

## **Women of the *raison d'État***

by  
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Seventeenth-century tragedy and tragi-comedy often push the limits of the *raison d'État*, that is, the belief that the State may go to extreme measures, or even commit immoral acts, to accomplish its aims. Furthermore, this ideology dictates that, since both cannot be satisfied, individuals should sacrifice their personal interests to those of the State, often embodied in the sovereign ruler. Male characters of the era seem to accept this either/or bargain because, in the worlds created on stage, they will be hailed as great champions, saviors whose memory will be eternally cherished.<sup>1</sup> Some female protagonists, however, seeing little hope of equal reward for their sacrifices, defy this stereotypically male portrayal of heroism by widening the horizon of possible options and proposing a more varied and, at times, radical response to the *raison d'État* conundrum.

Testing the boundaries of the *raison d'État* was certainly not confined to the seventeenth century. French monarchs throughout history have tried to augment their power and legitimate their rule often by associating themselves with religious/sacrificial images of Christ and military leaders. Pépin le Bref, in 752, was the first Franc king to have his ascension to the throne consecrated by a *sacre*. The practice ignited fears in the Catholic Church that the ceremony would be seen as granting religious authority to a secular ruler. Thus, Pope Innocent III, in 1204, forbade kings to be anointed on the head (as was the custom with bishops), an interdiction French monarchs ignored (Apostólides 11–12). In the thirteenth-century, after Philippe-Auguste's victory in the battle of Bouvines, French kings found a balance between the religious and military images by portraying themselves, with varying degrees of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Bénichou observes that, during the first half of the era, tragedy sought to excite this same kind of admiration among spectators for grandiose action and noble sentiments, as “tout était orienté vers le grand” (175).

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success, as legitimate because of their willingness to sacrifice their lives in battle for their people (Apostólides 21, 24).

Over the centuries, this idea of a servant/king bestowed on the sovereign wide moral latitude as he constructed State policies that justified actions even against individual citizens of the realm. Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532) was well known for advocating absolute sovereignty entitling the ruler to the unbridled and unchecked capacity to do as he pleases. Most French and European thinkers rejected this extreme view yet found ways to accord the monarch wide-ranging powers. The *rex et sacerdos* notion from the Middle Ages remained a popular image among Early Modern thinkers because it implied a king subject to civil and religious laws (Thuau 16), but it was undermined by numerous societal observers who accepted the occasional "necessity of immoral policies" (Church 3) especially during such crises as the Wars of Religion of the sixteenth century and the Fronde of the early and mid-seventeenth century.

While Jean Bodin (1530–96) sees the king as the ultimate authority who may dispose of his subjects' lives and possessions (Keohane 17), Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) seems to be of two minds on *raison d'État* tactics as he generally condemns dissimulation, yet realizes justice cannot be universal and absolute and therefore seems willing to accept a number of vices in a sovereign, including breaking his promises and authorizing violence (Church 73–74), if he is acting for the public good (Kruse 150–52). The Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) condones fraud and treachery if the ruler believes them necessary (Church 61). Echoing many of the ideas of Montaigne and Lipsius, Pierre Charron (1541–1603) condemns dissimulation at the court (Kruse 153), deeming it a method by which individuals seek gain for themselves but includes dissimulation and even secret executions as permissible monarchical actions if done to protect the populous (Church 76). Even those who seek to limit royal power in the name of religion concede to the king the prerogative to take the lives of his subjects as long as he does not corrupt their souls (Thuau 112–13).

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All of these notions are, of course, in the air when Cardinal Richelieu holds his post as principal advisor to Louis XIII from 1624–1642. Richelieu never advocates national policy be divorced from morality as does Machiavelli, but at the same time he sees no conflict between religion and interests of the State (Church 11, 48), both of which should ostensibly work for the public interest. Richelieu is unequivocal, however, in his contention that the public interest is solely visible to the king and his ministers as they alone are divinely selected as trustees of the public good (Keohane 175–76). The cardinal is mindful not only of his responsibility to justify State authority but also of the power of the theater to disseminate and reinforce his ideology. Not merely a fan of the stage, he may have authored or co-authored three plays during the 1630s and for a time kept several dramatists on contract while arranging *pensions* for Jean Rotrou and Pierre Corneille (Howarth 59–61).

