‘Dying of the fifth act’: Corneille’s (un)natural deaths

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‘Dying of the fifth act’: Corneille’s (un)natural deaths

Towards the end of a rather poor tragedy, one eighteenth-century spectator was surprised to see the tragic hero – who had otherwise been entirely healthy – suddenly die for no discernible reason. On asking his neighbour what the hero had actually died of, he was met with a bafflingly simple answer: ‘What of? Of the fifth act!’.

In this anecdote, the German playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing succinctly mocks both certain dramatists’ slackness in establishing narrative closure and the undemanding complicity of spectators prepared to accept such clumsy endings. For Lessing’s uncritical spectator, the ‘fifth act’ is something like a disease – a readily diagnosable medical condition that affects only fictional characters. In a well-constructed tragedy, Lessing implies, people do not just die unexpectedly.

And yet in real life, of course, people can – and sadly often do – die with little or no prior warning. Such deaths can thus form something of a stumbling block for dramatists. The very same death that might produce great and sincere sorrow in real life precisely because it is unexpected can, once transplanted onto the stage, break the dramatic illusion or otherwise leave us cold and unmoved. Indeed, it is fundamental to most conceptions of tragedy that ordinary deaths are not themselves tragic; in the words of one recent critic, each tragedy’s underlying claim is that ‘this death is exceptional’.

Similarly, the sixteenth-century playwright Jean de La Taille insisted that tragedy should concern itself with ‘larmes et


miseres extremes’, and not with events that take place ‘tous les jours naturellement et par raison commune, comme d’un qui mourroit de sa propre mort’. As La Taille implies, in tragedy one should not die of a death that obeys the ‘raison commune’ that we are all mortal. Rather, a tragic death requires some external intervention, the irruption of some deadly event before the hero’s ‘natural’ time has come. In short, a good tragedy requires the hero to be killed, and this killing, whether it takes the form of murder or suicide, needs to be causally motivated. Natural deaths, in contrast, have little or no place on the tragic stage.

Of course, Pierre Corneille was never one to shy away from a dramatic challenge. Throughout his career Corneille took many risks in flouting dramatic convention and audience expectation, with varying degrees of popular and critical success. This article focuses on a small, somewhat disparate handful of characters in Corneille who – for want of a better phrase – ‘just die’, without the need for bloodshed or murder. Their deaths are what I shall call ‘(un)natural’ deaths. They are ‘natural’ in that they could occur in real life, but onstage they risk appearing unnatural and artificial – a clumsy concession, as Lessing might imply, to the dramatist’s need to wrap up his plot in appropriately tragic fashion. There is, of course, an overlap here with the long-ridiculed deus ex machina conclusion, in which some powerful external force steps in at the eleventh hour to resolve an otherwise untenable situation onstage; indeed, as I shall argue, we are certainly invited to see a divine hand at work in the case of Attila, roi des Huns (1667). Generally speaking, though, (un)natural death in Corneille afflicts characters who, unlike the notorious Hunnish king, do not really deserve to die. In the other plays in my corpus – L’Illusion comique (1635), Théodore, vierge et martyre (1646), and Suréna, général des Parthes (1674) – women die of sorrow on being

separated from their beloved. Their deaths are, at least on an ethical level, excessive, even gratuitous. Furthermore, we should also note that their deaths are in an important sense (pace Jean Emelina⁴) quite distinct from suicide; whereas suicide implies agency, volition and responsibility, what we have in these cases is an apparently involuntary collapse of the character’s physical body.

The idea of dying of grief, sorrow or thwarted love has a long literary heritage in France, at least from La Chastelaine de Vergy onwards. Indeed, it was widely believed in early-modern Europe not only that people could die of excessive passion, but also that such deaths were quite commonplace.⁵ And although it is hard to square with Aristotelian demands for a rigorously constructed plot, we find this motif lurking around the very heart of French ‘classicism’, at the start of Phèdre and at points throughout La Princesse de Clèves.⁶

Unsurprisingly, dying of love also forms a leitmotif of amorous discourse at the time, although, as Corneille reminds us, we should not always take characters’ evocations of death too seriously, at least in comedy:


⁵ See, for example, Jean-François Senault, L’homme criminel ou la corruption de la nature par le péché (Paris: Le Petit, 1656), p. 465.

⁶ Essam Safty’s La Mort tragique: Idéologie et mort dans la tragédie baroque en France (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005), pp. 246-47, lists a few brief examples of tragic ‘deaths of grief’, but with only one glancing reference to Corneille.
nous ne voyons autre chose dans les comédies que des amants qui vont mourir, s’ils ne possèdent ce qu’ils aiment, et de semblables douleurs ne préparant aucun effet tragique, on ne peut pas dire qu’elle aillent au-dessus de la comédie.\(^7\)

The fact that substantially the same rhetoric can prepare an ‘effet tragique’ in some of his tragedies, of course, rather undermines Corneille’s bold claims here. We should also note that, although Corneille distributes this romantic rhetoric fairly evenly between his male and female characters, actually dying of love is for Corneille an exclusively female phenomenon, men tending to commit suicide in equivalent circumstances.\(^8\) A similarly ‘feminine’ response is the swoon; indeed, Chimène is only the most famous of Corneille’s women to faint on believing her beloved dead or doomed. In Corneille’s first two plays, Mélite and Clitandre, women fall into such a deathlike state that others believe that they too have died; the same briefly happens to Cornélie on witnessing her husband’s death in the tragedy Pompée.

