[Following the reviewer’s suggestion, I have made a brief reference to the famous ‘Je ne dois qu’à moi seul…’ line in a footnote.]

**Posthumous Glory and the Frustrated Death-Wish in Corneille’s *Horace***

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*Abstract*

This article explores the complex relationship between fame, glory, and death through the case of Corneille’s tragedy *Horace* (1640). Horace eagerly welcomes the chance to fight – and probably die – in a brutal combat against his brothers-in-law, believing that he is being offered a unique opportunity to show his valour and fortitude to his contemporaries and to secure his glorious posthumous ‘immortality’. Yet, having emerged triumphant, Horace proves to be strangely ill at ease with a life of fame. He recognizes that public acclaim is precarious, and that he may never again be offered the chance to match his moment of glory. Horace fears a post-heroic life of compromise; as he later explains, he would rather have died straight after the combat so as to preserve his glory forever in a single act. Glory, he learns, involves a complex interaction between the hero, his dazzled and expectant public, and a wilful fate that may never again allow him the opportunity to prove his heroism. By outliving his single moment of glory, Horace thus leaves his reputation at the mercy of posterity – a posterity in which Corneille’s tragedy plays its own complex role, and in which survival proves more tragic than death.

*Keywords*

Posterity, Glory, Death, Combat, Survival, Reputation, Rome

# *Introduction*

As many of the other articles in this volume demonstrate, one’s posthumous reputation typically rests on the foundations of one’s reputation while alive. Those who are commemorated and celebrated when dead are, for the most part, those who have enjoyed celebrity during their lifetimes as well. Of course, this is not always the case; history is dotted with occasional Van Gogh-like figures, whose posthumous renown vastly overshadows any fame they enjoyed during their lifetime. Indeed, it is surely in the military arena – where death is a constant risk – that posthumous renown has been promised most insistently to those who have had no particular stake on fame while alive. When Shakespeare’s Henry V assures his troops on the eve of Agincourt that their deeds will be remembered ‘From this day to the ending of the world’,[[1]](#footnote-1) he imagines a perspective so far in the future that any distinction between nobleman and nonentity, or even between those who survive the battle and those who fall in it, will have become irrelevant. Henry’s words here chime with what Leo Braudy claims about military glory in the Homeric tradition, too: that the honour accrued in warfare ‘frees its possessor from human time’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Noble military exploits apparently offer one way to make and secure one’s ‘name’ – transforming one from a mortal, embodied individual into an abstract, seemingly timeless or immortal, signifier.

From the individual warrior’s perspective, however, imaginatively leaping ahead to such a distant, ‘always already’ posthumous perspective beyond human time risks conflating two quite different outcomes of the upcoming battle: one’s actual survival or death. Indeed, in some ways the metaphorical immortality that military glory supposedly confers is better suited to those who fall in battle than to those who survive and emerge triumphant. Accordingly, this article explores the vagaries and elusiveness of heroic glory by focusing on a warrior who, having been plucked out of apparent obscurity by a moment of military glory, proves to be strangely ill at ease with the prospect of a life of fame. As I shall suggest, the eponymous hero of Corneille’s second tragedy, *Horace* (1640), has a curious and problematic conception of glory that is intricately bound up with his own death. While Horace’s brutal ‘honour killing’ of his sister Camille, and the lenient judgement it receives from the king Tulle, are rightly notorious, this article will focus not on Horace the murderer, but on Horace in his own confrontation with death. Horace faces death at two significant moments during the play – once in combat with the Curiace brothers, and then again when he is tried for the capital crime of murdering his sister. As we shall see, in both cases Horace actively seeks – or so he claims – to embrace the possibility of death, precisely in the hope of securing his posthumous reputation. Yet although Horace thus effectively yearns to be witnessed from a solidly posthumous perspective, both times he is frustrated of this satisfaction, and cheated of the glorious death and posthumous renown that he seeks.

# *Forbidding mourning*

Unlike his friend and opponent Curiace, Horace is already under the shadow of death from his very first appearance onstage, at the start of act II. As swiftly becomes clear, Horace and his two brothers have been chosen to represent the Roman side in the forthcoming combat. As several critics have noted, the discussion between Horace and Curiace here establishes a number of differences between the two. Many, perhaps unsurprisingly, have regarded Curiace as the weaker figure, and have read anticipations of his own forthcoming defeat into their conversation. For Serge Doubrovsky, for example, Curiace is scarcely ‘un adversaire à la taille d’Horace’.[[3]](#footnote-3) John D. Lyons, too, argues that Curiace’s ‘nostalgia’ – his professed envy of those who have already fallen in battle – ‘already marks him as a dead man’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet we should not let these thematic anticipations of Curiace’s upcoming defeat distract us from how Corneille subtly but insistently establishes him as both the more experienced and the more renowned of the combatants. Not only is Curiace of nobler birth than Horace – he is a ‘Gentilhomme’ rather than a mere ‘Chevalier’[[5]](#footnote-5) – but he has also already secured, if we are to believe Camille in scene 5, a solid military reputation. Attempting to dissuade him from the terrible battle, Camille reassures Curiace that ‘Tu n’es que trop fameux par tes autres exploits’ (II. 5. 545), and even that ‘Ton nom ne peut plus croître, il ne lui manque rien’ (II. 5. 549).

