emphasising the repercussions of such a contentious act, the tragicomedy could even be said to be promoting the concept of dynastic succession through its turbulent backdrop. In staging the disruption occurring within the natural world when the rightful ruler is displaced, the play would appear to symbolically re-enforce the early modern belief that identity should remain fixed.[74] During Amasis' disturbing dream, for instance, the palace is struck by violent lightning: 'Des horribles éclats ont paru dans ces lieux/ Qui, mêlant dans leur bruit mille éclatantes flammes' (I.I.86-87). Meanwhile, Simandius, the army general, informs the King of an unusually vicious storm that simultaneously hit the remainder of the city:

> Le Ciel de vos lauriers semble être un peu jaloux.
> Seigneur, vous a-t-on dit que toute cette terre
> A retenti du bruit d'un grand coup de tonnerre?
> Qu'on a vu dans ces lieux pleuvoir étrangement?
>
> I.I.122-125

Depicted as remarkably powerful, the storm makes Simandius fear another attack: 'Ils [les sujets] seraient mis en poudre' (I.I.132). Metaphors to the natural world further infer transcending the rightful order to be 'unnatural'; Amasis' mind is troubled by 'un petit orage' (I.I.33) and 'une étrange tempête' (I.I.37).[75] The tragicomic violent opening therefore engages somewhat ambiguously with socio-political concerns. Whilst on the surface the play openly condemns tyranny and appears to support the notions of dynastic succession and fixed identity as natural, the scene is nonetheless subtly underpinned with an act of tragicomic violence that inverts gender dynamics and challenges gender norms. Pascal's mingling of gender and the broader matter of status prove useful for analysing the tragicomedy's two main roles, Sésostris and Thimarette.

[74] For a discussion of these carefully constructed social boundaries, see Richard Bonney, *Society and Government in France under Richelieu and Mazarin 1624-1661* (London: Macmillan, 1988).
[75] An extensive number of references to 'le ciel' are also made in the opening act.

'Ou de fille, ou de fils' (I.IV.217): A Matter of Gender or Authority?

The revelation of a birth during the opening act of tragicomic violence triggers a series of misidentifications in which first Sésostris and then Thimarette are purported to be Amasis' child. Crucially, the ensuing confusion allows for the portrayal of analogous scenes in which, as we shall shortly see, neither sex is shown to be excluded from the possibility of power. Yet prior to discovering their prospective royal status, the supposed shepherd and shepherdess appear far from equal. Both act in accordance with conventional gender expectations, with Sésostris' strength and Thimarette's submissive nature being further underscored through the deployment of tragicomic violence.

Whilst Pascal's tragicomic martyr play opens with the portrayal of a passive and weak male protagonist, *Sésostris* offers an active male role renowned for his military exploits. Praised by secondary characters for his bravery and physical strength yet equally his modest and polite nature, Sésostris (currently an unidentified soldier who has successfully fought in the King's army) would appear to conform to the Cornelian hero archetype[76]:

Un certain inconnu, d'une terre étrangère,
Vint faire voir pour vous tant de zèle et d'ardeur,
Qu'on lui doit du combat le premier rang d'honneur
[…]
Un chacun admirait sa grâce et son courage,
Sa mine ravissait les cœurs de nos soldats
[…]
Seigneur, ce grand Guerrier eut tant de modestie […].

I.III.160-180

[76] Yet another example of his modesty is his decision to fight in the King's army under the false name 'Psammenite'.

The initial depiction of the male hero also introduces a component of dramatic irony. The references to his regal valour encourage the spectator to doubt his simple origins and to beat the King to his later assumption that Sésostris must be his son and rightful heir: 'Cette valeur, qui n'eut jamais d'égale/Marquait une naissance ou divine, ou royale' (I.III.171-172). Further similarities are drawn between the King and his 'son', with both characters being repeatedly described in relation to their 'lauriers'.[77] Likewise, even Lysérine's maid, Cyllénie, detects his higher status: 'Ce jeune inconnu [..] je serai fort trompée ou c'est celui-là même/ Qui doit vous faire un jour porter le diadème' (I.V.305-308). That Sésostris is first framed as the preferred and particularly well-suited heir (even taking the title of the play) is perhaps hardly surprising; as we have seen, primogeniture and salic law dominated seventeenth-century discussions of dynastic succession.[78] From a theatrical perspective, Hélène Baby, in her comprehensive study of the tragicomic genre, likewise deduces that 'le bel inconnu est le plus souvent un homme'.[79] Fearful that his recently augmented status will prevent his marriage to Thimarette, Sésostris proves himself to be a valiant lover. First expressing a desire to change clothing before appearing before the court in an attempt to delay their separation (II.VII), he then endeavours to persuade his lover to flee:

> Je vous enlèverai devant qu'il soit une heure
> Pour aller loin d'ici faire une autre demeure:
> J'aime mieux dans un bois adorer vos appas
> Que d'être sur un trône où vous ne seriez pas.
>
> II.IX.635-638

He vows to remain loyal to the shepherdess, frequently expressing his loathing of Lysérine.[80]

[77] See, for example I.I.III, I.II.106 and I.II.122 for the King; III.VII.925 and III.VIII.996 for Sésostris.
[78] As Derval Conroy notes, there is frequently, although not always, a latent code of sexual difference in representations of male and female rulers. Derval Conroy, *Ruling Women, II,* p.32. These differences will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.
[79] Baby, p.188.
[80] See, for example, III.I.

The immediate prominence accorded to Sésostris results in the overshadowing of his female counterpart. Absent until Act II, the female protagonist first emerges as a timid character remarkable only for her physical appearance. Incessantly depicted as an object of beauty ('la belle Thimarette', II.I.332; 'cet adorable objet', II.I.337; 'cette beauté si chère', I.II.35; 'un objet si charmant', II.I.357) and discussed in light of Amenaphis' attempts to force her into hiding, the remarks of Sésostris and Miris serve to establish Thimarette as a conventional female character circumscribed to the wishes of a father figure of authority. Following a lengthy scene in which Sésostris spies upon his lover after being encouraged to do so by his confidant, Pascal ensures the continued objectification of Thimarette whilst deflecting any possible condemnation for this voyeuristic behaviour — an act explicitly referred to as one of 'violence' (II.I.363) — from the male protagonist. Unaware of her observers, she continues to act in accordance with expected gender roles by stressing the passive role she played in her own disappearance: 'Il me fit mettre ici' (II.I.397); 'Il me fit embarquer' (II.I.387). Innocently expressing her love for her maid and taking offense when pressed to talk of her feelings for Sésostris by Edésie, Thimarette is encouraged to expose her emotions through the medium of song. Taking place within a forest, this bucolic setting is closely aligned to the pastoral genre. Through the dramatic construction of this tragicomic violent act, Pascal is able to create a theatrically effective scene in which Sésostris (and the spectator) are made aware of Thimarette's love. Whilst Vortsman explores this scene from the perspective of performance innovation, it is important to note its impact upon gender dynamics.[81] Via this voyeuristic scene, Pascal creates a sense of complicity on the part of the spectator, encouraging continued objectification whilst ensuring her female character does not diverge from expected female behaviour by publicly declaring her feelings.[82] Comedy further deters the spectator from

[81] Vortsman observes that although this device had been used to great effect in a number of male-authored plays, such as Philippe Quinault's *La généreuse ingratitude* or Molière's *Le Tartuffe,* this is the only occurrence of its use in a female-authored play in seventeenth-century France and perfectly demonstrates Pascal's awareness of dramaturgical questions and theatricality. See 'Sleeping Heroes', p.197.

[82] As d'Aubignac notes that a woman must never let it be known from her own mouth to a man that she has love for him. See Bourque, p.181 and Chapter I of this thesis.

viewing Sésostris' dishonest actions as negative; the playwright injects dramatic irony when the female characters imagine the possibility of the male character's presence: 'Si Sésostris était dans notre compagnie' (II.II.367); 'Si quelque berger me venait écouter?' (II.II.405). The objectification of Thimarette continues throughout the play, with even her female rival remarking upon her beauty.[83] This initial characterisation is perhaps what leads Vortsman to conclude that Thimarette is 'naïve and innocent […] accepting the reversals in her fortune without complaint'.[84]

It is, however, precisely Thimarette's physical appearance that first raises doubts regarding her lower status, eventually leading to her being recognised as Amasis' daughter and allowing her to attain a similar stage presence to her male counterpart. Reservations over her shepherdess origins are first cast when Sésostris observes how greatly his lover resembles the portrait of Ladice contained in the necklace bestowed to the male hero as a war prize: 'Jugez en la voyant, si ce petit ouvrage/ N'a pas beaucoup des traits de votre beau visage' (II.III.463-464). Next, Héracléon asserts that Thimarette is simply too beautiful to be the daughter of Traseas: 'Peut-il bien être/ Qu'une telle beauté soit fille d'un pasteur? / Non, cela ne se peut…qu'en dites-vous, ma sœur?' (II.VI.508-510). By staging characters supposing Thimarette's attractive appearance to be both a trait indicative of royal status yet simultaneously as a means for justifying the objectification and mistreatment of her personage, Pascal neatly reminds the spectator of the ambivalence surrounding female beauty within seventeenth-century society. As we saw in Chapter I, feminine beauty could be both a dangerous trait and a positive virtue in early modern France. As inferred through Pascal's earlier clever inversion of the normative rape narrative in *Agathonphile martyr*, and as we shall see in the proceeding chapter, feminine beauty is often concurrently valorised and condemned as dangerous for its facility to leave 'poor men ensnared'.[85] The very same trait contributing to Thimarette's subjugation also leads to her being considered for one of the most powerful positions imaginable.

[83] I.VI.511.
[84] Vortsman, *Tragedies and Tragi-comedies by French Female Dramatists,* p.97.
[85] Llewelyn, 'Beauty and Belief', p.121.

The spectator is further encouraged to question her lower status as Héracléon ponders whether Sésostris' age excludes him from the possibility of being the rightful heir: 'Ce fils est trop haut pour n'avoir que seize ans' (II.V.562).[86] Never fully excluding Thimarette from the possibility of power, Pascal highlights the astuteness of her female role when she confesses to her maid that she too suspects herself to be of higher birth:

> Je veux bien t'avertir que, parmi les vergers
> J'avais le cœur plus haut que n'ont pas les bergers
> Un certain noble orgueil montrait dans mon bas âge
> Qu'un jour je sortirais de cette île sauvage.
>
> IV.IV.1165-1168

The spectator thus encounters a female character both beautiful and self-aware.[87]

Despite Amasis' initial disbelief, after receiving confirmation of her royal status, Thimarette is welcomed and accepted as swiftly as her male counterpart.[88] Her characterisation as predominantly passive object now begins to be deconstructed. Indicating her capability to rule effectively, Amasis signals her ability to appease her subjects merely by appearing before them: 'Apaisons nos sujets, et pour les contenter/ Allons, ma fille, allons! Venez vous présenter' (IV.VI.1269-1270). In line with my New Historicist approach, when reading this scene alongside the wider socio-political context of the early 1660s, it is clear that the emphasis on the power of visibility aligns with the omnispresent iconography of the period that constructs — or 'self-fashions' — Louis XIV as a father-like figure to be loved rather than feared, negating the need for overt force to control subjects. It is, however, worth noting that Pascal has Amasis demand that his daughter be

[86] See also: 'Je verrai Thimarette/Porter bientôt un sceptre au lieu d'une houlette' (III.II.743-744).
[87] Gethner deduces Thimarette's astuteness to be a key distinction between her characterisation and that of the male protagonist: 'La jeune première, par contre, a un sens d'orgueil naturel qui manque à Sésostris'. Gethner, 'Les jeunes premiers', p.132.
[88] 'Venez, approchez-vous, cher gage de ma flamme/Vrai portrait de l'objet qui sut ravir mon âme' (IV.II.1087-1088).

accompanied by his *favori*:

> Je veux qu'Héracléon y soit auprès de vous,
> Pour les mieux assurer qu'il sera votre époux:
> D'abord qu'ils le verront et qu'ils pourront entendre
> Qu'ils devront obéir sous cet illustre gendre […].
>
> IV.VI.1273-1276

Deducing her leadership to require male backing, the King's request indicates his clear prejudice against women ruling independently and belief in the male prerogative to govern, echoing his earlier promise to wed either Héracléon or Lysérine to his heir and reflecting early modern patriarchal beliefs. Should he have a daughter, the male *favori* would marry his heir and 'posséder[a] tout', whereas should he have a son, Lysérine would become nothing more than 'sa maîtresse':

> J'atteste tous les dieux que si c'est une fille,
> Je vous ferai bientôt l'appui de ma famille,
> Et qu'après mon trépas vous posséderez tout,
> Et serez souverain de l'un à l'autre bout;
> Ou bien si c'est un fils, assurez-vous, Princesse,
> Que je saurai d'abord vous faire sa maîtresse.
>
> I.IV.263-268

Thimarette nonetheless soon proves her aptitude for acting autonomously when she too is raised to the rank of royal successor. Mirroring the role of the eponymous hero on several occasions, this reversal of fortune allows Pascal to stage analogous scenes in which each party, regardless of sex, is shown to act equally, serving as a subtle criticism of seventeenth-century patriarchal practices. Just as Sésostris initiates delaying tactics and offers to flee with his lover, Thimarette proposes that they continue to pursue their relationship in secret. Her reassurances deter Sésostris from his threat to commit suicide (IV.V), with the female protagonist also being entrusted to persuade the *guerrier* to

remain at court. Drawing upon the powers of speech and influence, she willingly speaks out to encourage others to challenge Sésostris' humble origins. Presenting his gallantry as innate, she discloses how he saved her from a crocodile during childhood in an indisputably tragicomic-infused battle: 'Sésostris se jeta sur ce fier animal […]/Ce monstre furieux expira sous ses armes' (IV.II.1129-1132).

Through this reversal of fortune, Thimarette and Sésostris are shown to respond identically to matters of the heart, shattering the early modern well-worn conceptual link between women and emotion, and men and duty. After realising the adverse impact of their newly found status upon their relationship with their lover, the reactions of both protagonists are equally passionate:

Thimarette *(en pleurant)* : Ta grandeur, Sésostris, me va causer la mort (II.VIII.598).
Sésostris : Ces bizarres effets de mon funeste sort/ Me font voir qu'il n'est rien de si doux que la mort (IV.V.1189-1190).

Love — as opposed to the heroic (and putatively masculine) notion of duty — drives the two characters to refute the throne:

Sésostris : J'aime mieux dans un bois adorer vos appas/ Que d'être sur un trône où vous ne seriez pas (II.VIII.637-638).
Thimarette : Et croyez que ce cœur sera toujours le même/ Qu'il vous estime plus cent fois qu'un diadème (IV.V.1219-1220).

Linguistic similarities can also be identified in their opposition to an arranged marriage; the protagonists 'abhorre[nt]' their prospective spouses.[89] Both Thimarette and Sésostris' decision to actively resist their separation supports Hélène Baby's deduction that the reciprocal love between a young male and female characters central to the tragicomic genre presents an opportunity to challenge the active/passive traditional gender-marked behaviours: 'La tradition sociale (et le

[89] See, e.g., IV.VI.1239.

fonctionnement social de l'univers tragi-comique) fait que l'on assigne le plus souvent au héros la position de sujet, et à l'héroïne celle de l'objet. Mais comme l'amour tragi-comique est réciproque, les fonctions d'objet et de sujet sont en fait interchangeables'.[90] Whilst neither are afforded the privilege of choosing their own spouse, so too can neither character, male or female, be said to accept their change in fortune 'without complaint'.

The staging of analogous scenes in which both a male and female character are prevented from marrying their lover due to their unequal social standing perhaps explains why the tragicomedy has been overlooked from the perspective of gender. According to Vortsman, it is 'their position as regards authority, and not their sex' which creates the play's obstacles.[91] Indeed, broader interrogations of the notion of status recur throughout the play. Alongside the abovementioned condemnation of the King's usurpation, ambition is repeatedly penalised, discouraging characters (and the spectator) from attempting to augment their position within early modern society.[92] Driven by base self-interest, Traséas is unsuccessful in, and punished for, his attempts to deceive his superiors: 'Hier l'ambition me sut faire mentir' (III.IV.837). Similarly, disguise — a tragicomic device capable of being staged to subversive ends — once again appears to be utilised to enforce the notion of identity as fixed.[93] Regardless of their outward appearances and items of clothing, the regal identities of Sésostris and Thimarette remain detectable throughout:[94]

Sous des habits fort à leur avantage,

On les a vus tous deux vêtus en cavaliers,

[90] Baby, p.104.
[91] Vortsman, *Tragedies and Tragi-Comedies by French Female Dramatists*, p.98.
[92] For a discussion of the troubling notion of ambition within early modern French society, see Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture: France, 1570-1715* (California: California University Press, 1993).
[93] As a highly stratified society founded upon 'fixed' roles of rank and gender, disguise marks the sudden dissolution of these carefully constructed social boundaries, calling into question the need for the established hierarchy. See Conroy, 'The Cultural Politics of Disguise'. For a breakdown of the different forms of deliberate and more 'accidental' disguises, such as that of Sésostris and Thimarette, see Georges Forestier, *Esthétique de l'identité,* notably pp.43-74.
[94] See also : 'Voyez sous cet habit [de berger] le plus grand des guerriers' (II.III.441).

Qui semblaient revenir de nos combats derniers.

Et quoique déguisés sous cet habit champêtre,

La grandeur du plus jeune est aisée à [re]connaitre.

II.IV.480-484

Unable to shed their 'innate' social standing by simply stripping themselves of all material markers, the tragicomedy would seem to validate the idea of status distinction as naturally and biologically fixed.

