"As-tu du coeur?" Women Reading Corneille

by
Claire Carlin

Ever since *La Querelle du Cid*, Cornelian theater has impelled critics to consider the images of women it depicts, from the *femme forte* and the *mère monstrueuse* to weaker, perhaps more nurturing female characters like Sabine. In the last 15 years, Corneille scholars have produced some subtle analyses demonstrating the complexity of Corneille's treatment of women (see Allentuch, Greenberg, Muratore, Rowan, Verhoeff). I propose a slight shift in perspective: I will concentrate on the possibility of a "female" reading of Cornelian texts, with the understanding that men can do a "female" reading just as women can, and usually have, read as males.

An evolution has occurred in Anglo-American feminist criticism since the late sixties: descriptions of the "immasculation" of women characters and readers of texts written by men, for example Judith Fetterly's *The Resisting Reader*, have been overshadowed by feminist scholarship on texts written by women. Elaine Showalter has argued that this approach is more fruitful in that it will lead to the elaboration of a true feminist poetics (182-85). However, the argument has recently been put forth convincingly in a collection of articles entitled *Gender and Reading* that feminist critics must not abandon the study of the female reader (see the articles by Kennard and Schweikart). A feminist reader response to texts written by men can yield a different, more positive result than simply uncovering negative images of women and the exclusion of woman's story from male texts. Although Corneille scholarship has already gone beyond a simplistic view of the portrayal of women in the corpus, the female reader has not been highlighted, either in her abstract, idealized form or in her individual reality.

Pierre Corneille's theater is well-suited to a refocused feminist reader response from the perspective of the actual late twentieth-century female reader; the *grandes tragédies* in particular have been force-fed to French students (and to our own) as works containing images essential to the French perception of nationhood. Almost any French

person not in our profession (and even some who are) will manifest either hostility or incredulity when introduced to a Corneille specialist. I have found the distaste for Cornelian theater stronger among women, usually because the traditional presentation of Cornelian heroism suggests personal fulfillment through the pursuit of *gloire* while stifling intimate interpersonal relations. If women could reread the scorned texts in a new light, perhaps their self-image would emerge refreshed rather than tarnished.

Critics examining the psychology of our author have found evidence in the plays of extreme fear of women (Verhoeff) as well as of the validation of so-called feminine values usch as sentimentality and avoidance of disputes (Allentuch, "*Cinna*," 881-85), but even these critics do not explicitly pursue the effect of the text on the reader, or her power over the text. A model based on the psychology of a hypothetical female reader should help women regain possession of a classical literature whose long-standing claim to celebrate universal values has tended to exclude them despite the work of these scholars.

Who is the "female" reader? A hypothesis surrounding her can be built up from at least two rather different perspectives. Definitions of femininity by French theorists such as Kofman, Irigaray, Lemoine-Luccioni, and Montrelay deny any distinctive identity to women. As Jonathan Culler puts it, they "see *le féminin* as any force that disrupts the symbolic structures of Western thought," even though they all have moments when they speak of the actual women's experience (49-50).

In this article, my perspective is an Anglo-American one: Anglo-American feminist critics explore the nature of feminity with a practical, overtly political, reality-grounded approach which insists on the validity and authority of women's experience as opposed to men's, and of a generalized viewpoint on the part of the female reader. In order to tap into this experience without relying entirely on the subjectivity of the individual reader, the notion of the hypothetical reader must be put forward. Culler suggests that the hypothesis of a female reader "marks the double or divided structure of 'experience' in reader-oriented criticism. Much male response criticism conceals this structure--in which experience is posited as a given, yet deferred as something to be achieved--by

asserting that readers simply do in fact have a certain experience" (50). I propose a female-centered paradigm for reading Corneille which takes its definition of feminity from Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*.[1] Gilligan's theory of sexually differentiated moral development provides many examples of the cohesiveness of a "women's experience" upon which a reading can be based.[2]