 In comparison with such superlatives, Curiace’s brief indication that Horace has demonstrated his own valour with ‘éclat’ (II. 1. 365) seems somewhat paltry. Indeed, there is little – beyond the choice of the Horace brothers as Rome’s champions in the first place – to indicate that Horace and his family are already famous. Curiace’s greater experience and fame might thus subtly colour our reading of his rather fulsome praise of Horace, and his assurances that the Alban cause is as good as lost. In any case, Curiace insists that Horace’s family’s name will be honoured forever:

Ce choix pouvait combler trois familles de gloire,

Consacrer hautement leurs noms à la mémoire;

Oui, l’honneur que reçoit la vôtre par ce choix

En pouvait à bon titre immortaliser trois… (II. 1. 355-58)

Although the battle thus stands to make the Horace family’s name, Curiace does not yet directly address the possibility that this will come at the cost of the Horace brothers’ lives; on the contrary, he suggests that Alba will doubtless fall to Rome. Instead, it is Horace who first articulates the prospect of his own death. He first modestly blames Rome for having made such a poor choice, but reasons that his sheer readiness to die – what he calls a ‘noble désespoir’ (II. 1. 386) – might just give him the edge in combat. At the very least, he reasons, he – unlike the swathes of his civilian countrymen – will never live to see Alba triumph: ‘Rome, quoi qu’il en soit, ne sera point Sujette, /Que mes derniers soupirs n’assurent ma défaite’ (II. 1. 387-88). If he should die, he implies, then death will at least spare him the shame of subservience to a foreign power, and thus preserve his core identity as a free Roman.

Interestingly, it is only now that Horace entertains the possibility of his own death that Curiace allows himself to address this possibility explicitly as well. Abandoning his former assurances that Rome will triumph, Curiace now announces that the two alternatives – the loss of his liberty as an Alban or the death of his friend – would be equally distressing for him. Horace, in turn, is aghast at the idea that Curiace would be saddened by the latter alternative:

Quoi! vous me pleureriez mourant pour mon pays!

Pour un cœur généreux ce trépas a des charmes,

La gloire qui le suit ne souffre point de larmes,

Et je le recevrais en bénissant mon sort,

Si Rome et tout l’Etat perdaient moins en ma mort. (II. 1. 398-402)

Horace positively welcomes the prospect of dying while fighting valiantly for his nation. Glory, he implies, follows such a death automatically, and entirely obviates the need for tears. Indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere, shedding such tears (at least over an enemy) might even be criminal; Horace will later kill his sister precisely for ‘daring to grieve’ Curiace, even in the privacy of the family home.[[6]](#footnote-6) When contemplating his own possible death, Horace’s only regret is that it will probably subjugate Rome to Alban control. Revealingly, however, even here Horace seems to assume that a new Alban world-order would not deprive him of his own personal posthumous renown. Perhaps this is unsurprising, since Corneille presents Alba throughout more as a mirror image or alter ego of Rome than as a deadly foreign enemy or ‘Other’[[7]](#footnote-7); Horace certainly trusts that a certain shared honour and mutual respect between the two nations will ensure that those who give their lives for the other side will nonetheless be given their posthumous due. As we shall see shortly, although Alba’s defeat means that we never get to see how Alba would have treated Horace and his brothers, Rome’s attitude towards its own slain enemies will shortly put the lie to Horace’s assumption here.

 Horace’s relish at the prospect of fighting, and even dying, for his country reaches new, perverse heights in the next scene, when news emerges that Alba has chosen as its fighters the three Curiace brothers themselves. Far from being dismayed that the two tightly-bound families are now deadly enemies, Horace regards their predicament as a sign that fate has singled them out for their virtue. Although even the simplest soldier, he insists, would welcome the chance to die for his country in battle against strangers or enemies, few would even dare to envy the situation that has befallen the Horace and Curiace brothers:

Combattre un ennemi pour le salut de tous,

Et contre un inconnu s’exposer seul aux coups,

D’une simple vertu c’est l’effet ordinaire,

Mille déjà l’ont fait, mille pourraient le faire.