While it is difficult to establish a definitive *quid pro quo* between Richelieu's patronage and Corneille's work, the playwright offers some of the best examples of male characters, typical of the era, who accept the *raison d'État* as superceding their particular interests. Corneille creates a kind of androcentric heroism that deprives the protagonists of any middle ground between State policy and personal concerns, yet showers them with reward when they choose the kingdom over their individual desires. The protagonists of *Horace* remain prime illustrations of heroes who realize that, although fighting for the State is a great honor, it also demands they sacrifice personal relationships and the lives of loved ones (469–70, 479, 502). Before they know they will fight each other, Curiace and Horace see nothing but “gloire” for the combatants who will determine the fates of Rome and Albe (355–58, 378–80, 399–402, 449–52). Their predictions are proven correct when Valère brings news of Horace's victory as well as the “chants de victoire” and the forthcoming tribute from the king, who pardons Horace's murder of his sister because of the hero's military value to the empire (1150–61, 1740–63). Likewise, Rodrigue's renowned *stances* make clear that the hero of *Le Cid* cannot escape the irresolvable conflict between his family's

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reputation and his love for Chimène (Act II, Sc. 6). Whereas the son focuses on his tragic dilemma, his father foresees public adulation for the son's military exploits as he defends Spain from invasion (1086–91). Rodrigue's situation is, however, only partially a classic *raison d'État* dilemma since his choice is not between Chimène and the State, but rather between Chimène and familial honor. Nonetheless, his warrior prowess and willingness to risk his life earn him effusive adulation from his people and his king (1101–16, 1221–28). In *Cinna*, an act of mercy, not military maneuvers, proves to be in Rome's best interest. Instead of punishing the conspirators plotting his assassination, Auguste pardons them largely because he is swayed by his wife's argument that the *raison d'État* demands he relinquish his personal desire for vengeance. Livie contends the emperor's clemency will ensure the long-term stability of Rome while earning him eternal popular acclaim for his leniency. Satisfying a personal vendetta must be subordinated to the needs of the empire (1199–1216, 1757–74).<sup>2</sup> Although their situations differ, these heroes are emblematic of the predominant *raison d'État* attitude of male protagonists of the time in their belief that these situations disallow any possibility of satisfying both their country and their individual wants. They must choose to serve either the State or their own interests and are amply rewarded for their sacrifice.

Several female protagonists of the era simply do not accept that either/or situation. Less preoccupied with rewards or their opportunities to earn them, which are often nonexistent or denied, these women concentrate more on entertaining a multitude of considerations in their deliberations on the traditional *raison d'État* dilemma. Unconstrained by the usually male dichotomous perspective that sees only mutually exclusive choices, these heroines are free to develop alternative answers where none seem to exist.

While an exhaustive study of the subject is beyond the scope of this article, the four plays discussed represent the wide spectrum

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion on kings and the *raison d'État*, see Ferrier-Caverivière.

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and vicissitudes of ideas on the *raison d'État* dilemma during the period. A sequentially linear evolution toward a consensus on this issue is hardly discernible in the seventeenth century; thus adopting a chronological approach would be counterproductive. Instead, I have chosen a character-driven study that will focus on the progressively more complex understanding the female protagonists have of their own predicaments and the increasingly sophisticated, and at times extreme, solutions they find. Jean Rotrou's *L'Innocente infidélité* (1634), Jean Racine's *Bérénice* (1670), Catherine Bernard's *Laodamie reine d'Épire* (1689), and Marie-Catherine Desjardins's *Nitétis* (1664) span much of the era, offer examples of tragedy and tragi-comedy from minor and major playwrights, and include perspectives from male and female dramatists. Despite little or no expectation of even posthumous recognition, the women of all four plays shape new perspectives on the threats of death, banishment, a loveless marriage, or a combination of all three in service to the State.

Rotrou's *L'Innocente infidélité* offers the most extreme example of self-abnegation in the form of the Queen of Epirus, Parthénie. Soon after she marries Felismond, he is put under a spell by Hermante, a spurned lover seduced by the king's earlier promise of marriage. Via demonic incantations and a magic ring, Hermante convinces Felismond to kill his new bride so Hermante may ascend to the throne. Learning of the order of her execution, Parthénie makes no effort to save herself, believing that such actions would constitute a violation of marital obedience and her promise to respect royal proclamations.