\(^7\) Corneille, *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols, ed. by Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1980–87), II. 552. All references to Corneille’s writings will be to this edition; unless otherwise indicated, plays will be referenced by act, scene and line number, and other writings referenced by volume and page number.

\(^8\) For example, Jason in Médée and Placide in Théodore commit suicide after the deaths of their beloveds, although in both cases here the situation is exacerbated by their inability to avenge the beloved’s death.
L’Illusion comique (1635, 1660)

The first example of an apparently ‘real’ death from grief in Corneille’s theatre is also the most problematic, because it occurs in an explicitly metatheatrical context. L’Illusion comique famously ends with a performance of a tragedy in which the hero is stabbed to death onstage. Both the audience and its onstage surrogate Pridamant do not yet know that they are watching a theatrical performance rather than reality. Importantly, these scenes were subject to some considerable rewriting by Corneille. In the lesser-known original version of the play, the hero is murdered in the middle of an adulterous assignment with the princess Rosine. Shocked by his death, Rosine swiftly dies as well, finding some consolation in following her lover to the grave (V. 5. 1701-04). The hero’s wife Isabelle (playing the noblewoman ‘Hippolyte’) witnesses this murder but remains devoted to her unfaithful husband. She insists that his killers should kill her too in order to complete their victory; when they refuse to do so, the play ends ominously, with her being escorted off to their master, who is apparently in love with her (V. 5).

Corneille’s rewritten version of 1660 removes the ‘other woman’ Rosine from the stage entirely, and transfers her grief-stricken death onto Isabelle herself; it is now on her death that the play-within-a-play ends. This change has two main advantages: one ethical, one aesthetic. Firstly, Corneille’s second version resolves the thorny moral issues of the original ending, in which an unseen persecutor has his rival murdered and takes sexual advantage of his widow. Secondly, by displacing this death from an entirely secondary character to – apparently – one of the play’s principal characters, Corneille is able to exploit the ‘love and death’ motif far more fully and convincingly.

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9 For ease of reference, and in order to reflect better the experience of Corneille’s spectator, I shall refer to the characters in the inner drama by the names of the characters who play them.
After all, surprising as Isabelle’s death might be, the possibility of dying of love is not suddenly raised at the end of the play unannounced. Death features heavily (albeit unsystematically) in the play’s romantic rhetoric throughout, and the theme has clustered most insistently around Isabelle. At times, for example, we find echoes of the neo-Platonic theory that lovers ‘die’ and are then reborn in their beloved – for example when Lyse tells Adraste that Clindor and Isabelle ‘meurent l’un pour l’autre, et n’ont qu’une pensée’ (II. 7. 581). Bound to the beloved’s soul and life, the neo-Platonic lover risks a rather more literal death if the beloved actually dies. Accordingly, when Clindor faces the death penalty Isabelle sees the two options facing her too as ‘la vie, ou la mort’ (IV. 6. 1220). Elsewhere Isabelle announces that she will not outlive her lover, although it is unclear whether she intends to commit suicide or whether she expects to die naturally of grief:

Mais en vain après toi l’on me laisse le jour;
Je veux perdre la vie en perdant mon amour:
Prononçant ton arrêt, c’est de moi qu’on dispose;
Je veux suivre ta mort puisque j’en suis la cause,
Et le même moment verra par deux trépas
Nos esprits amoureux se rejoindre là-bas. (IV. 1. 1013-15)

Whatever the case, Corneille uses a technique here that he will also exploit elsewhere: to weave death into the rhetorical fabric of the play so that the character’s own final demise is, if not motivated on a strictly causal level, then at least prepared thematically.

Yet if this particular play anticipates certain techniques that Corneille will adopt with later (un)natural deaths, it also undermines them in advance – not least by subjecting the very notion of dying of grief to some sustained metatheatrical mockery. Significantly, the first
person to allude to the idea in this play is not Isabelle, but the buffoonish soldier Matamore, who is, at least in his own fantasy world, as deadly a lover as he is a warrior. He claims, for example, that swathes of women have fainted or even died of love for him, and reminisces about the time when

\[\text{Je ne pouvais sortir sans les faire pâmer;}\]

\[\text{Mille mouraient par jour à force de m’aimer… (II. 1. 263-64)}\]

He speaks nonchalantly about the death he will inflict on the queen of Iceland: ‘Je lui vais envoyer sa mort dans une lettre’ (II. 1. 470), and welcomes his servant Clindor’s claims that two princesses also died of love for him (II. 1. 447). Matamore’s rhetoric here threatens to undermine in advance the plausibility of Isabelle’s death, since it implies that dying of love is something fictional or fantasized rather than realistic. Unlike my later examples, \textit{L’Illusion comique} thus exhibits a complex tension between treating the ‘death of grief’ motif as something real, and dismissing it as a mere fiction beloved of fantasists or playwrights. Whatever the case, Isabelle’s death is clearly not implausible enough to disabuse the ‘frame-play’ spectator Pridamant, whose continued embrace of the dramatic illusion implies a certain continuity between the ‘frame’ world and the onstage world he is watching. Indeed, Pridamant not only deems dying of grief an utterly plausible outcome for Isabelle, but he also swiftly envisages the same fate for himself. Indeed, it is only when Pridamant announces ‘Adieu, je vais mourir, puisque mon fils est mort’ (V. 6. 1740), that the wizard Alcandre decides to disabuse him, thus preventing Clindor’s purely fictional death from triggering a potentially genuine one in the ‘real world’ of the frame narrative.
Théodore, vierge et martyre (1646)

Corneille adopts a rather different approach to (un)natural death in his 1646 martyr-play Théodore, and seems quite happy with the result. In 1660, the year he rewrote the death scenes of L’Illusion comique, Corneille not only left Théodore almost unchanged but even congratulated himself on his handling of his denouement, claiming that ‘la maladie de Flavie, sa mort, et les violences des désespoirs de sa mère qui la venge, ont assez de justesse’.