Mourir pour le pays est un si digne sort,

Qu’on briguerait en foule une si belle mort.

Mais vouloir au Public immoler ce qu’on aime,

S’attacher au combat contre un autre soi-même,

Attaquer un parti qui prend pour défenseur

Le frère d’une femme et l’Amant d’une sœur,

Et rompant tous ces nœuds, s’armer pour la Patrie

Contre un sang qu’on voudrait racheter de sa vie,

Une telle vertu n’appartenait qu’à nous,

L’éclat de son grand nom lui fait peu de jaloux,

Et peu d’hommes au cœur l’ont assez imprimée,

Pour oser aspirer à tant de Renommée. (II. 3. 437-52)

Of course, this situation – of being set in a life-and-death struggle against a close friend or relative – is one of the archetypal tragic configurations outlined in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Indeed, Horace’s words here, and especially his first lines, heavily echo the passage of the *Poetics* in which Aristotle explicitly discounts as untragic plots in which deadly designs are enacted between those who feel only enmity or indifference towards each other. As Aristotle puts it, ‘if it is a case of two enemies, this arouses no particular pity’, and ‘the same is true in the case when people are indifferent to each other’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Strikingly, however, Horace seems not to recognize his situation as tragic, beyond a brief and somewhat flat acknowledgement that ‘notre malheur est grand’ (II. 3. 489). Rather, he embraces his terrible fate with relish as a sign of divine recognition. The ‘joie’ and ‘allégresse’ (II. 3. 492; 499) with which he claims to accept the combat are brief, personal foretastes of the impersonal immortality the battle promises for him. Fate itself, he claims, has singled out the six men for a brutally extreme test in order to let them display their heroism to the world:

Le Sort qui de l’honneur nous ouvre la barrière

Offre à notre constance une illustre matière.

Il épuise sa force à former un malheur,

Pour mieux se mesurer avec notre valeur,

Et comme il voit en nous des âmes peu communes,

Hors de l’ordre commun il nous fait des fortunes. (II. 3. 431-36)

From Horace’s perspective, the warriors are set in combat not merely against one another, but also, more importantly, against a Fate that is exhausting its own resources in order to test their constancy and resolve. Horace thus reconfigures the actual, literal battle as a more primal, symbolic one – a battle in which the question of who falls and who survives is far less important than that of how valiantly each warrior struggles against Fate itself, and how worthy they prove themselves of posthumous recognition. In a sense, Horace is following and amplifying the logic that had already underpinned his assumption that an Alban victory would not compromise his posthumous glory. Although Horace clearly hopes to see Rome victorious, in both cases he imagines being contemplated from a superior vantage point that will see beyond such trivialities as who lives and who dies.

 The more seasoned soldier Curiace, however, is less idealistic and more down-to-earth in his response. He concedes that the fighters stand to achieve eternal glory – ‘Il est vrai que nos noms ne sauraient plus périr’ (II. 3. 453)[[9]](#footnote-9) – but admits that the human cost of such immortality makes the obscurity of anonymity appear preferable:

Peu, même des grands cœurs, tireraient vanité

D’aller par ce chemin à l’immortalité:

A quelque prix qu’on mette une telle fumée,

L’obscurité vaut mieux que tant de Renommée. (II. 3. 457-60)

For the first time in the play, Curiace proposes a new, less heroic, perspective on renown and fame. To highlight this shift, Curiace chooses to end this part of his speech by repeating a rhyme on which Horace had closed his previous speech just eight lines earlier. Yet although Curiace ends a rhyming couplet with the same keyword as Horace, ‘renommée’, his choice of rhyme-word is crucially different. Whereas Horace had rhymed ‘renommée’ with ‘imprimée’, associating renown with the deep and indelible ‘impression’ of virtue onto the combatants’ hearts, Curiace equates it with the flimsy transience of smoke (‘fumée’). Although Horace does not respond to this new association at this point, by the end of the play Curiace’s suggestions about the flimsiness of reputation will apparently have taken root.

 Given his somewhat sceptical attitude here, it is striking that Curiace is – with one brief exception – the only character in the play to speak of the ‘immortality’ that this battle promises. Furthermore, in all but one case, Curiace associates this immortality with Horace rather than with himself. As we saw, he first claims that Rome’s choice could easily have ‘immortalized’ three houses rather than just one, and then rejects Horace’s zeal to achieve immortality by such brutal means. Curiace also begs his friend to consider the gulf between what he personally stands to gain by dying in battle and what his friends will lose:

A vos amis pourtant permettez de le craindre;

Dans un si beau trépas ils sont les seuls à plaindre:

La gloire en est pour vous, et la perte pour eux;

Il vous fait immortel, et les rend malheureux… (II. 1. 403-06)

Through Curiace’s threefold repetition of ‘immortel’ and its cognates, Corneille thus seems to establish Curiace as the guarantor of Horace’s future immortality. There is a double irony here. Most obviously, of course, Curiace’s paradoxical role means that any victory on Horace’s part can only ever be a Pyrrhic one; by its very nature, killing Curiace will rob Horace of the one person who promises to recognize the immortality of his name. Accordingly, indeed, once Curiace is dead the vocabulary of immortality all but disappears from the play.

