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Death Sentences: Corneille's Prison Monologues

Abstract

Although prisons are uncommon in French theatre after the 1640s, Pierre Corneille is no conventional playwright; indeed, no fewer than five of his characters are imprisoned and face the death penalty. This article thus explores Corneille's 'prison monologues' — soliloquies uttered by imprisoned characters contemplating their own forthcoming execution. Unable to engage materially with the world, Corneille's prisoners are effectively reduced to voices; although objectively powerless, they are subjectively able to wield language as a tool to engage with and symbolically triumph over death (a phenomenon that historian Douglas J. Davies calls 'words against death'). Refusing to condemn the potential fallibility or illegitimacy of the legal power that has condemned them, prisoners like the eponymous tragicomic hero of *Clitandre* and Clindor in *L'Illusion comique* devise creative, poetic accounts to justify and explain their imprisonment on a symbolic level, in an attempt to reconcile themselves to — or even to transcend — the degraded reality of their current situation and their upcoming fate. Corneille's prison monologues dramatize the tension between the prisoners' abstract trust in justice and their physical, embodied experience of imprisonment. Exploring these prisoners' creative verbal engagements with justice and their fear of death thus unearths a new side to these early Cornelian heroes.

Keywords: Corneille; justice; death; execution; imprisonment; fear; language

Introduction: Words against Death

Looking back over a play he had written a quarter of a century earlier, Pierre Corneille in 1660 regretted his decision to depict the imprisonment of the king *Ægée* onstage in his first tragedy, *Médée*. He complained that this prison is ‘un spectacle désagréable’ that he would recommend that dramatists avoid; as he explains, the bars that keep the Athenian king imprisoned hide half his body from the spectator, and make the onstage action drag.¹ If the plot requires a dramatic character to be held prisoner, he concludes, it is much better to have them either kept offstage entirely during their imprisonment, or to allow them onstage only under armed guard, as he himself had done in his more recent tragedies *Polyeucte* and *Héraclius*. The mid-century Corneille was not alone in his misgivings about depicting prisons onstage. Although La Mesnardière had insisted in 1640 that ‘le spectacle des prisons’ was ‘assez ordinaire parmi les actions tragiques’,² a range of new concerns — both aesthetic and ethical, both pragmatic and ideological — made this spectacle a far less common phenomenon over the following decade.³

¹ Pierre Corneille, *Médée*, pp. 533–94, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard ‘La Pléiade’, 1980–87), I (1980), p. 539.

² Hippolyte-Jules de La Mesnardière, *La Poétique*, ed. by Jean-Marc Civardi (Paris: Champion, 2015), p. 473.

³ Alain Couprie attributes this shift to three main factors: the practical difficulties of staging a prison; the rejection of the traditional *décor simultané* in favour of the more fixed unity of place, and the weaker *bienséance* and lesser dramatic appeal of seeing a heroic figure in such a sordid

Indeed, although conventions surrounding the unity of place often lend the ‘classical’ stage space a particular sense of prison-like confinement and claustrophobia (notably in Jean Racine’s *Bajazet* and *Esther*, for example), in practice this unity is one of the first rules to be flouted when dramatists choose to depict literal prisons onstage. After all, it would be nigh on impossible for an early modern dramatist — unlike, say, Jean Genet in *Haute Surveillance* a few centuries later — to set an entire play in a prison cell.

Despite these later misgivings, however, the younger Corneille shows a curiously insistent interest in prisons. Several of his characters from the period 1632–45 are shown imprisoned onstage and facing the death penalty.⁴ While these prisoners have a few basic features in common (most notably, they are all men), they come from various different social and dramatic contexts. They range from the king *Ægée* in the tragedy *Médée*, via the prince’s favourite *Clitandre* in the tragicomedy *Clitandre*, to the picaresque hero *Clindor* in the metatheatrical comedy *L’Illusion comique* and the dashing former law student *Dorante* in *La Suite du Menteur*. They do, however, have some common traits. Most have been wrongfully imprisoned; most will eventually be spared execution; most, too, are allowed what I shall call ‘prison monologues’: onstage soliloquies in which they reflect, from their prison cell, on their present circumstances and upcoming fate. (*Polyeucte*, we might note, is in the minority in all three respects here.) As this article will suggest with reference to a couple of case-studies, these

location. See Alain Couprie, ‘Prison et prisonniers dans le théâtre de Corneille’, *Cahiers de l’association internationale des études françaises* 37 (1985), 137-50 (pp. 140-41).

⁴ As Couprie points out, prison in Corneille’s plays is ‘presque toujours une cellule de condamné à mort’. Couprie, ‘Prison’, p. 139.

‘prison monologues’ hold a place apart in Corneille’s drama, and pose important questions about the young Corneille’s dramatic — indeed, at times even metadramatic or melodramatic — handling of poetic justice.