Here, the lovesick and bedbound Flavie, who never appears onstage, is desperately in love with Placide, and it is simply accepted by all the characters that she will die if Placide refuses to marry her, if not before. Flavie’s mother Marcelle, whose utter devotion to her daughter is the one restraint on her cruelty, repeatedly attempts to force Placide to marry Flavie and save her life. Given that Placide loves elsewhere, the question is thus less whether Flavie will die than when she will die – and, of course, what will happen afterwards. Flavie’s function in the plot is therefore quite different from what we have seen with Isabelle and Rosine. Unlike these characters, who die of grief only after their beloved’s death, Flavie is so frail that she risks dying of rejection by a lover who remains alive. Indeed, as things transpire, Flavie not only dies before her lover, but even provokes his death with hers.

It is, I would argue, crucial to Corneille’s dramaturgy that Flavie never appears onstage. If she were brought onto the stage, her very appearance might put into question the inevitability of her death; we might expect her to finally rise above her physical weakness in some great magnanimous (‘Cornelian’) triumph of the will. As it is, being bedbound both justifies her absence from the stage and enshrines her frailty as the essential component of her being. Indeed, for Corneille, Flavie is essentially a function of the plot rather than a three-dimensional character. We do not have any great emotional investment in her, as Corneille

10 ‘Examen’ to Théodore, ii. 272.
himself admits (II. 272); we never see her or hear her words recounted; and her eventual
death is of interest only in the effect it has on the other characters.

Perhaps because of Flavie’s functional role, we do not have any sustained rhetorical
association of love and death here. Corneille indicates this from the very start, when he has
Placide explain that he loves Théodore and then baldly announce that ‘Flavie, au lit, malade,
en meurt de jalousie’ (I. 1. 62-63). A century later, Voltaire would condemn this line as
utterly unpoetic in comparison with Racine’s evocative description of the dying Phèdre:

Ce style prosaïque est inadmissible dans le tragique. La poésie n’est faite que pour
déguiser et embellir tous ces détails. Voyez comment Racine rend la même idée:

Phèdre, atteinte d’un mal qu’elle s’obstine à taire,

Lasse enfin d’elle-même et du jour qui l’éclaire…11

But there is a reason behind Corneille’s prosaic tone, and in particular his two parenthetical
descriptors: ‘au lit, malade’. The literalism of the bed and the illness neutralizes in advance
any rhetorical ambiguity that the phrase ‘mourir de jalousie’ might otherwise have. As
Corneille indicates from the start, then, in this particular play he is not interested in creating
poetic or dramatic effects by juxtaposing literal and metaphorical deaths.

Functionally speaking, Flavie occupies one end of a chain of lovers: she loves
Placide, who loves Théodore, who loves God.12 Yet Corneille complicates this situation by

11 Voltaire, Commentaires sur Corneille, ed. by David Williams, in Œuvres complètes de

12 See Georges Forestier, Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l’œuvre (Geneva: Droz,
introducing Flavie’s mother, the vicious Marcelle. Desiring above anything else to keep her
daughter alive, Marcelle is thus required to hold back her murderous rage towards Placide.
Marcelle is quite open that she would have Placide killed were it not for her daughter’s
precarious health:

…pourrais-je épargner cette insolente vie,

Si sa perte n’était la perte de Flavie,

Dont le cruel destin prend un si triste cours

Qu’aux jours de ce barbare il attache ses jours? (I. 3. 239-42)

And Placide realizes that Marcelle cannot truly pose a threat so long as her daughter remains
in lovesick thrall to him. The chain of lovers linking Théodore and Flavie is stable only if
Flavie is still alive; indeed, it must be kept stable precisely to ensure that Flavie stays alive.
Placide’s survival thus also depends on Flavie’s, which explains why he later indulges
Marcelle’s later request to visit her and show her at least ‘une feinte douceur’ in order to
rescue her from ‘les portes du trépas’ (III. 5. 1062; 1064).

As the play progresses, however, Flavie’s health starts to depend more on Théodore’s
misfortune than on Placide’s goodwill. Like a pathological, almost vampirical, version of Le
Cid’s Infanta, Flavie provides a sort of inverse barometer for Théodore’s safety; she thrives
on Théodore’s misfortune and suffers when Théodore is happy. The news that Théodore is to
be prostituted, Marcelle assures us, will ‘soulager’ Flavie and bring her ‘allégresse’ (I. 4. 341;
340). Conversely, Théodore’s escape from the brothel is the final nail in Flavie’s coffin; as
Paulin puts it,

Flavie est aux abois, Théodore échappée
D’un mortel désespoir jusqu’au cœur l’a frappée;
Marcelle n’attend plus que son dernier soupir. (V. 1. 1527-29)

What ultimately triggers Flavie’s death is thus not Placide’s rejection of her, but Théodore’s escape from ignominy. Perhaps reflecting the inverse relationship between the two women, Flavie’s death is finally announced by none other than her rival, Théodore herself (V. 5. 1613-16). As Théodore realizes, now that Flavie is dead, the final check to Marcelle’s rage has been removed. Nothing can now stop Marcelle from unleashing one of the bloodiest denouements in Corneille’s canon: within a matter of scenes, four main characters will have been stabbed to death. Quite unlike Isabelle’s death in the rewritten L’Illusion comique, then, Flavie’s death does not resolve the dramatic action, let alone spare a villain the need for further crime. On the contrary, what triggers one of the bloodiest slaughters in Corneille’s work is the essentially un-tragic death of a single, unknown, offstage character.