Resisting Tragicomic Violence: Thimarette's Strength

However, through the inclusion of two secondary characters, Héracléon and Lysérine, the playwright further plays upon the tragicomic themes of doubling and violence, with the challenging of traditional gender dynamics subsequently underpinning the entirety of her dramatic work. Distinctions in Pascal's characterisation of the two siblings results in Héracléon posing a far more ominous threat than his sister. From the outset of the play, the male *favori* is constructed as an intimidating persona. Immediately dismissive of the King's nightmare, he reveals himself to be an advocator of violence. To reassure Amasis of the unchallengeable nature of his rulership, Héracléon draws upon past examples of conquests won through the deployment of physical force: 'Ces peuples mutins […] n'ont pu résister aux forces de nos coups' (I.I.5-6). This advice, when considered in parallel with the ongoing 'civilizing' process taking place during the period in which the play was produced, runs counter to the increasing value being accorded to a compassionate King. Unlike Lysérine, who adores Sésostris regardless of his status, her brother's motivation for pursuing Thimarette is worryingly twofold; driven not only by his love for the female protagonist's beauty, Héracléon's attempts at courting are stirred by his desire for the crown: 'Un sceptre est charmant aussi bien que ses yeux' (III.II.766).[95] Although critics are unanimous in their contention that the

[95] At the end of Act IV, Lysérine proclaims her love for Sésostris despite him being once again perceived to be Traséas' son.

male *favori*'s adoration of Thimarette is genuine, his objectification and sexualisation of the Princess perhaps indicates that he at times perceives her merely as a means of attaining the throne: 'Sous ces nouveaux habits, admirez ce beau corps/ Ou la nature a mis ses plus riches trésors' (IV.II.1105).[96] Indifferent to her resistance and expressing little interest in anything but her physical appearance, he condemns her for being 'aussi lâche que belle' (V.VI.1512). Seemingly forgetting the fact that he too is embroiled in a case of unrequited love, Héracléon cruelly taunts his sister about Sésostris' coldness: 'Ce prince pourtant vous tient un peu de loin' (III.II.809). The sudden reversal in Sésostris' and Thimarette's fortune further sets apart the two siblings, with their differing reactions showing the female *favorite* in a far more favourable light. Disgruntled and unconvinced of the title character's royal status, Héracléon manipulates Traséas into coming forward with the truth (III.V). Desperate to win over Thimarette, he then spies upon the Princess on two occasions (V.I; V.VI). Taking place outside of her bedroom, Pascal renders this act of voyeurism as intrusive and thus as violent as possible. Lysérine, on the other hand, upon realising her pursuit of Sésostris to be futile, speaks out to denounce her brother. A striking example of a woman acting autonomously, she writes a letter distancing herself from the court and her brother's actions before undertaking a self-imposed exile.[97] Meanwhile, refusing to concede defeat — particularly after receiving confirmation of Thimarette's royal status — Héracléon sets into motion a violent plan to abduct his beloved.

Necessitating greater resistance, Héracléon's aggression allows Thimarette to display her strength. After discovering his voyeurism, she boldly confronts his actions: 'Quoi, venir m'écouter? Quelle est donc votre audace?' (V.VI.1519). Offended by his forceful approach to love, the Princess openly admits her dislike for Héracléon before dismissing him from her presence. The female protagonist also brazenly expresses her resistance to the arranged marriage in the presence of all

[96] See, for example, Gethner, 'Lyon as Theatrical Space'.
[97] Indeed, Perry Gethner finds women to typically write letters after deciding to assert their autonomy and take greater control over their own destiny, notably within the comic genre. Perry Gethner, 'Women's Letters in Classical French Comedy', *Cahiers*, 4.2 (1990), 1-16.

other characters, including King Amasis.[98] By contrast, Sésostris is rarely staged alongside Lysérine, instead fleeing her at every opportunity: 'Sésostris, arrêtez: pourquoi me fuir ainsi?' (IV.VIII.1318). Héracléon's final act of tragicomic violence emphasises the astute and intelligent nature of Thimarette. Suspecting her unwanted lover of treachery, she instructs the two confidants to follow him (communicated via a stage direction): *Thimarette commande tout bas à Miris et Edésie de les suivre pour les observer* (V.VII). With his intent to abduct the Princess discovered, Sésostris and the King's guards are summoned. Defeating Héracléon (with only his confidant, Tanisis, killed during battle), Thimarette's instinctive command prevents the act of 'transports violents' from ever taking place. Finally, the Princess is given the opportunity to decide the traitor's punishment. Pardoning her repentant admirer, Pascal presents a female persona capable of exercising a fair ruling without being swayed by her own emotions: 'Je vous pardonne tout, même sans répugnance' (V.XI.1690). This compassionate and stoic judgement deconstructs the early modern notion that women are driven solely by their passions. Whilst this clemency takes place in the private sphere, the sharp contrast between the characterisation of Héracléon and Thimarette nonetheless also hints at women's potential to rule in the public sphere.

Despite first seeming to conform to conventional gender dynamics, through the characterisation of the title character and Thimarette (alongside that of Héracléon and Lysérine), *Sésostris* clearly challenges the subordinate role accorded to, and expected of, women within seventeenth-century French society. The initial scene in which a female apparition is constructed as a strong, astute and inherently good personage becomes reality. Allowing for the staging of analogous scenes, this opening act of tragicomic violence results in neither sex being excluded from the possibility of power; both protagonists are given the opportunity to prove their capability to act autonomously. Tragicomic violence reappears throughout as a means of demonstrating the strength of the play's two protagonists; Sésostris is a valiant warrior capable not only in battle but also at

[98] See, for example : 'Je ne le [Héracléon] pourrai voir que comme un adversaire' (IV.IV.1184).

fending off wild beasts, whilst conversely, Thimarette showcases her strength through the ways in which she defends herself *against* acts of aggression. Closing the tragicomedy with the promise of marriage between these two lovers after Sésostris is revealed to be Apriez's son, we are left with the impression that Thimarette will hold significant influence over the rightful heir's ruling; a point explicitly expressed by the title character earlier in the play: 'Que je dois partager le trône qu'on m'apprête/ Je veux qu'en ce royaume elle impose des lois' (III.I.728-729). Atypical of the tragicomic genre, the 'rightful' order fails to be fully restored by denouement.

Agathonphile martyr and Sésostris: Concluding Remarks

Following close critical engagement with Françoise Pascal's two tragicomedies within the socio-political and historical context in which they were produced, the potential for generic violence to disrupt supposedly fixed gender dynamics is evident. The playwright commences both dramatic productions with the staging of a scene of tragicomic violence. Satisfying the genre's demands for entertainment and excess, these scenes simultaneously engender a site for envisaging an alternate world in which women refuse to remain subordinate to their male counterparts. Within *Agathonphile martyr*, the dramatic device takes the form of sexual violence. Attempting to seduce and rape her sleeping step-son, Irénée and Agathon's interaction overturns the gender-marked active/passive traditional dichotomy. Within *Sésostris*, Ladice's initial haunting of her husband establishes women as morally and physically superior to the living male characters. Whilst the attempted sexual assault and apparition are (in accordance with generic classification) presented as far-fetched, the playwright in fact appears to be utilising their *invraisemblance* to further destabilise normative gender roles. Within Pascal's first production, the theatricality of the act encourages the spectator to view Irénée's passion-driven scheming as mere entertainment rather than a true reflection of (negative) female behaviour. During the opening of the dramatist's only 'pure' tragicomedy, the illusory nature of the King's dream allows for an extreme reversal of gender dynamics in which the strength of the female protagonist is shown to parallel that of Ancient Gods.

Pascal can therefore be said to exploit the putative regulatory freedom granted by the generic classification of her plays to challenge early modern gender hierarchy.

The initial display of gender inversion extends to the remaining — and far more 'realistic' — scenes of the two dramatic productions, constituting a new dramatic *vraisemblable* and consolidating the play's revised vision of gender relations, with tragicomic violence here being deployed as a means of highlighting contemporary gender concerns (notably around the *mariage de convenance*). Amplifying the weak and passive nature of the male protagonist established during the opening sexual assault, Triphine proves her capacity to act autonomously when she independently orchestrates her own 'abduction' in an attempt to evade an arranged marriage; a manoeuvre atypical of 1630s tragicomedy. Establishing sympathy for her personage, the protagonist's bold and violent plotting against the patriarchal order is presented as rational and necessary. Triphine's death, in which she exercises her right to choose, is constructed as a final act of defiance. Despite the female protagonist of *Sésostris* being first portrayed as a passive object, through the medium of tragicomic violence, she too demonstrates her ability to exercise strength, with the initial objectification of her personage (alongside that of Triphine) rendering resistance all the more remarkable. Defending herself against a male character's attempted violence, Thimarette boldly challenges the voyeuristic activities of Héracléon and, unaided, thwarts her own abduction, triggering the play's happy denouement. With the rightful order failing to remain 'subliminally present', Pascal displaces tragicomic drama not only on a temporal level — that is to say historically through continuing to use the genre when it had fallen out of favour — but also to a seemingly subversive end; the opening inversions of roles are never proven to be merely 'illusory'.

Often pairing displays of tragicomic violence with other generic signifiers, the playwright further demonstrates the dramatic form's capacity to engage with early modern gender anxieties. Through using sleep and dreams during the opening scenes of aggression, the spectator is

immediately presented with a male role in a position of passivity.[99] Similarly, the theme of doubling is cleverly deployed across both tragicomedies as a means of challenging seventeenth-century patriarchal social practices. A close critical analysis of *Agathonphile martyr*'s language and structure exposes subtle parallels between Pascal's presentation of contractual marriage and Irénée's act of sexual aggression, allowing for a reading of the play's violent opening as underscoring the abusive nature of the *mariage de convenance* for early modern women. By creating discursive echoes between the language of Irénée and that of Polydore, the dramatist also ensures the disruption of the conceptual link between women and uncontrollable desire; both male and female personages are shown to be equally susceptible to their emotions under the powerful influence of love. Similarly, the veiled revelation that occurs during Ladice's haunting and the ensuing confusion enables the staging of analogous scenes throughout *Sésostris.* Despite the King's clear belief in the male prerogative to rule, neither sex is excluded from the possibility of power. In a similar manner to *Agathonphile martyr*, the protagonists are shown to respond identically to matters of the heart. In the closing scene of the play, Thimarette is nonetheless offered the opportunity to demonstrate her capacity to rule without any emotional sway. With criticisms of early modern patriarchal society often existing in the 'margins' of these dramatic productions and exposed only through close critical readings of the texts within their socio-political context, the value of applying a New Historicist approach to early modern French theatre is evident.

Although the focus of this analysis lies with gender, it is impossible to overlook the engagement of both dramatic productions with broader contemporary concerns. Through the introduction of an audacious and wise confidante in *Agathonphile martyr*, the spectator encounters a female character proficient at acting upon her own initiative despite not only her gender but also her lower status, calling into question the need for the prescribed hierarchy. Whilst this is a common trope of the comedic genre, the serious backdrop in which Celiane is operating distances her

[99] Vortsman, 'Sleeping Heroes, Speaking Heroines'.

characterisation from one that incites laughter. Conversely, *Sésostris* appears to reinforce the notion of identity as fixed. Touching upon the contentious theme of tyranny, the tragicomedy presents the repercussions of failing to meet the demands of dynastic succession. Similarly, ambition and the desire to augment one's social position is framed as an inherently negative trait. Through the use of an additional tragicomic trope — that of disguise — the playwright further presents identity as constant. Regardless of their outward appearance, the regal identities of Sésostris and Thimarette remain detectable throughout, validating the idea that status distinction is naturally and biologically fixed. Despite a seeming lack of consistency across the two dramatic works (with one contradicting and the other coinciding with early modern theatrical expectations of status), the inclusion of references to rank nonetheless further proves tragicomedy — in the same way as tragedy and comedy — to be capable of critiquing seventeenth-century socio-political considerations.

Finally, whilst Pascal's decision to place *Agathonphile martyr* and *Sésostris* within the now obsolete genre of tragicomedy may never be fully understood, it is clear that certain characteristics of the genre, notably tragicomic violence, provide the playwright with a site for challenging conventional gender roles and for engaging with broader socio-political concerns. By presenting protagonists motivated primarily by love and driven largely by a desire to resist a contractual marriage, Pascal confines her challenging of the normative order almost exclusively to the familial domain, only touching upon the political sphere. As we shall now see, Madame de Villedieu fully extends the subversion of gender dynamics to the political sphere when she stages female protagonists successfully navigating violent tyrannical regimes in *Manlius* and *Nitétis*.

Chapter III
Negotiating Tyrannical Violence: Gendered Resistance in Madame de Villedieu's *Manlius* (1662) and *Nitétis* (1663)

Introduction

The dramatic tyrant can hardly be termed a neutral figure on the seventeenth-century French stage. Defined in Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* as an 'usurpateur' or 'un Prince qui abuse son pouvoir, qui ne gouverne pas selon les loix, qui use de violence et de cruauté envers ses sujets', both the illegitimacy and brutality associated with tyrannical regimes certainly challenge the increasing demand from certain early modern dramatic theorists for a staged glorification of monarchical government and the omission of visible scenes of violence.[1] Indeed, by very definition, the tyrant would appear inherently antithetical to the socio-political and aesthetic theatrical imperatives being increasingly enforced in the latter half of the century.

Yet despite the apparent irreconcilability of despotism with didactic dictates, dramatic representations of tyranny remain surprisingly ubiquitous throughout the seventeenth century.[2] A closer examination of this seemingly seditious figure reveals several plausible explanations for its continued stage acceptance. First appearing in Ancient Greek and Roman theatre, the tyrant is located within a specific literary tradition deemed worthy of adaptation for the stage by early modern theorists, providing playwrights with a wealth of despotic sources from which to take inspiration.[3] The display of pomp and dazzle allied with portrayals of monarchic power is unquestionably theatrical, whilst the presence of an unjust tyrannical force provides playwrights with an obvious source of dramatic conflict to overcome throughout the course of their play.[4]

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[1] Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel*.

[2] As John D. Lyons remarks '[la tyrannie] est une forme de pouvoir qui fascinait les auteurs du XVIIe siècle'. John D. Lyons 'La vérité tyrannique' in *L'Invraisemblance du pouvoir: Mises en scène de la souveraineté au XVIIe siècle*, eds. Jean-Vincent Blanchard and Helene Visentin (Paris: Presses Paris Sorbonne, 2005), pp.53-68 (p.53).

[3] D'Aubignac, for instance, observes that 'les Athéniens se plaisaient à voir sur leur théâtre les cruautés et les malheurs des Rois […] et la rébellion des peuples pour une mauvaise action d'un souverain'. D'Aubignac, *La pratique du théâtre*, p. 119. Interestingly the same explanation of ancient precedence is often given to justify the continued presence of staged suicide. On dramatic aesthetics and suicide, see Introduction and Chapter I.

[4] Jacques Truchet, for example, refers to representations of tyranny as 'merveilleusement spectaculaire'. Jacques Truchet, 'La tyrannie de Garnier à Racine: Critères juridiques, psychologiques et dramaturgiques' in

Further, owing to the dramatic demand for poetic justice, the tyrant rarely goes unpunished. In staging the demise of the oppressor (or, in the case of tragicomedy, their sudden conversion to virtue), tyrannical portrayals may be used to demonstrate to the spectator exactly what happens when the absolutist ideal is not met, serving as a counter-model to just monarchical rule, or in New Historicist terms, an example of subversion and containment.[5] Whilst subjects had a duty to obey the legitimate sovereign, submission to a tyrant was the subject of intense debates, with resistance being permitted in certain circumstances.[6] As dramatic theorist d'Aubignac remarks, challenges to royal authority are only permitted in cases where the cruelty of the tyrant's regime is 'considérable' and regicide in particular must not be presented 'sans de très signalées précautions'.[7] Measures should therefore be taken to ensure the tyrant emerges as a thoroughly odious personage. In addition, the playwright should ideally separate the character of the tyrant from contemporary absolutism by staging a usurper rather than a tyrant through exercise.[8] The plot, too, should be distanced geographically and temporally from contemporary events in order to discourage the spectator from drawing parallels with the absolutist power of the King.[9] Likewise, in accordance with aesthetic debates over the staging of violence, examples of the tyrant's aggression should either

L'image du souverain dans les lettres françaises, eds. Noémi Hepp and Madeleine Bertaud (Paris: Klincksieck, 1985), pp.257-264 (p.258). Likewise, James D. Matthews contends that the inherently dramatic appeal of tyranny rather than a desire to express a political statement explains the popularity of the theme within the tragicomic genre. James D. Matthews, 'The Tyrannical Sovereign'.

[5] Havivah Schwartz's study of flawed monarchs in Racine's works reaches similar conclusions, viewing Racine's staging of 'imperfect' rulers as a means of reinforcing the need for an absolutist ideal. See Havivah Schwartz, *Racine's Imperfect Monarchs: Models of Kingship in Bajazet, Iphigénie and Phèdre* (PhD: University of Pennsylvania, 2004). For a discussion of tyranny as a temporary aberration of character within the tragicomic genre, see Antoine Soare, 'Parodie et catharsis tragi-comique', *French Forum*, 9.3 (1984), 276-289.

[6] For a comprehensive overview of the early modern subjects' right to resist tyranny, see Anna Rosensweig, *Tragedy and the Ethics of Resistance Rights in Early Modern French Theater* (PhD: University of Minnesota, 2014).

[7] D'Aubignac, *La pratique du théâtre*, pp.119-120. As Melanie Bowman remarks in her excellent study of dramatic displays of the suffering body, 'it was too terrible to contemplate killing kings, or at least it was the one thing that was not presented.' Bowman, *The Spectacle of the Suffering Body,* p.14.

[8] Ekstein, 'Staging the Tyrant', p.114.

[9] Opting for an oriental subject is often seen to provide the playwright with more aesthetic and socio-political freedom. See, for instance, Tom Bruyer's discussion of Racine's *Bajazet*. Tom Bruyer, '"On n'entre point dans les raisons de cette grande tuerie": Bajazet ou la représentation d'une catastrophe orientale' in *Penser la catastrophe à l'age classique*, *vol. II,* eds. Thierry Belleguic, Benoit de Baere and Nicholas Dion (Paris: Editions Hermann, 2015), pp.217-230.

take place behind the scenes or be limited to past cases of unjust punishment and/or confined to future threats of brutality.[10] Whilst the threat to absolutist authority is, then, to some extent attenuated by the tyrant's status as an archetypal dramatic character with a prescribed set of acceptable conditions, theatrical representations of tyranny also resonate within early modern discussions of sexual politics. As touched upon in Chapter I, the troubling relationship between gender and tyranny has been subject to much critical scrutiny. In her comprehensive study of theatrical portrayals of female rulership, for instance, Derval Conroy dedicates a chapter to a detailed analysis of the construction of female rulers within seventeen early modern French dramatic works, many of whom are tyrants.[11] While allowing for the fact that the many portrayals of female despots cannot be read exclusively as an inherently gendered statement in itself due to the countless equivalent examples of volatile male rulers, Conroy nonetheless concludes that the framing of tyrannical disorder in gendered, essentialist terms within these plays exploits and hence propagates the well-worn association of women, power and disorder.[12] Rebecca Bushnell, in her study of the tyrannical figure on the early modern English stage, likewise remarks upon the capacity of despotic representations to reinforce gender hierarchy.[13] Centring her analysis upon portrayals of ineffective male rulers, Bushnell traces the numerous early modern analogies connecting femininity to tyranny back to Greek literature and culture (still highly influential within seventeenth-century French dramatic theory). The tyrant's enslavement to passion and pursuit of pleasure echoes the ancient cultural associations of women with insatiable desire and irrationality; 'Woman is represented as "naturally" what the tyrant becomes'.[14] Perry Gethner finds Jean de Rotrou's tragedy *L'Innocente Infidélité* (1634) to offer an explicit example of the 'effeminate' tyrant within seventeenth-century French drama. With the despot plotting to have his wife secretly drowned by

[10] As Ekstein observes, Pierre Corneille consistently chooses to have his tyrants avoid violent acts during the course of the play's action. Ekstein, 'Staging the Tyrant', p.118.
[11] Conroy, *Ruling Women, II.* See Chapter I, pp.5-65.
[12] *Ibid*., pp.6-7.
[13] Rebecca Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990).
[14] *Ibid*., p.21.

his chief minister to enable him to marry his mistress, the playwright's construction of a passion-driven tyrant performing in a cowardly manner 'can be linked to a tradition according to which oppressors were effeminate, at least according to Ancient Greek stereotypes'.[15] Through forging a link between the cruel male oppressor and stereotypical female vices, theatre may once again perpetuate concerns over women and/in power.