The dramatic structure of Corneille's plays provides another reason why the reader's role should be reemphasized. The spectator or reader of Corneille's dramas is obliged to participate actively in the play's construction, more so than in the works of other playwrights of the period. Whether reading or viewing, the audience members function as part of a group, a collective which must judge the central figures in order to decide whether or not they deserve the label of "hero"; the structure is more that of classical comedy than of tragedy since the text does not encourage the individual spectator or reader to identify with the hero. The hero is a superior being, but he/she can only be so with the approbation of society as represented by the consumer of the text. (See my article "The Woman as Heavy" for a fuller explanation of the functioning of this structure). It is the reader/spectator's responsibility to validate the potential hero, to name her or him. The goal of such judgment is to designate the behaviors which will best perpetuate and renew society. According to most reader response theory, thexts await the reader before they exist. This operation becomes extremely clear in Cornelian plays because they cannot come to a conclusion without an audience. The burden of judgment, the assumption of responsibility on the part of the reader or spectator makes her the creator of the dénouement. Her sex, when used as a conscious instrument of difference, can change the outcome of the play.

Carol Gilligan's theory centers on notions of judgment and responsibility; she describes how definitions of right and wrong based on male paradigms have traditionally been put forth as universal, from Freud to Piaget to Erikson to Kohlberg. *In a Different Voice* proposes an ethic of responsibility and judgment different from the male model. The male ethic emphasizes fairness and equality, a sense of justice emanating from a consistent application of the rule of Law. The male ethical

conception equates maturity with separation and individuation, a tendency which psychologists may of course trace from the infant's relations with the mother; Gilligan studies both male theorists and actual male behaviors from infancy to adulthood in order to reinforce her argument. Since each individual should have access to equal treatment according to this model, everyone has the right to fulfill his or her potential. In the case of the Cornelian hero, this means the possibility for glorious achievement. Interestingly, the male texts and individuals that Gilligan studies communicate strongly their belief in the possibility for success on an almost unlimited scale, barring circumstances that make them identify themselves as ordinary (or non-heroic). The ability to recognize this potential in themselves: these men should be quite receptive to Corneille's theater in its most conventional interpretation.

The female ethical model Gilligan traces is quite different, since for women connectedness supersedes separateness, and judgment is based on context rather than on a strict application of rules. Responsibility for women means caring for others, and equity in a given circumstance is more important than a uniform notion of equality. Recognition of the difference of the other is essential, and yet empathy is sought rather than avoided as threatening. The fully morally developed person would let the female model readjust the picture of isolation the male model projects, but without sacrificing autonomy and feelings of self-worth.

In Cornelian theater, the *grandes tragédies* bring issues of adjudication explicitly to the forefront, and the critics' commentary on the label "heroic" has diverged the most for these plays. The perspective I propose applies to today's readers, although I do not discount a certain stability of male-female reader response across the centuries. My rereading is not radically new, but where on occasion others have noted and chosen to validate the behaviors I will call female, I will attempt to analyze them systematically according to Gilligan's schema in the hope of arriving at a conclusion helpful to those who would like to read as women without the attandent inferiority complex Corneille's texts have tended to inspire. Gender identity is a theme in moral development, a theme that is usually, but not necessarily, linked to one's sex.

Most psychological theorists have equated failure to spearate from the other with failure to develop: Gilligan cites Piaget, Mead, Lever, Erikson, Bettelheim, and Horner (9-15). Rodrigue is an excellent example of a man seizing the opportunity to become successful through separation. An act ostensibly committed for his father actually permits Rodrigue to acquire a self-made identity: he will be "Le Cid." If this act also cuts him off from Chimène, this unfortunate but necessary side effect can be accepted, at least temporarily. Rodrigue works for the collectivity and is rewarded by it; he appears confident and triumphant throughout most of the play and self-doubt does not plague him. The female viewpoint described by Gilligan demonstrates why Chimène wavers in her resolve to punish Rodrigue and why she also has difficulty in accepting the solution proposed by the king: women include in their judgments points of view other than their own. What has been seen as "women's moral weakness, manifest in an apparent diffusion and confusion of judgment, is thus inseparable from women's moral strength, an overriding concern with relationships and responsibilities" (16-17).