*Attila, roi des Huns* (1667)

Despite his apparent satisfaction with the conclusion to Théodore, Corneille never attempted to reuse the technique. The closest he would come is with Emilie (in Sertorius, 1662), whose death in childbirth, far away in Rome, finally leaves Pompée free to return to his estranged wife Aristie. As d’Aubignac snidely put it, Corneille here effectively disposes of an unwanted secondary character with ‘un coup de Tonnerre’. It is tempting to see Corneille’s next (un)natural death, at the end of *Attila*, as a defiant embrace of precisely the sort of death that d’Aubignac here denounces. Yet Attila’s death also marks another change in direction for

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Corneille. Whereas the female characters who die of grief (Rosine, Isabelle, Flavie and, later, Eurydice) are all ultimately secondary characters, invented by Corneille, the whole tragedy of Attila is constructed around the historically attested violent death of a notoriously cruel male figure.\textsuperscript{14} The historical Attila is probably best known for two things, both of which – as the gazetteer Robinet’s account of Corneille’s play suggests – make him a rather counterintuitive choice of hero:

\begin{quote}
\textldquod\textquoteright un roi des plus mal n\textquoteright s,

D\textquoteleft un H\textepsilon{}ros qui saigne du nez,

Il a fait, malgr\textepsilon{} les critiques,

Le plus beau de ses Dramatiques.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Corneille knew that he was setting himself a challenge in choosing a tragic hero who was not only a monstrous barbarian but who also died from a copious nosebleed. Even by Corneille’s idiosyncratic standards, Attila’s death is highly inappropriate for tragedy both in its gruesomeness and its lack of \textit{vraisemblance}, and it is interesting to see the steps Corneille takes to make it broadly acceptable to audiences. Firstly, I shall argue, Corneille attempts to

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{14} Given the highly provocative nature of Attila’s denouement it is, to say the least, surprising that this tragedy scarcely features in Georges Forestier’s otherwise meticulously thorough ‘genetic’ study of Corneille’s plot construction, \textit{Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l’œuvre}.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
consolidate these two problems into one by thematically associating Attila’s cruelty with his undignified death. Secondly, despite Robinet’s rather flippant summary, Corneille preserves some tragic decorum by presenting Attila’s death as a haemorrhage rather than specifically as a nosebleed. Thirdly, Corneille exploits another historical source that challenges the nosebleed hypothesis. According to Marcellinus Comes, Attila ‘was pierced by the hand and blade of his wife’ Ilidco, and Corneille raises the possibility of this alternative outcome when he has the French princess Ildione plan to marry and then assassinate him. Presumably aware that his spectators will be expecting a nosebleed, Corneille thus keeps both historical accounts active as possibilities as his tragedy progresses.

Yet spectators familiar with Corneille’s general practice might have had reason to doubt the likelihood of Attila’s assassination. A decade earlier, Corneille had explained that characters who are set to win spectators’ affection and goodwill should be spared the need to spill others’ blood: ‘C’est un soin que nous devons prendre de préserver nos héros du crime tant qu’il se peut, et les exempter même de tremper leurs mains dans le sang, si ce n’est en un juste combat’ (III. 160). Wicked characters might deserve to die, but the dramatist should nonetheless spare his heroes the need to deal this deadly blow. Accordingly, Corneille’s previous villains have tended either to be dispatched by the hand of a secondary character or to commit suicide, like Marcelle, in a fit of murderous rage. These latter deaths have the advantage of dispatching both murderer and victim in a single gesture, thus preserving the heroes’ innocence; indeed, Corneille suggests that such a suicide leaves a strong moral example, ‘puisqu’elle devient un effet de la justice du ciel, et non pas de la vengeance des hommes’ (III. 160).

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A similar idea of heavenly justice underpins *Attila*, in which Corneille’s characters take care to present Attila’s death as an exemplary case of God’s justice. Surprising and timely as it is, Attila’s death does not come entirely out of the blue. Indeed, Corneille takes care to ‘prepare’ Attila’s death, by offering indications and clues about it from the opening acts, so that the spectator is familiar with the possibility long before death strikes. Corneille does this, primarily, through the figure of blood. Blood flows throughout this tragedy – not literally, since *Attila* has one of the lowest body-counts in Corneille’s tragic canon, but rhetorically, as befits Corneille’s understanding of Attila as more tactician than warrior.

As the play demonstrates, Attila’s principal strategy in both military and political conflict is to set his enemies against each other, thus keeping himself safe and his hands clean. This general strategy, however, might show that Attila has learnt a lesson from one fateful time when he did the opposite. In act II we learn that Attila has been subject to a vicious daily haemorrhage ever since he murdered his own brother Vleda (some eight years previously, according to the sources). As one character explains,

> Le sang qu’après avoir mis ce prince au tombeau
> On lui voit chaque jour distiller du cerveau,
> Punit son parricide, et chaque jour vient faire
> Un tribut étonnant à celui de ce frère.
> Suivant même qu’il a plus ou moins de courroux,
> Ce sang forme un supplice ou plus rude ou plus doux,
> S’ouvre une plus féconde ou plus stérile veine;
> Et chaque emportement porte avec lui sa peine. (II. 1. 379-86)
The extent of the bleeding varies in force depending on Attila’s anger. From the start, then, Attila’s haemorrhage is inscribed into a narrative of crime and punishment. Corneille thus links together two historical ‘givens’ (Attila’s fratricide and his haemorrhage) through a symbolic narrative of guilt and retribution. Attila’s very body is punishing his previous ‘parricide’ – the shedding of his own family blood – through the ritual shedding of his own blood.