Conversely, Sarah Johnson, also exploring the parallels between male tyrants and women, views the gendered dimension of unjust despotism within a more subversive framework.[16] Just as the tyrant may claim power illegitimately, so too may the female character be said to achieve usurpation through her ability to inspire and recognise sexual desire and redirect it to political ends.[17] Here, Johnson departs from Nina Ekstein's view that women can accede to the level of tyrant (that is, she may have absolute power) only in the private domain.[18] Johnson presents cases in which the 'effeminacy' of the tyrant is countered by a 'masculine' female character, reading the destabilising of characteristic gender traits as 'challenging the exclusively male prerogative to govern'.[19] Indeed if, as we saw in Chapter I, women are excluded from power precisely because they 'sont forts sujettes à leurs passions, et, par conséquent, peu susceptibles de raison et de justice,' then the dramatic portrayal of a male tyrant severely and uncontrollably motivated by personal desire perhaps has the potential to undermine early modern reasoning behind women's omission from the throne.[20]

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[15] Perry Gethner, 'Challenges to Royal Authority in Plays by Male and Female Writers' in *Relations & Relationships in Seventeenth-century French Literature: Actes Du 36e Congrès Annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature, Portland State University, 6-8 Mai 2004*, ed. Jennifer Perlmutter (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2006), pp.73-82. See p.75. See early chapters on drowning being typically considered a 'feminine' death.

[16] Sarah Johnson, *Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[17] *Ibid*., p.111.

[18] Nina Ekstein, 'Staging the Tyrant', p.120. In the public domain, the term 'tyrant' is simply not applied to women.

[19] *Ibid*., p.112.

[20] Richelieu, *Testament politique*, p.13.

This chapter seeks to examine the relationship between violent tyranny and gender within the dramatic productions of Madame de Villedieu. Originally known by the name Marie-Catherine Desjardins, Villedieu is the only female playwright to fully exploit the theme of tyranny, with violent portrayals of despotism dominating the intrigue of her three theatrical works: *Manlius* (1662), *Nitétis* (1663), and *Le Favori* (1665).[21] The first female dramatist to have her plays performed by a professional company in Paris and to receive a command performance at Versailles, Villedieu is certainly one of the most commercially successful female playwrights of the century.[22] Yet although the most studied and best-known seventeenth-century female author today, Villedieu's dramatic works have, until recently, been almost entirely neglected.[23] Critics have instead tended to focus on her much-debated personal life; her novels, short stories and controversial poetry (the playwright first achieved notoriety in 1650 for her sonnet *Jouissance*); or her summary of Molière's *Les Précieuses Ridicules* over her own dramatic productions.[24] Whilst a recent influx of interest in the theatre of Madame de Villedieu goes some way towards addressing her treatment of contemporary socio-political issues, these studies tend to focus almost exclusively on *Le Favori*: a tragicomedy with close parallels to the Foucquet affair excluded from discussion here due to its overly comic undertones, musical interludes and surprising denouement that ultimately undermines the theme of tyranny within the play.[25] Most recently, those critics investigating her treatment of the authority

[21] Madame de Villedieu, '*Manlius*', in *Théâtre de femmes, II,* pp.311-382; Madame de Villedieu, '*Nitétis*', in *Femmes dramaturges, II,* pp.95-103; Madame de Villedieu, '*Le Favori*', in *Théâtre de femmes, II,* pp.383-452.
[22] Henry Carrington Lancaster deems Villedieu to be the 'ablest of women dramatists'. Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth-Century, Volume 5* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1942), pp.86-7.
[23] In her mammoth study of the author, for instance, Micheline Cuénin dedicates less than ten pages to Villedieu's dramatic corpus. Micheline Cuénin, *Roman et société sous Louis XIV: Madame de Villedieu (Marie-Catherine Desjardins 1640-1683),* 2 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1979). See in particular Vol. I, pp.114-122.
[24] On her personal life, see for example, Bruce Archer Morrissette, *The Life and Works of Marie-Catherine Desjardins (Madame de Villedieu) 1632-1683* (St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1947). On her other written works, see for example, Nancy D. Klein, *The Female Protagonist in the Nouvelles of Madame de Villedieu* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992) and David Harrison, 'Keeping on the Mask: Madame de Villedieu's *Annales galantes* and the Pleasures of *Not* Revealing History', *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 75.2 (2021), 92-105. Despite writing a summary of the opening night of *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, Villedieu was not in fact present at the performance.
[25] For a discussion of the play's negotiations of the Foucquet theme, see Chloé Hogg, 'Staging Foucquet: Historical and Theatrical Contexts of Villedieu's *Le Favori*', in *A Labor of Love: Critical Reflections on the Writings of Marie-Catherine Desjardins (Mme de Villedieu)*, ed. Roxanne Decker Lalande (London: Associated University

figure in relation to early modern absolutism deem her work to be relatively conservative from a political standpoint. Perry Gethner, for instance, notes that the playwright carefully avoids the possibility for comparison between her tyrants and Louis XIV and does, in fact, endorse monarchical government.[26] Similarly Chloé Hogg contends that the playwright's inclusion of comic undertones cleverly mitigates the potential for political controversy.[27]

By centring upon the construction of violent tyrannical rule and ensuing resistance within *Manlius* and *Nitétis*, it is my contention that Madame de Villedieu's dramatic works exploit the archetypal figure of the despot not to critique royal authority, but rather to challenge seventeenth-century gender hierarchy. Taking each play in turn, my analysis will begin by exploring the specific ways in which Villedieu establishes her two rulers as tyrants. As both plays feature legitimate male leaders rather than usurpers, the need to ensure their exercise of power appears unjust and violent is first crucial if any form of resistance is to be permitted. Through a careful rewriting of her source text, Villedieu ensures Torquatus (*Manlius*) is transformed into a violent despot prepared to sentence his own son to death under the pretext of Roman duty whilst secretly satisfying his own sexual desires. Cambyse (*Nitétis*) is all the more odious. Unlike Torquatus, who attempts to hide the tyrannical nature of his regime, Cambyse openly strives to legalise divorce and incest to fulfil his wish of marrying his sister, even having his own brother executed during the 'live' action of the play when he dares to object. Whilst it may at first be tempting to view Villedieu's decision to stage exclusively male tyrants as significant in itself, the gendering of the tyrant belongs, as we have seen, to a broader classical tradition in which dramatic cases of male rulers rival their female counterparts. My analysis will therefore turn to the ways in which resistance to — rather than representations of — violent tyrannical regimes appear specifically gendered within the two plays. When constructed

Presses, 2000), pp.43-63. Villedieu's final tragicomedy is also the only play by a seventeenth-century female playwright to have been revived by a theatrical troupe in the twenty-first century, which may further explain why it has received greater critical attention than Villedieu's other two dramatic works. On contemporary theatre group *La Compagnie La Subversive*, see Introduction.

[26] Perry Gethner, 'Conspirators and Tyrants in the Plays of Villedieu', in *A Labor of Love*, pp.31-42.

[27] Hogg, 'Staging Foucquet', pp.43-63.

effectively, tyranny opens up a legitimate site for playwrights to stage resistance to an overwhelming force of authority, offering dramatists the opportunity to present exceptionally courageous protagonists. In both of Villedieu's plays, those who successfully negotiate the tyrant's violence are almost all female. With the title male character of *Manlius* both unable and unwilling to act owing to the tyrant's ability to manipulate those around him, female characters come to the fore. Proving themselves to be far more astute than Manlius, Omphale and Camille use the tyrant's true motivations and desire against him, articulating resistance through their language and actions in order to wound the tyrant's authority. Villedieu's only tragedy features equally strong female characters who repeatedly question Cambyse's brutality. Whereas once again the male characters are found misjudging the best course of action to take, Nitétis and Mandane prove themselves to be courageous and decisive leaders, pushing against the aforementioned conceptual links between women and power. As master of her emotions and driven solely by the notions of duty and honour, Villedieu's title character, Nitétis, challenges man's privileged access to the throne. Similarly, the character of Mandane repeatedly defies and resists the despot's authority, demonstrating leadership ability and manipulating male desire, supporting Johnson's view that tyrannical representations may be deployed to seditiously gendered ends.[28] It will be argued, therefore, that the subversive element of Villedieu's works lies not with the portrayal of a tyrant; but rather, in the ways in which her female characters are depicted as diametrically opposed to their male (both tyrannical and 'heroic') counterparts. Disparaging negative conceptions of female capacity promulgated by those wishing to exclude women from rule, Villedieu effectively dramatises and affirms the urgings of early modern feminist socio-political treatises (such as Christine de Pizan's 1405 *La Cité des Dames*), configuring a space for imagining the possibility of female governance within seventeenth-century French society.[29]

[28] Johnson, *Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic.*

[29] For an excellent overview of these conceptions and debates, particularly those put forward by Christine de Pizan, see Sarah Hanley, 'Mapping Rulership in the French Body Politic: Political Identity, Public Law and the "King's One Body"', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 23.2 (1997), 129-149. See also Conroy for an

Manlius

Overview

The first play written by a female dramatist to be performed by a professional troupe at the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* in May 1662, *Manlius* was considered a moderate success by seventeenth-century French standards.[30] Today, however, the tragicomedy is perhaps best remembered for its role in the *Querelle de Sophonisbe*: a lengthy literary debate between d'Aubignac (Villedieu's mentor) and journalist Jean Donneau de Visé, throughout which the playwright is heavily criticised for the changes she makes to her source text.[31] Borrowing from Roman history, Villedieu adapts Tite-Live's *Torquatus Manlius,* making several significant alterations that serve to transform the consul from legitimate ruler into barbarous tyrant. The plot revolves around Torquatus, now sole ruler of Rome following the death of fellow consul, Decius, in an act of self-sacrifice during battle prior to the start of the play. Since consuls typically serve in pairs, Torquatus now has almost unlimited power. Despite having promised to marry Camille, Decius's widow, Torquatus desires Omphale, a captive Latin princess in love with his son, Manlius, and whom his son loves in return. Upon discovering Manlius to be his rival, Torquatus condemns his son to death for an earlier crime in which the title character launched a successful attack against the Latin army without first seeking permission. Crucially, Villedieu lessens the severity of his offense.[32] Whilst the source text presents a young hero who initiates an attack prior to the start of the war, and does so strictly for personal glory, in Villedieu's play, the battle is already well underway, and Manlius leads his men into battle only because they themselves have already come under attack. Torquatus's condemnation of Manlius for his war crime thus serves merely as a pretext. By lessening the titular protagonist's misconduct and

examination of these possibilities in sources contemporaneous with the plays in question. Conroy, *Ruling Women, I*.

[30] For a discussion of the play's initial reception, see Perry Gethner's critical introduction to the play.

[31] For an overview of the quarrel, see Myriam Dufour-Maître, *Héros ou personnages? Le personnel du théâtre de Pierre Corneille* (Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 2013), p.44. See also René Bray, *La Tragédie cornélienne devant la critique classique d'après la querelle de 'Sophonisbe', 1663* (Paris: Hachette, 1927).

[32] For a detailed discussion of these changes and their implications, see Gethner 'Conspirators and Tyrants', notably pp.31-35.

introducing two invented female characters, Villedieu presents the spectator with a consul driven by personal desire rather than duty — a distinction central to the monarch/tyrant dichotomy — thus opening up a site for staging legitimate resistance to a cruel and violent authority. Indeed, the tyrant's motives are persistently challenged throughout the play, and in the concluding act, Torquatus abruptly concedes and permits his son's marriage to Omphale. The tragicomedy closes with the promise of a double wedding characteristic of the genre, as opposed to the violent beheading of the protagonist that concludes the source text.

Constructing Tyranny

Whilst secondary characters set out to excuse Manlius for his actions, citing young age, inexperience and the father/son relationship as reason enough for a lighter sentence, Torquatus maintains that his duty to the state requires him to condemn his son to death.[33] Hyperbolic declarations of his dedication to Rome dominate his public discourse. Upholding a vocabulary that encapsulates seventeenth-century classical ideals of law and duty, Torquatus disguises his actions as politically and morally motivated rather than driven by egotism and sexual desire. Adopting a justificatory rhetoric that places his duty to his country above paternal affection, Torquatus strives to legitimise his son's death sentence by publicly feigning subservience to his official role:

> […] Je sais bien ce qu'il est : /Et j'ai tout consulté sur ce mortel arrêt,
> Mon cœur m'a dit cent fois que c'est un fils que j'aime,
> Mais je dois au Sénat beaucoup plus qu'à moi-même,
> Puisque mon fils l'offense il est mon ennemi,
> Et jamais il ne faut servir Rome à demi,
> Je lui dois Manlius, je veux la satisfaire.
>
> II.IV482-487

[33] Camille, for instance, insists Manlius is a young man who simply acted with 'un peu trop de chaleur' (I.II.92).

Even when his lector Junius challenges his motives, Torquatus downplays the role played by passion in his brutal sentencing.[34] Acknowledging his love for Omphale, he continues to contend that passion serves simply to complement his duty to Rome.

Only when Torquatus is alone does the true extent to which personal desire drives his actions become apparent, revealing his decline into tyranny. Through the use of lengthy monologues and frequent asides, Villedieu relies upon the private sphere to document her ruler's progressive transformation from legitimate consul and father into violent rival as he succumbs to his amorous emotions, eventually allowing personal desire to dictate reasons of state.[35] First evoking the spectator's sympathy by woefully continuing to act out the typically tragic and acceptably noble deliberation between patriarchal duty and paternal affection, passion slowly infiltrates the latter half of his speech.[36] Recognising the advantageous relationship between his requirement as Consul to satisfy Roman law and his love for Omphale, Torquatus begins by conveniently merging state concerns with personal desire to justify his resolve to punish his son:

Vertu, Romains, Sénat, Lois, devoir trop sévère,
Qui voulez arracher Manlius à son père !
Dure nécessité de voir couler un sang,
Dont la nature a mis la source dans mon flanc !
Dignité de Consul, cruelle soif d'estime

[34] Contrastingly, the confidant in *Nitétis* encourages his master's tyranny.
[35] As noted by Gethner, *Manlius* features a remarkably large number of monologues in contrast to Villedieu's subsequent plays, constituting twelve percent of the total dialogue. See Perry Gethner, 'L'intériorité dans le théâtre de Villedieu : Monologues, réflexions, auto-analyse', in *Madame de Villedieu et le théâtre: Actes du colloque de Lyon*, eds. Nathalie Grande and Edwige Keller-Rahbé (Narr: Verlag, 2009), pp.119-130 (p.120). This is perhaps due in part to the prominence of dissimulation in the construction of both Torquatus and secondary characters. Owing to the length and critical role played by monologues in exposing Torquatus's tyrannical nature, these extracts warrant quoting at length.
[36] The difficulty of successfully fulfilling the role of both father and king is a recurrent theme within seventeenth-century French theatre. See, for instance Jean Rotrou's 1648 *Venceslas*, ed. Wolfgang Leiner (Berlin: West-Ost-Verlag, 1956). For a discussion of the *roi/père* dichotomy, see Jacques Scherer, 'Quelques limites du thème du roi dans le théâtre français du XVIIe siècle' in *Thèmes et genres théâtraux aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles, mélanges en l'honneur de Jacques Truchet* (Paris, P.U.F, 1992), pp.437-44 and Jean-Marie Apostolidès, 'Image du père et peur du tyran au XVIIe siècle', *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 44.1 (1980), 5-14.

À qui mon propre fils doit servir de victime !

Amour de mon pays qui me fûtes si cher,

Un père malheureux ne peut-il vous toucher ?

Dois-je vous immoler un fils couvert de gloire

Et lui donner la mort pour prix d'une victoire ?

Ne saurais-je accorder dans ce péril mortel,

L'amour de la patrie et l'amour paternel […] ?

[…]

Mais, pourquoi balancer une mort résolue ?

La perte de mon fils n'est-elle pas conclue ?

L'amour plus que les lois a signé son arrêt,

Et je dois son trépas à mon propre intérêt ;

Omphale me méprise et l'ingrate l'adore,

C'est mon rival, on l'aime et je consulte encore,

Je tremble, je frémis, ha ! C'est trop combattu,

La nature vous cède amour, Sénat, vertu,

Ne me résistez plus importune tendresse,

[…]

Vous avez contre vous et Rome et la Princesse.

II.I.351-389

This initial vacillation, further demonstrated through the extensive use of interrogatives and exclamations, alongside references to his shaking mortal body, all work towards creating a humanising image of an otherwise disagreeable ruler.[37] A similar portrayal of an indecisive

[37] Torquatus's repeated use of interrogatives is not confined to the rhetoric questions found in his monologues; nearly fifty interrogatives can be counted in Torquatus's dialogue. The majority of these questions appear in the first half of the play, before dwindling in Acts IV and V, once again serving as an indication of his gradual descent into command-giving tyrant.

Torquatus is encountered in his treatment of matters of the heart. His passion for Omphale, certainly sincere and all-consuming, alternates between pleas, threats, blackmail and conflicting depictions: she is both 'belle inhumaine' (I.III.113) and 'adorable insensible' (I.III.129). The emphasis on irresolution, confusion and hesitancy can perhaps be termed a dramatic necessity of the play's genre, preparing the spectator for the tyrant's seemingly sudden repentance in the concluding scenes of the tragicomedy.