A few general reflections about prison monologues will be necessary beforehand. On the face of it, solitary confinement might seem to be the natural home of the monologue; being unable to perform any significant physical actions or even to interact with anyone else, a character in prison is, effectively, reduced to a voice. In practice, however, both the status of language and its dramatic function are quite distinctive in prison monologues. For example, although these monologues contain elements of all three traditional rhetorical modes — judicial, epideictic, and deliberative — they cannot be satisfactorily categorized as any. While their lack of an (intradiegetic) audience to impress or persuade might make them appear essentially deliberative in function, deliberative rhetoric is also fundamentally out of place for death-row prisoners who, having no power to change events, have no alternative courses of action to choose between. Even the urgency of the underlying passion that most dramatic theoreticians deemed a necessary counterweight to the inherent *invraisemblance* of monologues⁵ cannot fully be reconciled with the long stretches of inactivity that confront prisoners. At least in terms of the dramatic narrative, then, these speeches are essentially superfluous, and contribute nothing; this factor surely contributes to their increasing rarity as the conventions of ‘classical’ theatre take over during the century. Indeed, in retrospect Corneille would be dismissive of these speeches, claiming in his 1600 theoretical writings that such lengthy monologues as we find in *Clitandre*

⁵ See Mariette Cuénin-Lieber, *Corneille et le monologue: une interrogation sur le héros* (Tübingen: Narr, 2002), p. 80.

were now, thankfully, a thing of the past: ‘c’était une beauté en ce temps-là, les Comédiens les souhaitaient, et croyaient y paraître avec plus d’avantage’.⁶ As Corneille implies, such monologues effectively offer actors ‘set-piece’ speeches that might have considerable emotional or dramatic power but which are not integrated into the overall plot. As I hope to suggest, though, if these speeches are superfluous in this respect, this very gratuitousness might hold a certain interest.

According to Mariette Cuénin-Lieber, the prison monologues we find in *Clitandre*, *Médée*, and *L’Illusion comique* all deal with the same basic issue: in each case, she claims, ‘il est question de la condition de captif’.⁷ Although, within this broad remit, the monologues nonetheless range over various issues, we can nonetheless isolate some more specific common elements. These prison monologues often circle around three different temporal aspects of the judicial system: the past sequence of events that has led to their imprisonment; their present state of captivity; and their future execution. Furthermore, as we shall see, underlying these monologues is a tension between the literal, real-life, judicial system that has condemned the prisoners and the speakers’ own desire to find, or develop, an alternative justification of their imprisonment. As I shall demonstrate, however, Corneille’s prisoners often resist anything as mundane as a literal explanation of their captivity; rather than consider, for example, that they might have been wrongly imprisoned, they gravitate toward more fanciful and creative explanations that justify their imprisonment on a more symbolic or poetic level. Death-row

⁶ Pierre Corneille, *Clitandre, ou l’innocence délivrée*, pp. 91–173, in *Œuvres complètes*, I, p. 104.

⁷ Cuénin-Lieber, p. 115.

prisoners are, after all, in a unique situation. In most of Corneille's plays, death tends to emerge suddenly and unexpectedly; even when characters are aware that their lives are under threat, the actual form that their death takes (its time, place, or method) tends to take them off-guard. In many of Corneille's plays, exposure to death provides a litmus test for a character's moral fibre, resilience, and overall heroism; indeed, this idea underlies Corneille's idiosyncratic redefinition of the unity of tragic action in terms of the threat of death rather than its reality. Knowing that death is imminent, a prisoner facing judicial execution is, conversely, in a very distinct position. 'When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight,' Samuel Johnson memorably put it in the following century, 'it concentrates his mind wonderfully'.⁸ Imprisonment introduces a crucial time-lag between the moment of condemnation and the moment of death — a period which allows prisoners scope to reflect on and confront their upcoming fates in ways that other dramatic characters rarely can. Indeed, although his heroes are often typecast as being unflinchingly courageous in the face of death, these prison monologues give Corneille the opportunity to explore other, rather more complex, relationships to mortality. Accordingly, in this article I shall focus on prison monologues from two of Corneille's non-tragic works: those of the eponymous tragicomic hero Clitandre and Clindor in *L'Illusion comique*. While the other prison monologue — that of *Ægée* in *Médée* — is also rich and fascinating on its own terms, it is perhaps more productive to explore the confrontation with death in two works which Corneille did not deliberately write as tragedies.

⁸ James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. by R. W. Chapman, intro. by Pat Rogers (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 849.

Corneille's prison monologues can be helpfully read as part of a broader phenomenon, one which historian Douglas J. Davies calls 'words against death':

the way human beings use language so as not to let death have the last word. As self-conscious, language-using and language-creating agents, human beings deploy their prime tool — language — to engage with death: often it is deployed as if it were a weapon against an enemy.⁹

Davies is, of course, speaking in very general terms about the way humans across history have used language (and indeed other modes of representation) as a coping mechanism to confront their inevitable mortality. Yet his ideas shed a particularly interesting light on those characters we see facing judicial execution. Being unable to engage materially or objectively with the world, Corneille's prisoners wield language in an attempt to work through, to transcend, or otherwise to reconcile themselves to, their upcoming fates. As Couprie puts it, imprisonment offers Corneille's characters the opportunity for an almost spiritual 'retour sur soi' in which they achieve 'une liberté d'un autre ordre, tout intérieure'.¹⁰ And yet this process is not always quite as straightforward or as successful as Couprie seems to suggest. Indeed, as we shall see, the way Corneille's prisoners seek to achieve this 'interior freedom' is often by constructing alternative — sometimes quite fanciful — symbolic explanations or interpretations of their own predicament. Furthermore, having no intradiegetic audience, their monologues can ultimately be

⁹ Douglas J. Davies, *A Brief History of Death* (Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell, 2005), p. 20.