Fitting as it is, though, this narrative is not as simple as it first appears. For a start, Attila’s bleeding is causally overdetermined. If his daily haemorrhages are a punishment for his brother’s death (‘un tribut étonnant’), each individual bout also punishes an individual fit of rage. This punishment, this (to quote the novelist Céline’s evocative phrase entirely out of context) ‘death on the instalment plan’, is both too much and too little. On the one hand, Attila sheds more of his own blood alive than he could ever do in death. And yet Attila’s protracted punishment also leaves him alive to commit further atrocities. If some supernatural force lies behind Attila’s punishment, then, it does not punish him with immediate death, but rather defers this final punishment indefinitely, allowing him to continue to inflict bloodshed onto the world.

Since Attila’s haemorrhage is overdetermined, it is fitting that his final moments testify to both his current rage and his founding act of fratricide. Corneille does his best to intertwine, both thematically and causally, Attila’s fratricide with his final deadly haemorrhage. The original motivation for his murder of his brother already involves the two foreign kings, Ardaric and Valamir, who are present at his death. As we are told, Attila took violent offence to his brother’s respect for the two kings:

Son frère ainé Vléda plus rempli d’équité

Les traitait malgré lui d’entière égalité;
Il n’a pu le souffrir, et sa jalouse envie
Pour n’avoir plus d’égaux s’est immolé sa vie. (II. 1. 375-78)

If Vleda’s respect for the kings initially led Attila to kill him, it is the kings’ continued respect for each other, and their stalwart refusal to fight to the death as Attila insists, that bring him to paroxysms of frustrated rage. It is here that Corneille addresses the question of divine punishment most explicitly. Attila defiantly explains his self-appointed title of ‘God’s scourge’. As he explains, God does not always punish instantly; he sometimes withholds his wrath and sometimes inflicts his punishment on the whole earth. Attila regards himself as being the vessel of God’s current wrath. Between the biblical Flood – the ‘déluge d’eaux’ – and the prophesied ‘déluge de feux’ that will eventually consume the earth, comes the ‘déluge de sang’ that Attila embodies (V. 3. 1573-82).

There is deep irony here, of course. Attila’s claims about how God sometimes withholds punishment remind us both that Attila himself is living on borrowed time, and that the deluge of blood may well be his own. Attila may be God’s agent, but – as the Roman noblewoman Honorie points out (V. 3. 1583-92) – he remains subject to God’s power. As she warns him, the very tyrants that enact God’s judgement on their subjects are themselves also (and especially) condemned to his divine wrath. Attila refuses to be put off by such threats, and insists that he will enact God’s bloody wishes until the end. It is at this point that Attila starts to bleed. Honorie interprets this bleeding as a message from the afterlife that the tyrant is finally being summoned to join his victims:

Ton sang, qui chaque jour, à longs flots distillés,
S’échappe vers ton frère et six rois immolés,
Te dirait-il trop bas que leurs ombres t’appellent?
Faut-il que ces avis par moi se renouvellent?

Vois, vois couler ce sang qui te vient avertir,

Tyran, que pour les joindre il faut bientôt partir. (V. 4. 1599-1604)

Attila defiantly replies that he would welcome dying gradually by haemorrhage, since – unlike the divine ‘foudre’ (V. 3. 1605) predicted by Honorie – this will still grant him enough time to punish all his enemies. He then leaves, taking his bride Ildione to the altar.

Although Honorie seems not to trust her own claims about divine punishment, God seems to prove her right; Valamir soon arrives and triumphantly announces the tyrant’s death. Perhaps fittingly, Valamir offers two concurrent explanations for Attila’s overdetermined death; he attributes it to both Attila’s cruelty and to the workings of heaven:

Écoutez

Comme enfin l’ont puni ses propres cruautés,

Et comme heureusement le ciel vient de souscrire

À ce que nos malheurs vous ont fait lui prédire. (V. 6. 1727-30)

As Valamir recounts, although Attila himself is ‘stunned’ by the sudden onset of his blood – ‘il s’étonne’ (V. 6. 1734) – he shows little concern, explaining that if his blood does not stop flowing, ‘on me paiera ce qu’il m’en va coûter’ (V. 6. 1736). It is at this point that he suddenly freezes, ‘sans parole, sans force’ (V. 6. 1737). The timing of Attila’s paralysis here, like the discreet textual echo of the ‘tribut étonnant’ that his blood pays daily to his brother, is surely significant; Attila seems to be punished for refusing to recognize his blood loss as punishment for his previous crimes, and for regarding it as something that itself needs to be avenged or repaid.
Attila’s death goes through various stages that gesture towards different causal, symbolic and poetic explanations.\(^\text{17}\) He is suddenly reawoken from his paralysis by a vision of his murdered brother and the ghosts of six other kingly victims. Yet rather than being haunted by remorse, Attila is unrepentant, and – like Racine’s Oreste – hopes to slaughter his hallucinated victims a second time in a fit of rage. Yet this final burst of rage opens up all the ‘channels’ of his blood; his soul, blood and life all spew out from his body, and he collapses in a heap. Valamir’s account ends as it begins, stressing how Attila’s own cruelty – his ‘fureur(s)’ (V. 6. 1767-68) – has served as his own punishment. Yet heaven is, once again, swiftly given its due. The king Ardaric now comes onstage, proclaiming the ‘bonheur étonnant que le ciel nous renvoie’ (V. 7. 1773). For a third time now, Attila’s punishment is presented as ‘stunning’ (étonnant), which of course it is, in more ways than one. Historically attested, it nonetheless defies vraisemblance; and yet, despite being (in John D. Lyons’s neat expression) not a \emph{deus ex machina} but a \emph{deus ex historia},\(^\text{18}\) it nonetheless requires all Corneille’s poetic, rhetorical and dramatic skills to prevent it from being the clumsy denouement that it threatens to be.

