Vileness and violence:

the Cornelian corpse

In 1662, Bossuet famously started his ‘Sermon sur la mort’ by asking ‘Me sera-t-il permis aujourd’hui d’ouvrir un tombeau devant la cour, et des yeux si délicats ne seront-ils point offensés par un objet si funèbre?’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Bossuet was, of course, talking metaphorically; he was not literally about to expose a corpse before his congregation. Yet he shows here a concern that the physicality of death, even when evoked through language alone, might prove offensive or troubling to his rather refined listeners. Indeed, the corpse that Bossuet evokes soon comes to trouble even language itself, decomposing from a determinate, once recognisably human, entity into ‘un je ne sais quoi qui n’a plus de nom en aucune langue’ (p. 136). As Bossuet implies, the collapse of a previously well-defined body threatens the very collapse of language. Established modes of verbal representation may prove insufficient to contain the radical otherness of a dead human body.

According to received wisdom, ‘classical’ France has little time or taste for anything as unseemly as the corpse. Death may be a perennial literary concern, but even in that most deathly genre of tragedy, dead bodies are – like the acts that lead to them – typically kept out of sight. Being (according to a long-standing folk etymology) ‘ob-scene’, corpses are largely relegated to the offstage realm. Seventeenth-century tragic convention, then, encourages us to see the corpse in broadly Kristevan terms as that abject that has to be rejected in order to preserve integrity.[[2]](#footnote-2) In fact, though, seventeenth-century French theatre shows a curious fascination with the corpse. Indeed, even Racine’s two most famously ‘classical’ plays include visceral and gruesome descriptions of mutilated bodies – the ravaged ‘corps hideux’ of Athalie’s mother Jezebel, trampled by horses and devoured by dogs,[[3]](#footnote-3) and the scarcely recognisable mass of blood and flesh that was once the young Hippolyte.

This article explores the treatment of the corpse a generation earlier, focusing primarily on Corneille’s 1643 tragedy *La Mort de Pompée*. This playmarks an interesting turning-point in Corneille’s dramatic treatment of dead bodies; it is certainly the last time that Corneille shows any real dramatic interest in the materiality of the corpse. Superficially, of course, this movement might seem to confirm a simple narrative of ‘classicisation’ which would have Corneille repress his own ‘baroque’ tendencies in the name of polished regularity. Yet Racine’s later work reminds us to resist such straightforward chronological explanations. Indeed, Corneille’s last significant engagement with the corpse will turn out to be the most sophisticated, systematic, and gruesome of all. Furthermore, the play is also characterised by an insistent lexis of vileness; words such as ‘vil’, ‘bas’, and ‘abject’ emerge at crucial points throughout, but they are often displaced away from the dead body itself and onto the living.

# Corpses before *Pompée*

Before turning to *Pompée*, it will be helpful to outline Corneille’s earlier engagement with corpses. For the first few decades of the century, freshly dead bodies were not uncommon on the French stage; Corneille himself briefly shows us corpses in *Clitandre* (1632), *Médée* (1634), and *L’Illusion comique* (1635). Yet these visible corpses are perhaps less relevant here than those that Corneille’s next two plays evoke through language alone. In *Le Cid*, Corneille allows Chimène a rich and emotionally powerful speech about her father’s dead body. Interestingly, for all the viscerality and bloodiness of the description, Chimène nowhere uses a vocabulary of vileness or baseness to describe the corpse. While blood is a key focus, this is a noble blood that spills from the Count’s ‘généreux flanc’ and evokes his past military glories in service of the king:

Ce sang qui tant de fois garantit vos murailles,

Ce sang qui tant de fois vous gagna des batailles,

Ce sang qui tout sorti fume encor de courroux

De se voir répandu pour d’autres que pour vous…[[4]](#footnote-4)

Yet if the Count has not been made vile by his death, his killer largely escapes infamy too. After a brief reference to ‘son indigne attentat’ (II. 7. 673), Rodrigue appears in Chimène’s account not as a base or underhand murderer, but as a hot-headed ‘jeune audacieux’ who displays ‘témérité’ (II. 7. 694-95).