¹⁰ Couprie, 'Prison', p. 148; p. 147.

aimed only at self-deception; the speakers attempt to weave a beguiling and compelling narrative of events, hoping to trick themselves into falling for the lures of their own rhetoric, and to lull themselves into a sense of comfort over a situation they cannot control. If they are sometimes successful in doing so, their success is only ever provisional; moments of optimism and positivity are invariably interrupted by bouts of disillusionment. These monologues are not, therefore, level-headed, clear, consistent, objective, dispassionate discussions of the judicial system; nor are they purely creative, fancifully *précieux* poetic engagements with justice as a theme. Rather, as Davies's comparison of language to a 'weapon used against an enemy' suggests, the speakers are struggling with unwelcome emotions and thoughts, and grasp at whichever arguments, conceits, or maxims they can seize — however incomplete or makeshift — to help them gain the upper hand at that particular point.

***Clitandre* I: Illusions of Innocence**

The first of Corneille's prisoners is the titular hero of his second play, the tragicomedy *Clitandre* (1632). Despite being the play's title character, Clitandre is scarcely its hero; his role in the action is largely passive. Indeed, even after editing down and adapting his speeches when he rewrote the play as a tragedy in 1660, Corneille himself would still describe Clitandre as 'un Héros bien ennuyeux, qui n'est introduit que pour déclamer en prison'.¹¹ As part of *Clitandre*'s very complex plot, Clitandre is framed by the villainous Pymante and arrested on the charge

¹¹ Corneille, I, p. 102. For more on Corneille's changes in the 1660 version, see Georges Couton's remarks in *Œuvres complètes*, I, pp. 1199–1200. This article focuses on the original, longer versions of both plays.

(although he is not initially told this) of attempting to ambush and kill the King's favourite, Rosidor. Clitandre remains imprisoned for about half the duration of the play, whose plot becomes a race against time for the other characters to discover Pymante's perfidy before Clitandre is executed. Uniquely for his prisoners, Corneille grants Clitandre two monologues, in acts III and IV; while these scenes thus offer moments of respite from the complicated main action, they allow Corneille to depict Clitandre's changing response to his upcoming fate, and his shifting attitudes towards the judicial system that has wrongly imprisoned him.

Clitandre's first monologue starts by juxtaposing two seemingly irreconcilable issues: his stark sensory experience of imprisonment, and his reluctance to believe the impressions of his senses. He offers a vivid, multi-sensory account of his oppressive surroundings, which evokes in turn the smell (the 'air sale et puant d'un cachot effroyable'), his visual impressions (the 'incertaine clarté' of daylight), and the physical sensation of his chains ('le poids de ces fers').¹² Yet despite this powerful evocation of his physical environment, Clitandre cannot, it seems, quite reconcile himself to the testimony of his senses. His speech begins:

Je ne sais si je veille, ou si ma rêverie
 A mes sens endormis fait quelque tromperie;
 Peu s'en faut, dans l'excès de ma confusion,
 Que je ne prenne tout pour une illusion.
 Clitandre prisonnier! (III. 2. 881–85)

¹² *Clitandre*, III. 2. 886–88.

As his almost inarticulate exclamation ‘Clitandre prisonnier!’ here implies, the very notion that he — the innocent and dutiful subject — might be imprisoned encapsulates an oxymoron or logical fallacy too paradoxical to be countenanced. The only way he finds so far to resolve this intolerable conflict is to reject one of the two premises. Accordingly, in curiously Cartesian fashion, Clitandre resolves to doubt the reality of what he nonetheless distinctly perceives — not out of rigorous a priori scepticism but rather out of his unshakeable conviction of his own innocence.

At points he appears relatively successful in rejecting the testimony of his senses. As he explains, while he can clearly see the gloomy prison light and feel the weight of his chains, some part of him refuses to trust this evidence:

Je les sens, je les vois; mais mon âme innocente
 Dément tous les objets que mon œil lui présente
 Et, le désavouant, défend à ma raison
 De me persuader que je sois en prison. (III. 2. 889–92)

Although his overall point is straightforward — he cannot believe his eyes — Clitandre’s formulations show him to be a curiously split, even fragmented, subject here. After all, Clitandre describes his cognitive processes here from a strangely impersonal perspective. He distinguishes between various components of his being — his perceiving self (‘je’), his soul, his eye, his reason, and even a final ‘me’ that seems to differ from the opening ‘je’ — and outlines the relationship between them, but he does so with a curiously factual tone that makes it hard to equate him as speaker with any of them. These lines also figure Clitandre’s innocence in an

unexpected way. Rather than consisting merely in an absence of crime, innocence — in the guise of his ‘*âme innocente*’ — is here a persuasive subject in its own right: something which ‘*dément*’, ‘*désavoue*’, and ‘*défend*’. As this alliterative repetition of ‘*dé-*’ implies, Clitandre’s innocent soul plays an essentially negative role, dismantling and discrediting any external evidence that challenges its worldview.