\textit{Suréna, général des Parthes (1674)}

Corneille draws on these poetic, rhetorical and dramatic skills to far greater pathetic effect when dealing with the final death in his whole canon, that of Eurydice in his swansong tragedy \emph{Suréna}. It is perhaps striking that, leaving aside the Senecan-inspired bloodbath of


\(^{18}\) Lyons, p. 176.
Médée, Corneille’s tragic career is effectively framed by two deaths from grief, Rosine’s in the first *L’Illusion comique* and Eurydice’s in *Suréna*. Indeed, as I shall suggest, in the final moments of his dramatic career Corneille revisits and reworks elements of the ‘baroque’ earlier play, in an attempt to make them more palatable to contemporary (‘classical’) tastes.

Like that of *Théodore*, the plot of *Suréna* is based around a deadlock that can be resolved only in death. The general Suréna loves and is loved by Eurydice; the two lovers stoically but fatalistically agree that they will not marry the people proposed to them by the king Orode, even at the cost of their lives. Using the same technique as in *L’Illusion comique*, Corneille ‘prepares’ the heroine’s death through a network of textual allusions. Both lovers equate being separated from each other with death; indeed, this association underpins the very first words that Suréna utters to Eurydice onstage:

> Je sais ce qu’à mon cœur coûtera votre vue ;
> Mais qui cherche à mourir doit chercher ce qui tue.
> Madame, l’heure approche, et demain votre foi
> Vous fait de m’oublier une éternelle loi :
> Je n’ai plus que ce jour, que ce moment de vie.
> Pardonnez à l’amour qui vous la sacrifie,
> Et souffrez qu’un soupir exhale à vos genoux,
> Pour ma dernière joie, une âme toute à vous. (I. 3. 249-56)

As in *L’Illusion comique*, though, it is the ill-fated woman who evokes death most frequently. From her very first appearance, indeed, Eurydice reveals a certain melancholic mind-set that constantly (in her words) ‘poisons’ itself by considering different possibilities and predictions, however unlikely. As she explains,
Quand on a commencé de se voir malheureuse,
Rien ne s’offre à nos yeux qui ne fasse trembler,
La plus fausse apparence a droit de nous troubler,
Et tout ce qu’on prévoit, tout ce qu’on s’imagine,
Forme un nouveau poison pour une âme chagrine. (I. 1. 110-14)

Death is the only outcome that Eurydice can envisage. Surrendering Suréna to his arranged bride would be an act of figurative suicide: ‘Savez-vous qu’à Mandane envoyer ce que j’aime, /C’est de ma propre main m’assassiner moi-même? (V. 5. 1075-76). Allowing Suréna to die, however, would also kill her; she tells him that the very same sigh ‘qui tranchera vos jours’ would ‘tranche[r] aussi des miens le déplorable cours’ (I. 3. 259-60). The prospect of marrying the king’s son Pacorus, to whom she is betrothed for political reasons, is perhaps worst of all in its invocation of death:

EURYDICE.   Au nom des dieux ne me le nommez pas,
Son nom seul me prépare à plus que le trépas.

PALMIS. Un tel excès de haine!

EURYDICE.    Elle n’est que trop due
Aux mortelles douleurs dont m’accable sa vue. (I. 2. 205-06)

In her own words, she is beset by a ‘mortel ennui’ that seeks nothing more than to ‘mourir avec lui [Suréna]’ (IV. 2. 1123-24).

Yet Eurydice, and Corneille through her, complicates the somewhat stock topos of ‘dying of grief” by proposing an alternative solution – a solution that she is, in a sense,
already living out. Rather than dying, she wants to carve out for herself an intermediate state that languishes elegiacally between life and death:

Je veux qu’un noir chagrin à pas lents me consume,
Qu’il me fasse à longs traits goûter son amertume ;
Je veux, sans que la mort ose me secourir,
Toujours aimer, toujours souffrir, toujours mourir. (I. 3. 265-68)

This final line here is made all the more striking not only by its famous metrical irregularity and because it is echoed by Suréna himself at the end of the act (I. 3. 348), but also because of the paradoxical formulation ‘toujours mourir’. Eurydice wishes not to die, but rather to ‘be dying’ – to be in a permanent state of elegiac languor that achieves no end or respite in death, but which is dedicated solely to her thwarted passion for Suréna. Suréna’s death would finish her off in an instant, but his survival would allow her to continue her state of loving suffering.