Two acts later, however, in his final monologue, references to political retribution vanish. Now oscillating between his somewhat dubious paternal affection and his love for Omphale, Torquatus's internal debate exposes his utter surrender to passion, revealing the powerful role played by his secret motive in his decision to condemn his son to death:

Tu mourras, tu mourras, ô fils trop téméraire
Dont les feux insensés ont osé me déplaire.
Le sort en est jeté ; rival audacieux
Ton sang effacera le crime de tes yeux.
[…]
Mais toi que me veux-tu, ridicule tendresse,
Importun mouvement, lâche et molle faiblesse :
Pourquoi viens-tu troubler un cœur envenimé
Qui ne voit dans mon fils qu'un rival trop aimé :
Va, ne t'expose plus au feu qui me possède
Où l'amour veut régner il faut que tout lui cède.
[…]
Mon fils est mon rival, je ne le connais plus.
Je ne le connais plus ; mais puis-je méconnaître,
Un fils si glorieux et si digne de l'être :

Celui que je renonce avec tant de fureur

[…]

Et dois-je en répandant un sang si précieux,

Usurper un pouvoir qui n'appartient qu'aux Dieux,

Ah ! Respecte Consul, une si belle vie,

[…]

Mais où m'emportez-vous, sentiment paternel ?

[…]

Éteignons dans son sang ses téméraires feux :

Exécutons du sort l'arrêt irrévocable :

C'est mon rival, on l'aime, il est assez coupable.

IV.I.983-1032

Manlius's daring and audacious nature, elsewhere tied by secondary characters to his crime against the state and often positively qualified through phrases such as 'bouillante ardeur' (II.IV.439), 'vaillant criminel' (I.II.90), 'héroïque audace' (II.IV.439) and 'illustre coupable' (V.I.1288), is here displaced into the realm of desire. Repeatedly pairing 'téméraires' with 'feux' with no reference to his duty to Rome, Torquatus exclusively anchors his son's brashness in actions of the heart, consequently binding his own motivations to passion and now proving his actions to be wholly incited by personal desire and jealousy (which Torquatus himself refers to as his own 'bouillante ardeur').[38] Ending the monologue by condemning his son to death — a command he will repeat twice more — Torquatus consolidates his degradation of character.[39] His strict application of the law now remains nothing more than a guise for his self-serving tyranny.

[38] I.III.129.

[39] These monologues consolidate Forestier's view that 'lorsqu'un monologue délibératif est prêté à un tyran, ce n'est nullement pour créer une opposition entre ethos et pathos, c'est au contraire pour manifester combien sa soumission entière au pathos lui fait rejeter au loin toute autre considération'. Forestier, *Passions tragiques et règles classiques,* p.287.

The weight accorded to dissimulation in consolidating Torquatus's transformation from consul to tyrant is not, in itself, particularly remarkable. Pierre Corneille's tyrannical construction of Cléopâtre (*Rodogune*, 1647), for instance, revolves around the regent's refusal to reveal the order of primogeniture, then feigning surrender before attempting infanticide.[40] Likewise, Jean Racine's Néron (*Britannicus,* 1669) pretends to turn away from violent rule prior to murdering the male hero. Nor is mendacity a trait confined to dramatic representations of tyranny. Indeed, as set out in Chapter I, and as is in line with my New Historicist approach, it is important to remember that political manipulation and disguise frequently dominate the regimes of dramatic tyrants and legitimate sovereigns alike, with deception often being positively qualified as a skill required for successful rule.[41] In response to Georges de Scudéry's criticism of *Le Cid*, for example, the Académie Française defends the King's attempts to trick Chimène into believing her lover is dead, deeming it to be an acceptable method (and one with precedence) for a king to acquire information: 'Pour reconnoistre le sentiment de Chimène, il [le roi] luy asseure que Rodrigue est mort au combat. Car cela se pourroit bien deffendre, par l'exemple de plusieurs grands Princes, qui n'ont pas fait difficulté d'user de feintise dans leur jugemens, quand ils ont voulu descouvrir une vérité cachée'.[42] Another example of an otherwise just king relying upon dissimulation can be found in Villedieu's third and final dramatic production. *Le Favori* revolves around a monarch who appears to turn on his 'favourite' Moncade, condemning him to exile. It is not until the play's final scene that both the spectator and the secondary characters learn that the King's anger toward Moncade has been feigned; the protagonist is restored to good standing when the ruler's actions are revealed to be a

[40] For an excellent discussion of the role of secrecy in the play, see Ibbett 'Chapter 4: Taking One's Time, or, Cléopâtre is Corneille' in *The Style of the State in French Theater,* pp.93-122. See also Pierre Corneille, *Rodogune: tragédie* (Paris: Droz, 1946).

[41] As Hélène Bilis concisely remarks, 'dissimulation lies at the heart of early modern sovereignty'. Hélène Bilis, 'The Silence of Subjects: Tragedy and the Refusal to Speak in Tristan's "La Mort de Sénèque"', in *L'Eloquence du silence: Dramaturgie du non-dit sur le scène théâtrale des XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: European and Drama Studies, 2014), pp.197-218 (p.199).

[42] Académie Française, *La querelle du cid*, p.388. In his lengthy attack on his adversary's play, Scudéry claims Corneille 'fait agir ce sage Prince comme un enfant qui seroit bien enjoué'. Scudéry, 'Observations sur *Le Cid*', p.93.

political strategy designed to expose court chameleons and prove to Moncade that his lover does not simply desire him for his status. A theme dominating both of Villedieu's tragicomedies, dissimulation appears particularly well-suited to the genre; anticipating the happy denouement, the spectator enjoys these scenes of chaos and confusion content in their knowledge that a character is only temporarily hiding their identity.[43]

Of particular interest here, however, is the way in which Villedieu exploits the central role of monarchical and tragicomic deception through her construction of gendered resistance in *Manlius*. Resulting in discrepant levels of knowledge amongst the secondary characters, it is precisely Torquatus's policy of dissimulation that allows for a dismantling of the tragic hero, and results in the emergence of strong and astute female characters who strive to overcome the tyrant's illegitimate desire for violence.

Dismantling the Male Hero

As the title character of Villedieu's play, Manlius is noticeably absent from the stage.[44] Failing to appear until Act I Scene V and featuring alongside his father on only three occasions, the supposedly chief protagonist remains the sole character left completely unaware of the severity of his own situation for the majority of the play, placing him in a position of inferiority. In contrast to secondary characters, whose secret exchanges enable them to penetrate 'aisément au travers de la ruse et déguisement' (IV.IV.1269-70) and thus legitimise their later challenges to tyrannical authority, the exclusion of the male hero renders him unable to recognise even the need to resist. Criticised for his

[43] Disguise is of course also frequently used in comedies. However, the genre's figures of authority are typically confined to the familial sphere rather than the political arena. For a discussion of deception in early modern French comedy, see Emilia Wilton-Godberfforde, *Mendacity and the Figure of the Liar in Seventeenth-Century French Comedy* (London: Routledge, 2017). In contrast, within the tragedy of *Nitétis,* the tyrant makes no attempt to hide his true motives.

[44] Manlius is present in only eight of the thirty-four scenes. His physical absence is perhaps one of the reasons why his character is frequently omitted from critical analyses of the play. Renard-Branca, for instance, barely mentions the title character. See Angele Renard-Branca, 'A Woman's Happy Tragedy: The Paternal Order in Question – Madame de Villedieu's *Manlius*', in *Fortune and Fatality: Performing the Tragic in Early Modern France*, eds. Desmond Hosford and Charles Wrightington (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp.163-179.

‘aveugle esprit’ (I.VI.331) and ‘abusé d’une fausse apparence’ (I.VI.337), the title character repeatedly misjudges the appropriate course of action. First appearing on stage boasting of his disobedience, Manlius displays his lack of judgement when he proclaims that his unauthorised military exploits — ironically the very same actions seemingly condemning him to death — will symbolically guarantee immortality:

J'ai cueilli des lauriers que la gloire moissonne,
La mort des ennemis et leur captivité
M'ont ouvert le chemin de l’immortalité,
De leurs chefs couronnés j’ai couvert la poussière,
Et pour rendre ma gloire encore plus entière,
Il m’était défendu de donner le combat,
Et j’ai fait vaincre Rome en dépit du Sénat.

I.V.250-256

Despite repeated warnings from secondary characters, Manlius once again exposes his vulnerability when he confidently declares that the ends justify the means: ‘Le bonheur du succès couronne le forfeit/Et quand on a vaincu, l’on a toujours bien fait’ (I.V.283-4). Even when faced with the identity of his rival in love, naivety dictates Manlius's response: a character trait Villedieu underscores through a cleverly manipulated linguistic echo of an earlier scene. Torquatus’s surprise at Camille’s revelation at the outset of the play — ‘Que dites-vous? [..] Quoi? Mon fils, mon rival? […] Connaissant Manlius, je ne saurais penser/ Qu’aux lois d’une captive il daigne s’abaisser’ (I.I.37-52) — is interrupted by an aside that reveals this disbelief to merely be a guise: ‘Feignons de ne pas croire une telle nouvelle’ (I.I.50). By contrast, Manlius’s near identical response two acts later stresses his genuine disbelief, leading him to make yet another miscalculation:

Mon père, mon rival?
Ô dieux! que dites-vous? […]

[…] je connais mon père;

Et j'ai peine à penser qu'un Romain si sévère […]

Voulût ainsi ternir cent belles actions.

III.II.787-802

Stunned by Camille's revelation and refusing to accept his father as his rival, he proceeds to wrongly accuse Decius's widow of acting out of jealousy (III.II.804). Still unwilling to act, the protagonist's inability to distinguish truth from deception leaves Manlius incapable of playing out the role of male hero.[45]

If the centrality of dissimulation plays some role in justifying the generic classification of *Manlius*, it may also be said to function as a theme capable of injecting comic resonances into an otherwise tragic dilemma. Indeed, by the 1660s, the interspersing of short comic interludes within an overall tragic setting emerges as the most popular blend of generic hybridity.[46] But although Torquatus would perhaps appear to be the dramatic personage most vulnerable to ridicule, due, in part, to the portrayal of excess associated with dramatic representations of tyranny, the playwright's complex construction of the tragic ruler successfully negates any potential for mockery.[47] Instead, Villedieu shifts the comic opportunity offered by deception and well-received within the tragicomic genre to her eponymous protagonist, further undermining his role as male hero. Achieved not only through the dramatic irony ignited by his misjudgement of situations discussed above, humour is further generated through the title character's own failed attempts to deceive those around him. From the opening lines of the play, Manlius's love for Omphale is openly discussed amongst secondary characters despite his best efforts to 'déguise avec soin sa folle passion' (I.I.7). All characters (and, crucially, the spectators) are made aware of his 'secret' love from the outset. As a

[45] It is worth reiterating that on both occasions, it is the female character Camille who reveals their romantic interests.

[46] For an overview of tragicomedy's gradual transformation from a play incorporating Baroque and Romanesque characteristics into the more 'classical' tragedy with a happy ending, see Baby, *La Tragi-Comédie.* See also Chapter II.

[47] On the comic potential of the tyrant, see Hélène Bilis, *Passing Judgement*, notably chapter 4.

result, his attempts to feign surprise when Camille confronts him about his sentiments for Omphale, innocently responding 'Moi, Madame?' (III.II.753) more closely aligns him with the 'naïf' character type commonly encountered in the comedic works of Molière, offering a brief moment of humour.[48] Of course, Manlius's inability to deceive also carries serious undertones: as we have seen, to be skilled in the art of dissimulation serves as a crucial indicator of one's capacity to rule. As set out in Chapter I, Cardinal Richelieu even uses a woman's supposed lack thereof as yet another justification for their exclusion from the throne: 'Les femmes, paresseuses et [si] peu secrètes de leur nature, sont si peu propres au gouvernement'.[49] Hinting at his incompetency as a leader through this combination of serious and comic elements, Villedieu offers a double belittling of her title male character.

Opposed in their differing abilities to deceive, Manlius and Torquatus nonetheless remain identical in their submission to love.[50] Just as his tyrannical father manipulates reason of state for romantic ends, striving to dictate the actions of Omphale through the threat of public execution, Manlius evokes violence in his attempts to impress his lover. Bound up in the belief that his military expediency will both satisfy his desire for eternal Roman glory and gain Omphale's approval — a principle that runs counter to both the ongoing civilizing process as well as salon culture — Manlius's own account of his bravery swiftly transforms into a confession of adoration. Here, we witness an example of what Henriette Goldwyn perceives to be a unique literary role located within Villedieu's dramatic works, '"the man in love", the emergence of a hero who is not only a conqueror but a respectful and tender lover':[51]

Dieux, que je suis heureux si presque en même jour,

Je suis favorisé de Mars et de l'amour!

[48] For a discussion of this comic character 'type', see Charles Mazouer, *Le personnage du naïf dans le théâtre comique du moyen âge à Marivaux* (Paris : Librairie Klincksieck, 1979).
[49] Richelieu, *Testament politique*, p.328.
[50] Similarities between the two male characters in the private domain are stressed throughout by the female characters. See, for instance, Omphale's remarks: 'Vois quelle ressemblance entre un père et son fils' (I.IV.215).
[51] Goldwyn, 'Men in Love', p.65.

[…]

Je viens mettre à vos pieds mes lauriers et ma gloire.

Princesse j'aime mieux vos fers que ma victoire,

Au Camp j'étais vainqueur de cent mille ennemis,

Ici je ne suis rien qu'un esclave soumis :

Mais vivre dans vos fers, c'est l'honneur où j'aspire,

Et ce rang près de vous vaut ailleurs un Empire.[52]

I.V.247-262

Infused with the discourse of a *chevalier de boudoir*, such a chivalrous declaration can hardly be said to carry overtly negative implications for his character. As Goldwyn rightly deduces, Manlius's gallant language is certainly less tainted by passionate abandon than that of his father.[53] Yet, in exposing his utter devotion to Omphale through self-referential remarks to enslavement whilst submissively throwing himself at his lover's feet — an action the playwright draws to our attention in her *Dédicace* — Villedieu suggests her protagonist, in a similar manner to Torquatus, privileges matters of the heart over affairs of state. When paired alongside his naivety, the title character's overwhelming love for Omphale once again hinders his ability to act. His seemingly noble refusal to abduct the captive for fear of compromising her honour (a decision he reaches only after several moments of indecisiveness) is tainted by his failure to recognise that this very passivity will result in her being forced into the equally dishonourable act of misalliance with a tyrant. In fact, it is precisely his own powerlessness at the sight of Omphale, as well as his belief that she functions as an object of attraction to all men, that leads him to excuse the dishonourable actions of his father: 'Puisqu'il

[52] Interestingly, the reference to 'Mars' marks yet another linguistic parallel between the two central male characters, albeit once again with subtle modifications. Torquatus's reference to the Roman God of War is mentioned alongside 'Bellone' — the Roman Goddess said to drive the male God's chariot — and perhaps serves as a subtle reminder that the tyrant's own military actions are essentially dictated and controlled by a female character (I.III.116), whereas Manlius here links the God to the more innocent 'l'amour', indicating his more gallant nature.

[53] Goldwyn, 'Men in Love', p.69.

[Torquatus] avait des yeux, qui pouvait l'en défendre? / Qui peut voir sans transport tant de divins appas? / Qui peut connaître Omphale, et ne l'adorer pas?' (III.III.840-842).[54] Appearing to accept his fate regardless of its true motivations, his earlier inability to resist turns into a simple unwillingness to act. Clearly, resistance must be sought elsewhere if the drama is to achieve its tragicomic denouement.

Female Resistance: 'Pour le bien des Etats, tout semble être permis'

Omphale stands in complete contrast to the passive Manlius in her active and significant contribution to the resolution of the plot. Seemingly cast in a doubly binding role of passivity as both female and captive, the princess, second only to Torquatus in terms of number of lines spoken, is accorded a powerful position in the play. Renowned for her 'orgueil indomptable' (I.III.165) and 'courage inflexible' (I.III.130), Omphale incessantly challenges the two male characters in her attempts to amend both the impassivity of Manlius and the tyranny of Torquatus. Hoping to incite the title character to action, Omphale presents Manlius with numerous opportunities to question and react against his unjust sentence. She subtly warns Manlius to '[craindre] plus justement le Consul votre père' (I.V.273), before hinting at the tyrant's true motives with phrases such as 'je crains les lois, l'état et même la nature' (I.V.297). Later, she even orders him to flee.

Her attempts to deter Torquatus are equally varied. Aware of the ruler's passion from the outset of the play, Omphale tries to take advantage of his romantic desires through her use of manipulation and persuasion. Reminding him of her royal status, the princess later deploys flattery, feigning concern over the potential damage to the tyrant's virtue and esteem that would be brought about if his desire for misalliance were to be made public.[55] Similarly, she delays the death sentence by offering herself in marriage and demanding to speak to Manlius 'sans témoins' (V.II.1353). Often

[54] As we will shortly see, a further (and more overt) example of the shifting of responsibility for an illicit male desire from the man himself to female beauty can be found in *Nitétis.*

[55] 'Je vous ferai connaître/ Que celles de mon rang n'ont point ici de maître' (I.III.185-186).

referring to the Senate and stressing that 'tout le Camp murmure' (II.V.543), Omphale reminds the tyrant that his orders remain far from absolute and will not be met without challenge. Further undermining his authority, this 'étrangère' appropriates the very same dutiful rhetoric upon which Torquatus's power rests when she calls into question his devotion to Rome:

Hé, de grâce, Seigneur, revenez à vous-même ;
Parler ainsi de Rome, est sans doute un blasphème :
Ce n'est pas sur mon choix, que l'Auguste Sénat
Juge des intérêts qui regardent l'État :
Il sait mieux observer l'ordre de la justice,
Et ne consulte pas sur ce point mon caprice.
Si le Sénat se plaint, qui serait assez vain,
Pour croire en triompher dans l'âme d'un Romain ?

V.I.1307-1317

It is worth noting here that the princess's demand for the tyrant to 'return to himself' is echoed by Torquatus in the closing lines of the play, possibly indicating that his son's submissive attitude is not, as the tyrant will later claim, the sole factor driving his sudden wish for redemption.[56] Eventually Omphale resorts to outright aggression, verbally assaulting his character in a public attack: 'Monstre pernicieux […] tigre affamé de sang, barbare, inexorable […] Barbare, et fier tyran' (V.III.1477-1487). The princess's passionate paroxysm is almost immediately followed by a threat to commit suicide. Appearing on stage armed with a dagger, she threatens to take her own life in order to remain beside Manlius. Crucially, and despite the use of the dagger over the more 'masculine' sword, Omphale's suicide is presented as an heroically Roman feat.[57] As Ruth Vortsman observes, the image of the Roman soldier falling on his sword forms part of the audience's understanding of masculine

[56] 'Allons donc rendre grâce à la bonté suprême/ De ce qu'elle a rendu Torquatus à lui-même' (V.VII.1591-2).
[57] As we shall see, a very different construction of suicide is offered via one of the leading male characters in *Nitétis*.