And yet this position of scepticism proves hard to maintain. Confronted once again with the reality of his imprisonment, Clitandre soon actively attempts — in the monologue’s first use of apostrophe — to reason with his own perceptual capacities: ‘*Et je suis retenu dans ces funestes lieux? | Non, cela ne se peut, vous vous trompez, mes yeux*’ (III. 2. 895–96). While his underlying logic remains the same, then, Clitandre himself as speaker now takes on the active role that his ‘*âme innocente*’ had done. In order to rationalize and explain his situation, however, Clitandre’s reasoning now shifts into the realm of poetic conceit. As he explains, although his eyes used to be a reliable mode of perception, able to transmit visual impressions reliably to his heart, the direction of traffic must since have been reversed, and his eyes fallen under the sway of his heart; nowadays, he tells his eyes, ‘*mon cœur en prison vous renvoie à son tour | L’image et le rapport de son triste séjour*’ (III. 2. 899–900). In order to discredit his visual impressions, Clitandre draws on the stock *précieux* conceit of love as a prison, and subsequently projects this allegorical prison — or at least claims to see it projected — onto his environment. In other words, Clitandre tries to convince himself that his literal prison is in fact only a metaphorical one which his overpowering love for Caliste has caused him to hallucinate as real.

Although stock uses of the ‘love as prison’ conceit often focus more on captivity than punishment, Clitandre keeps the juridical dimension — the question of guilt and innocence — in operation. He chastises himself for having just referred to his imprisonment as a ‘*triste séjour*’,

reasoning that it is disrespectful of him to complain about what he should consider his ‘adorable prison’ (III. 2. 902). By speaking ill of his imprisonment, he reasons, he has committed a crime which implicitly justifies his imprisonment:

En vain dorénavant mon esprit irrité
 Se plaindra d’un cachot qu’il a trop mérité,
 Puisque d’un tel blasphème il s’est rendu capable.
 D’innocent que j’entraî, j’y demeure coupable. (III. 2. 903–06)

Clitandre’s reasoning ties itself in poetic knots here in its attempt to devise a narrative that explains and justifies his literal imprisonment. In a strange, almost pathological excrescence of metaphorical conceit, this detour through the allegory of love allows him first to welcome his imprisonment as a hallucinated allegory and then to find within his very displeasure at his captivity a symbolic justification for his actual imprisonment.

Some part of Clitandre, however, recognizes that this is all a vain attempt at self-deception. He now awakens from his poetic reverie, disavowing all his previous reasoning as ‘Folles raisons d’amour’ and ‘mouvements égarés’ (III. 2. 907) and striving for an alternative resolution to the paradox of his imprisoned innocence. Shifting from the realm of amorous metaphor to the actual juridical situation, Clitandre now glimpses for the first time a new potential explanation of his situation: that the justice system itself is fallible. His ‘esprit en balance’, he comes to recognize, has been brought to believe sheer extravagance (‘la même extravagance’) rather than to ‘s’imaginer, sous un si juste Roi, | Qu’on peuple les prisons d’innocents comme moi’ (III. 2. 909–11). Yet this heretical possibility that royal justice might be

flawed is one that the loyal subject Clitandre finds hard to countenance. Not only does he first produce ‘extravagantly’ irrational explanations before even acknowledging that the judicial system might have made a mistake, but — as this last quotation suggests — he takes any hint of royal fallibility as opening up the hyperbolic possibility that the kingdom’s prisons might all be populated with equally innocent people, all wrongfully imprisoned.

Having now cast into doubt the integrity of the justice system, Clitandre reasserts his loyalty and devotion as a subject even as he attempts to seek an explanation for how the King could have erred in convicting him. The solution he alights upon is the possibility that some rival, envious of his place in the affections of his beloved Prince, might have unfairly slandered him: ‘Ah Prince! c’est quelqu’un de vos faveurs jaloux | Qui m’impute à forfait d’être chéri de vous’ (III. 2. 919–20).¹³ Having done so, though, Clitandre reworks this logic in order to blame himself and thus partly exculpate the judicial system. As he reasons, he is being punished for not heeding the advice of his ‘dieu tutélaire’, the Prince: ‘C’est là ma seule faute, et c’en est le salaire, | C’en est le châtement que je reçois ici’ (III. 2. 926–27). Yet when we consider the actual nature of Clitandre’s ‘faute’, his logic here proves as circular as it was with Caliste. In act II scene 5, the Prince had recommended that Clitandre stay with him rather than obey the King’s summons without some indication of the charge levelled against him. If this is indeed Clitandre’s ‘crime’ then this crime follows his conviction rather than causally motivating it. With both Caliste and the prince, then, Clitandre fabricates for himself crimes that cannot logically have

¹³ For more on the at least quasi-amorous relationship between Clitandre and the Prince, see Michael Hawcroft, ‘Homosexual Love in Corneille's *Clitandre* (1632),’ *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 15.1 (1991), 135–44.

motivated his imprisonment but which he nonetheless calls upon to justify it on a poetic level. According to Clitandre's exacting moral logic, failing to act appropriately to one's arrest or imprisonment is a crime which retroactively justifies the judicial measures in the first place.