The play, then, builds up through repetition a sense that the options facing Eurydice are either literal death or, at best, an elegiac half-life that is akin to death and that can be maintained only by constantly deferring the moment of Suréna’s final surrender to Mandane or to an executioner. Yet this stalling cannot last forever. The fifth act demands its victims, and the wearily heroic Suréna goes off to meet his fate. Although he is supposedly being banished from the court merely for the duration of Eurydice’s wedding to Pacorus, everyone onstage knows that he is leaving for the last time. His sister Palmis pleads with Eurydice to change her mind and save his life. Eurydice finally relents, but too late; her maid now arrives, announcing that Suréna has been killed by three anonymous arrows. Palmis now plunges into angry despair, blaming in turn the king and his son for Suréna’s death, the heavens for not avenging it, and finally Eurydice herself for appearing so unmoved. As it transpires, though,
Eurydice’s silence in fact expresses far deeper sorrow. After Palmis’s angry tirade, Eurydice announces, quite calmly, that she is dying, before turning to her attendant for physical support: ‘Non, je ne pleure point, madame, mais je meurs. /Ormène, soutiens-moi’ (V. 5. 1732-33). This is the single line that Voltaire, in his brief commentary, deigns to quote from a play for which he shows scant critical regard. According to Voltaire, this line has the potential to encapsulate ‘le sublime de la douleur’, but fails because it does not fit with what we have seen of Eurydice’s character:

Il faut pour dire qu’on meurt de douleur, et pour en mourir en effet, avoir éprouvé, avoir fait voir un désespoir si violent, qu’on ne s’étonne pas qu’un prompt trépas en soit la suite. Mais on ne meurt pas ainsi de mort subite après avoir fait des raisonnements politiques, et des dissertations sur l’amour.19

For Voltaire, only a display of violent despair, rather than intellectualized ‘dissertations d’amour’, can sufficiently motivate a character’s death from grief. For Corneille, though, it is, if anything, Eurydice’s dignified restraint during these final scenes that produces the pathos, particularly against the backdrop of her previous elegiac laments. Corneille takes care to contrast the heroically généreuse Eurydice against Suréna’s more impulsive sister Palmis, who is baffled by and distraught at her apparent passivity, and much of this scene gains its pathos from this contrast between the two women. Eurydice remains nearly silent throughout the last two scenes, uttering only a brief ‘hêlas!’ at Ormène’s confirmation that her lover is dead (V. 4. 1718), and her final words contrasts starkly with the eleven-line tirade from Palmis that precedes them.

19 Voltaire, Commentaires sur Corneille (Œuvres complètes, LV. 977).
A brief comparison with Isabelle’s death in *L’Illusion comique* will help to illustrate the ‘sublime sorrow’ of Corneille’s final scene. Although they seem to have passed unnoticed by commentators, there are some important similarities between the two scenes. Most obviously, both Eurydice and Isabelle are confronted with the death of their lover; both announce that they are dying; and both are tended to by their faithful servant as the curtain falls. Despite these similarities of structure, though, Eurydice’s tone is quite different to that of Isabelle’s hasty and chaotic final lines in *L’Illusion*:

**ISABELLE.** Vous ne l’avez massacré qu’à demi,

Il vit encore en moi; soûlez son ennemi:

Achevez assassins de m’arracher la vie.

Cher époux en mes bras on te l’a donc ravie!

Et de mon cœur jaloux les secrets mouvements

N’ont pu rompre ce coup par leurs pressentiments!

O clarté trop fidèle, hélas, et trop tardive,

Qui ne fait voir le mal qu’au moment qu’il arrive!

Fallait-il... Mais j’étouffe, et, dans un tel malheur

Mes forces et ma voix cèdent à ma douleur,

Son vif excès me tue ensemble et me console,

Et puisqu’il nous rejoint…

**LYSE.** Elle perd la parole.

Madame. Elle se meurt, épargnons les discours,

Et courons au logis appeler du secours.20

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20 *L’Illusion comique* [1660 edition], p. 1447.
Isabelle’s final speech here is desperate and exclamatory; her words have no practical value and go unheeded by their various addressees. Indeed, her speech lurches between various addressees, from her husband’s murderers, to her dead husband himself and then to an apostrophized ‘clarté’; she then breaks off, beset by physical sensations that she proceeds to describe, before dying (melodramatically) in the middle of a sentence in which she looks forward to being reunited with her husband. Eurydice, in contrast, is resigned and pragmatic in tone. Her final two and a half lines also shift between three addressees, but, knowing that her remaining time is precious, she is far more concise and practical. Rather than describing her thought processes or physical sensations, she swiftly passes on relevant information to the two women present. Only in her last line does she shift to a higher register, apostrophizing her dead lover with her final wish: ‘Généreux Suréna, reçois toute mon âme’ (V. 5. 1734).

Here, of course, her words echo the end of her lover’s first speech to her, cited above:

‘Souffrez qu’un soupir exhale à vos genoux, /Pour ma dernière joie, une âme toute à vous’ (I. 3. 255-56). While this neat textual echo builds on and – since Eurydice is now genuinely dying – literalizes the elegiac rhetoric of Suréna’s earlier words, it also gestures beyond the literal, towards a more symbolic or spiritual domain in which the two lovers might be reunited. Both women gesture towards some reunion in the afterlife, but while Isabelle seems to take this prospect for granted, reunion with Suréna may be just a wistful, wishful aspiration for the dying Eurydice. Effectively, what Corneille does at the end of Suréna is to decouple the rhetoric from the death, offloading onto Palmis the bulk of the exclamatory rhetoric and apostrophes that Isabelle herself carries in the earlier play. This decoupling allows him to exploit the emotional benefits of the verse without this detracting from the dignified presentation of Eurydice.
Conclusion

As I have suggested, the motif of the (un)natural death – the death without a murderer – surfaces sporadically throughout Corneille’s dramatic career, and stands at the intersection of various issues. Yet while certain themes recur, these deaths are remarkably different in many respects. Although it would probably be misleading or reductive to offer any definitive conclusions about this strangely disparate bunch of deaths, a couple of observations should help to contextualize them all, and perhaps explain what makes the ending of Suréna, to my mind at least, so powerful.