But even though the Count’s corpse is not vile, it is certainly troubling in ways that chime with Bossuet’s remarks. Chimène’s narrative as a whole is confused and chronologically disjointed, moving between past and present, and even juxtaposing different past forms when referring to the same event: the *passé composé* of ‘mes yeux ont vu…’ (II. 7. 665) is later followed by the *passé simple* ‘Je le trouvai sans vie’ (II. 7. 678). By disrupting Chimène’s chronology, the corpse seems to symbolically retain some vestiges of life; its blood ‘fumes’ with rage, and then ‘writes’ Chimène’s duty into the sand, before its single wound starts to speak up like a mouth that is then displaced onto Chimène’s present appeal to the king. The Count’s corpse thus comes to undermine basic distinctions between self and other, past and present, and life and death.

Yet although Corneille effectively airbrushes the Count’s corpse out of his plot after this scene, several of his criticswere quick to assume – and to take offence at their assumption – that his body was lying in state nearby during Rodrigue’s encounter with Chimène in act III. Without offering any textual evidence, Georges de Scudéry blamed Chimène for ‘souffrir en même temps, et en même maison, ce meurtrier et ce pauvre corps’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nonetheless, Corneille seems to have taken inspiration from such assumptions in his next play, *Horace*, where he takes care to keep Camille’s dead body present in the spectator’s mind. At the end of act IV, Horace chases Camille offstage; we hear her cries from nearby as he kills her, and soon learn that she has died in her father’s arms. Old Horace’s first words at the start of the next act – ‘Retirons nos regards de cet objet funeste’ (V. 1. 1403) – remind us that Camille’s corpse is still next door. The daughter whom he had embraced in her dying moments has now become a mere ‘object’. Turning their literal gaze away from Camille’s corpse allows the men to contemplate the more general truth that, for Old Horace at least, it embodies: that heavenly judgement can bring people low for their overweening pride.

Our attention is next drawn to Camille’s body during Valère’s prosecution speech to the king Tulle. Here, Valère briefly evokes Camille’s corpse through the rhetorical device of *praeteritio*, combined with a dash of vivid hypotyposis:

Je pourrais demander qu’on mît devant vos yeux

Ce grand et rare exploit d’un bras victorieux.

Vous verriez un beau sang pour accuser sa rage,

D’un frère si cruel rejaillir au visage,

Vous verriez des horreurs qu’on ne peut concevoir,

Son âge et sa beauté vous pourraient émouvoir:

Mais je hais ces moyens qui sentent l’artifice. (V. 2. 1513-19)

Evoking the image of Camille’s young and beautiful body in the king’s mind while pretending not to, Valère then complicates this emotional appeal by drawing on a further trope: the traditional belief, known as *cruentatio*, that a corpse will shed blood afresh in the presence of its killer.[[6]](#footnote-6) Of course, since this trial is concerned not with establishing Horace’s status as perpetrator, but with judging the deed itself, this imaginary appeal to Camille’s body is a gratuitous, purely emotional one. Like Chimène, Valère thus invests the corpse with a certain vitality and movement, equating its continued blood loss with the unfinished business of the killer’s impunity. Yet Valère goes one stage further still, offering to present the body to the king not as an object but as an act: ‘Ce grand et rare *exploit*’. For Valère, the physical corpse becomes strangely conflated with the bloody act that led to it. By proposing to display the corpse so that it will shed blood once again, Valère thus effectively seeks to re-enact onstage the original (unseen) confrontation between brother and sister, but this time with Camille played by her lifeless corpse and with Horace’s reputation definitively stained by the ‘inconceivable horrors’ of the murder.

*Horace* ends with one final allusion to Camille’s corpse, when the king Tulle proposes to placate her ghostly shades not by passing justice on her killer, but by burying her alongside her dead suitor Curiace (V. 3. 1775-82). Problematic as Tulle’s decision is, this ending reminds us that the posthumous treatment of characters’ bodies can constitute a crucial (if often neglected) part of the tragic narrative. Unsurprisingly, those few heroes in Corneille’s works who actually die do tend to receive appropriate burial. In *Polyeucte*, for example, the newly converted Félix decides not only to bury the two Christian martyrs Polyeucte and Néarque honourably but also to ‘Baiser leurs corps sacrés’ (V. 6. 1813), while in 1662 the renegade Roman general Sertorius will also receive noble burial from his countryman Pompée. It is of course ironic that Pompée is so attentive to ensuring Sertorius’s vengeance and burial; as Corneille’s audience would be well aware from an earlier play, Pompée’s own corpse would be treated in a far less dignified manner.