Roman nobility, and by showing herself ready to make the ultimate sacrifice, Omphale marks her rejection of the situation she finds herself in; undertaken in a public place, 'her threat reinforces the idea that her sacrifice is, as Barthes suggests in *Sur Racine*, a direct threat against the oppressor'.[58]

In contrast to Omphale, Camille neither desires nor is she desired by the two male characters. It is precisely the absence of a love interest that drives Donneau de Visé's condemnation of Villedieu's tragicomedy. Deeming the invented character of Camille to be superfluous to the play's action, the journalist highlights a common view of the period when he expresses the idea that female roles serve no other function than that of romantic object: 'Le spectateur ne sait plus quel intérêt elle a dans la pièce, en voyant qu'elle ne témoigne d'amour, ni pour le père ni pour le fils'.[59] Yet, a closer analysis of Camille's characterisation reveals that romance is not simply absent from her concerns; rather, Villedieu presents the spectator with a female protagonist who frequently denounces love, marking a notable and seemingly deliberate departure from the stereotypical role ascribed to, and clearly expected of, female characters. From her very first appearance, Camille describes love as 'étrange' (I.I.I), before later defining romantic desire in irrefutably negative terms: 'Cette vaine chimère/Ce caprice de sens, ce poison des Vertus' (III.I.648-9). Drawing an analogy between love and a serpent with quasi-parasitic tendencies during her initial encounter with the tyrant, Camille then proves her superior awareness of love's ability to infiltrate, control and ultimately destroy its host:

L'amour est si subtil qu'il se glisse aisément,
Il entre dans les cœurs sans qu'on sache comment ;
Une âme le nourrit longtemps sans le connaître,
Et quand par son adresse, il s'en est rendu maître,
Semblable à la vipère, il déchire le flanc,

[58] Vortsman, *Tragedies and Tragicomedies,* p.122.
[59] Jean Donneau de Visé, 'Défense de la Sophonisbe de Monsieur de Corneille', in *Jean Donneau de Visé et la querelle de "Sophonisbe": Ecrits contre l'abbé d'Aubignac*, ed. Bernard J. Bourque (Narr: Verlag, 2014), pp. 39-70 (p.43).

Dont il avait sucé la substance et le sang.

I.II.99-104

Not only distanced from the typical characteristics expected of her female status through being impervious to love, Camille is shown to physically step outside of her prescribed spatial domain. Leaving what Nina Ekstein perceives to be the 'feminine' private location of the tent and entering the 'masculine' public stage arena on several unexpected occasions,[60] Camille disrupts the tyrant's thoughts by suddenly appearing before him: 'Mais, Dieux!/ Quel objet importun se présente à mes yeux ?/ Madame, quel dessein dans ce lieu vous amène?' (IV.II.1033-35). He has earlier exclaimed: 'Quoi, si matin, Madame, être hors de la tente ? / Qui vous peut aujourd'hui rendre si diligente ?' (I.II.21-22). This dual departure from expectations (that is, the portrayal of a female character who both fails to privilege matters of the heart and refuses to remain confined to the private sphere) visibly disturbs Torquatus. Taken by surprise and unable to respond effectively to Camille's detachment from love and persistent presence — both of which enable her to retain a greater awareness of, and control over, the activities of the male characters — Decius's widow provers herself capable of successfully undermining the tyrant's authority. It is worth noting that this empowerment may be due in part to her widowhood, which, as we saw in earlier chapters, represents a rare space of gendered autonomy for women in the early modern period. However, as we shall see, Villedieu does not limit this empowerment to the character of the widow.

Instead of the infatuation that drives the actions of the male characters, Camille is motivated by an overwhelming sense of patriotism, with her character exemplifying the 'masculine' Roman duties of glory, honour and courage utterly absent from the characterisation of her male counterparts. She even explicitly proclaims her desire to prove 'que Camille est Romaine' (IV.II.1036). Seeking to defend Manlius's life and shield Torquatus from committing an act of unjust violence that would mark a betrayal to his country, Camille, just like the Princess, encourages

[60] Nina Ekstein, 'The Second Woman in the Theatre of Villedieu', *Neophilologus,* 80 (1996), 213-224.

Manlius to flee (with or without his lover), before even offering the title character the support of the army should he wish to resist more directly (III.II). Although Manlius opts instead for passivity, meaning the conspiracy in question never materialises, Camille is shown to be prepared to do anything for the good of her country: 'Pour le bien des Etats tout semble être permis' (II.VI.617). Moreover, she too considers physical forms of action, even contemplating — albeit fleetingly — killing the tyrant herself:

Il est temps, d'éclater, montrez votre courroux,
Et vengez d'un seul coup, l'État, Camille, et vous :
Mais, pourquoi battre l'air de ces vaines paroles ?
Que sont à ma douleur tant de plaintes frivoles ?
Ne puis-je sans les Dieux repousser un affront ;
Et mon bras n'est-il pas un remède plus prompt ?
Ah, ne balançons point, la plainte est inutile,
Armons nous d'un poignard, courons ; mais où Camille,
Te charger de la mort, d'un Consul, d'un Romain,
Et dans un si beau sang oser tremper ta main ?
[…]
Les criminels désirs, que t'inspire ta rage,
Te feraient mériter ta honte, et cet outrage ;
Cherche d'autres moyens pour ton soulagement.

III.I.669-685

The appropriation of 'masculine' Roman traits encourages the spectator to identify with Camille over the weaker male characters. When paired alongside Torquatus's tyrannical nature and the fact that this murderous act is ultimately rejected and condemned by Camille rather than committed,

Villedieu ensures that the topic of regicide is treated with the 'très signalées précautions' d'Aubignac recommends.[61]

Whilst, then, the acts of physical violence proposed by both Camille and Omphale are never required for the play to reach its tragicomic denouement, their language and movements nonetheless persistently challenge the tyrant's own violent aims. As bold, astute and active characters, the two women serve as counter-models to the weak and passive male protagonist. Moreover, through their appropriation of Roman qualities — the very same traits upon which Torquatus's execution relies — the two women undermine the tyrant's authority, indisputably contributing to his sudden return to just monarchical rule. Such a reversal of fortune, however, cannot be achieved in Villedieu's next (and far more tragic) play *Nitétis.*

Nitétis

Overview

As the only one of Madame de Villedieu's three plays to be ascribed the generic classification of tragedy, *Nitétis* offers a far greater example of the potential for devastation incited by tyrannical regimes than the portrayals of despotism located within the playwright's two tragicomic works. First performed in April 1663 at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and praised as 'une tragédie esquise', Villedieu's sole tragedy is nevertheless believed to have been less well-received by spectators and critics than her other dramatic productions, and is certainly the least studied today.[62] The Parfaict brothers, for instance, deem the play to be badly composed, featuring weak characters and only mediocre versification.[63] The seeming lack of admiration for Villedieu's tragedy may also be due in part to the

[61] D'Aubignac, p.120.
[62] For an overview of the play's critical reception, see Gethner's introduction to the play and Marie-France Hilgar, 'From History to Drama: Nitétis' Evolution', *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, 85.1 (2014), 103-108. In his study of *Le Favori,* Jeffrey Peters simply dismisses the tragedy as the 'failed Nitétis'. Jeffrey Peters, 'Kingship and Paranoid Subjectivity in Marie-Catherine Desjardins's *Le Favori*', *French Forum*, 25.3 (2000), 261-276 (p.261).
[63] Francois et Claude Parfaict, *Histoire du théâtre depuis son origine jusqu'à présent, IX* (Paris, P.G. Lemercier et Saillant, 1736-49), pp. 197-98.

work's problematic denouement and the dramatist's decision to once again modify the focus of her historical source text.

Borrowing from Herodotus's *History Book III* (440BC), both the Ancient Greek writer's work and Villedieu's text explore the tyrannical regime of Cambyse, son of Cyrus the Great and now cruel ruler of Persia. The playwright departs from her source text by (as the title of her work suggests) awarding a central role to Cambyse's wife, Nitétis, of whom Herodotus says very little. The daughter of King Apries, and the sole member of the royal family to have her life spared by the usurper King Amasis prior to the opening of the tragedy, Villedieu's augmentation of the role of the female character perhaps marks a subtle nod to another early modern woman playwright. As we saw in the previous Chapter, Françoise Pascal's tragicomedy *Sésostris,* produced only two years earlier, revolves around the identities of the children of King Apries and King Amasis. *Nitétis* opens with the news that the despot intends to legalise divorce and incest in order to fulfil his desire to marry his sister, Mandane, who loves, and is loved by the King's top general, Prasitte. So enraged by those opposing his illicit actions, Cambyse has his own brother, Smiris, executed during the 'live' action of the tragedy for openly daring to object. Meanwhile, Phameine — Nitétis' lover prior to her forced marriage to the despot and now Cambyse's prisoner — escapes captivity, desperate to visit the Queen. Caught together, the tyrant wrongly accuses his loyal wife of adultery, intending to punish her through the murder of Phameine. Before another brutal assassination can be realised, the news of an impending uprising led by Prasitte reaches the tyrant. Panicked, Cambyse flees. His faithful wife, desperate to save her husband, rallies the palace guards and frees Phameine, ordering him to lead the troops and save the beleaguered despot. Mistakenly believing Phameine to have been sent to murder him, the King commits suicide.[64] The play closes with Mandane intending to marry Prasitte. Conversely, the Queen, refuting the quasi-happy denouement, refuses to marry Phameine; she will not profit from her husband's death by marrying his enemy. In a similar manner to *Manlius*,

[64] The tyrant's suicide marks another departure from the source text, in which the despot accidentally wounds himself and dies of gangrene three weeks later.

Villedieu mitigates the need to stage regicide with 'de très signalées précautions'. Yet as we shall see, the playwright once again portrays varying levels of effective opposition to the tyrant's rule throughout *Nitétis.*

Constructing Tyranny: 'Ce monstre au mépris des lois de la nature'

From the outset of the play, the King of Persia immediately emerges as the clear-cut villainous character. Commencing with the revelation of his intent to divorce his faithful wife, the extent of Cambyse's despotism soon becomes apparent when the motive for this 'telle injustice' (I.I.I) is revealed to be his incestuous desire for his sister:[65]

Avez-vous su, Madame, à quelle extrémité,
Le roi porte son crime et son autorité ;
Que ce monstre au mépris des lois de la nature
Pour dernier attentat joint l'inceste au parjure,
Et s'osant assurer de l'aveu de mon cœur,
Veut confondre les noms d'épouse et de sœur ?

I.II.155-160

Unyielding in his pursuit to consummate his illicit passion for Mandane, this 'monstre' is closely aligned to Furetière's definition of the tyrant through his willingness to deploy brutal acts of violence against his subjects solely as a means of satisfying personal desire. Frequently threatening aggression, Act II closes with the barbaric ruler ordering the murder of his own brother after he openly voices his objection to the planned illegitimate wedding to their sister. Cambyse delights in envisaging as much suffering as possible for his familial victim:[66]

[65] Divorce was of course illegal in France prior to the Revolution. See Julie Hardwick, 'Seeking Separations'. As Ekstein remarks, incestuous desire was a recurring motif amongst tyrannical representations, driving, for instance, the despot in Du Ryer's 1628 *Aretaphile*. Ekstein, 'Staging the Tyrant', p.115.
[66] Alongside yearning to inflict as much physical pain as possible, the King endeavours to maximise psychological distress by controlling the delivery of information. In Act I, we learn of his attempt to force his sister to deliver

Inventons pour Smiris quelque nouveau supplice.

Ouvre-toi, mon esprit, redouble tes clartés,

Pour me venger c'est peu des tourments inventés,

Il en faut trouver un, dont l'horreur inouïe,

Fasse même trembler l'infernale furie,

Un qui fasse avouer aux siècles à venir,

Que moi seul j'ai trouvé le moyen de punir.

I.VI.586-592

Whereas Corneille's inherently tyrannical Cléopâtre (*Rodogune*) takes pleasure in a pain that revolves around continuity rather than consummation, preferring, as Katherine Ibbett observes, to prolong suffering rather than bringing it to a bloody end, Villedieu has Cambyse's assassination of Smiris manifest itself during the span of her play.[67] Departing from conventional portrayals of oppressive governors in the latter half of the century (where tyrannical violence is typically relegated to historical acts of brutality or limited to future threats of cruelty), the playwright eliminates any possibility of reconciliation for her tyrant; only a tragic outcome remains viable. The ruler's repeated defiance of the Gods — a clear violation of divine right — further thwarts a sudden conversion to virtue at the play's denouement. Showing little remorse for destroying Egyptian 'autels' and 'temples' (I.III.218) during his recent attack on the country, the oppressor proceeds to boast that he is better than the Gods:

Je touche à l'heureux jour, ou peut-être les Dieux

De ma félicité devenant envieux

the news of his intended divorce to his wife, 'croyant que de sa part cette horrible nouvelle/Vous semblera peut-etre encore plus cruelle' (I.II.193-194). As Gethner remarks, the act of fratricide is rendered all the more serious since he is childless. Gethner, 'Conspirators and Tyrants in the Plays of Villedieu', p.36.

[67] Ibbett, *The Style of the State'*, p.111. Interestingly, Ibbett ties Corneille's portrayal of figures of authority delaying or thwarting the death of a subject to the Foucauldian notion of biopower: the State's desire to manage and control bodies. For Cléopâtre, a marriageable body (as opposed to a dead body) is the 'ultimate pawn' to the practices of power.

Cèderaient le pouvoir de lancer le tonnerre

Pour goûter le plaisir qui m'attend sur la terre.

I.IV.226-230

As Perry Gethner notes, Cambyse's sacrilegious behaviour would both shock and deter the spectator from associating the despot with the contemporary monarch. Villedieu is 'careful to depict Cambyse as a monster whose views on morality and religion bear no resemblance to those of *le roi très chrétien*'.[68] Later threatening to torture Phameine and to murder his own wife, this clear counter-model to the absolutist ideal is associated with the devil: 'Quel démon suscité par la plus noire envie/ Livre aux mains de Cambyse une si belle vie?' (III.I.621-622). Here, Villedieu assigns a trait typically associated with the female sex to her male ruler.

Whilst the King's deployment of violence to satisfy incestuous desire alongside his defiance of the Gods create an irrefutably tyrannical regime (and therefore one against which resistance is legitimised), the omnipresent nature of the King renders any attempt to interrogate or undermine his authority particularly challenging. Appearing in thirteen of nineteen scenes (across Acts I-IV), the scheming of his subjects is frequently interrupted as they hear the tyrant approaching: 'Il s'avance/De grâce cachez-lui cette bouillante ardeur' (II.II.203-204).[69] The despot's seeming desire for visibility extends to the medium through which he inflicts physical and emotional pain.[70] Flaunting his brutality, Cambyse takes pleasure in ensuring both himself and others bear witness to the pain of his victims. In Act III, for instance, he ruthlessly informs Nitétis that he intends to place her in the position of bystander for the painful death of Phameine:

Je veux pour mériter encor mieux ton horreur,

Faire à l'instant périr ce traitre en ta présence,

[68] Gethner, 'Challenges to Royal Authority', p.81.

[69] In contrast, the King is completely absent from Act V. He also expresses his frustration when subjects attempt to 'éviter ma présence' (II.IV.454).

[70] Such a portrayal supports Ekstein's view that the dramatic tyrant is a natural creature of theatre, both constituting and using spectacle for their own narrowly focused ends. Ekstein, 'The Dramatic Tyrant', p.115.

Voir tes pleurs augmenter sa peine et ma vengeance

Et lavant dans son sang l'affront que je reçois,

Contempler tes douleurs dans ses derniers abois.

[…]

Je vas faire expirer ton amant dans les gênes

Te rendre le témoin de ses dernières peines […]

III.III-IV.836-883

The King revels in the possibility that witnessing such an act of violence may bring about his wife's tears, enabling him to observe a material representation of her distress: 'Laissez couler vos pleurs […]/ Ne vous contraignez pas dans ces rudes alarmes' (III.IV.843-845). Even the assassination of Smiris — reduced to that of any other subject — is framed as a performative exercise of authority:

Rende ce juste trépas si cruel et si prompt,

Qu'on sache le supplice aussitôt que l'affront :

Montrons comme tout cède aux droits de la couronne,

Et que même le sang n'exempte personne,

Que pour tous les sujets qui méprisent leur roi,

Smiris soit à jamais une tonnante loi,

Qu'il fasse voir qu'un front qu'on veut réduire en poudre,

En est plutôt frappé quand il est près du foudre […]

II.V.555-562

Through this alignment of violence to a discernible demonstration of power capable of securing subjects' submission, we encounter a subtle allusion to *le spectacle de l'échafaud*: a brutal and more importantly public execution that, at the turn the century, purportedly served to 'restaurer' and

'réactiver' the power of the sovereign following a fleeting threat to its authority.[71] Yet in line with my New Historicist approach, it is important to consider the play within the specific historical context in which it was written. As Hélène Bilis rightly remarks, and as set out in Chaper I, the socio-political and theatrical period in which Villedieu is writing marks a shift away from not only public displays of punitive violence but even from open references to the 'paraphernalia' of the judicial process.[72] The playwright's departure from the 'spectacle of the scaffold' thus once again underscores the unjust nature of her tyrant's 'disciplinary' (or in this case torturous) mechanisms. Here, the parade of violence formerly intended to punish a subject's felonious activity and restore monarchical authority in fact signifies the extent of the King's own criminality. The haste with which these acts of cruelty are undertaken ('si prompt/à l'instant'), alongside the repeated references to a twenty-four-hour timeframe for the realisation of the impending wedding further ensures resistance remains problematic (as well as underscoring the dramatist's adherence to Unity of Time): 'Avant la fin du jour/ Ma sœur satisfera ma rage ou mon amour' (I.V.319-320).[73]

Openly operating a regime of unjust violence, Cambyse, in stark contrast to Torquatus, makes no attempt to conceal his true motivations; rather, the despot explicitly endorses and justifies his criminality. This belief in the arbitrary nature of his power is perhaps the dramatic character's most disturbing trait. Dismissing his wife's warning that he risks enraging the Gods as 'vaines paroles' (I.IV.226) and 'menaces frivoles' (I.IV.227), the King appears genuinely shocked by Mandane's refusal to marry her own brother:

Quelle arrogance!

Braver impunément mes lois et ma puissance,

Jusque à la menace oser s'abandonner,

[71] Foucault's seminal *Surveiller et punir*, for example, depicts the brutal public execution of a parricide in eighteenth-century France, deducing the spectacle to be deployed as a mechanism for restoring authority. See Foucault, *Surveiller et punir.*

[72] Bilis, *Passing Judgement,* p.85.

[73] As Theresa Varney Kennedy notes, the most evident example of Villedieu's compression of time to a period of twenty-four hours is Cambyse's death, reduced from the three weeks of suffering he endures in the source text. Kennedy, *Deliberative Heroines*.