Although the plot is eventually discovered, Hermante imprisoned, and the royal couple reunited, Parthénie must nevertheless make some difficult and innovative decisions before this happy ending is realized. Fully aware that Felismond is carrying on a liaison with Hermante, she initially dismisses it as a fleeting affair that will soon run its course:

L'amour ne dure pas estant si violente,  
J'obtiendray quelque jour ce que possede Hermante  
(649–50)

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Un jour les Dieux touchés de mon amour extreme  
 Pour me le rendre enfin le rendront à soy-mesme (653–  
 54)

However, Evandre, a royal advisor, seeing a more ominous threat in Hermante, makes a proposal that would circumvent the dichotomous *raison d'État* that dictates separation between private and State matters. He suggests killing Hermante as a way of fulfilling both Parthénie's personal interest in preserving her marital honor and the State's interest in political stability:

Coupons racine aux maux dont ces salles amours,  
 Troublent vostre repos & menacent vos jours.  
 L'honneur, & les respects deus à la loy divine  
 Et le bien de l'état dépend de sa ruine, (659–62)

Evandre's words convince Parthénie that Hermante represents a danger more serious than a mere tryst, but her reply signals a more submissive approach to her husband's dalliance:

Evandre, que ma mort previenne la pensee  
 D'irriter cette ardeur dont son ame est blessee;  
 Un si pressant instinct me porte à le cherir,  
 Que si je luy déplais, il m'est doux de mourir, (665–68)

There is nothing she would not tolerate as she subordinates herself completely to the king's extramarital affair: "J'ayme cette beauté, parce qu'elle luy plaist / Et prefere son bien à mon propre interest" (675–76). Parthénie has not only internalized the previously mentioned ideologies that allow a ruler to demand the death of any citizen; she also embodies Richelieu's belief that only the monarch is able see the necessity of such a demand.

When Evandre tells her the king has ordered him to kill her, the queen seems to agree with the principle implied in Evandre's initial deadly proposal: she is not constrained by the traditional *raison d'État* ideology demanding an individual choose between personal romantic relationships and State imperatives. However, instead of interpreting this principle as a license to kill Hermante and save her own life, Parthénie sees it as an order to obey her husband and the king as one and the same. Evandre, and perhaps the audience

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as well, may have expected Parthénie to embark on a path of tortuous introspection during which she would be required to choose between obeying the king's order by accepting her death or appearing before Felismond as the persecuted wife begging her husband for mercy. Yet Parthénie rejects this mutually exclusive perspective. She does not see Felismond as either ruler or husband just as she is not either subject or wife. She cannot resist her execution, whether ordered by Felismond as sovereign or Felismond as spouse, because both must be obeyed regardless of his motivation. Seeing herself simultaneously as an obstacle to her husband's happiness and a victim of the king's death sentence, she readily offers her life: "Ce que hait un Monarque est digne de perir, / Et déplaire à son Roy, c'est plus que de mourir" (731–32).

She does yield to Evandre's request that she remain alive and in hiding until the king comes to his senses (879–94), but when she and Evandre discover a plot to whisk her away to a safer location (957–64), she calls such a plan "lâche trahison" (1024). Unaware that Clarimond, her former lover, is behind the plot (1031–36), Parthénie seems guided by an unswerving loyalty to the king as she accepts Evandre's dangerous plan to foil her kidnapping: "Mourons fidèlement pour un Prince infidelle / Ma vie est importune, & ma mort sera belle" (1067–68). She learns of Clarimond's part in the scheme only after Evandre shoots him dead. She then claims it is honor that prevents her from shedding any tears. While she accepts responsibility for Clarimond's demise, her only regret is that she did not punish Clarimond by her own hand (1119–30).

Love usually reigns supreme in the hierarchy of values in the typical tragi-comedy of this period. Protagonists will cast aside their own desire for social ascendancy, their obligations to their families, and even their duty to the *raison d'État* if they believe they are acting in the best interest of their beloved (Gethner, *L'Innocente* VI). In essence, Parthénie flattens this hierarchy by putting her marital and patriotic commitments on the same level. In her consciousness, love and duty converge rather than clash. She is not particularly remarkable for her willingness to make a grand sacrifice—many male tragic heroes do the same—but rather

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for her decision to attenuate a rigidly dichotomous worldview even when such an action puts her life in danger. This decision allows her to merge seemingly incompatible forces into one, thereby reconciling any potential conflict, though receiving little recognition for such a feat. Even at the end of the play, despite agreeing that postponing her execution was the right decision, she tells the king she is "...une femme, indigne de son sort, / Puis que de vostre part j'ay redouté la mort" (1447–48). Although Evandre had earlier praised such dedication, "Quelle ame de rocher, quel esprit si babare / Verroit sans s'amolir une amitié si rare?" (677–78), Parthénie's force of will and her acceptance of an especially cruel State decision (traits not unlike those displayed by Horace) go unnoticed at the dénouement. Most of the men (her father, uncle, husband, and priest) marvel at this "divine adventure" (1455) and give thanks to heaven for the happy conclusion, but they have nothing to say about the queen's strength of character, no accolades for her loyalty, and no praise for her unique point of view.