Yet Clitandre is not content to restore a semblance of judicial order by condemning himself. He insists, too, that his unknown rivals deserve and will receive punishment for usurping his Prince's authority. His rivals might have avenged the Prince by treating him thus, but — as he tells the Prince — this vengeance is itself an offence: 'vous saurez montrer, embrassant ma défense, | Que qui vous venge ainsi puissamment vous offense' (III. 2. 929–30). He reassures himself that the Prince's 'heureux retour' from the hunt will see himself spared and his enemies suitably punished (III. 2. 933). The changes between the start and end of this monologue are revealing. At the start, Clitandre trusts the judicial system so inherently that he can scarcely believe that he is in prison. By the end, he acknowledges that the system is theoretically fallible, but nonetheless regards any errors as only momentary blips that will invite further retribution. Justice, he insists, has only been deferred, not prevented.

Clitandre II: Posthumous Justice

Yet although Clitandre starts out trying to reject the reality around him as if it were the illusion, his final lines expose his trust in the Prince's justice as little more than a consoling illusion itself: 'Mais on ouvre, et quelqu'un, dans cette sombre horreur, | Par son visage affreux redouble ma terreur' (III. 2. 935–36). Despite never having mentioned feeling any fear before, on hearing the cell door open, Clitandre speaks of his 'terror' as though it has already been openly acknowledged. Corneille thus retroactively reminds us that Clitandre's words reflect only part of his overall emotional experience; their apparent confidence is exposed as having been, in part at

least, bluster and fantasy. The visitor turns out to be the hideous jailer, come to unlock Clitandre's chains. For a moment, it seems that he is going to set Clitandre free, but Clitandre's hopes are dashed again as he learns that he is merely being brought before a judge.

When we next see Clitandre in prison, both his situation and general attitude have changed somewhat, not least because he is now aware of both the accusation against him and the death penalty he faces. After vainly trying to persuade the jailer to pass a message on to his Prince, Clitandre shouts after him with angry insults:

Va, tigre, va, cruel, barbare, impitoyable,
 Ce noir cachot n'a rien tant que toi d'effroyable,
 Va, porte aux criminels tes regards dont l'horreur
 Seule aux cœurs innocents imprime la terreur [...] (IV. 6. 1417–20)

As at the end of the previous monologue, the hideous jailer again serves as the lightning-rod for Clitandre's fears; his ugly face seems to metonymically embody and distil all the horrors of the prison he guards. Once the jailer is out of earshot, Clitandre now turns to reflect on his own situation again. Clitandre realizes that he has been framed, although he does not know who the perpetrator is. He reflects bitterly on the various unjust paradoxes of his situation, above all the contrast between his own ignominy and the honour he imagines his rival enjoying. Now having definitive evidence of the fallibility of royal justice, Clitandre appeals to a still higher justice to punish his persecutors after their deaths; he tells his absent and unknown enemy that heaven has 'un destin plus tragique' in store for him, and that 'mille affreux bourreaux' in 'les gouffres des

enfers' hold worse torments in store than anything conceivable by mortals: 'des cruautés qu'on ne peut concevoir' (IV. 6. 1442–47).

What is also new in this second monologue is Clitandre's awareness of the death penalty that faces him. Unable to guess at the identity of his persecutors, he claims, the one thing his 'esprit troublé' can see for sure is 'ma honteuse mort' (IV. 6. 1439–40). As this formulation suggests, what seems to bother Clitandre most is not — or at least not explicitly — his upcoming death itself but rather the shameful stain on his reputation it brings. Indeed, Clitandre is particularly concerned about how he will live in on the memory of his beloved Prince. Now aware that the Prince is unlikely to come and save his life as he had previously assumed, he now begs him, in absentia, to at least preserve his reputation untarnished in his memory: 'Permettez que mon nom qu'un bourreau va ternir | Dure sans infamie en votre souvenir' (IV. 6. 1455–56). Unable to live on in the popular imagination, he seeks only a special place in his prince's heart.