The concerns that we have seen so far about treating dead bodies with respect rarely extend to the corpses of villains. The king in *Clitandre* clearly does not find it punishment enough that the villains Géronte and Lycaste have been killed, and insists that their dead bodies must also be dragged through the mud. The assassins Métrobate and Zénon in *Nicomède*, like Perpenna’s accomplices in *Sertorius*, are torn to pieces by a baying crowd. Sometimes, it seems, death alone is insufficient; some types of villainy require redress through further violence inflicted on the villain’s corpse. The sheer gratuitousness of such physical acts inflicts an important symbolic violence on the dead, dishonouring them further through posthumous punishment.

In all these cases, the treatment of the body marks a retrospective public judgement on the dead. Elsewhere, however, such acts of violence towards corpses can reflect the villainy of the perpetrators, especially when the corpse concerned is of nobler standing. Indeed, aside from the irascible king in *Clitandre*, only outright villains or faceless mobs are morally base enough to seek to inflict further violence on anyone’s corpse. In *Médée*, we are reminded that the cruel sorceress once chopped up her own brother’s body and threw the pieces into the sea, thus compelling her father to retrieve them all in order to give him appropriate burial. A decade later Corneille will draw on a strikingly similar situation in *La Mort de Pompée*.

# *Pompée*: scenes of slaughter

*La Mort de Pompée* is a curious play in Corneille’s canon. No other tragedy places such emphasis on the corporeality of death, and yet the man on whose corpse the play centres never once sets foot onstage. Indeed, the initial mistreatment and subsequent restoration of Pompée’s corpse provide a basic narrative backbone for what is otherwise one of Corneille’s most loosely structured plots. Although Pompée’s assassination might never be fully avenged, Corneille gestures towards some form of narrative closure with the promise that his decapitated head will eventually join the cremated remains of the rest of his body.

Corpses, death, and violence permeate this play. As Louis Auchincloss observes, ‘the story teems with gruesome events: the battle in Greece, the murder of Pompée, the recovery of his body flung in the sea, the vengeance wrought by César, the attempt on César’s life, the suicide [sic] of Ptolomée – yet all must take place offstage’.[[7]](#footnote-7) The tragedy starts with about as unpleasant an evocation of violence as seventeenth-century conventions would allow, in its grisly account of the aftermath of the battle between César’s and Pompée’s troops at Pharsalus:

Quand les Dieux étonnés semblaient se partager,

Pharsale a décidé ce qu’ils n’osaient juger;

Ses fleuves teints de sang et rendus plus rapides

Par le débordement de tant de parricides,

Cet horrible débris d’Aigles, d’armes, de chars,

Sur ses champs empestés confusément épars,

Ces montagnes de morts privés d’honneurs suprêmes,

Que la Nature force à se venger eux-mêmes,

Et dont les troncs pourris exhalent dans les Vents

De quoi faire la guerre au reste des vivants,

Sont les titres affreux dont le Droit de l’épée,

Justifiant César a condamné Pompée. (I. 1. 3-14)

Two thematically key words here are ‘confusément’ and ‘débordement’. The scene, much like the meandering sentence in which it is evoked, is characterised by both excess and chaos. Broken weapons, chariots, standards, and corpses are all intermingled. Bodies are both broken down – fragmented, dismembered, and rotting – and yet merge both into each other and even into the environment more generally. Like the river which overflows with bodies and blood, the ‘mountains’ of corpses that Ptolomée evokes here offer a grotesque parody of the natural landscape. Nature and man have become gruesomely intermingled; half the Roman senate have now become no more than vulture fodder (I. 1. 58). Yet amongst this evocation of general carnage, one set of imagery will stand out for its symbolic significance. The mountains of anonymous, dismembered ‘trunks’ that have been denied burial are apparently still ‘breathing out’ infected air. The battle, it seems, is not yet over. Not only has Pompée himself survived, but there is still some unsanitary menace from the corpses he leaves behind. Yet the underlying conflict has now shifted; this is no longer a battle between the rival forces of Pompée and César, but a war being waged by the dead against the living. What remains after the Pharsalus slaughter, then, is an unstable, pullulating death that offers no sense of resolution or closure.