Self-denial and a readiness to entertain alternatives also play crucial roles in Jean Racine's *Bérénice*, in which both Titus and Bérénice must eventually sacrifice their mutual love for the stability of the Roman Empire. Bérénice, Queen of Palestine, eagerly anticipates the end of official mourning for Vespasian, former Roman Emperor and Titus's father, so that Titus may keep his promise of marriage to her, allowing them to claim the titles of emperor and empress (164–76). The two have been waiting for years for this union, all the while seemingly ignoring the Roman law prohibiting the emperor from marrying either a foreigner or a monarch. Bérénice's idealistic vision of a happy future as wife of the new emperor ultimately yields to the harsh reality that such a union is not possible if Titus is to ascend to the throne. It is an equally agonizing sacrifice for both parties, but one that does not translate into equitable dividends.

Bérénice resembles Parthénie in that the former also struggles to find a way around the *raison d'État* dilemma, which forces a choice between romantic and State interests. However, she differs fundamentally by her absolute and almost brazen refusal, until the



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very end, to acquiesce to an imperial proclamation, promulgated by her fiancé, that will bring about her emotional ruin. By championing the individual's rights over those of the empire, for a time, she incarnates the antithesis of the *raison d'État* justifications of State power cited earlier. Racine's work also deviates from a traditional *raison d'État* apology by portraying an emperor whose wishes are diametrically opposed to those of the empire. The fact that even a sovereign must bend to a non-divine superior authority conjures the image of an abstract and overwhelming State entity.<sup>3</sup>

In Act I, despite the dictates of Roman law, Bérénice convinces herself Titus's promise of marriage will win over the Roman populace:

Le temps n'est plus, Phénice, où je pouvais trembler.  
Titus m'aime, il peut tout, il n'a plus qu'à parler.  
Il verra le Sénat m'apporter ses hommages,  
Et le peuple de fleurs couronner ses images. (297–300)<sup>4</sup>

In Act II, she dismisses the possibility that Titus will not flout the law and chooses to believe that his abrupt departure in the previous scene is due to his jealousy of Antiochus, the king of Commagene, who has declared his love for the queen (640–51). Desperately clinging to this unlikely explanation, she refuses to entertain others: “Ne cherchons point ailleurs le sujet de ma peine” (652). Bérénice continues to reject the either/or reality of her circumstances in Act III in which she still contends Titus will disobey the law because reneging on his promise of marriage would be an affront to his personal honor (906–08). It is not until the final act that Bérénice internalizes the fact she must renounce her love and accept banishment, but she pays a higher price than the new emperor.

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<sup>3</sup> For a thoughtful exploration of the paradox of sovereign authority as embodied in a human ruler and as an abstract construct, see Keohane 17.

<sup>4</sup> For a short while, Titus also indulges the fantasy that Rome will accept his marriage to Bérénice, but promptly recognizes his self-delusion (1000–24).

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Titus's more dichotomous perspective of their predicament allows him to see the grave consequences Bérénice will have to face as a result of his decision to banish her. He sees no middle ground and recognizes the injustice of his attempts at reparation as he exclaims to his "confident":

Je lui dois tout, Paulin. Récompense cruelle!  
 Tout ce que je lui dois va retomber sur elle.  
 Pour prix de tant de gloire et de tant de vertus,  
 Je lui dirai: «Partez, et ne me voyez plus.» (519–22)

The emperor knows full well, and Paulin reminds him, that the Senate will accord new lands to Bérénice upon her departure from Rome (522–27). He makes a similar offer to Antiochus as payment if he will be the bearer of the bad news and take her away (741–67). But Titus is aware that these offerings are merely "Faibles amusements" (528) for the queen, "Je connais Bérénice et ne sais que trop bien / Que son coeur n'a jamais demandé que le mien" (529–30).

This is not to say she is blind to the pomp and pageantry surrounding the new emperor. Indeed, Bérénice sees the trappings of power, but fails to realize that if Titus embraces them, she must relinquish them, to preserve Roman stability. Still hoping they may reign together, she becomes swept up in the excitement. Of the recent ceremonies, she says:

Ces flambeaux, ce bûcher, cette nuit enflammée,  
 Ces aigles, ces faisceaux, ce peuple, cette armée,  
 Cette foule de rois, ces consuls, ce sénat,  
 Que tous de mon amant empruntaient leur éclat; (303–  
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Such observations in reality constitute of list of the perks Titus will enjoy, and Bérénice will surrender, when he orders her exile. A life together is only possible if he abdicates and they both abandon

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<sup>5</sup> Noting the "queen's attraction to the discrete, the quantitative, and the cumulative," Ellen McClure sees Bérénice's ebullient admiration of this spectacle as her attempt to recreate the "moment of love at first sight" with Titus (310).