The final lines of his monologue take a new turn. Having previously assumed that his ignominious death will serve only to compound and confirm his slandered reputation, Clitandre now imagines, with increasing confidence, the eventual disclosure of the truth. After initially announcing that 'J'ose, j'ose espérer qu'un jour la vérité | Paraîtra toute nue à la postérité', he comes to consider this posthumous ratification to be so assured that it 'adoucit déjà la rigueur de ma peine', giving him a 'plaisir secret' that prepares his soul to leave his body 'avec moins de regret' (IV. 6. 1459–64). The aspirations on which his two monologues end thus help flag up Clitandre's overall emotional development and his acceptance of his fate. Having initially wallowed in fantasies of being rescued, at the end of the second monologue Clitandre resigns himself to his execution, subordinating concerns about his life to concerns about his reputation and honour. The second monologue may end on an equally unwarranted note of optimism to the

first, but this time at least Corneille does not puncture the heroic tone with the bathos of the jailer's arrival. Rather, the monologue ends on this heroic note, and, as if summoned by a poetic logic, the very next scene shows us that the Prince has just learned the truth about Clitandre's innocence from the nobleman Cléon and is ready to rescue him. The next time we see Clitandre, of course, it is as a free man — one whose very courage in the face of death, ironically if typically of Corneille, seems to have earned him the right to be rescued from it.

***L'Illusion comique*: Love as Crime and Redemption**

One of the most complex and evocative engagements with the death penalty in Corneille's theatre comes a few years later, in his curious and experimental metatheatrical comedy *L'Illusion comique* (1635). By act IV, the young adventurer Clindor has been imprisoned for killing a rich and powerful rival, Adraste, who had ambushed him with a group of servants. Unlike Clitandre, then, Clindor is actually guilty of homicide, albeit in self-defence — although we might note that Clindor shows remarkably little remorse for Adraste's death, even given these mitigating factors. When we find Clindor in act IV scene 7, he has been in prison for four days, and is scheduled to be executed the following day. His monologue is complex and problematic on various levels. For a start, it can seem rather out of place, not least because by this stage in the narrative the audience already knows that there is a plan afoot to rescue him. Two decades later, the critic d'Aubignac would implicitly warn against scenes such as this, arguing that lengthy speeches forfeit much of their emotional potential if the audience knows that the speaker's distress is misplaced — in his example, because a princess is alive when her beloved believes her dead, or,

in this case, because the audience knows that Clindor will probably escape execution.¹⁴

According to d'Aubignac's logic, a speech cannot have its full emotional effect on audiences who know or suspect that all is, or eventually will turn out, well; this reasoning also underlies his distaste for the generic label 'tragicomedy', which hampers audience empathy by indicating its happy ending from the start.¹⁵ In such cases, d'Aubignac suggests, the dramatist should avoid giving the character 'une longue plainte mêlée de sentiments de tendresse et de douleur' that the better-informed audience would find hard to relate to, but rather plunge the character into a desperate suicidal fury.¹⁶ The option of suicide, of course, is not available to any of Corneille's prisoners; indeed, Ægée's inability to escape human justice and to take his own life nobly underlines much of the distress of his monologue in *Médée*. Whatever the case, Clindor's prison monologue marks an important turning-point in his apparent development as a character, and perhaps the dramatically awkward timing of this scene is meant to draw attention to his internal development. As John Trethewey points out, Clindor is here noticeably 'speaking out of character', and the elevated tone of his speech prepares us for the pseudo-tragic metatheatre of the final act.¹⁷

¹⁴ D'Aubignac (François Hédelin, abbé), *La Pratique du théâtre*, ed. by Hélène Baby (Paris: Champion, 2001), p. 460.

¹⁵ D'Aubignac, p. 219.

¹⁶ D'Aubignac, p. 460.

¹⁷ John Trethewey, *'L'Illusion Comique' and 'Le Menteur'* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1991), pp. 35–36.

Clindor's speech falls into three main sections. He starts off his monologue in a strikingly, even defiantly cheerful tone, clinging to happy memories of his beloved Isabelle to bolster his resolve and provide comfort in the midst of the horrors he is currently experiencing:

Aimables souvenirs de mes chères délices
 Qu'on va bientôt changer en d'infâmes supplices,
 Que, malgré les horreurs de ce mortel effroi,
 Vous avez de douceurs et de charmes pour moi! (IV. 7. 1237–40)

Both Clitandre and Clindor thus associate their captivity with love, but in different ways. Whereas Clitandre had attempted to reject his prison environment as an allegorisation of his love for Caliste, Clindor acknowledges the literal reality of his captivity, his cell, and the tortures that await him, but he overlays these with memories and fantasies of his own. He is pleased that his happy memories of Isabelle still offer 'douceurs' and 'charmes' for him, and he asks these thoughts to continue to console him even when death appears before him in all its 'plus noires couleurs' (IV. 7. 1243).

Yet Clindor's love for Isabelle serves as more than just a consolation for the horrors he is facing; indeed, he works it into a causal narrative that justifies his current situation. As he reasons, in being loved by Isabelle he won more delight and pleasure than he ever deserved: he has been, he claims, 'heureux par-delà mon mérite' (IV.7. 1246). While this unmerited past joy marks a symbolic victory over the grimness of his current surroundings and the horror of his upcoming fate, it also starts to transform into the symbolic cause of his misfortunes. Clindor reasons that he is himself effectively criminal for experiencing a happiness that was beyond his

station and which he never deserved. He announces that if he should ever complain about the severity of his misfortunes, he needs to recall ‘l’excès de ma témérité’ (IV. 7. 1248), and remind himself

Que d’un si haut dessein ma fortune incapable
 Rendait ma flamme injuste et mon espoir coupable,
 Que je fus criminel quand je devins amant,
 Et que ma mort en est le juste châtement.