# Pompée’s head

Curiously, this vivid and macabre evocation of carnage is offered to us by someone who was present neither at the battle or nor at its aftermath: the Egyptian king Ptolomée. Even so, this gruesome opening tableau sets the scene quite appropriately for a play in which both the materiality and the symbolism of the corpse constantly threaten to undermine any possibility of an aesthetically satisfying narrative. The play opens with Ptolomée consulting his three advisors Photin, Achillas, and Septime, about what welcome to offer the fleeing Roman general Pompée. Afraid to anger Pompée’s powerful adversary César, who is in hot pursuit, Ptolomée finally resolves to follow the general consensus that Pompée must be killed once he arrives in the harbour of Alexandria. This act is duly carried out, without any hindrance, during the play’s first interval. Indeed, Pompée himself – as we learn in act II – even recognises the trap that is laid out for him, but goes to meet his death with a proud dignity that contrasts with the trickery and cruelty of his killers. He is stabbed numerous times by four renegade Romans and subsequently decapitated by their leader Septime.

Pompée’s decapitation, then, is not integral to his murder; rather, it is a further act of violence conducted against his corpse. If his murder is an indictment of the cynicism and cowardice of the king who ordered it, then the brutal posthumous treatment of his corpse marks a further – symbolic but no less shocking – offence. Gratuitous as it is, Pompée’s decapitation is nonetheless laden with meaning, and it swiftly evokes, and enters, a complex symbolic system of exchange. The head is an important and multivalent symbol within seventeenth-century French tragedy. Attached to a living (personal or political) body, the head typically implies reason, judgement, control and order – all things duly inverted once head and body are sundered. The decapitated head often serves as a vivid shorthand both for an individual’s death and for more general chaos – as, for example, in Cinna’s image of the carnage of the Roman civil wars:

Le fils tout dégouttant du meurtre de son père,

Et sa tête à la main demandant son salaire. (I. 3. 201-02)

Even when no literal decapitation is expected, many tragic characters speak of wanting the ‘head’ of an enemy or rival. For example, Emilie explicitly offers herself up as the prize for the emperor Auguste’s death, announcing that

S’il [Cinna] me veut posséder, Auguste doit périr:

Sa tête est le seul prix dont il peut m’acquérir. (I. 2. 55-56)

In *Le Cid*,too, Chimène proclaims herself the ‘conquête’ of whichever cavalier brings her Rodrigue’s head (IV. 5. 1412). As this repeated lexis of ‘salaire’, ‘conquête’, and ‘prix’ implies, the intended victim’s head can thus form part of a mercenary exchange of bodies and services. This exchange can be truly vilifying; in *Héraclius* (1647), the emperor’s daughter Pulchérie defiantly tells the tyrant Phocas that she will offer herself to ‘quiconque à mes pieds apportera ta tête’, even if this is ‘l’esclave le plus vil qu’on puisse imaginer’ (III. 3. 1049). This is one of very few uses of the word ‘vil’ across Corneille’s complete tragic corpus.[[8]](#footnote-8) Interestingly, one of the few other uses occurs precisely in *Pompée*, when Ptolomée himself evokes the ‘sang abject et vil’ of two of the conspirators involved in Pompée’s assassination (IV. 2. 1224).

In most of these cases, then, the head is mere synecdoche for the victim’s death or dead body. Chimène might ask for Rodrigue’s head, but she does not literally expect his decapitation.[[9]](#footnote-9) In *Pompée*, however, this metaphor is brutally and needlessly literalised. Indeed, Pompée’s head proves to be doubly gratuitous because its recipient César has not (unlike Chimène, Emilie, and Pulchérie) even asked for it; Pompée is hoping to buy César’s goodwill in advance, by sparing him the need for further warfare. Adding insult to injury, Ptolomée’s henchmen present themselves as heroic warriors, and their ignoble assassination as the glorious culmination of César’s war against his rival. Pompée’s head is impaled on a lance and borne aloft as though it were, in the observer Achorée’s words, ‘un grand trophée après de grands combats’ (II. 2. 532). Achorée’s hollowly ironic repetition of ‘grand’ alerts us to the grotesque discrepancy between the assassins’ dishonourable behaviour and the heroic image they hope to present. The phrase ‘grands combats’ rings still more hollowly, of course, when we recall the horrific images of the slaughter at Pharsalus on which the play started.