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Roman splendor—a prospect the emperor briefly contemplates before quickly realizing that even Bérénice would be unhappy with “Un indigne empereur, sans empire, sans cour / Vil spectacle aux humains des faiblesses d’amour” (1405–06).

Mitchell Greenberg underlines this almost insidious atmosphere of absence and “melancholia” that goes beyond the “psychological state of the protagonists” and grieves for a union of opposites that can never be. He sees Racine’s tragedy as an “allegory of a more profound loss that the play...mourns in ways that are perhaps forever incomprehensible to it itself” (80). There is no doubt Titus, allegorically associated with familiar, Western culture (Greenberg 79), is tortured by this profound feeling of alienation stemming from having fallen in love with Bérénice, symbolic of the exotic Orient (Stone 225, Greenberg 79). This allegory aptly describes an unbridgeable chasm, lurking in Titus's psyche, between Rome's vision of itself as a disciplined, ordered society and the East as a decadent culture of forbidden sensuality (Stone 225). What is “coded as male and Roman” stands in stark contrast to “otherness: beauty, female, oriental” (Greenberg 82). Titus's Roman indoctrination teaches that foreigners do not understand that individual desire for advantage or stature can exist only insofar as they perpetuate the glory of the State. As a foreigner, then, Bérénice cannot fathom Titus’s acceptance of an ideology that dictates he must sacrifice his desire for her for the good of the empire. Thus, she persists in her stubborn belief that Titus will not withdraw his marriage proposal for fear of acquiring a dishonorable reputation (906–08). The queen “confuses Titus's ‘gloire’ as personal honour...with the reality of his ‘gloire’ in the political sphere” (Barnwell 24). She accurately gauges his sincere love for her and, following the cultural norms of her homeland, naturally assumes he will indulge his passion, allowing it to lead him to union with her. Yet Bérénice misunderstands Titus's adherence to a Roman ideology that sees willingness and ability to suppress emotions as necessary qualities of a fit ruler. Loss of self-control is unacceptable in a Roman potentate and would turn Titus into nothing more than “a slave to a passion defined as Otherness” (Ahmed 291). Despite his love, Titus aspires to be the

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ideal monarch characterized by his control of his emotional, internal chaos provoked by the clash between his overpowering, fervent affection and his simultaneous willingness to forgo immediate gratification for a greater good (Han 5).<sup>6</sup> But no time remains for him to reconcile “deux identités qui, selon la loi romaine, doivent rester distinctes” (Stone 227). Titus knows the stakes and understands he can no longer defer implementing a decision that will ruin any chance for personal happiness.<sup>7</sup> As he says to Bérénice: “Mais, il ne s’agit plus de vivre, il faut régner” (1102).

The rewards for submitting to a *raison d’État* ideology may bring no solace to Titus, but they nevertheless constitute a compensation package seemingly available only to men. Both protagonists are equally devastated by their renunciation of a life together, yet the advantages are certainly more immediate and ostentatious for Titus. Paulin describes how the Romans express their appreciation for his actions:

Déjà de vos adieux la nouvelle est semée.  
Rome, qui gémissait, triomphe avec raison;  
Tous les temples ouverts fument en votre nom,  
Et le peuple, élevant vos vertus jusqu’aux nues,  
Va partout de lauriers couronner vos statues. (1220–24)

There are no bonfires of praise for Bérénice and the recompense for her exile is substantially inferior to that of the emperor. She and Antiochus will receive the aforementioned lands, but, as Pierre Han observes, this territorial expansion still only serves as an outpost of Rome’s power (5). The queen also departs with her honor intact, fully aware that she would have been the “woman

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<sup>6</sup> This ideology of self-control is not just a prescription of virtuous behavior for theatrical characters. It is indicative of a larger societal ethos of the second half of the seventeenth century that advocates the use of absolutism, reason, and morality to combat an inherently corrupt human nature (Rohou 53–54).

<sup>7</sup> Mary Reilly’s blunt and accurate description of the dénouement foresees a “dream of eternal life together transformed into the nightmare of never dying...an eternity of anguish and alienation...everlasting torment, an existence attuned to hell” (96).