Et détester un feu qui veut la couronner […]

I.IV.249-252

When confronted about the illegality of incest, the King draws upon precedence to validate his illegitimate desire : 'Cent exemples fameux autorisaient ma flamme/Un dieu connu de tous, fit de sa sœur sa femme/On en fait une loi chez les Assyriens' (II.IV.489-491). Later, he can also be found displacing blame for his incestuous passion onto his sister:

Oui l'amour seul, l'amour a causé ma fureur,
Et c'est vous qui l'avez allumé dans mon cœur :
Cessez onc de venir me reprocher mon vice.
Si j'ai fit des forfaits vous en êtes complice,
De la mort de Smiris accusez vos appas.
Si j'ai verse son sang, vous conduisiez mon bras :
Je vous aimais, il fut à cette ardeur contraire,
Sans vous, sans vos appas, vous auriez votre frère […]

IV.II.1111-1118

The King's advisor only encourages this transferral of culpability: 'Elle a su vous charmer, elle vous voit soumis/ Son orgueil en abuse et se croit tout permis' (I.V.255-256). Voicing the early modern patriarchal perception that women are to be held accountable should their 'charms' trigger a man's desire for sexual conquest, Predaspe infers the Princess's supposed manipulation of male desire to be an intrinsic characteristic of the female sex: 'Elle fait ce qu'une autre aurait fait à sa place' (I.V.254).[74] As both King and man, Cambyse is 'entitled' to his object of desire, with the deployment of force framed as a legitimate means of conquering female resistance: 'Que vous vous la [Mandane] devez, et que pour l'acquérir/ Il faut et commander et se faire obéir' (I.V.291-292); 'Eprouvez les

[74] As Bernard Bourque notes, writers such as d'Aubignac frequently held women wholly responsible should they be the recipient of unwanted sexual advances. Bourque, *All the Abbé's Women,* p.181. See also Chapter I.

effets d'un peu de violence' (I.V.266). In placing a discussion of male entitlement (as well as the conceptual link between trickery and the female sex) within the context of a tyrant's incestuous desire for his sister, the playwright, in a similar manner to Pascal, refracts patriarchal norms through a different lens, encouraging the spectator to interrogate the legitimacy of such beliefs within contemporary French society. As we saw in the previous Chapter, these subtle critiques can often only be elicited through close critical engagement with the text, testifying to the value of a New Historicist approach to the plays under consideration in this thesis.

It may be tempting to view the King's justification for his vehement actions as artificial, operating (in a similar vein to Torquatus) his tyrannical regime under the guise of monarchical and masculine duty. In the opening scene, Mireine even reminds the spectator that 'l'amour aime la feinte et la précaution' (I.I.144). Troublingly, however, Cambyse's monologues expose a genuine belief in his reasoning. Away from his subjects, the King briefly hesitates over the execution of his brother. Momentarily displaying signs of a conscience, the despot then proceeds to convince himself of the legitimacy of his actions, deducing himself to merely be fulfilling his duty to the crown: 'Il faut céder, Nature, à la grandeur suprême/ Toute votre puissance est ici sans effet/ Pour qui défend un sceptre il n'est point de forfait' (II.VII.614-616). Proclaiming in all sincerity the act of parricide to be in the best interests of the State, nothing can deter the King from pursuing his regime of brutality: 'Sa mort était un coup d'état/ Sans doute il méditait quelque grand attentat' (IV.I.919-920). Utterly self-assured of the righteousness of his actions, further highlighted through Villedieu's inclusion of ironic statements such as 'un monarque est souvent l'esclave de ses lois' (IV.II.1023), the tyrant's characterisation hinges on madness.

Whilst unruly desire and an unrelenting belief in his arbitrary authority are what rouse the Persian King to deploy violent tyrannical actions as a means by which to exercise his power, these very same traits emerge as potential weaknesses. Blindly driven by his quest for unchallengeable control, the despot is repeatedly shown to misjudge situations and mistrust the wrong characters.

At the outset of the play, we learn that the ruler was tricked into marrying Nitétis when seeking an alliance with Egypt, having been deceived by usurper King Amasis into believing her to be his daughter and heir to the Egyptian throne: 'Par le tyran Cambyse fut surpris' (I.I.148).[75] Misinterpreting his wife's relationship with Phameine, Cambyse's somewhat ignorant disposition and susceptibility to duping are further underlined through the insertion of a brief moment of humour. Wrongly deducing his wife to have been confessing her love for the captive when she was in fact declaring her loyalty to her husband, the playwright applies dramatic irony and a clever linguistic echo by having her tyrant sincerely remark 'un roi tel que Cambyse est rarement surpris' (III.II.780). Disregarding any advice contrary to his wishes, Cambyse listens to, and allows himself to be manipulated by, the malicious Predaspe: 'C'en est fait, je me rends à ce conseil fidèle' (I.V.313). Although the adverse influence of a secondary character may at times prove useful should a playwright wish to detract from the immoral activity of a primary protagonist, Villedieu nonetheless sustains her tyrant's odiousness by presenting his glee and satisfaction at the news of Predaspe's murderous activity, undertaken upon his command: 'Quoi donc son insolence/ A donc reçu par toi sa récompense' (IV.I.889-890).[76] The playwright also guarantees the tyrant alone is accountable for later threats and/or acts of brutality, and ensures Predaspe meets a suitable demise.[77]

Enslaved to his passion, the King's seemingly sincere love for Mandane briefly humanises an otherwise repugnant dramatic character. Detailing his attempts to resist, it soon becomes apparent that Cambyse is left utterly powerless by his amorous emotions. His love is represented as violent and all-consuming, driving him to lose control and succumb to madness:

[75] Amasis in fact substituted his own daughter for Nitétis, captive prisoner and daughter of King Apries, from whom Amasis stole the throne.
[76] An example of such a technique is provided in Chapter II. Not wanting her male personage to be condemned by the spectator for engaging with the immoral act of spying, Pascal ensures the idea comes entirely from Sésostris' servant. Within the context of monarchical power, the minister is often held responsible for decisions that have the potential to disgrace the King. Maurice Baudin, 'The King's Minister in Seventeenth-Century French Drama', *Modern Language Notes*, 54:2 (1939), pp.94-105.
[77] Predaspe in fact later challenges his master's desire to commit violence against the Queen: 'Mais perdant Nitétis n'appréhendez-vous point?' (IV.I.983).

Le Ciel en nous donnant le sceptre pour partage,

N'a pas fait pour l'amour ce foudroyant langage ;

Ce dieu sait décocher ses traits avec tant d'art,

Que contre eux la couronne est un faible rempart.

Ce pouvoir absolu, cette vaste puissance,

Cette grandeur suprême et cette indépendance,

Enfin, ces dons du ciel qui font dire en tous lieux,

Que les rois sont ici les images des Dieux,

Sont des fantômes vains auprès d'une maîtresse

S'ils n'ont pas le pouvoir d'obtenir sa tendresse […]

I.V.273-282

The spectator is yet again reminded of the ruler's vulnerability to human weakness through allusions to his corporeal body. Upon commanding the execution of his brother, Cambyse is momentarily struck down by physical side effects: 'Je sens mon front couvert d'une morne sueur/ Certain frisson mortel se glisse dans mes veines' (II.VII.596-597).[78] This explicit display of the ruler's physicality departs from the conventional early modern notion of the King's body as sacred, whilst its feebleness following the ordering of a tyrannical command can perhaps be said to highlight to the seventeenth-century French spectator that the operation of an oppressive government is not without repercussions. When placed within the context of the King's two bodies, moreover, through unbridled passion and disrespect of the Gods, Cambyse separates himself from his body politic. According to Ernst Kantorowicz, only by muting human desires can the sovereign fully fulfil the role of his 'spiritual' body; that which serves the symbol of his office, allowing for the continuity of monarchy even when the monarch died.[79] Highlighting not only the physical fallibility of his mortal

[78] For additional references to his corporeal body, see, for example, 'Mon sang allait sceller leur indigne alliance' (IV.I.970).

[79] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*.

body but equally hinting at the absence of a symbolic body, Villedieu signals the precarity of his power. The ultimate demonstration of the King's ill-judgment and physical weakness occurs in the closing act of the play, when he foolishly perceives that Phameine — the very same person sent to save him — seeks to murder him. Committing suicide off-stage in a moment of fear, Cambyse is refused the very visibility that defines his tyranny, with the playwright rejecting the artistic autonomy granted to the staging of suicide.[80] Camybse's self-inflicted death — a common demise for female tyrants — is nonchalantly announced by a female servant during a scene of chaos: 'Il n'est plus' (V.III.1283).[81] Whilst suicide is one of the few violent scenes permitted on stage, Villedieu chooses not to visibly present the tyrant's death, instead exploiting language to undermine Camybse's significance and power. As we shall now see, prior to the tyrant's passing, varying levels of effective opposition to his despotic regime are presented.

The Shortcomings of Male Resistance

Three male characters — Smiris, Prasitte and Phameine — attempt to contest the tyrant. Yet ultimately unsuccessful in overthrowing Cambyse's reign, their varying resistance mechanisms are presented as short-lived, ineffective, and at times even counterproductive. Smiris is the first male protagonist to display opposition to the King's regime. Clearly disturbed by his brother's marital intentions, he openly voices his disgust. Prepared to undertake extreme measures in his endeavours to halt the incestuous nuptials, Smiris advocates violence: 'Pour agir prudemment quand les maux sont extrêmes/Il y faut apporter des remèdes de même […] Quand mon bras serait mon unique espérance/Seul il rompra l'hymen, ou Cambyse…' (I.II.190-202). Although his readiness to commit regicide would perhaps alarm the seventeenth-century French audience, he swiftly and repeatedly reminds the spectator that the King's blasphemous language and illicit decorum render resistance morally justifiable, explicitly detaching Cambyse from his regal status: 'Un prince qui vous craint bien

[80] As we have seen in earlier chapters, suicide was somewhat exempt from seventeenth-century aesthetic regulations surrounding violence.
[81] Conroy, *Ruling Women*, *II,* p.63.

moins qu'il ne vous aime,/ Vous sépare aujourd'hui de votre diadème' (II.IV.473-474). Hoping to incite others to assist his sister in evading her unwanted marriage, Smiris claims that the Persians support rebellion whilst also encouraging Prasitte to coax Nitétis into challenging her husband (II.I). The King's brother stirs others to resist regardless of their status:

> On peut être sans sceptre et n'avoir nuls défauts,
> Puisque sans être roi, l'on peut être héros.
> Ces titres éclatants que la vertu nous donne,
> Doivent naître de nous et non d'une couronne.
>
> II.II.395-398

As Henriette Goldwyn remarks, here the male role interestingly offers 'une critique de l'absolutisme qui confronte l'autonomie du sujet au pouvoir d'un monarque'.[82] Yet present only in Act I and Act II before we receive news of his assassination in Act IV, Smiris himself is refused the opportunity to 'être héros'. Villedieu nonetheless rewards the royal for his defiance (significantly shown to be driven wholly by his opposition to his sister's potential loss of autonomy) by amending her source text to facilitate a heroic death for the King's brother: 'Au seul nom de son roi/ Il a d'abord tourné ses armes contre moi […]/ Et pour dernier soupir il prononce un blasphème' (IV.I.908-918).

A less palpable obstruction to the tyrant can be identified with the invented character of Prasitte. Despite Perry Gethner praising his character for daring to protest, I would argue that these discursive challenges are constructed as hesitant and futile.[83] Initially, Mandane's suitor displays utter resignation when competing against monarchical authority for a romantic interest: 'Pour mon mal il n'est point de remède/ Le roi veut ma princesse, il faut que je la cède' (II.I.329-330); 'Son pouvoir a rendu ses désirs légitimes' (II.I.333). Exhibiting a similar ignorance to Cambyse, he too

[82] Henriette Goldwyn, 'Mme de Villedieu — la transformation théâtrale: De l'héroïsme à l'épicurisme galant', *Cahiers du dix-septième XI*, 1 (2006), pp.107–120 (p.112).
[83] Gethner, Perry, 'Challenges to Royal Authority'.

fears that his lover may be swayed by the title of Queen: 'Que puis-je vous offrir, qui vaille un diadème? […] / Qu'en vous privant d'un sceptre, il put vous acquérir' (II.II.377-391). Concern that a female lover may be enticed by a marriage offering an augmented social status is a recurrent motif across early modern drama. In Georges de Scudéry's *Le Vassal Généreux* (1636), for instance, Théandre requires repeated reassurance of his female lover's lack of aspiration to raise her status to royalty by marrying Lucidan. In *Nitétis,* however, Prasitte's anxieties are framed as utterly irrational owing to the marriage in question being an incestuous union between brother and sister; a consideration Mandane reiterates to her suitor on numerous occasions.[84] Making feeble excuses to avoid confronting the Queen ('Elle est occupée', II.I.327), he attempts to avoid his obligation to resist despotism by emphasising what he perceives to be the insurmountable authority of the tyrant: 'Qui pourrait ici-bas s'opposer à ses lois? […] /Qui peut dans cet état le détruire ?' (II.I.331-334); 'A quels moyens, Seigneur, pouvez-vous recourir ?/ Contre un prince absolu, contre un frère' (II.II.411-412). Alone with the King, Prasitte maintains his courteous nature: 'Permettez-moi de grâce/ Que j'ose m'opposer' (II.V.566-567). His contestations are subsequently disregarded, with his brief objection to the death of Smiris in fact only incensing the King to worsen the brutality of his brother's punishment. Prasitte's future protests are consigned to asides. Only an excess of violence (Mandane's suicide threat and the murder of Smiris) incite Prasitte to physical action. Despite ultimately leading a (thwarted) uprising against the King, details surrounding the conspiracy remain sparse, with the playwright shunning Prasitte's unexpected and hasty execution of a rebellion from the stage. Here, Villedieu could perhaps be said to be taking advantage of the aesthetic regulations forbidding violence from the stage to ensure the focus remains on the resistance of the female characters, further reinforced through the minimal verbal description of the attempted uprising. Mandane is found contemplating the motive behind her lover's sudden desire to oppose the tyrant: 'Car enfin si Prasitte a part à son supplice/Un mouvement jaloux en peut être complice' (V.I.1177-1178). Hinting at the possibility of a jealous impulse — a negatively viewed emotion often exclusively

[84] See, for example, II.II.353-354.

attributed to the female sex — rather than political duty, Villedieu lessens the extent to which Prasitte's actions can be viewed by the spectator as honourable.

Perhaps the most flawed attempt to resist the tyrant's authority can be found with the character of Phameine. Following an initial demonstration of military valour ('son bras porta partout l'horreur et le carnage', I.I.114), the male character is swiftly defeated in battle and captured by Cambyse prior to the play's opening scene: 'Phameine fut trouvé dans un monceau de morts/Dont on le retira pour le charger de chaînes' (I.I.132-133). Ascribed to the role of prisoner for much of the tragedy, Villedieu places her dramatic character in a subordinate role typically (as with Omphale in *Manlius*) reserved for the female sex. Completely absent from the stage until Act III, Phameine's first dramatized encounter with Nitétis demonstrates the extent to which love alone incentivises his actions. Wallowing in the loss of his beloved, the male protagonist shows little impetus to oppose the tyrant, instead resigning himself to suicide:

> Je sais qu'il faut perdre la vie,
> Que je ne puis souffrir qu'elle me soit ravie,
> Sans vous faire savoir dans ces derniers abois,
> Que Phameine est toujours ce qu'il fut autrefois.
>
> III.I.629-632

Of course, as demonstrated with Camille (*Manlius)*, as well as the female characters located in Françoise Pascal's tragicomedies, suicide may be framed as a heroic means of resistance. Here, however, Phameine's resolve is associated not with an act of self-empowerment but as an escape from the emotional pain triggered by unattainable love: 'L'amour dans mon cœur l'a si bien su tracer/Qu'à peine le trépas pourra-t-il l'effacer' (III.I.687-688). In showing a male character aside from Cambyse to be prone to emotional outburst, Villedieu discourages the spectator from viewing the tyrant's passion as an exclusively 'feminine' trait. Caught by the King after escaping prison and sneaking into the Queen's chamber to bid her a final farewell, Phameine's actions prove counter-

productive to halting the tyrannical regime. The captive attempts (unsuccessfully) to disguise his romantic attraction to the Queen after she requests he defend her and persuade the ruler of the innocence of his visit to her bedroom: 'Qu'un prince tel que moi dans sa captivité/ Ne perd rien de sa gloire, et de sa dignité […]/ Je venais la prier de hâter mon supplice' (III.II.759-770). An ineffective dissimulator, Phameine enrages Cambyse to the point of threatening mariticide whilst proving himself an unsuitable ruler due to his inability to dissimulate. As we shall now see, through their approach to resistance, women better demonstrate their ability to govern effectively.