Death, Clindor reasons, is a fair and just punishment for the crime of loving Isabelle in the first place. However deserved his upcoming death might be, Clindor nonetheless simultaneously claims it as a source of glory:

Quel bonheur m’accompagne à la fin de ma vie!
 Isabelle, je meurs pour vous avoir servie;
 Et de quelque tranchant que je souffre les coups,
 Je meurs trop glorieux, puisque je meurs pour vous! (IV. 7. 1253–56)

Somewhat overlooking the more literal causes of his imprisonment (Adraste’s death at his hands), Clindor reinterprets his upcoming death through two distinct symbolic moral frameworks. In Clindor’s complex and shifting reasoning, his love for Isabelle is both the crime that figuratively merits death and a source of consolation (and even defiant glory) in the face of this fate.

The opening stages of Clindor's monologue thus show him trying to reconcile himself to his fate by constructing hypothetical narratives that justify his punishment, at least on a symbolic level. Yet, like Clitandre in his moments of optimism, Clindor cannot retain this attitude for long. His proud, defiant tone is suddenly punctured by his bathetic realisation that all his talk of glory is a mere veneer that seeks only to disguise from himself the shame of his punishment: 'Hélas! que je me flatte, et que j'ai d'artifice | Pour déguiser la honte et l'horreur d'un supplice!' (IV. 7. 1257–58). In this moment of clarity and disillusionment, Clindor realizes that he has been using 'artifice' and trickery to try to hide from himself the reality of his upcoming fate. Like Clitandre before him, Clindor also insists here, briefly, on the shameful nature of his impending execution. Again echoing Clitandre, but at greater length, Clindor also addresses the unfairness of his forthcoming execution in a succession of bitter and ironic paradoxes that highlight the perverse nature of his captivity and impending punishment. He comments indignantly on the ironies of fate that have led the man he killed to become his persecutor, and his own courage to become a crime:

L'ombre d'un meurtrier creuse encor ma ruine;

Il succomba vivant et, mort, il m'assassine;

Son nom fait contre moi ce que n'a pu son bras... (IV. 7. 1261–63)

Interestingly, although Clindor clearly feels that his punishment is not fully justified, he does not explicitly discuss the ethics of killing in self-defence here. Rather, he rhetorically presents his own upcoming execution not as a judicial punishment but rather as the deadly culmination of Adraste's previous attack on him. In Clindor's account, Adraste is a murderer whose death has

spawned ‘mille assassins nouveaux’ hell-bent on conducting a ‘meurtre public avec impunité’ (IV. 7. 1261, 1264, 1268). Although Clindor’s rhetoric here makes a stark contrast between the legitimate executions of the official justice system and illegitimate, murderous assassination, this distinction gradually starts to break down as his opponents effectively appropriate his death for themselves. Tomorrow, he claims, his courage will be turned into a ‘crime’ and his head offered to the ‘déloyal’ (IV. 7. 1269–70). Echoing his earlier paradoxes, Clindor reflects on the ironies of his situation:

J’ai repoussé la mort, je la reçois pour peine.

D’un péril évité je tombe en un nouveau,

Et des mains d’un rival en celles d’un bourreau. (IV. 7. 1275–77)

In Clindor’s eyes, the judicial authority that has condemned him is not a legitimate power but just a weapon seized — or rather usurped — by the perfidious Adraste’s followers in order to pursue with impunity their master’s original murderous designs. This, in effect, he uses to explain the ignominy of his death; while there had been some dignity in defeating ‘un rival’ in combat, he now faces a shameful death at the hands of ‘un bourreau’. The second section of the speech thus offers an opposing narrative to the first. What Clindor originally presented as a glorious testimony to his love for Isabelle has transformed into an unjust murder visited upon him from beyond the grave.

The third and final section of his speech is perhaps the most haunting, as Clindor now starts to describe the visions of his upcoming execution that have been assailing him for the past few nights. Recounting his walk to the scaffold as he visualizes it nightly, Clindor evokes the