As a dramatic theoretician, Corneille is – like Aristotle before him – very aware that our attention, as an audience, always risks being distracted away from the suffering of the tragic victim by the triumph of his or her persecutor. He fears that our overriding emotion might end up being unpleasant indignation at the latter rather than emotionally satisfying pity for the former. In this respect, the ‘(un)natural death’ motif allows Corneille’s spectator all the tragic pleasures of death but without the bitter aftertaste of seeing a villain triumphant. We certainly find something of this in Suréna, where Eurydice’s death spares her from the unwelcome advances of Pacorus – or, perhaps more correctly, where her death spares Pacorus from being placed in a situation that might discredit him in our eyes. In fact, Suréna’s own death in this final play – his assassination from a distance, by an unknown hand – also helps to concentrate the tragic focus further onto those who die, and away from those responsible. The same basic desire, to avoid presenting a villain triumphant, underlies the other examples as well, albeit in very different ways. As we have seen, for example, Corneille rewrites L’Illusion comique in order to avoid depicting the triumph of the prince

Florilame. Of the two out-and-out villains in our corpus, Marcelle and Attila himself, both end up dead; one engages in a bloody rampage and then kills herself, while the other is struck down while attempting to drive his enemies to the psychological brink. In both cases, their deaths thus spare the virtuous characters the need to commit bloodshed. Even so, it is really only in *Suréna* and, briefly, in *L’Illusion comique* that Corneille really seeks to exploit the potential pathos of the (un)natural death.

The strategies Corneille uses to motivate these deaths also reflect some general progression in his treatment of the theme. As his career progresses, Corneille increasingly attempts to foreshadow or ‘prepare’ these deaths by appealing to another, more symbolic or rhetorical, level of reality on which these deaths make sense or appear somehow appropriate. In *L’Illusion comique* and *Théodore* these appeals are not particularly strong. In *Théodore* Flavie’s illness appears emphatically literal, while in *L’Illusion comique* Isabelle’s apparent ‘death’, however well prepared rhetorically, is finally exposed as only ever having been a fiction anyway. In *Attila* and *Suréna*, however, the sustained imagery of blood or death that Corneille gradually builds up helps to pave the way for the character’s eventual, literal, death. Attila’s causally overdetermined death, perhaps appropriately, is caught between two paradigms. Like Flavie before him, Attila is already literally, physically ill; but as with Eurydice after him, his death is also woven into the rhetorical fabric of the play long before he actually dies. At the same time, his death also acquires some tragic irony lacking from the other plays: Attila misreads his own symbolic role, seeing himself as God’s scourge not his plaything, and is finally struck down for it.

In contrast, the motivations for Eurydice’s death in *Suréna* are shifted onto a purely symbolic plane. Unlike Flavie and Attila, Eurydice is not physically ill, although her melancholic temperament – announced in the very first scene – somewhat predisposes her to death from the start. Indeed, Eurydice’s melancholic psychology is entirely in keeping with
the play’s deathly symbolism; unlike in *Attila*, then, there is no ironic mismatch here between
the character’s view of events and the symbolic logic of the play itself. So while Attila’s
death is sudden, bloody, defiant, and shocking (‘étonnant’ being, as we have seen, the
operative word), Eurydice’s death flows as naturally as poetic artifice allows from her
temperament and her tragic situation. And yet, to complicate matters, we as spectators of
*Suréna* might mistake all Corneille’s careful ‘preparation’ of her death as just hollow,
conventional romantic rhetoric. If this is so, then the denouement of *Suréna* completely
inverts that of *L’Illusion comique* and – to my mind – marks its aesthetic triumph over its
deliberately metatheatrical precursor. In the earlier play, we are briefly tricked into mistaking
a play for reality, and a staged death from grief as a real death, before a final revelation
definitively separates truth from fiction. In *Suréna*, in contrast, we might well take Eurydice’s
early claims about dying of love with a pinch of salt, as just so much clichéd romantic
rhetoric, before her final moments reveal – in a moment of terrible tragic irony for us – that
her language has been literal all along.

Only four years before *Suréna* was first performed, Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain had
attempted to breathe new life into a stale, long-dead metaphor by subjecting the phrase ‘Belle
Marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d’amour’ to all manner of garbled
reformulations.22 Over the course of his career, Corneille likewise takes the stock, hackneyed
notion of ‘mourir d’amour’ – or, in one case, ‘de fureur’ – and runs it through various
different permutations, each time with quite different effects. As we might recall, Monsieur
Jourdain finally discovers that he had actually struck lucky with his original formulation,
however trite it might seem to us. Although he would scarcely have appreciated the

and others (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 2010), ii. (II. 4).
comparison, Corneille is perhaps not so different. After all, it is surely striking that in his final, most elegiac tragedy – the one with which he chooses to end his life as a dramatist, a good decade before his own natural death – the aging Corneille finds himself returning to his very first ‘death of the fifth act’.