The Egyptian crowds, through whom the head is carried, are not fooled by this veneer of glory; indeed, their response only underscores the true horror of the situation:

Cependant Achillas porte au Roi sa conquête,

Tout le Peuple tremblant en détourne la tête,

Un effroi général offre à l’un sous ses pas

Des abîmes ouverts pour venger ce trépas,

L’autre entend le tonnerre, et chacun se figure

Un désordre soudain de toute la Nature,

Tant l’excès du forfait troublant leurs jugements

Présente à leur terreur l’excès des châtiments. (II. 2. 549-56)

For the superstitious Egyptians, the head seems to herald divine wrath. Whereas in some of Corneille’s plays, the masses themselves are capable of base and brutal acts, here the general response throws into relief the cruelty of the king’s henchmen.

One of the few people not to be struck by horror at Pompée’s head is the otherwise cowardly king Ptolomée himself. Breaking with his historical sources, Corneille has Ptolomée present César with the head in person, rather than through an intermediary named Theodotus. We do not see this scene onstage, of course; it is recounted to us by the equerry Achorée, who confesses his own deep shame at witnessing such ‘bassesse’ from his king (III. 1. 750). Ptolomée boasts to César that he will place both Pompée and his wife Cornélie ‘en vos mains’ (III. 1. 758). Although there is nothing to indicate yet that this language is anything more than metaphorical, Ptolomée’s triumphant revelation of Pompée’s head suddenly makes this apparently ‘dead’ metaphor into a grotesquely vivid and literal prospect.

Achorée’s description of what Charmion ironically calls ‘ce beau présent’ (III. 1. 731) again stresses its horrific appearance. Although the unity of time mercifully prevents Pompée’s head from undergoing the same decomposition that it must have done historically, Corneille still manages to convey some sense of horror in the object itself:

Il semble qu’à parler encore elle s’apprête,

Qu’à ce nouvel affront un reste de chaleur

En sanglots mal formés exhale sa douleur.

Sa bouche encore ouverte et sa vue égarée

Rappellent sa grande âme à peine séparée,

Et son courroux mourant fait un dernier effort

Pour reprocher aux dieux sa défaite et sa mort. (III. 1. 762-68)

Although Plutarch’s account gives no description of the head itself,[[10]](#footnote-10) Corneille treats us to this concise but powerfully allusive portrait of the dead statesman’s expression. Here, Pompée’s head appears eerily alive and ready to speak. Strikingly, however, Pompée’s facial expression in death contrasts markedly with his attitude at the time of his assassination. The physical mutilation of his corpse seems to have robbed him, retrospectively, of his earlier moral integrity. During his assassination, Pompée had haughtily refused even to look heavenward, but now his decapitated head’s ‘vue égarée’ hints at a blasphemous reproach to the gods. His final ‘soupir illustre’ (II. 2. 526) has now been replaced by the head’s ‘sanglots mal formés’, which seem to ‘exhale’ his suffering just as the dismembered corpses of Pharsalus had ‘exhaled’ noxious gases. Pompée’s expression is not frozen at the moment of his noble death, then, but has evolved to reflect these new ‘affronts’ conducted against his corpse. Pompée’s own narrative, it seems, is not over with his death.

# ‘Souls of mud’: vile advisors

Yet for all the horror of Pompée’s head, the overall sense that Corneille evokes here is the indignity and baseness of those involved in the assassination. To some extent, of course, this displacement of horror from the corpse to the killer is already implicit in Plutarch’s account; we are told that, on witnessing the head, Caesar treated its bearer Theodotus ‘like a polluted murderer and turned away’ (p. 296). In Corneille’s play, those responsible for Pompée’s death – Ptolomée, his corrupt advisors, and the assassins themselves – seem united above all by their incapacity to recognise the horror of their deeds. Even the craven king Ptolomée seems to show more fear of César than horror or remorse at his actions. Proving himself far nobler than his king, Achorée confesses feeling deep shame at Ptolomée’s ignoble behaviour during this scene:

Sa frayeur a paru sous sa fausse allégresse,

Toutes ses actions ont senti la bassesse,

J’en ai rougi moi-même, et me suis plaint à moi

De voir là Ptolomée, et n’y voir point de Roi (III. 1. 749-52)

Achorée’s grievances here echo a formulation used earlier by Ptolomée’s sister Cléopâtre, who blames the king for falling under the sway of his lowly advisors:

Le Roi l’eût secouru, mais Photin l’assassine,

Il croit cette âme basse et se montre sans foi,

Mais s’il croyait la sienne, il agirait en Roi. (II. 1. 378-80)

Although the word ‘vil’ occurs only once in the play, Ptolomée’s advisors are evoked throughout this play in terms that indicate their baseness and vileness. After Pompée’s death, Achorée refers to the ringleader as ‘l’infâme Septime’ (II. 2. 545). Later on, Cléopâtre will openly equate such advisors’ moral standing with their lowly social position, claiming that ‘Ainsi que la naissance ils ont les esprits bas’ (IV. 2. 1195). And even though Corneille promotes Photin from his historical role as court eunuch (another vile, mutilated body, this time living) to Chief Counsellor of Egypt, the dramatist takes pains to stress his moral baseness. It is Photin whom Cléopâtre singles out as reflecting the moral depravity of Ptolomée’s counsellors, when she exclaims

Je ne le vois que trop, Photin et ses pareils

Vous ont empoisonné de leurs lâches conseils:

Ces âmes que le Ciel ne forma que de boue… (I. 3. 263-65)

Importantly, though, despite Cléopâtre’s claims, social standing and moral sense do not always go hand in hand in this play. For a start, we can clearly see a gulf forming between Ptolomée the man and his kingly role. By act III it seems that Ptolomée has been fully corrupted by the baseness of his advisors. All the king’s actions, claims Achorée, now expose his ‘bassesse’ (III. 1. 750). As Cléopâtre suggests in her allusion to the advisors’ ‘poisonous’ advice, villainy and perfidy are strangely contagious. Indeed, by act V, the very coastline of Alexandria has become ‘cette infâme rive’, metonymically corrupted by the brutal acts that took place there (V. 1. 1481).

Even the heroic César himself briefly feels the lure of perfidy. Unlike his historical counterpart, he experiences a moment of ‘maligne joie’ on seeing his rival’s head (III. 1. 775); however, he quickly masters himself, and castigates Ptolomée for daring to put a Roman citizen to death. So although Pompée’s head might strike us as vile and unpleasant, for Corneille it serves more as a moral touchstone for the baseness or heroism of the other characters. In this sense it is striking that Corneille entrusts the play’s four great narrative accounts of offstage violence to two people: the cowardly king Pompée and the unexpectedly noble servant Achorée. Ptolomée, who can evoke the unseen Pharsalus slaughter for us so vividly without having been present, proves strangely unmoved by the sight of a human head decapitated on his very orders. His underling Achorée, on the other hand, proves to be a dignified and sensitive eye-witness of the play’s three other great offstage scenes of violence: Pompée’s murder, the presentation of his head, and – finally – Ptolomée’s own death.

# Pompée’s body and ashes

If Pompée’s head functions as a moral touchstone for the other characters, something similar is true of the rest of his mutilated corpse as well. Once the head is cut off and borne aloft heroically, the rest of Pompée’s body is dumped unceremoniously into the sea:

On descend et, pour comble à sa noire aventure,

On donne à ce Héros la Mer pour sépulture,

Et le tronc sous les flots roule dorénavant

Au gré de la Fortune, et de l’Onde, et du Vent. (II. 2. 533-36)

Scandalously, Pompée’s mutilated ‘trunk’ is not only deprived of appropriate burial, but also left to the vagaries of fortune, via the natural forces of the wind and sea. Again, Corneille subtly adapts Plutarch’s account. According to Plutarch, the corpse was not only thrown into the sea as ‘a ghastly spectacle for anyone to see who wanted to’, but even attracted onlookers who took some time to have ‘their fill of the sight’ (p. 295); preferring to restrict the Alexandrian onlookers’ emotional palette to sheer horror, Corneille tactfully edits out of his account their ghoulish fascination with the headless corpse.

Yet while Pompée’s head briefly tempts even César towards moral baseness, Pompée’s body prompts unexpectedly honourable behaviour in one of his men. Rising above his ‘âme servile’, Pompée’s freedman Philippe nobly resolves to retrieve the body – ‘ce dépôt précieux’ – to give it what meagre burial he can:

Philippe d’autre part, montrant sur le rivage

Dans une âme servile un généreux courage,

Examine d’un œil et d’un soin curieux

Où les vagues rendront ce dépôt précieux,

Pour lui rendre, s’il peut, ce qu’aux Morts on doit rendre,

Dans quelque Urne chétive en ramasser la cendre,

Et d’un peu de poussière élever un tombeau

A celui qui du Monde eut le sort le plus beau. (II. 2. 557-64)

This brief passage repeatedly draws on the bathetic contrast between the grandeur of the dead hero and the fate of his corpse. Pompée’s corpse is ‘ce dépôt précieux’, but stands to be commemorated only with ‘quelque urne chétive’ and ‘un peu de poussière’.