Female Resistance: 'Ces titres éclatants que la vertu nous donne / Doivent naître de nous et non d'une couronne'

Viewed by her husband as a disposable object, any attempt taken by the tragedy's title character to obstruct Cambyse's power requires caution. As he makes explicit, the tyrant would, without reservation or hesitation, secure the swift assassination of his wife. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, one of our first encounters with Nitétis is that of a female character shirking and discouraging opposition to royal authority: 'Quoi qu'à sa cruauté Cambyse ose permettre/Il vaut mieux le souffrir que d'oser le commettre' (I.II.185-186). Recollecting her childhood at the outset of the play, the Queen emerges as a longstanding passive victim at the hands of male authority. As the daughter of the Egyptian King Apries and the sole surviving member of the royal family following Amasis' usurpation of the throne, Nitétis depicts her previous treatment as an object merely to be exchanged and transferred. She is hardly, as Henriette Goldwyn reasons, shown to be liberated from the 'constraints of family and politics […] and situated beyond patriarchal bonds' by her status as orphan.[85] Seeking to secure his power, we learn that Amasis first successfully tricks and manipulates the title character into falling in love with his son, Phameine: 'Tu ne doutes pas qu'il ne lui fût aisé/De vaincre un jeune cœur qu'il avait abusé […] Son fils était charmant, qui pouvait me défendre?' (I.I.59-62). Substituted in place of Amasis' late daughter as a booty following defeat in battle, the Princess is then forced to depart

[85] Henriette Goldwyn, 'Men in Love', p.79.

from Northern Africa (ironically a region associated with lust and excessive cruelty in seventeenth-century France) to marry the licentious and brutal Cambyse.[86] Now wed to the odious tyrant, Nitétis expresses her frustration at her continued powerlessness despite (or possibly because of) her regal status: 'L'on me traita d'esclave en m'élevant à lui […]/ On m'ôta le pouvoir de régner sur moi-même' (I.I.20-22). Her opening lines indicate an eagerness to not only escape the control of her husband, but also the responsibility accompanying a monarchic role: 'Il [le sceptre] eut toujours pour moi trop peu de charmes/La plus belle couronne est pesante à porter' (I.I.14-15). Here, Villedieu's emphasis upon Nitétis' utter lack of desire for the throne already begins to contest early modern reasoning for excluding women from positions of authority, such as jurist Cardin Le Bret's contention that women's supposedly 'natural' drive to usurp power signals a threat to the social order.[87] Mandane's nonchalance towards the throne is also overtly stressed: 'Tout ce pompeux éclat n'offre rien de nouveau/ A qui, sans s'éblouir l'a vu dès le berceau' (II.I.355-366).[88]

Irrespective of her repeated subjection to male powers, the Queen disturbs certain components of her husband's tyrannical government, particularly in relation to his self-construed omniscience. In the opening act, Cambyse hopes to surprise and distress his wife with news of their divorce. Already aware of his illicit intent and indifferent to their separation, Nitétis remains emotionally static: 'Je sais tous tes projets, et les Dieux sont témoins/ Qu'un divorce est de toi ce que je crains le moins' (I.III.207-208). Deploying language dominated by references to her superior knowledge, the female protagonist refuses the despot the visual signs of distress he so desires.[89] The title character further frustrates the King by remaining unresponsive to his violent terrorisations, most notably when he threatens the murder of her beloved: 'Je crains peu l'effet de tes vaines

[86] Gethner, 'Challenges to Royal Authority in Plays by Male and Female Writers'.
[87] Le Bret, p. 43. He claims : 'Il serait fort dangereux que les Femmes de cette qualité eussent une puissance égale à leurs marys, d'autant que leur naturel ambitieux ne les laisse jamais en repos qu'elles n'ayent usurpé les advantages du commandement souverain, et reduit en fin leurs marys sous leur empire'.
[88] The idea of the burden of Kingship is a common motif within seventeenth-century French theatre. Gillian Jondorf, 'What is a King? The Figure of the King in Rotrou', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 10.1 (1988), 40-52.
[89] See, for example, 'je sais qu'il vous choisit' (I.II.161).

menaces […]/ Un cœur tel que le mien n'est pas né pour trembler' (III.III.869-871). Unlike Prasitte, whose departure from the stage is termed an act of obedience by the King following his dismissal (II.V), Nitétis also denies Cambyse his much-desired visibility by defiantly deserting her husband on several occasions.[90] Instead of open retaliation, she calmly reminds her husband of the power of divine retribution, prefiguring the play's denouement:

Je te donne un avis et pieux et sincère,
Crains ce que te prépare un hymen odieux,
Tu combles la mesure et tu lasses les Dieux ;
Leur justice a déjà des sujets assez amples […]
Si tu joins l'inceste à tous ces attentats
Sache qu'il est des Dieux et redoute leur bras ;
Peut-être que le Ciel lassé de tant de crimes,
Nous sépare déjà pour choisir ses victimes ;
Après tant de forfaits et d'actes inhumains
Appréhende pour toi jusqu'à tes propres mains.

I.III.214-224

As we saw earlier, however, the King foolishly takes no heed of his wife's advice, dismissing her sage discourse as frivolous threats. The Queen's reliance on discourse as opposed to any form of physical action functions in sharp contrast to the violence of her husband, with her concern for her husband aligning her more closely to the virtue of *douceur* now expected of rulers.

Whilst Cambyse's utter disregard for his wife arguably renders her protests somewhat futile, it is my contention that a subversive inversion of conventional gender roles is created less through Nitétis' resistance mechanisms *per se* and instead via the motives driving her approach to tyrannical

[90] See, for example, the end of Act I, Scene III.

opposition. Upon closer consideration, it becomes apparent that the Queen's seeming reluctance to engage with any uprising against the despotic regime is tied to neither fear nor passivity. Rather, Nitétis remains steadfastly loyal to her spouse owing to her desire to adhere to a strict code of personal honour and duty: 'Tels que soient du roi les forfaits odieux […] il est l'époux que j'ai reçu de Dieux' (III.I.675-676). This allegiance to one's husband could, as Nina Ekstein argues, in some ways be viewed as exemplary of the patriarchy.[91] Yet Villedieu is careful to present the Queen's unquestionable devotion to a man she abhors and reluctance to counter his violence as incentivised solely by a desire to satisfy her own goals:

Si dans ta place un monstre avait ma foi
Il aurait dans mon cœur le même rang que toi
C'est en toi mon honneur et ma gloire que j'aime
Et je n'y trouve rien de charmant que moi-même

III.II.831-834

Whist 'gloire' and 'honneur' would hardly be 'neutral' references for the seventeenth-century spectator, typically implying a set of behaviours endorsed and defined by the patriarchy (such as fidelity and modesty when applied to women), we are nonetheless left with the impression that Nitétis is acting autonomously and in her own personal interests.

In contrast to all three male characters, romantic desire remains utterly absent from Nitétis' motives. Unlike Camille in *Manlius*, however, the title character is not portrayed as impervious to love, allowing herself to briefly dwell upon her past romance with Prasitte: 'Si les Dieux avaient cru notre amour légitime/ Ils n'auraient pas souffert qu'on en eût fait un crime' (III.I.729-730). Crucially, Nitétis' exchange with her lover enables her to demonstrate complete mastery of her emotions:

La foi fait dans mon cœur l'office de l'amour

[91] Ekstein, 'The Second Woman', p.218.

Une âme à qui la gloire est fortement connue

Sur tous ses mouvements est toujours absolue

C'est l'honneur qui la règle et non ses passions […]

III.II.816-819

Declining the opportunity to join the liberated Phameine, Villedieu's female role completely deconstructs the ancient (and early modern) cultural associations of women with insatiable desire and irrationality; one of the fundamental characteristics used to validate their exclusion from power. The playwright further hints at women's capacity and suitability to rule when she stages the army obeying her orders without question (V.II.1233-1234).[92] Desiring to remain a widow at the end of the play, the possibility that the Queen may now continue to rule autonomously remains open.

Owing to her utter and continued devotion to her brutal husband, Villedieu's unique construction of her title character has been subject to some critical consideration, with Perry Gethner suspecting Nitétis' characterisation to be 'too statically perfect' to hold the interest of the seventeenth-century spectator.[93] Whilst this is not a criticism with which I necessarily agree given the abovementioned references to her earlier relationship with Prasitte, through Mandane, the much-overlooked 'second' woman of the tragedy, Villedieu contrasts the Queen's now impervious attitude to love with an example of a passionate female protagonist. My focus on this role counters existing criticism about the play as well as the function of secondary female characters often located within early modern theatre more widely.[94] In Act II, Mandane is first to declare her adoration to the army general: 'Je vous aime, Prasitte' (II.II.363). Upon learning of his role in the uprising, the Princess then deliberates between love and duty before privileging her reputation over passion:

Comment accorder l'amour et le devoir? […]

[92] We are also informed that 'le peuple' admire the Queen (II.I.340).
[93] Gethner, 'Women Playwrights in the Age of Louis XIV', p.21.
[94] Even Nina Ekstein's exploration of the 'second' woman in Villedieu's theatre – a character she defines as the 'undesired' female personage – centres on the play's title character. Ekstein, 'The Second Woman'.

Mais dans le haut éclat du rang où je fus née,

C'est un crime pour moi d'être soupçonnée […]

Et le Ciel nous demande une vertu si pure […]

V.I.1184-1201

Not only a woman adept at governing her own sentiments, Mandane proves capable of inciting emotive responses from her male counterparts. In Act II, her suicide threat — paralleling that of Camille through its framing as a heroic act of defiance — disturbs the passivity of Prasitte:

A mourir.

Oui, Princes, le trépas est le seul qui me reste ;

Mais seul il pourra rompre un hymen si funeste ;

Un grand cœur est toujours le maître de son sort […]

Puisque, grâces aux Dieux, la mort nous et permise

Je puis tout sur moi-même, et je brave Cambyse

[…]

Vous changez de visages:

Quoi! ce malheur est donc plus grand que vos courages ?

II.II.412-424

Rousing her lover to act (whether deliberately or unintentionally), Mandane's outburst exemplifies Johnson's argument that women may depart from the private domain by inspiring sexual desire and redirecting it to political ends.[95] In addition, the Princess's readiness to engage with such extreme measures indirectly undermines the King's violence in the scene that immediately follows: threatening to murder her should she refuse his hand in marriage, the spectator has already been made aware that Mandane would 'préfère aisément la mort à l'infamie' (II.II.430).

[95] Johnson, *Staging Women.*

The Princess's fervour extends to her overt defiance of the tyrant. From their first staged encounter together, Mandane (unike Prasitte and Phameine) unhesitatingly contests the behaviour of her brother:

Gardez plus de respect pour la Divinité
Et modérez l'excès de cette vanité ;
Moins on attend le coup et plus il nous étonne,
La foudre peut briser la plus belle couronne,
Et les secrets des Dieux qui troublent nos desseins
Ne sont pas pénétrés par les faibles humains.
[…]
Car vous êtes mon roi, mais je suis votre sœur,
Et pour peu que je sois à vos desseins contraire,
C'est un pouvoir borné que le pouvoir d'un frère.

I.IV.230-242

Reducing Cambyse from his royal standing to that of male sibling, with the references to 'frère' and 'sœur' ensuring the sex of both characters remains at the forefront of the audience's mind, Mandane's language reinscribes the tyrant's power more in terms of sibling rivalry than in the discourse of effeminacy. She also later reminds him of his mortal status through references to his physical frailty: 'Quoi tu frémis alors que je t'approche […]/ Qui peut verser mon sang redoute-t-il ma voix?' IV.II.989-991); 'Mais tu pâlis, tyran, que redoute ton âme? / Qui ne craint pas les Dieux, craindrait-il une femme?' (IV.II.1069-1070). Here, Mandane shows how the tyrant's body betrays him, with the visual cues to 'frémis' and 'pâlis' highlighting an emotional incontinence. Executing a similar policy of openness as her tyrannical brother, Mandane calls into question the abstract connection between women and manipulation, whilst through forming an alliance with Nitétis

(made all the more remarkable by the fact that they belong to the same love triangle), she demonstrates her loyal nature. To Nitétis, she pledges honesty:

> […] celles de notre rang
> Doivent toujours montrer un cœur sincère et franc;
> Qu'entre nous désormais la feinte soit bannie,
> J'aime votre vertu, je hais la tyrannie […]
>
> I.II.171-174

Alongside discursive challenges, Mandane engages with, and exploits, the tyrant's approach to spectacle and violence. The first to offer her Smiris' military hand as a resistance tool, the Princess demonstrates leadership ability (I.II.179). Unafraid to undertake acts of violence herself, Mandane undermines Cambyse's desire for omniscience when, playing up to stereotypes associated with the early modern violent woman, she threatens to murder him whilst he sleeps:

> Qu'en te flattant ma main ne te cache un poignard
> A te voir défier de mes propres tendresses
> Et craindre incessamment jusques à mes caresses. […]
> Tiens, je t'offre ma main, ose la recevoir
>
> IV.II.1056-1067

As a deceptive form of assassination taking place in the private and intimate domain of the bedroom using the 'feminine' weapon of the dagger (associated with secrecy and passion), Villedieu's construction of this threat of violence in some ways exploits patriarchal conventions associated with early modern women. Here, however, Mandane very much appears to be deliberately and tactically playing up to the King's worst fears, denying him his desire for visibility and clarity and contributing to his increasing madness. Moreover, with the threatened violence entailing regicide, this private act transgresses into the public sphere, much in the same way that Mandane herself transgresses traditional gender roles. Held captive for her unrelenting objections to the tyrant, Mandane is

excluded from observing the later combat not, as is the case with Pierre Corneille's heroines discussed in earlier chapters, simply because of her sex but owing to her bold and outspoken nature.[96] She nonetheless revels in the possibility of viewing her brother's death, vowing to escape imprisonment to witness the one act of violence Cambyse seeks to visually deny her:

S'il prétend me priver du plaisir de sa mort
Rien ne peut dérober ce spectacle à ma vue
Et son injuste amour me rend trop absolue
Pour craindre que l'orgueil des plus hardis soldats
Ose arrêter ici, ni mes yeux, ni mes pas

IV.IV.1144-1149

Closing the play, Mandane continues to command the male characters, proving herself to be a calm and effective leader: 'Allez, Princes, allez, calmer ce juste effroi […]/ Je vous tiendrai parole, et prétends désormais/ Etablir dans ces lieux l'allégresse et la paix' (V.VI.1397-1402).

Finally, through the tyrant's self-inflicted death, the playwright reconciles her tragedy with the theory of divine right; the premise that God alone has the right to punish a malicious monarch.[97] Yet despite conforming to political expectations surrounding the staging of a tyrant's demise, Villedieu's seemingly 'safe' ending continues to disrupt the accepted hierarchy of gender. Although the identity of the future leader remains unclear, the tragedy closes with a woman's right to rule never being questioned: Either Mandane or Nitétis will take up the title of Queen.

Manlius and Nitétis: Concluding Remarks

With violent tyrannical rulers driving the intrigues of *Manlius* and *Nitétis,* Madame de Villedieu certainly veers away from the portrayal of a glorification of royal authority and the omission of visible acts of brutality increasingly demanded by socio-political and aesthetic theatrical imperatives

[96] See, for example, *Le Cid* and *Horace,* which are covered in the Introduction and Chapter I to this thesis.
[97] See Gethner's introduction to the tragedy.

in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Torquatus emerges as a confirmed despot prepared to sentence his own son to death under the pretext of Roman duty whilst secretly satisfying his own sexual desires. Meanwhile, Cambyse openly strives to legalise divorce and incest to fulfil his wish of marrying his sister. Delighting in the suffering of others, he even has his own brother executed during the 'live' action of the play.

Yet following close critical readings of the texts within their cultural context, it is clear that through her careful construction, Villedieu ensures her two oppressors conform to accepted portrayals of tyrannical regimes. Inspired by Ancient source texts, both rulers are distanced from contemporary absolutism, with their views on morality bearing no resemblance to those of *le roi très chrétien*. Likewise, through references to their physical frailty, Villedieu departs from the conventional early modern notion of the King's body as sacred. Inherently theatrical and offering an obvious source of dramatic conflict to be overcome by the play's denouement, the two tyrants are suitably punished, indicating to the spectator that failure to meet the absolutist ideal is not without consequence. In accordance with the choice of genre, *Manlius* closes with Torquatus's sudden repentance, whereas adhering to the demands for poetic justice, *Nitétis* ends with the demise of Cambyse. In both cases, the highly contentious outcome of regicide is mitigated.

Despite seemingly evading a representation of tyranny capable of posing a threat to the absolutist ideal, Villedieu engages with the ways in which the dramatic character type typically resonates within early modern discussions of sexual politics. In its most simplistic form, it may be tempting to view Villedieu's decision to stage exclusively male tyrants as significant in itself. Yet in line with my New Historicist approach, it is important to remember that the gendering of the tyrant belongs to a broader classical tradition in which dramatic cases of negative male rulers rival their female counterparts. In addition, tyrannical regimes — irrespective of the despot's sex — are often framed in gendered, essentialist terms, propagating the well-worn association between women, power and disorder. Crucially, however, the playwright destabilises the parallels so frequently drawn

between a tyrant's enslavement to passion and the ancient (and early modern) cultural associations of women with insatiable desire and irrationality. In *Nitétis*, the tyrant is repeatedly detached from his royal status, reminding the spectator that what they are witnessing is simply an irrational male character utterly incapable of self-control, a point the playwright stresses through the excessive use and threat of tyrannical violence.

Moreover, by placing discussions of male entitlement and female objectification in the context of one tyrant's desire for his sister and another's uncontrolled yearning for his son's beloved, with their emotions driving them to violent action, the playwright encourages the spectator to question the legitimacy of such patriarchal principles within early modern French society. Not only presenting her tyrants as driven by romantic desire over political duty, Villedieu's putatively 'heroic' male characters are equally prone to emotional outbursts, further challenging the presentation of woman as 'naturally' what the tyrant becomes; rather than being effeminate, the tyrant's characterisation is instead aligned to that of these 'ordinary' men. Manlius repeatedly privileges matters of the heart over state affairs, with his discourse dominated by confessions of adoration for Omphale. Likewise, alongside Phameine's longing for an unrequited love, the dramatist hints at the presence of a jealous motive driving Prasitte's actions.

As a character type rooted in tradition yet one which opens up a legitimate site for staging resistance to an overwhelming figure of authority, it soon becomes apparent that the most subversive component of Villedieu's work lies not with the portrayal of the tyrant himself, but rather with the opposition presented against his brutal regime. The playwright exploits this premise of permissible resistance to cruel and violent powers to depict exceptionally strong, astute female characters. Diametrically opposed to the despot in their capacity to master their emotions and via their adherence to the heroic notions of duty, glory and honour, Nitétis and Camille subtly undermine the perceived 'effeminacy' of the tyrant, successfully appropriating 'masculine' characteristics and demonstrating their potential leadership ability. Indeed, by staging women's

awareness of, and control over, their romantic inclinations even when faced with violent threats and actions, the dramatic productions destabilise early modern reasonings behind their exclusion from the throne. Faced with contrasting tyrannical regimes (one operating under a policy of dissimulation and hesitation; the other centred upon openness and haste), women are shown to be perceptive enough to adapt their approaches to resisting violence accordingly. Omphale appropriates the very same dutiful rhetoric upon which Torquatus' power rests, deploying flattery and feigning concern over the potential damage to the King's virtue and esteem should his desire for misalliance be made public. Similarly, Nitétis refuses to grant Cambyse the signs of visual distress he so desires, whilst Mandane parallels his policy of open brutality with her own overt discursive challenges and physical threats of violence as a tactic to disturb the tyrant. Their resistance is rendered all the more remarkable in light of their repeated objectification by male characters and allocation to seemingly passive positions at the outset of the plays.

In contrast, the resistance of the male characters within *Manlius* and *Nitétis* is constructed as largely ineffective. Exploiting the role of tragicomic and monarchical deception, the title character of Villedieu's first tragicomedy remains the sole character unable to recognise the need to challenge his father's government. Displaying ignorance and unable to distinguish truth from deception (a fundamental disqualifier of one's capacity to rule), Manlius remains inactive, with his failed attempts to mimic the tyrant's policy of dissimulation aligning his role to the 'naïf' character type more commonly associated with comedy. In the case of *Nitétis,* Phameine simply resigns himself to suicide. Unlike the identical threats of Camille and Mandane, framed as heroic acts of defiance, his desire for death is depicted as far from an act of self-empowerment. Utterly overlooking the need to resist Cambyse's regime, he is instead shown to be searching for an escape from emotional pain triggered by an unattainable love. Although Prasitte attempts to obstruct the tyrant, his mechanisms prove somewhat counter-productive. Here, the very same dramatic regulations seeking to enforce early modern gender hierarchy could perhaps even be said to aid the playwright in her deconstruction of conventional social norms. Owing to the prohibiting of visible scenes of violence,

the uprising remains hidden. Instead, the plays centre upon the strength of the visible female characters. Male resistance to violent rule is thus presented not just as ineffective but also largely non-existent. The male characters are unwilling, or unable to see the necessity, to stand up to oppressive rulers. They largely conform to social norms, even when they are the victims of it. It is perhaps possible to attribute their compliance to the fact that they themselves would benefit from these traditional societal constructions in different circumstances.