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scorned," both by the emperor and the Roman people, had she stayed after Titus's decision to abandon her (1179–80). In her last verses of the play, which take the form of wistful and wishful thinking, she expresses only a faint hope that others will some day remember their example of tender and doomed love:

Adieu: servons tous trois d'exemple à l'univers  
De l'amour la plus tendre et la plus malheureuse  
Dont il puisse garder l'histoire douloureuse. (1502–04)

But even if the collective memory of the empire honors their sacrifice, any adulation would be shared among all three protagonists. The tally is clear. Despite Bérénice's initial audacious offer of an alternate life, Racine has her internalize the inevitability, if not the justification, of a State much as Richelieu envisions it: one that exists to augment its own supremacy and to achieve its territorial and economic objectives (Keohane 176). Both rulers must accept the same agonizing loss of an intense passion so Rome may continue to reign as the most powerful empire of the known world. Titus will be cherished for years as its courageous leader while Bérénice is banished to its outer rim.

Catherine Bernard's *Laodamie, reine d'Épire* reveals some of the problems especially pertinent to an unmarried female sovereign.<sup>8</sup> Bernard features strong women, motivated by a mix of their devotion to each other and to a suitor as well as to the State, who receive rather muted praise for their actions. The play begins with the eponymous heroine resigned to the prospect of passionless matrimony with Attale, Prince of Paeonia. The queen has

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<sup>8</sup> This was not merely a theatrical conflict; the Early Modern period is replete with examples of women holding *de facto*, if not *de jure*, power. Despite Salic Law, France witnessed three female regencies during this period—Catherine de Médicis (1560–64), Marie de Médicis (1610–17), and Anne of Austria (1643–51)—while Jeanne d'Albret, mother of the future Henri IV, was queen and sole ruler of Navarre from 1562–77. Elizabeth I's reign over England during the 1500's and Queen Christina of Sweden (1632–1654) provide evidence France was not the only nation grappling with the extension of monarchical authority to women. Nonetheless, by the seventeenth century, at least in France, a queen's temporary right to rule if her father or husband/king was absent or incapacitated was largely undisputed (Gibson 142–43).

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renounced her love for Gélon, a Sicilian prince and successful warrior she has promised to her sister, Nérée, in deference to her father's wishes and because Attale's military prowess would assure the kingdom's safety (1257–60). The queen's struggle to serve her country, her sister, and herself is complicated when news of Attale's death pushes Paeonia to threaten war and incites Epirus to clamor for Gélon as its new king. The incompatible loyalties of the sisters clash until Nérée decides to retreat to the Temple of Diana so Gélon may wed Laodamie thereby forming a solid and popular union that will defend the realm. Her fiancé dissuades her from entering the temple, the palace guards take her away, and a crowd gathers hoping to convince Gélon to disobey the queen's order to banish him as punishment for his refusal to accept the throne. Sostrate, a pretender to the throne and Attale's assassin, attacks Gélon who kills Sostrate just as Laodamie arrives on the scene. One of Sostrate's men seeks revenge, but slays the queen as she protects Gélon. The play ends as Nérée offers Gélon her hand and the throne.

Bernard paints a world of dubious or tenuous connections between personal sacrifices for the *raison d'État* and the compensation they supposedly produce.<sup>9</sup> Like Parthénie and, eventually, Bérénice, Laodamie and Nérée submit themselves to the will of a State that offers them few rewards for their readiness to endure hardship, in this case, forfeiture of a felicitous marriage with Gélon. Although the play is set in antiquity, the sisters

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<sup>9</sup> This is a theme common to several French dramatists of the century and their female protagonists. Philippe Quinault's *Astrate* (1664–65) recounts the story of Élise, Queen of Tyre, whose murderous rise to power brings only the threat of constant rebellion. She assassinates her predecessor only to discover she is in love with his son. At play's end, her suicide helps restore the rightful heir to the throne but garners no appreciation. Gautier de Coste de La Calprenède, Thomas Corneille, and Claude Boyer offer their versions of the *Comte d'Essex* (1638, 1678, and 1678, respectively). Corneille's adaptation portrays an especially tortured Queen Elizabeth I who must order the execution of her beloved count for his alleged participation in a conspiracy, even though her unrequited love is also a motivating factor. Whatever her incentive, she gains no praise for her strength of character. My thanks to Perry Gethner for bringing these plays to my attention.

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seemingly accept the prevailing seventeenth-century ideology that the needs of the realm supercede individual wants. Their sacrifice may not be as extreme as Parthénie's or Bérénice's, but Bernard's heroines inject new criteria into the debate by introducing poignant, sisterly pain and empathy as serious factors essential to their *raison d'État* deliberations.