 A further irony emerges, however, when we read the play’s other two allusions to immortality against each other. Curiace’s one allusion to the immortality that he himself stands to gain in the combat also speaks volumes. When Camille begs him not to fight, Curiace haughtily rejects the idea of passing up the honour of combat. He exclaims ‘Que je souffre à mes yeux qu’on ceigne une autre tête /Des lauriers immortels que la gloire m’apprête […]!’ (II. 5. 551-52). On the face of it, Curiace is here refusing to do the cowardly thing by living on as a mere observer of another’s glory. Yet, as his allusion here to ‘laurels’ – the symbol of victory – implies, the immortality that he envisages for himself is quite different from that which he sees awaiting Horace. Whereas his earlier formulations left the battle’s outcome tactfully open, Curiace’s anticipated ‘lauriers immortels’ clearly reflect his private confidence that he will indeed emerge victorious. Ironically, of course, Curiace’s confidence in his own victory will prove ill-founded, and Corneille will compound this irony with the play’s one remaining reference to immortality, when Old Horace speaks in turn of the ‘lauriers immortels’ that now bedeck Horace’s head (V. 3. 1678).

# *Mourning glory and the grateful dead*

In act II, the upcoming battle apparently promises to secure the renown of all the combatants, regardless of whether they triumph or die. By the end of the play, however, immortality has become the attribute of the victorious survivor, rather than of the dead. Yet this ‘immortality’ proves to be curiously fragile, and indeed strangely incompatible with Horace’s literal survival. Before the battle, as we have seen, Horace actively welcomes the prospect of dying for his nation, and insists that the glory that follows his death is incompatible with tears. Horace is not the only Roman to express such sentiments. When, midway through the battle, his father, Old Horace, learns that two of his sons have died, he tells his distressed daughter Camille:

Tout beau, ne les pleurez pas tous,

Deux jouissent d’un sort dont leur père est jaloux.

Que des plus nobles fleurs leur tombe soit couverte,

La gloire de leur mort m’a payé de leur perte… (III. 1009-12)

As Old Horace suggests, he is ‘jealous’ of his sons’ fate. Death in honourable combat is a fate to be prized, and one of which Old Horace (like Don Diègue in Corneille’s previous play) has been deprived. Accordingly, he promises them the noblest of burials. Old Horace’s vocabulary of ‘payment’ here is particularly striking. Like his son, he implies that it is not necessary to ‘repay’ noble deaths with tears, since their accrued glory has, in effect, already settled the account. Tears, indeed, are due only when honour – something far more important than life – has been forfeited. Mistakenly believing that his remaining son has fled the battlefield after his brothers’ deaths, Old Horace insists that this shameful cowardice is what deserves tears:

Pleurez l’autre, pleurez l’irréparable affront

Que sa fuite honteuse imprime à notre front,

Pleurez le déshonneur de toute notre race,

Et l’opprobre éternel qu’il laisse au nom d’Horace. (III. 1017-20)

Horace’s supposed cowardice casts a permanent shame onto his family name – a shame so strong that it seems even to override the glory only just won by the two dead brothers. In fact, the permanence of this shameful stain contrasts sharply with the surprising ease with which the supposedly glorious Roman and Alban dead are actually forgotten. Even when Old Horace’s misunderstanding has been cleared up and he realizes that his son has saved Rome, the noble dead scarcely seem to feature in his thoughts. Paradoxically, the Roman sense that a heroic death is automatically compensated for by immediate glory can lead, in practice, to a curious indifference towards the dead. Before the men go off to fight, Horace gives his sister Camille the emotionally unrealistic, and even logically impossible, command: ‘après le combat ne pensez plus au mort’ (II. 4. 530). In a perverse paradox, killing thus appears almost as a victimless crime, since by definition its victim no longer exists. Accordingly, Horace explains, should Curiace win, Camille must receive him not ‘en meurtrier d’un frère’ – that is, in some continued relationship to the dead – but simply ‘en homme d’honneur qui fait ce qu’il doit faire’ (II. 4. 519-20). The dead, it seems, have no further claim on the living, who must sunder all affective bonds to those lost.