We next learn about Pompée’s corpse at the start of act V, when Philippe recounts to the widow Cornélie how he retrieved the body. Despite having been left to the mercy of chance and the elements, the corpse is eventually brought near enough to the shore for Philippe to retrieve it. Yet the sea is not entirely forthcoming with Pompée’s body, but rather buffets it back and forth with a strange sense of playful anger:

…la vague en courroux semblait prendre plaisir

A feindre de le rendre, et puis s’en ressaisir. (V. 1. 1491-92)

Even when his body is retrieved, Pompée’s fate is still apparently dictated by chance. Philippe constructs a makeshift pyre out of a nearby shipwreck: ‘Je lui dresse un bûcher à la hâte, et sans art, /Tel que je pus sur l’heure, et qu’il plut au hasard’ (V. 1. 1495-96). Chance also works in Pompée’s favour when an old Roman, Cordus, happens to pass by and recognise the headless body; although Philippe initially wishes only to give his master decent burial, Cordus informs him that César has sworn vengeance on the attackers and that Philippe can safely return the ashes to Pompée’s widow.

Yet although the retrieval of Pompée’s corpse is historically attested, Corneille offers scattered clues that the gods might be showing some belated respect for the hero, steering chance events to guide his corpse back, eventually, to his widow. Similarly, by specifying that the driftwood used for the pyre comes from a shipwreck – ‘le débris d’un naufrage’ (V. 1. 1494) – Corneille also gestures forwards to the fate of Ptolomée, who within a few scenes will try to escape humiliation and capture by César but drown when his overloaded boat capsizes. Revealingly, the sea that has just eventually returned Pompée’s body will simply swallow up the cowardly king who had commanded his death. As Serge Doubrovsky suggests, Ptolomée’s fate reflects his essential mediocrity: ‘Il retombe dans la “foule”, dans la condition commune, à laquelle le héros […] sait que sa vocation est d’échapper’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Unlike Pompée’s body, which the sea conveniently washes up for his servant, Ptolomée’s corpse will be lost forever. In contrast, Pompée’s body is not only washed up but – thanks to the notoriety of the assassination and the ‘triste marque’ of the neck stump (V. 1. 1502) – now proves just as recognisable as his decapitated head. Unlike Ptolomée, who will retain his bodily integrity but die amongst faceless hordes, Pompée is cut into two pieces, both of which stand as permanent markers of his identity and grandeur.

Although we never see Pompée onstage, the urn containing his ashes is brought onstage at the start of act V by his grieving widow Cornélie. Unlike the head, which is passed between villains before being presented to César, the ashes are treated with respect by all who encounter them. Cornélie refers to her husband’s ashes as the ‘reste du grand Pompée’ (V. 1. 1460), and her formulation is echoed in turn by Philippe (‘ces restes d’un Héros’, V. 1. 1516), César (‘restes d’un demi-dieu’, V. 1. 1527), and Cléopâtre (‘cendres d’un Héros’, V. 2. 1559). Such evocations of Pompée as hero or demigod serve to set him in another implicit chiasmus with the weak king Ptolomée: while Pompée’s charred remains continue to evoke his former grandeur to all witnesses, Ptolomée’s own moral baseness has – as we recall – made him unrecognisable as a king.