The opening scene makes clear Laodamie consents to a union with a man she does not love for the good of the State (12–28), but any personal gain or “gloire” she would acquire for her sacrifice is unclear. There is no mention of gratitude among her people or even any indication they are aware of her gesture. Already queen, she could hardly hope for higher rank and may even expect her power to diminish as she would, at best, have to share it with the new king and, at worst, see it wrested from her altogether. Attale's untimely death removes that onerous eventuality while introducing an opportunity for both personal gain and loss. Marrying Gélon would secure a union with a man she loves, protect her territory from imminent invasion from Paeonia, and please the populace, but comes with the price of betraying Nérée. In a moment of sisterly tenderness rarely seen on the stage at this time, the queen summarizes their utterly impossible situation:

A cette guerre encor Rome va prendre part.  
 Pour mon peuple effrayé, serai-je sans égard?  
 Il demande pour roi le prince qui vous aime,  
 Dites, que puis-je faire en cette peine extrême?  
 Je vous aurais peut-être épargné de l'ennui,  
 En vous désavouant ce que je sens pour lui.  
 Mon amitié n'a pu se résoudre à se taire, (847–53)

Laodamie makes the heart-wrenching decision to offer Gélon the throne, in essence, by proposing to him, and to banish him if he refuses:

L'on a besoin d'un roi, vous le voyez assez.  
 La guerre dont encore nous sommes menacés,  
 Par un roi seulement peut être soutenue;  
 Un roi seul peut calmer la populace émue. (1221–24)  
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Si vous ne régeniez pas, fait que je vous exile.  
 Mes sujets à l'aimer seraient toujours portés.  
 Les détours seraient vains: ou régeniez, ou partez. (1232)

Although she stresses the offer stems from popular pressure and the urgent need for a military leader, the tremendous personal advantage she would gain diminishes the “gloire” traditionally associated with a purely *raison d'État* sacrifice. In any case, her offer carries little consequence since Gélon's preference of exile over offending Nérée denies the queen even the opportunity to prove she is willing to endure personal loss—Laodamie's marriage to Gélon would alienate the queen from her beloved sister—for the good of the State. Assassinated in her final selfless act, it remains unclear whether her motivation is to protect a man she loves or a valued soldier whom the people have already declared king (1325–28). In any case, there are no songs, accolades, or predictions of celebrations of the queen's legacy.

Nérée's goodwill parallels Laodamie's in that she is willing to sacrifice for her country, but she never gets the chance. She sees Gélon is the people's choice: “On vous appelle au trône...” (910), knows her love has been an obstacle to his royal destiny: “Mon amour inquiet vous ôtait la couronne;” (937), and fears the wrath of her compatriots if she is seen as the impediment to his national leadership: “Verrais-je contre moi tout un peuple en furie, / Me reprocher les maux de ma triste patrie?” (957–58). Nonetheless, Nérée's rather original solution of accepting a life of isolation draws neither praise nor admiration. The queen, having ordered Nérée's return from the temple, does little more than curse the gods and express jealousy that Gélon thinks only of pursuing his fiancée after refusing the crown (1295–1312). The prince's wailing and begging of Nérée (1318–19) are completely consistent with a character who cares only about love and nothing about the will or fate of the people (899, 944, 965–67).<sup>10</sup> Even the citizens of Epirus

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<sup>10</sup> Perry Gethner highlights how Bernard reworks male heroism, making Gélon into a character who “ne ressent pas la moindre fidélité envers sa famille ou son pays natal, est dépourvu d'ambition politique, et ne recherche que la gloire personnelle en accumulant des exploits et gagnant l'amour de sa dame” (*Femmes... Tome I* 186).



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give only the faintest acknowledgement to the inner struggles of Nérée and Gélon: “Tout le peuple est touché d'un si parfait amour” (1322). Despite the fact the women surpass the men in their willingness to sacrifice for the State, they are denied both the chance to execute their plans and the admiration usually accorded such efforts.<sup>11</sup>

Our fourth play features a queen who ostensibly fulfills her duty to the State by endangering her own life to defend the contemptible Cambyse, King of Persia, who has threatened her with expulsion and death. Even though her actions lead to the king's demise, her assertion that she was trying to protect her husband goes unchallenged largely because she brings about a regicide welcomed by all. Yet she reaps no recognition and no reward for the personal risk she undertakes. Marie-Catherine Desjardins, the future Mme de Villedieu, takes poetic license with a story found in Herodotus to dramatize the tale of Nitétis, Queen of Persia. Nitétis is forced to marry the monstrous Cambyse who shows utter disregard for his people and their customs. Nitétis deplures, but will not stop, her husband's plan to dethrone her by marrying his own sister, Mandane. The queen's respect for the State is so extreme that, when faced with rebellion, she garners forces to protect the king, believing *lèse-majesté* to be a more serious crime than royal incest. To everyone's relief, the king mistakes the guards sent to protect him as a contingent of attackers and commits suicide.