 As I have suggested elsewhere, the Roman honour code in *Horace* reflects a strangely mathematical balance between profit and loss that cancels out any need to grieve the dead.[[10]](#footnote-10) In fact, the male Romans’ attitude towards those lost in this battle suggests that the same logic also prevents survivors from honouring or commemorating the dead in any substantial way. As Old Horace explains to Sabine in the final act, the shades of those who have died nobly are at peace and require no further reprisals in this life. If she consults the ‘Mânes généreux’ of her brothers, he explains, she will find that they are content to have died: ‘Ils sont morts mais pour Albe, et s’en tiennent heureux’ (V. 3. 1638). Only Sabine’s continued tears and distress at the situation, he continues, threaten to disturb them; lamenting the dead impugns their glory. A noble death, it seems, is far more glorious in anticipation than it proves to be in practice. For all the discussions and anticipations of immortality in the first half of the play, the supposedly glorious dead actually fall into near-oblivion. The living seem to be under very little obligation to recognize the dead. Not only is grief regarded as inappropriate for those who have fallen in battle, but only the most perfunctory gestures need to be performed in their honour; the glory of the two Horace brothers’ sacrifice is reflected, we recall, not in the (presumably stone) tomb that awaits them, but in the ‘noble flowers’ that will briefly adorn it until they themselves decay. Death in combat, it seems, can be – and indeed has to be – its own reward. From the perspective of Old Horace at least, the glory that supposedly placates the ghostly shades of the dead seems to require no further input from the living.

Yet although Horace initially shares this outlook, his stance seems to shift at some point during or after the combat. When he later explains to his distraught sister why she should not grieve for their dead brothers, his reasoning marks a subtle difference in focus from his father’s earlier words:

Rome n’en [tears] veut point voir après de tels exploits,

Et nos deux frères morts dans le malheur des armes

Sont trop payés de sang pour exiger des larmes.

Quand la perte est vengée on n’a plus rien perdu. (IV. 5. 1258-61)

Like his father, Horace seeks to stifle Camille’s tears by stressing that any loss has already been fully repaid. Yet Horace’s mode of repayment is subtly different. Whereas Old Horace had seen the brothers’ death as instantly counterbalanced by the glory they accrued, for Horace it is his own subsequent act of vengeance that restores order. Horace thus presents his brothers’ deaths not as inherently glorious battlefield sacrifices but as unfinished business requiring further reprisals on his part. Certainly, vengeance was already on Horace’s mind during the battle itself. Once his brothers were killed, we learn, Horace tactically fled in order to pick off his opponents in turn. Having defeated two brothers, and now facing only the most severely wounded one, Horace proclaimed out loud that only this last death would be conducted in the name of Rome. As Valère recounts,

C’est peu pour lui de vaincre, il veut encor braver.

‘J’en viens d’immoler deux aux Mânes de mes frères,

Rome aura le dernier de mes trois adversaires,

C’est à ses intérêts que je vais l’immoler’,

Dit-il… (IV. 2. 1131-34)

At least in retrospect, now that he can be confident of Rome’s triumph, Horace casts his first two victories as private vengeances for his dead brothers, and reserves the final, easiest, blow for Rome. Like the supposedly disrespectful tears of his sister Camille and his wife Sabine, Horace’s insistence on avenging his brothers again denies the supposedly inherent glory of their deaths. Uncharacteristically, then, Horace briefly breaks with Roman values by acknowledging, albeit briefly, a continued duty towards the dead. In presenting his first two victories as private vengeance, Horace appropriates glory and acclaim for himself, the victorious survivor, and denies it to his dead brothers. As he swiftly learns, however, glory is a fragile and elusive thing, fundamentally ill-suited to the hands of the living.

# *Reputation and the public audience*

Horace’s changing attitude towards the question of posthumous glory becomes most apparent in the final act of the play, when he is put on trial in front of the king for killing his sister Camille. Horace’s defence – such as it is – is striking for two main reasons. For a start, he insists that he wishes to die, albeit for reasons quite different from those offered by his prosecutor Valère. Secondly, he scarcely addresses the question of his sister’s brutal murder at all, preferring to focus systematically on his concern for his own reputation. Of course, we do not have to take Horace at his word when he claims to want to die here; in the light of the king’s eventual verdict we could certainly read his speech as a piece of defiant bravado strategically engineered to prove his heroism and secure his eventual reprieve. Yet, especially in the light of Lyons’s provocative but compelling analysis of the battle itself, we should be wary of projecting intentions onto Horace’s actions simply on the basis of their outcome.[[11]](#footnote-11) In any case, as I hope to suggest, being spared death does not mean that Horace is thereby fully exonerated.