Importantly, Pompée’s urn is first brought to his rival César before being passed on to his widow. Indeed, his ashes become something of a battleground between the two. César, we learn, treats the urn with a display of magnanimous respect, kissing it and swearing vengeance on Pompée’s killers, before ordering that the ashes be restored to Cornélie. As I mentioned earlier, the decapitation and reunion of Pompée’s corpse offers a rudimentary narrative structure to the play. César certainly hopes that his respectful treatment of Pompée’s body will put an end to this particular episode. When he is presented with the ashes, César is keen to take symbolic control of the situation, asking Philippe to present them to Cornélie as ‘ce don que je lui fais’ (V. 1. 1532). He promises, too, to return Pompée’s head to Cornélie, so that it can be cremated and ceremoniously reunited with his other ashes. César hopes that this act, conducted jointly by Pompée’s rival and his widow, will appease the dead hero’s ghostly shades and bring reconciliation between himself and Cornélie (V. 4. 1683-86). Yet whether or not Pompée’s shades are satisfied, Cornélie herself refuses to be placated by such obsequies. Such rites, and even the deaths of those responsible for Pompée’s assassination, do not resolve the situation for her. While acknowledging the greatness of her rival, she decides to take the ashes with her to Africa and find some way to avenge herself on César, the beneficiary of the killing.

# Conclusion

Corneille is not one for nice, neat resolutions, and I would not want to mutilate or mangle his corpus by imposing one Procrustean reading onto this text. Yet Corneille does seem to echo – or, rather, anticipate – Bossuet’s suggestion that the corpse can trouble both our sensibilities and our linguistic categories. As the gruesome account of Pharsalus implies, dead bodies can forfeit their identity and physical integrity – the anonymous dead here are unstable entities, being reabsorbed (by vultures and rivers) into the natural environment. Yet even moving away from such visceral scenes of anonymous carnage, Pompée’s own readily identifiable corpse also seems to linger on an uncanny borderline between life and death. His head and his body gesture backwards, both to the moment of his death and yet also, beyond that, to a glorious and heroic life that contrasts with its pitiful current state. Gruesome as a decapitated head and a headless corpse might be, what they evoke is the heroic past, not the degraded present. His corpse certainly evokes a sense of vileness, but this vileness is effectively displaced onto those responsible for his death in the first place, those who prove too base to recognise the horror of their deeds. Ptolomée refers to the ‘abject and vile blood’ of his advisors, and by the end of the play this vile blood has been shed (and abjected) in different ways: Photin is executed, Septime stabs himself, and Achillas dies in battle, defending his master. Yet neither their bloodshed nor the sea’s swallowing of Ptolomée is enough, it seems, to set Pompée’s spirit to rest. In this respect it is perhaps Cléopâtre’s image of their ‘âmes […] de boue’ that lingers longest. Being lowly and base from birth, Photin and his vile companions emerge, she implies, from the same formless, base matter that has elsewhere swallowed up the countless victims of Pharsalus – and with which, morally speaking, they can engulf even their king long before his own body is swallowed up by the sea. Ironically, then, although Ptolomée dies with his body physically intact, it is the body of Pompée – unseen, brutalised and mutilated as it is – that stands as the play’s most potent symbol of integrity.

1. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, in *Sermon sur la mort et autres sermons* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1970), p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: essai sur l’abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980). As Kristeva puts it, the corpse, as symbol of abjection, ‘m’*indiqu*[*e*] ce que j’écarte en permanence pour vivre’ (p. 11).  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jean Racine, *Athalie* (I. 1. 118), in *Œuvres completes*, ed. by Georges Forestier, 2 vols., i *Théatre-Poésie* (Paris: Pleiade, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pierre Corneille, *Le Cid* (II. 7. 667-70)., in *Œuvres completes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 3 vols (Paris: Pleiade, 1980-87), i (1980). All subsequent references to Corneille’s plays will be to this edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Scudéry, ‘Observations sur *le Cid*’, pp. 367-431, in Jean-Marc Civardi, *La Querelle du ‘Cid’ (1637-1638)* (Paris: Champion, 2004), p. 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Philippe Ariès, *L’Homme devant la mort*, vol. 2: *La mort ensauvagée* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Louis Auchincloss, *‘La Gloire’: The Roman Empire of Corneille and Racine* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Charles Muller claims there are a total of five uses of ‘vil’ in Corneille’s tragedies, but does not reference them. See *Étude de statistique lexicale: le vocabulaire du théâtre de Pierre Corneille* (Paris: Larousse, 1967), p. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We might note that in Guillén de Castro’s source text for *Le Cid*, *Las mocedades del Cid*, Rodrigo fulfils Ximena’s demand for his head by offering it to her himself, albeit still attached to his living body. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Plutarch, *Roman Lives*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Serge Doubrovsky, *Corneille et la dialectique du héros* (Paris : Gallimard, 1963), p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)