Disparaging negative conceptions of female capacity promulgated by those wishing to exclude women from rule, Villedieu effectively dramatizes and realizes the urgings of early modern feminist socio-political treatises outlined in Chapter I. Through contrasting her portrayal of a violent tyrant (alongside passion-driven male roles) with bold, astute and heroic female characters, the playwright deconstructs the male prerogative to rule, configuring a space for imagining the possibility of female governance within seventeenth-century French society.[98]

[98] In so doing, Villedieu's plays feed into a much broader tapestry of works in which female rulership is depicted as a viable and even desirable possibility. See Chapter I and Conroy, *Ruling Women, II.*

Conclusion

Concluding remarks

This thesis set out to explore the representation of violence and gender in the dramatic works of two seventeenth-century French female playwrights and in the context of early modern patriarchal society. Its overarching aim was to consider the ways in which female-authored tragedies and tragicomedies conformed to or departed from expected constructions of gender dynamics and the extent to which these portrayals engaged with contemporary debates surrounding the role of women within culture and society. As highlighted in the introduction to this study, dramatic violence emerged as a fundamental yet aesthetically and socio-politically complex theme in early modern French theatre, notably in relation to gender, and yet research into the relationship between the two remains limited. Similarly, whilst we have begun to see an increased interest in the dramatic repertoire of seventeenth-century female playwrights, their works continue to be overlooked by contemporary scholars, and the theme of violence in female-authored early modern theatre has to date received no critical attention. Through this study, I have uniquely sought to demonstrate how the dramatic representation of violence provides fertile territory for a study of gender and how close critical engagement with the theme of violence and gender in hitherto understudied female-authored works enables a richer understanding of the tensions inherent to early modern sexual politics. This concluding chapter reviews the findings of this study and synthesises the key arguments put forward. I return to the critical approach of New Historicism and assess its value in the context of this research. The following discussion also draws out the original academic contribution of this study, as well as its limitations, and puts forward suggestions for further research.

Destabilising traditional narratives of gender through dramatic violence

As established in the first part of this thesis, seventeenth-century French society was underpinned by a dominant discourse that sought to consign the female sex to a position of subservience. Across two key institutions — the government and the household — we have seen how age-old prescriptive and essentialist views concerning women's nature and capabilities were often deployed to posit

male dominance as the natural and fixed hierarchical order. Whilst the 'woman question' has already been explored in much detail, my first chapter considered a wide range of cultural works to highlight how questions of gender and power pervaded different aspects of society. The image of woman as the lesser sex was predominantly a cultural constant underpinned by social, legal and literary practices. I have shown how theatre in particular could play a central role in the propagation of this hierarchy of gender. The increasing enforcement of aesthetic regulations from the 1630s onwards sought to ensure the stage reflected and reinforced the prevailing socio-political order, with *la bienséance* and *la vraisemblance* encouraging portrayals of female subservience and inferiority, inculcating French subjects in patriarchal values. I have hinted at the repercussions that could arise when playwrights depart from this prevalent code of sexual politics, with literary disputes such as *La Querelle du Cid* and *La Querelle du Sophonisbe* illustrating the strength of feeling at times surrounding representations of women that fail to align with cultural expectations. Yet as a marked period of social and political instability, with the period of drama under consideration being one in which political, social and cultural norms were being intensely renegotiated, we have also seen how challenges to the prevailing sexual hierarchy emerged in both society and culture.[1] As demonstrated in the final section of Chapter I, it is within the context of these debates that women increasingly emerge as cultural producers in their own right, notably in the theatrical domain.

The introduction and first chapter of this study have demonstrated the potential for the theme of dramatic violence to engage with and often succumb to aesthetic and socio-political pressures. Indeed, the display of dissident behaviour as punishable by death combined with the survival of 'good' characters clearly has the potential to serve as a form of social stabilization. On gender specifically, we have seen how violent acts could function as a mechanism for encouraging the confinement of the female sex to the private sphere. The regular display of female characters using deadly force to acquire political power and alignment of violent male tyrants with effeminacy

[1] As set out in the Introduction, this is a particularly interesting period of flux politically, post-Fronde but not yet an established absolutism under Louis XIV, but also aesthetically, with dramatic regulations not yet fully in force.

would have fed into contemporary concerns surrounding women in positions of authority. Similarly, the frequent presentation of female characters as victims of gendered acts of violence (including abduction, voyeurism and sexual assault) requiring rescue from or by the male protagonist clearly aligned with contemporary beliefs around women as the naturally weaker sex. Even the type of death and weapon used often reinforced gendered behavioural codes. Yet as we have seen the theme was inherently complex, notably in its interactions with the increasingly normative dramatic aesthetics. Coming under significant scrutiny for its potential to destabilise verisimilitude and decorum, the removal of almost all visible scenes of violence from the stage in the second half of the century may go some way towards explaining why the theme has not been subject to sustained critical attention. In placing violence at the centre of my enquiry, this thesis has brought to the fore the theme's continued socio-political significance despite its staged absence. More significantly, in recognising the stage as a central site in which counter-arguments to the dominant hierarchy can and do publicly emerge, it has provided a unique space for exploring the potential for dramatic violence to function as a subversive mechanism, calling for a re-evaluation of the theme more widely.

The second half of this thesis turned to the dramatic works of two French female playwrights. In departing from the traditional literary canon, this study contributes to a growing interest in the works of early modern women dramatists. Benefitting from increased access to the world of theatre through salon culture (enabling access to male playwrights and mentors) and increased audience participation, we have seen how women overcame societal barriers to become successful playwrights in the latter half of the century. Through its focus on tragedies and tragicomedies, this study attests to women's ability to boldly engage with daring and serious subject matters and male-dominated genres (even participating in generic innovation), countering assumptions that seventeenth-century women's writing was confined to novels or poetry or concerned only with romantic intrigues. Through their theatre, Pascal and Villedieu underscore women's ability to engage with and shape societal developments, reflecting the salon culture in

which they were both closely involved. Their dramatic productions interact with contemporary subjects in the political sphere, such as tyranny and *la douceur*, as well as the private domain, such as marriage and gallantry. These works and the themes therein expose deep-rooted tensions circulating in society regarding women in the household and in government. At times using their paratexts to draw attention to the sexual imbalance of power that existed within society, we have seen how women openly challenged the hegemonic narrative. Through close critical engagement with their dramatic works, this thesis reinforces female-authored theatre as an innovative and important source, and one that holds relevance to our understanding of early modern literature and society and women's role therein.

Chapter II explored two tragicomedies of Françoise Pascal: *Agathonphile martyr* (1655) and *Sésostris* (1661). Here I put forward the novel argument that Pascal, through her deployment of what I have termed 'tragicomic violence', exploited the putative regulatory freedom granted by her choice of genre to challenge early modern gender hierarchy. Through her opening scenes of tragicomic violence, Pascal pairs powerful women alongside passive weak male characters to immediately disrupt conventional gender dynamics. Whilst the attempted sexual assault and apparition are (in accordance with the play's genre) presented as somewhat far-fetched, Pascal at times makes use of their *invraisemblance* to further destabilise normative gender roles. In *Agathonphile martyr*, the theatricality of the act encourages the spectator to view Irénée's passion-driven plotting as mere entertainment rather than a true reflection of female behaviour. Meanwhile in *Sésostris*, the illusory nature of the King's dream allows for an extreme reversal of gender dynamics in which the strength of the female protagonist is shown to parallel that of Ancient Gods. This inversion remains throughout the plays, and we encounter further strong female characters fully capable of instigating and challenging acts of tragicomic violence to achieve autonomy. In Pascal's tragicomic martyr play, Triphine proves her capacity to act autonomously when she orchestrates her own 'abduction' to escape an arranged marriage, with her resistance against the patriarchal order presented as rational and necessary. Her death, in which she exercises her right to

choose, is constructed as a final act of defiance. Meanwhile, the passive and weak nature of the male 'hero' established in the opening scene of sexual violence only amplifies as the play progresses. Likewise, in *Sésostris*, Thimarette challenges the violent voyeuristic activities of Héracléon and, unaided, thwarts her own abduction, triggering the play's happy denouement. With the 'rightful' order not restored by the denouement, these plays and the violence therein encourage the spectator to envisage an alternate world in which women refuse to remain subordinate to their male counterparts. Moreover, through close examination of the structural and discursive construction of tragicomic violence within these two plays, I have also exposed how Pascal affiliates these scenes with wider seventeenth-century patriarchal practices, offering a subtle criticism of the societal mechanisms that seek to confine women to the domestic sphere. Finally, although the focus of my analysis lies with gender, this chapter also drew out the ways in which both of Pascal's dramatic productions — through their deployment of not only tragicomic violence but wider generic signifiers such as doubling, disguise, sleep and dreams — engage with wider contemporary concerns, such as tyranny, dynastic succession and social status, underscoring tragicomedy's ability to critique seventeenth-century socio-political norms. This is a component of the genre still often overlooked today and marks another significant original finding of this thesis.

Chapter III then examined two theatrical productions of Madame de Villedieu — *Manlius* (1661) and *Nitétis* (1662) — which take as their focus the dramatic tyrant. After considering how playwrights navigated the potential threat this contentious character type posed to the absolutist ideal, this chapter explored the theme of tyranny in the context of sexual politics. Whilst male-authored works frequently display male tyrants as effeminate (hypocritical, emotional, secretive, cowardly) and female tyrants as monstruous aberrations and thus function to reinforce the male prerogative to rule, I argue that Villedieu exploited the violent dramatic tyrant to challenge seventeenth-century gender hierarchy. Enabling a legitimate site for staging resistance to an overwhelming figure of authority, we have seen how Villedieu ensures it is exceptionally strong, astute female characters that come to the fore. Diametrically opposed to the despot in their capacity

to master their emotions and in their adherence to the heroic notions of duty, glory and honour, Nitétis and Camille successfully appropriate supposedly 'masculine' characteristics and demonstrate their potential leadership ability. Using language to detach the tyrant from his royal status and remind the spectator that what they are witnessing is simply an irrational male personage lacking self-control, as well as ensuring secondary 'heroic' male characters are shown to be equally prone to emotional outbursts, the playwright destabilises conceptual links between women and power. In terms of resistance to violence, women are shown to be perceptive enough to adapt their approaches accordingly. Omphale appropriates the very same dutiful rhetoric upon which Torquatus' power rests, deploying flattery and feigning concern over the potential damage to the King's virtue and esteem should his desire for misalliance be made public. Similarly, Nitétis refuses to grant Cambyse the signs of visual distress he so desires, whilst Mandane parallels his policy of open brutality with her own overt discursive challenges and physical threats of violence. Whilst the resistance of male characters is either completely absent or otherwise unsuccessful, Villedieu frames the suicide threats of Camille and Mandane as heroic acts of defiance and self-empowerment. Their resistance is rendered all the more remarkable in light of their repeated objectification by male characters and allocation to seemingly passive positions at the outset of the plays. Moreover, by placing discussions of male entitlement and female objectification in the context of one violent tyrant's desire for his sister (*Nitétis*) and another's uncontrolled yearning for his son's beloved (*Manlius*), the playwright encourages the spectator to question the legitimacy of these broader patriarchal principles in early modern French society. Disparaging negative conceptions of female capacity advanced by those wishing to exclude women from rule, Villedieu effectively uses a violent character type to configure a space for imagining the possibility of female governance in seventeenth-century French society.

Despite navigating the two completely distinct forms of tragicomic and tyrannical violence, it can be concluded that both Pascal and Villedieu exploit the dramatic theme for socio-political ends, undermining aesthetic regulations as well as the prevailing gender hierarchy. Through their

theatrical productions and the violence therein, these women hint at alternative constructions of gender to those upheld by prescriptive Ancient and early modern discourses of sexual difference. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the restricted aesthetic and socio-political environment in which they were writing, challenges to the dominant gender hierarchy in these works are nonetheless distinctly subtle. In many ways, the use of the controversial theme of tyranny and the unusual generic classification of tragicomedy perhaps serve to distract the spectator from the specifically gendered underpinnings of these works. Moreover, on the surface, both playwrights initially appear to be writing in accordance with expected gender stereotypes. Across all four works, we find examples of passive and objectified female characters as well as passion-driven aggressors. It is only through close critical engagement with the works and the context in which they were written that I have unveiled their subversive undercurrents. Of particular note is that both Pascal and Villedieu predominantly steer away from visibly staging scenes of violence, even opting not to take advantage of the more aesthetically acceptable exceptions such as suicide. Instead, scenes of aggression are confined to language. Once again, this could be read as a cautious approach to ensure adherence to aesthetic regulation. Yet it is precisely within their discursive constructions of staged violence that we find these contestations to the physical and symbolic violence being inflicted upon women across different sectors of society. As a result, the playwrights' seeming adherence to aesthetic regulations could even open up a site for staging gendered resistance. Hence, this study calls into question current critical understandings of the social role and potential function of seventeenth-century dramatic aesthetics more broadly.

New Historicist Approach

In light of the aesthetic restrictions and the tacit nature of challenges to the dominant hierarchy, the value of applying a New Historicist approach to early modern French theatre is evident. Through close critical readings of the dramatic works of French female playwrights within the socio-political context in which they were written, New Historicist practices have facilitated the exposure of

challenges to the early modern patriarchal society in the 'margins' of texts and in non-canonical works. Through placing historical and cultural ruptures of the gender hierarchy at the centre of my study, I have shown the viability and applicability of a New Historicist approach to questions of gender, and it is clear that New Historicist and feminist perspectives should not always be viewed as contradictory. Adopting New Historicist practices has also helped to mitigate essentialist or reductive conclusions. Decoding the works of Pascal and Villedieu as part of a much larger cultural narrative has ensured wider literary norms and developments such as the popularity of tyranny are not read as necessarily subversive in and of themselves. Likewise, integrating a New Historicist approach has ensured I factor in my own positionality as a researcher. Exploring the works of female playwrights within the nuanced context of their own specific societal dictates and paying particular attention to the parameters of gender norms at the time in which they were writing has helped steer me away from anachronistic assumptions. Finally, and perhaps most critically, a New Historicist perspective helps with articulating and underscoring the significance of my findings. Armed with the understanding that all cultural forms are socially and politically productive, the tragedies and tragicomedies of Pascal and Villedieu should be viewed as political forces in their own right. Not only reflecting the society in which they were writing, the works of seventeenth-century French female playwrights should be seen to be speaking to and helping to shape contemporary debates on gender. This study has, however, highlighted the need to exercise caution when applying Greenblatt's New Historicist concept of 'subversion and containment' — i.e., when 'actions that should have the effect of radically undermining authority turn out to be the props of that authority' — to these works and within this context. [2] As we have seen, the female playwrights under consideration here, whilst seeming to adhere to the dramatic regulations — that is to say the 'props' of patriarchal authority — through their muting of violence, instead exploit this prop to challenge society through discourse, avoiding containment. Artistic form is thus very much intertwined with the circulation of ideas and beliefs. These dramatic works challenge the patriarchal system and

[2] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p.53.

should be recognised for their relevance and contribution to seventeenth-century writing and the evolving role of women within society.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

In limiting its scope to two female playwrights, this thesis has inevitably sacrificed a level of breadth for the insight that can be gleaned through close critical readings. As such, whilst my study has suggested that female dramatists deployed the theme of violence as a subversive mechanism, it cannot claim to be exhaustive. It is also important to recognise that the four works under consideration here were produced during a socio-political and aesthetic interregnum, and so we cannot yet conclude whether this phenomenon is unique to this particular time frame or extends beyond the period. My findings thus open up a number of further lines of enquiry. Firstly, additional research is required to understand the ways in which other French female playwrights deploy the theme of violence. Close critical readings of the works of Madame Deshoulières and Catherine Bernard, writing at the height of 'Classicism', would no doubt offer valuable insights into the elaboration of the theme of violence and the representation of gender during a period of intensified aesthetic regulation.[3] Both certainly do not shy away from the theme. In Deshoulières's *Genséric* (1680), for instance, female protagonist Sophronie discovers that Prince Trasimond, to whom she is betrothed, is in love with the captive Princess Eudoxe. Taking matters into her own hands, Sophronie sets out to murder her rival. However, her plotting does not quite go as planned. During this calculated move, she accidentally strikes Trasimond, who gets in the way of her attack, killing him instead of Princess Eudoxe, before she then commits suicide herself. Whilst Deshoulières opts not to stage these scenes of violence in accordance with aesthetic regulation, the reporting of the murder and suicide are extensive, spanning several scenes and recounted from the perspective of different

[3] See Madame Deshoulières 1680 tragedy '*Genséric*' in *Femmes dramaturges en France (1650-1750), Pièces choisies: Tome II,* pp.159-173; Catherine Bernard's 1689 tragedy '*Laodamie, Reine d'Epire*', in *Théâtre de femmes de l'Ancien Régime, XVIIe – XVIIIe siecle, III*, eds., Aurore Evain, Perry Gethner and Henriette Goldwyn (Saint-Etienne: Universite de Saint-Etienne, 2011), pp.39-105; and Bernard's 1690 tragedy, '*Brutus*', in *Théâtre de femmes de l'Ancien Régime, XVIIe – XVIIIe siecle, III*, pp.107-182.

characters. It would be interesting to consider the ways in which the language used to depict these bloody acts might impact upon the representation of gender dynamics and norms in the play, and to compare this with broader theatrical constructions of violence, including those considered here. Reinterrogating the theme of violence more widely across the early modern dramatic repertoire would also be valuable. This is a rich and broad theme clearly capable of engaging in both overt and covert ways with contemporary socio-political developments and one that warrants greater scrutiny. Finally, whilst my restricted scope has ensured that the under-studied works of Pascal and Villedieu have received further close critical attention, in moving beyond these conclusions, there is still no doubt much more to be said about these authors' works and those of French female playwrights more widely. It is my hope that this thesis will spark future scholarship on the works of French female playwrights of the period, with their works recognised as constituting an innovative and influential contribution to the seventeenth-century dramatic canon.

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