 As Horace explains to the king, the battle against the Curiaces was an exceptional situation that allowed him to display all the virtue of his ‘grand cœur’ (V. 2. 1556). The fate that had pitted him heroically against his own brothers-in-law is, he implies, wilfully parsimonious with such opportunities for true heroism, and it is highly unlikely that he will ever again be offered the opportunity to perform a comparable act. Horace may, he fears, never again live up to such glorious deeds – not through any personal insufficiency or weakness, but simply because the occasion will never arise again. He has effectively outlived his moment of glory, and cannot maintain his own sense of glorious heroism amongst the compromises and banalities of everyday life. Horace thus provides an interesting case of what Emily R. Wilson calls ‘tragic overliving’. This Wilson defines as ‘a central thread in the tragic tradition that is concerned not with dying too early but with living too long’ and, in particular, with outliving a particular decisive or traumatic event.[[12]](#footnote-12) The most memorable case of ‘overliving’ in Corneille’s work is probably that of the aged Don Diègue in *Le Cid*, whose life is ignominiously spared by his haughty rival the Count after an abortive duel. Yet whereas Diègue faces the shame of surviving defeat, and therefore outliving his own honour, Horace faces the far more paradoxical shame of surviving victory.

 Indeed, as Horace discovers, survival is a far more problematic state than he had first envisaged. The problem of survival is that in passing from relative anonymity to public celebrity, Horace has watched his flourishing reputation fall into the hands of a deeply superficial general public. Previously, Horace has had only worthy witnesses to his prospective glory. In different ways, Horace has regarded both Curiace and, beyond him, Fate itself as respectful opponents, acknowledging and testing his resolve in the face of adversity, and promising to recognize and enshrine his glory indefinitely. Yet Horace’s own glory is now at the mercy of the common people – an anonymous but vocal throng whose judgement is crucially flawed. Roman citizens, Horace explains, judge everything only superficially, ‘par l’écorce’ (V. 3. 1559); they will expect him to continue performing glorious deeds without considering whether the circumstances are propitious:

L’honneur des premiers faits se perd par les seconds,

Et quand la Renommée a passé l’ordinaire,

Si l’on n’en veut déchoir, il faut ne plus rien faire. (V. 3. 1570-72)

If the only way not to fall from public grace is to ‘do nothing’, the best way to do this is to die. As Horace explains, he ought ideally to have died on the spot just after his victory in order to establish his glory permanently:

…pour laisser une illustre mémoire,

La mort seule aujourd’hui peut conserver ma gloire:

Encor la fallait-il sitôt que j’eus vaincu,

Puisque pour mon honneur j’ai déjà trop vécu. (V. 3. 1579-82)

We might be tempted to read into this final line some remorse on Horace’s part for killing his sister. However, the allusion is vague at best, and indeed Horace’s talk two lines earlier of ‘conserving’ (rather than ‘restoring’) his glory implies that he does not regard his honour as having yet been sullied. At best, Horace’s unacknowledged murderous act illustrates a more general principle, that the merest threat of dishonour can compromise a scrupulous hero’s glory. As Horace puts it, ‘Un homme tel que moi voit sa gloire ternie, /Quand il tombe en péril de quelque ignominie’ (V. 3. 1583-84). Via a quite different route, Horace has thus come to the same conclusion as the prosecution: that he deserves death. The crucial difference, of course, is that whereas his prosecutor Valère hopes to bring shame onto his name, Horace believes that only death can preserve his honour and glory intact:

Mes vœux avec les siens conspirent aujourd’hui,

Il demande ma mort, je la veux comme lui.

Un seul point entre nous met cette différence,

Que mon honneur par là cherche son assurance,

Et qu’à ce même but nous voulons arriver,

Lui pour flétrir ma gloire, et moi pour la sauver. (V. 3. 1549-54)

Yet although Horace seeks death, he does not want it to take the form of an ignominious public execution. Rather, in his final words in the play, he asks for the king’s permission to commit suicide: ‘Permettez, ô grand Roi, que de ce bras vainqueur /Je m’immole à ma gloire, et non pas à ma sœur’ (V. 3. 1593-94).

# *Conclusion: securing posterity*

Glory, Horace learns, involves a complex interaction between the hero, his dazzled and expectant public, and a wilful fate that is frugal with opportunities for heroism. Indeed, although he does not mention ‘le sort’ in this final speech, it seems that whatever supernatural powers had previously exhausted themselves trying to test his mettle still have one final trick up their sleeve – to patiently let him outlive his own moment of glory and survive into a world of inadequacy and compromise. Surviving means living to see his own reputation in the hands of people who are ill-equipped to measure his true worth. Accordingly, reasons Horace, only dying can freeze his narrative at the point of his greatest glory, and thus deprive the public of any possibility of revising their opinion – or, at the very least, can spare him the possibility of witnessing any change in his public reputation.