whole experience in quite sensory, bodily terms, as though it were happening to him in the present. He describes, for example, how, with chains on his feet, he sees the ‘honteux appareil’ of his death and the ‘funestes ministres’ of his execution and hears the cries of ‘l’amas insolent d’un peuple qui me suit’ (IV. 7. 1280, 1281, 1284). In keeping with the metatheatrical conceit of the whole play, Clindor’s evocative speech thus turns his sparse prison, through his (and the audience’s) imagination, into the scene of his impending execution. While his stress on the sensory impressions echoes that of Clitandre at the start of his first speech, albeit with the auditory (the sound of cries) discreetly replacing the olfactory (the stink of the prison), Clindor’s stance here is quite different. The sensory stimuli of his prison environment are not so much rejected as false (as in Clitandre’s first monologue) as overridden by an unbidden sensory fantasy of what is to come. Clindor’s use of the present tense throughout this account allows various different time periods to shade into each other. His actions and experiences, conducted and described in the present, are both a rehearsal of his upcoming last steps to the scaffold (the future) and a re-enactment of the visions that have been assailing him each night (the past). This conflation, or superimposition, of different time schemes adds a new dimension to his otherwise fairly standard paradox ‘la peur de la mort me fait déjà mourir!’ (IV. 7. 1288); Clindor’s brief but repetitive spell in prison has allowed past, present, and future to collapse into a single vague continuum which is already saturated with death. Returning to the themes of the start of his monologue, Clindor now invokes his absent beloved Isabelle again, insisting that she alone can counteract all these fears, and cause all the ‘infâmes portraits’ of his death to dissipate. Like Clitandre with his Prince, Clindor begs the absent Isabelle to preserve his memory, insisting that if she does ‘je croirai revivre’ (IV. 7. 1294). The speech thus ends as it began, with Clindor’s

insistence that his love for Isabelle can provide him with fortitude and consolation in the face of a death it has involuntarily provoked.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, it is hard to make definitive pronouncements about Corneille's prison monologues because they are, in themselves, inherently shifting and unstable. In these monologues we catch the prisoners improvising as they wrestle with an unknown, multifaceted, and protean enemy: death or, perhaps more specifically, the fear of death. Although both men sporadically strive to convince themselves that what they really fear is the ignominy of a shameful death on the scaffold, Corneille has them both suggest that this is a mere mask for what Clitandre calls his 'terreur' and what Clindor calls 'la peur de la mort'. By openly acknowledging (however fleetingly) their fear of death, Clindor and Clitandre thus mark their difference from many of Corneille's later heroes, who tend to prove resolute in the face of danger throughout; they also prove different from their fellow prisoner Ægée in *Médée*, who longs — with apparent sincerity — for the opportunity to kill himself rather than face the shame of an ignoble execution.

Yet what is of interest here is perhaps less the nature of their enemy than the strategies they use to fend it off. As we have seen, both men use language in an attempt to creatively construct new explanations and justifications for their captivity. In his later theoretical writings, Corneille will suggest that the tragic dramatist's task is to take some known historical givens — non-negotiable facts of history — and to construct a narrative that will dramatically motivate

them.¹⁸ In a sense, Clitandre and Clindor attempt to do the same thing. Both are confronted with some apparently irrefutable facts (that is, their present captivity and their upcoming execution) which they use their powers of reasoning and rhetoric to negotiate — at least, in Clitandre’s case, once they have genuinely acknowledged these facts as irrefutable. Importantly, though, both men remain dutiful enough subjects to resist the easy temptation of condemning the judicial system outright. Instead, rather than simply blaming the legal process for wrongly imprisoning them, they both fabricate crimes so as to motivate or justify their imprisonment, at least on a symbolic level; Clitandre accuses himself of having been too successful in winning his Prince’s affections, while Clindor reasons that merely daring to love as someone as worthy as Isabelle had made him criminal from the start. In other words, the coexistence of two apparently irreconcilable givens — the integrity of the legal system and the fact of their unmerited imprisonment — compels Corneille’s prisoners to seek explanations beyond the literal, and to become creative users of language in an attempt to overcome or transcend their current captivity. It is in this respect that I earlier considered these monologues as both metatheatrical and melodramatic. Metatheatrically, in their use of ‘words against death’, Corneille’s prisoners become like poets or dramatists in their own right, conjuring up fictive symbolic explanations of their imprisonment, precisely in the hope of tricking themselves (as their own intradiegetic audience) into accepting their punishment as just. From the perspective of the literal (extradiegetic) audience, however, the poetic lengths to which they go to justify their imprisonment might also seem melodramatic and overblown. By creatively reworking their situation in order to justify it on a non-literal level,

¹⁸ This idea is explored by Georges Forestier in ‘Illusion comique et illusion mimétique,’ *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, 11 (1984), 377–91.

Clitandre and Clindor demonstrate both their creative ingenuity and their heroic credentials — their readiness to exist on a more symbolic plane, beyond the mundane and literal. Yet in doing so they further flag up the injustice of their own captivity in the first place. Furthermore, of course, the crimes they charge themselves with are fanciful and self-flattering ones; anticipating a reasoning that will underpin even Corneille’s final play, *Suréna*,¹⁹ both men lay claim to the flaw of simply being too heroic or too successful. In a curious anticipation of Roland Barthes’s claim in *Sur Racine* that ‘tout héros tragique naît innocent; il se fait coupable pour sauver Dieu’,²⁰ Clitandre and Clindor both make themselves guilty — at least rhetorically — in order to preserve the moral validity of the justice system that condemns them. Ironically, however, unlike with *Suréna* or with Racine’s self-incriminating tragic heroes, Clitandre’s and Clindor’s very readiness to submit to their juridical fate seems to authorize their creator to allow them to escape it.

¹⁹ Georges Forestier discusses the construction of this play this at length in *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l’œuvre* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1996), pp. 31–59.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), pp. 54–55.