The other perspectives Chimène must add to her judgment of Rodrigue's behavior are that of her dead father as well as that of society. While Rodrigue is able to earn social approval by continuing to act, Chimène's position remains ambiguous. She attempts to act through her pursuit of Rodrigue, but her actions are considered detrimental to the group. However, were she to acquiesce and marry Rodrigue after a suitable period as the king wishes, society might still regard her disapprovingly. *Les Sentiments de l'Académie sur Le Cid* suggest the reaction of some seventeenth-century spectators, and marriage and patricide could still be shocking today.

Both Rodrigue and Chimène pay attention to the *qu'en dira-t-on* since group judgment is just as important as individual judgment in Cornelian theater. Nevertheless, Chimène's notion of a just and fair outcome considers the nuances of context more than does Rodrigue's, so she does not cease to suffer. Gilligan compares what she calls the rights conception of moral development to the responsibility conception. While in the rights conception, the highest stage of moral development is "geared to arriving at an objectively fair or just resolution of moral dilemmas upon which all rational persons could agree, the

responsibility conception focuses instead on the limitations of any particular resolution and describes the conflicts that remain" (21-22).

The dénouement of *Le Cid* has been controversial precisely because it is open-ended. The text places responsibility for resolving the conflict--or not--on the audience. Any possible solution does indeed present limitations; the play seems to emphasize the (female) responsibility conception of moral development when Chemène's dilemma is highlighted. Chimène alone continuously articulates the difficulties inherent in their situation. A female reading in Gilligan's sense would insist that Chimène's waffling between love and honor represents a higher form of moral development than the certainty Rodrigue exhibits during most of the play.

In *Horace*, the doubling of the couple allows a more nuanced treatment of moral issues and illustrates that the female perspective need not reside only in female characters. While both Horace and Camille tend to cling to moral absolutes, Curiace and Sabine see all sides of their problem and waver and suffer for it. However, Curiace has the advantage of escape through an honorable death; Sabine's request to die in the last scene expresses her pain as she confronts a situation apparently without any other solution. Mitchell Greenberg shows that death in the play means apotheosis for men in a reflection of the ideals of the State, as opposed to intimate family relations (277). However, the women cannot make the same leap into metaphor because "they can never subscribe entirely to the ideology that founds the *polis*" (278), that is, the ideology of Law and patriarchal order. Gilligan finds in the female viewpoint a reluctance to judge, which "remains a reluctance to hurt,... one that stems not from a sense of personal vulnerability but rather from a recognition of the limitation of judgment itself" (102). Sabine's behavior would in this light be considered the result of the depth of her understanding rather than of a desire to escape her fate. Greenberg points out that male characters in *Horace* (besides Curiace) repress those threatening female traits in themselves that represent refusal of the Law (273). The female characters express a dangerous ambiguity of values. In this play, according to Greenberg, "margins of ambiguity remain possible, margins that must be watched and controlled by the State" (276). As Gilligan suggests,

women's moral conception tends to threaten long-accepted norms, especially as regards the relationship between individual needs and the rule of Law.[3]

Corneille completely reverses the moral perspective of the male and female characters in *Cinna.* Harriet Allentuch has alread demonstrated that in Jungian terms, Corneille often depicts both the masculine and feminine principles within one character in a play (880).[4] Curiace and Camille in *Horace* are, I believe, examples of this strategy. Cinna continues it in a clearer manner: he has the "feminine" role of highlighting bonding rather than political victory, he gratifies the emotional demands of others, he does not fear intimacy as Emilie appears to, and his appeal to sentiment is rewarded; sincere emotion is a source of growth and power for all who embrace it in the play (881). Allentuch also sees the feminine principle at work in Cinna's submissiveness and aversion to disputes as well as in his anguish as he is unable to choose between Emilie and August, which leads to feelings of helplessness (883-84). It is Auguste who ends up balancing the masculine and feminine principles in the play, according to Allentuch (885).