 Interestingly, it is not the king, but rather Horace’s father, who first responds to Horace’s final speech and who addresses his concerns about reputation. In Livy’s original narrative, Horace’s reprieve is effected by the citizens of Rome, who are moved by his father’s tears. Through Old Horace, however, Corneille haughtily distances himself from both this populist appeal to emotion and the populace who would be moved by it. Indeed, Old Horace agrees with his son that the common herd is an unworthy judge, but insists that commoners are not the guarantors of a hero’s reputation:

Horace, ne crois pas que le Peuple stupide

Soit le maître absolu d’un renom bien solide.

Sa voix tumultueuse assez souvent fait bruit,

Mais un moment l’élève, un moment le détruit,

Et ce qu’il contribue à notre Renommée

Toujours en moins de rien se dissipe en fumée. (V. 3. 1711-16)

Old Horace repeats Curiace’s earlier rhyme of ‘renommée’ and ‘fumée’, while nuancing its remit. Public acclaim might well be transitory, he acknowledges, but this will not affect the solidity of a truly heroic reputation. Rather, he argues, a hero’s glory is held and secured by a quite different class of public: those kings and other great souls who can see past appearances and truly judge an individual’s worth:

C’est aux Rois, c’est aux Grands, c’est aux esprits bien faits,

A voir la vertu pleine en ses moindres effets,

C’est d’eux seuls qu’on reçoit la véritable gloire,

Eux seuls des vrais Héros assurent la mémoire.

Vis toujours en Horace; et toujours auprès d’eux

Ton nom demeurera grand, illustre, fameux,

Bien que l’occasion, moins haute ou moins brillante,

D’un vulgaire ignorant trompe l’injuste attente. (V. 3. 1717-24)

With his vocabulary of ‘vrai’ and ‘véritable’, Old Horace implicitly distinguishes between two types of glory, true and false. The hero’s ‘true’ audience, he insists, consists of those great souls that are able to discern ‘vertu’ even in its flimsiest and subtlest manifestations. While the masses are prone to overlook the role that context plays in acts of heroism, the greatest souls can gauge a hero’s worth even in the least conducive of circumstances. It is through this worthy audience that Horace’s name, his father insists, will remain ‘grand, illustre, fameux’. Even if circumstances might not allow Horace to achieve anything as glorious as they did today, he will live on in the memory of kings and other great men.

Of course, Old Horace’s speech here has a second intended addressee, beyond his son. By insisting that true glory is born of the interaction of a worthy hero and an equally worthy audience, Old Horace also implicitly addresses the king whose task is to pass judgement; he thus subtly invokes the latter’s own interest as guarantor of Horace’s name. And yet this speech also has, beyond the king, a third intended addressee. As my own vocabulary of ‘audience’ here has suggested, there is something implicitly metatheatrical about the relationship between a hero and his public. After all, tragic characters tend to know that the public gaze – and, for that matter, the gaze of posterity – is upon them. We, Corneille’s audience, form part of this posterity, and Old Horace’s words here seem to invite us to identify with the ‘esprits bien faits’ able to discern his son’s virtue and confirm his glory and memory despite the vagaries of fortune. As we shall see shortly, however, Tulle’s own final verdict nuances this attitude still further.

The implicit metatheatricality of *Horace* becomes still more apparent when we consider the dedicatory letter to Cardinal Richelieu that accompanied early editions of the play. As Lyons has noted, Richelieu appears in Corneille’s letter as the ‘ideal spectator’, someone whose sound and astute critical judgement can be read off his face by the diligent dramatist.[[13]](#footnote-13) Richelieu does not need to articulate his praise or his criticisms verbally; they are there to be discerned by the assiduous playwright. Accordingly, Corneille can claim to be ‘entièrement redevable’ to Richelieu for his reputation. He signs off his dedication to Richelieu by quoting (and adapting) another Horace, the Roman poet:

*Totum muneris hoc tui est,*

*Quod monstror digito praetereuntium*

*Scenae non levis artifex:*

*Quod spiro et placeo, si placeo, tuum est.*[[14]](#footnote-14)

[Only to you do I owe this renown of being pointed out by passers-by as a serious craftsman of the stage; what inspiration I have and what pleasure I provide, if indeed I do, are your work.]

The sentiment is clearly elitist. Superficial fame is maintained by the faceless throng – the common spectators who show their approval through demonstrative ‘applaudissement[s]’[[15]](#footnote-15) or, in the Horace quotation above, finger-pointing. Yet it is only under the silent gaze of the super-spectator Richelieu – a gaze the dramatist carefully inspects in turn – that Corneille can truly develop and bolster his own dramatic skills.

And just as Richelieu recognizes and confirms Corneille’s glory, the select few can recognize and confirm that of Horace within Corneille’s tragedy. At the end of the play, the king Tulle – perhaps swayed by Old Horace’s words – does spare the young warrior’s life. Yet this verdict is not a simple reprieve, because the king is more sophisticated than the judgement he ostensibly gives. Tulle insists that, given the unique circumstances, the laws must in this case be silent and Rome ‘dissimulate’ what has happened:

Qu’elles se taisent donc; que Rome dissimule

Ce que dès sa naissance elle vit en Romule;

Elle peut bien souffrir en son libérateur

Ce qu’elle a bien souffert en son premier auteur. (V. 3. 1755-58)

The silence that Tulle demands of Rome’s laws (like the silence of the contemplative spectator Richelieu) clearly contrasts with the clamorous but short-lived ‘bruit’ with which the general public’s ‘voix tumultueuse’ greeted Horace’s victory against the Albans (V. 3. 1713). Yet – *pace* Doubrovsky[[16]](#footnote-16) – we should not mistake this silence for the silence of oblivion, or of obliviousness. After all, Tulle, the supreme spectator-king, insists that he has not forgotten the enormity of Horace’s crime – any more, we might add, than the Roman state has forgotten the act of fratricide on which it was originally founded. Indeed, Tulle insists categorically that Horace’s crime is ‘grand, énorme, inexcusable’, and reassures Valère that his own arguments have not been erased (‘effacés’) by anything said since (V. 3. 1740; 1730). The only thing preventing Horace’s execution is the state’s debt to him; as Tulle explains, ‘Sans lui j’obéirais où je donne la loi, /Et je serais Sujet où je suis deux fois Roi’ (V. 3. 1745-46). Horace has thus become the very underpinning of Roman power, and to execute him would be to undermine – at least symbolically – the entire basis of the Roman state as it now exists. Having first represented his fellow Romans in the combat arena, Horace is now compelled to stand as their representative and figurehead indefinitely.

In this respect, Rome’s silence does not necessarily imply acquiescence in or approval of Horace’s actions – let alone oblivion – but rather a careful and unresolved consideration of both his deeds: the heroic and the brutal. Horace must live on ‘pour server l’Etat’ (V. 3. 1763), knowingly under the watchful, silent gaze of a king who holds his glory in his hands, but who will not forget his crime. Refusing to let either predominate or counterbalance the other, Tulle thus keeps both elements of Horace’s narrative in his mind – just as Livy will later do in his history, and indeed Corneille in his tragedy. In different ways, then, Tulle, Livy, and Corneille himself all thwart Horace’s desire to end his narrative in a blaze of military glory. Unlike the apparently superficial public, who decide hardily and categorically based on gut feelings and appearances, they refuse to reduce his identity to any single act, whether heroic or ignoble – and, in so doing, they let his narrative go down in history, as unresolved and as problematic as their own judgements on him.

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1. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. by Gary Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 2004), IV. 3. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (Oxford: OUP, 1986), p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Serge Doubrovsky, *Corneille et la dialectique du héros* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963),p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John D. Lyons, *The Tragedy of Origins: Pierre Corneille and Historical Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pierre Corneille, *Horace*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1980), i. See ‘Acteurs’, i, 844. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Harris, ‘*Oser pleurer*: Corneille’s *Horace* and the Power of Tears’, *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 31: 2 (2009), 163-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Doubrovsky, pp. 147-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, eds, *Classical Literary Criticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1435b; p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In fact, this line and others like it take on a particular ironic quality for spectators familiar with Livy’s source text. Livy starts his tale by announcing that ‘an uncertainty persists in regard to the names – to which people, that is, the Horatii belonged, and to which the Curiatii’. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* [book I, chapter 24], trans. by B. O. Foster, 14 vols, Loeb Classical Library, 114 (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), i, p. 81. Livy’s comment thus flags up how easily names, and hence ‘renown’, can become literally detached from the individuals they supposedly designate. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Harris, ‘*Oser pleurer*’, p. 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Lyons, *The Tragedy of Origins*,pp. 45-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Emily R. Wilson, *Mocked with Death: Tragic Overliving from Sophocles to Milton* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John D. Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder: The Theory of Tragedy in Classical France* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press: 1999), p. 17. We should note in passing that Corneille’s preface here marks a noticeable *volte-face* away from the bravado of his self-congratulatory 1637 poem, ‘Excuse à Ariste’, in which he had famously – and provocatively – asserted that ‘Je ne dois qu’à moi seul toute ma Renommée’. See Corneille, i, 780 (l. 50). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Corneille, i, 835. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Corneille, i, 834. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For Doubrovsky, Horace’s act is ‘absous, *à condition d’être oublié*’ (p. 181). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)