The problem with this sort of reading is that the feminine principle ends up devalued unless put in the context of feminine morality. Gilligan suggests a balance between the masculine and feminine ethic and that they can act as correctives upon each other, but by noting that Cinna feels "helpless to determine his own destiny" (884) without explaining why this is not necessarily negative, Allentuch appears to add a major weakness to her definition of the feminine principle. The text, for example II,4, justifies the view of Cinna as Emilie's pawn, but the very lack in initiative on his part can be read as one more element in an ethic which stresses connectedness as its fundamental value. Cinna can never choose between Emilie and Auguste because he loves them both, just as Sabine declares herself unable to either accept or reject the murders committed by Horace, and Chimène remains uncomfortable when choosing between her father and her fiancé. Cinna's character makes explicit that essential segment of the female ethic more obliquely suggested by the open-ended structure of *Le Cid* and *Horace*, that the reluctance to make a choice is not a defect but rather the result of a well-refined moral understanding. Gilligan

does not see moral paralysis in the reluctance to judge because in the fully developed feminine ethic, "moral judgment is renounced in an awareness of the psychological and social determination of human behavior..." (103). Cinna acts and reacts in a social and psychological context he understands so well that it would be impossible to exclude either Auguste or Emilie from his compassion and support.

While Emilie hesitates little in her quest to punish Auguste, Pauline in *Polyeucte* never really comprehends her husband's choice until the last moment of miraculous grace in V,5 (as compared with V,3). She doubts, thus she suffers. There is no ambiguity in Polyeucte's moral code. Only Sévère ends the play wrestling with moral uncertainty. He is the one left behind because he continues to wonder, to doubt, to weigh, and to avoid a definitive choice. Even this play about the certainty of a Christian martyr does not avoid the issue of moral relativism; Pauline and Sévère's emphasis on relationships seems in fact more reasonable and appealing, and quite worthy of consideration on the part of the reader.

The reader's situation is as ambiguous as the character's in the open-endedness of a female moral perspective. However, validation of a reluctance to choose and to judge *within* the text does not need to imply reluctance to interpret on the part of the reader: the choice may not be definitive, but is must still be made--in Gilligan's paradigm as in Lorneill's.

Notes

[1]Gilligan's theory proposing that a different ethical code exists for men and women has been controversial, but well received by feminist scholars in all disciplines who are ready to accept a radical shift in perspective in order to highlight long-neglected aspects of women's experience. Gilligan's works is grounded in at least two sorts of study: 1) interviews with male and female paired subjects of several different ages, and 2) a study of the effects on women of their decisions about abortion and how they articulate their feelings differently one year after an abortion. Social scientists may criticize the generalizations she draws from her studies, but the contrasts she finds between men and women do exist, even if they are not universally applicable.

Literary critics of the 1980s must surely be able to acknowledge that no reading is definitive and to allow experimentation with various paradigms. Feminist literary critics cite Gilligan with some frequency: see *Gender and Reading* (xx and *passim*).

[2]When Gilligan's theory is juxtaposed with the work of the above-mentioned French theorists, some connections can be made, since Gilligan too participates in the process of disrupting traditional symbolic structures. However, the basic difference in approach remains, and needs to be further examined in a more detailed manner than would be possible here.

[3]Greenberg's work would be a good starting point for the reconciliation of Anglo-American and French feminisms since his definitions of feminity are taken from French theorists, especially Irigaray and Montrelay, and yet possible parallels with Gilligan do exist, as suggested here.

[4]Allentuch is referring to the concepts of animus/anima in Jung's work. Animus and anima "represent basic tendencies within each person that usually correspond to those manifested by persons of the opposite sex" (*Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* 815).

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