Like Bérénice, Laodamie, and Nérée, Desjardin's heroine realizes her first obligation is to the State. At times, she mirrors Parthénie's immutable dedication to her duties as wife and queen even though Nitétis is convinced such devotion may strip her of both roles and despite the widespread support for rebellion against the king. Where Nitétis differs radically from the other heroines, and especially from Parthénie, is in her bold actions that suggest she has, in her mind, separated the State, Cambyse as husband, and Cambyse as king. To the State and to her husband, she will remain

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<sup>11</sup> Outside the theater, this was not always the case. Women were sometimes rewarded with land for exceptional service to the State (Gibson 157–58).

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loyal, but as for the king, she seems to decide he has forfeited his right to rule and thus Nitétis has no choice but to assume the role of a temporary, legitimate sovereign to restore order to the State.<sup>12</sup>

Early on, however, none of her words or deeds implies she has made such a mental leap nor that she is thinking of such drastic action. Aware of Cambyse's criminal behavior, Nitétis remains unmoved when Mandane and Smiris, Mandane's and the king's brother, suggest resisting the king's plan to wed his sister:

...les crimes du roi vous semblant détestables,  
Vous formez des desseins encor moins pardonnables;  
(181–82)

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Quoi qu'à sa cruauté Cambyse ose permettre,  
Il vaut mieux le souffrir que d'oser le commettre. (185–  
86)

She remains steadfast even as others foment revolt and the king threatens her life. In Act I, Predaspe, head of Cambyse's personal guards, informs the king that Smiris is encouraging Mandane's resistance (305–10). In Act II, Smiris echoes the advice of Evandre (the royal advisor from *L'Innocente infidélité*) by exhorting Prasitte, Mandane's suitor, to entice Nitétis to dethrone the king for the sake of her own ambition, for the good of the State, and to eliminate the royal rival for Mandane's affections (321–24). He further assures Prasitte that the Persians are ripe for rebellion, favor Nitétis, and that he is ready to excite the people's revolutionary passions (334–42, 443–46). Smiris even dares to tell his brother/king that nature itself opposes his incestuous union and, in that sense, puts the monarch on the same plane as ordinary men (505–14). In Act III, Cambyse catches the queen in conversation with Phameine, her former lover and prince of Egypt, who has escaped from the king's prison. It is in this scene where Nitétis

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<sup>12</sup> Nitétis's actions parallel those that Gabriel Naudé (1600–53) calls "coups d'Estats" which are only permissible to a king in desperate times and include reviving a corrupt kingdom (Keohane 173).

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may be initiating her mental division of Cambyse as husband and king. In this exchange, she rarely refers to his royal authority, yet talks of “la foi” (816) and “l’honneur” (819) she owes to a cruel man only because he carries the title of husband: “Ainsi malgré ta haine, et ma première ardeur [for Phameine] / Le devoir t’a rendu le maître de mon coeur:” (823–24). Nitétis makes it painfully clear that her respect is reserved for the institution of marriage:

Que c’est au nom d’époux que mon âme se donne,  
 Qu’en t’aimant comme tel j’abhorre ta pesonne,  
 Et que si dans ta place un monstre avait ma foi,  
 Il aurait dans mon coeur le même rang que toi; (829–  
 32)

Later in this conversation, when she does allude to Cambyse as king, her words sound like a warning:

Mais lorsque dans un prince au crime abandonné,  
 Je vois ce même époux que les Dieux m’ont donné,  
 Que la raison me dit que la foudre s’apprête,  
 Et que ma foi m’oblige à craindre pour sa tête, (855–  
 58)

Cambyse, undaunted, threatens to torture and kill Phameine in front of her and then do the same to her (879–85), to which Nitétis replies somewhat enigmatically:

Ah! méchant, ah! barbare,  
 Vas-tu donc immoler un mérite si rare?  
 Ha! courons sur ses pas, et détournant ses coups,  
 Epargnons s’il se peut un crime à notre époux. (885–88)

This seemingly tepid response may represent Nitétis’s marital loyalty to a fault and her respect for the *raison d’État*. Yet, her only concern seems to be “sparing” her husband, not the king, from committing another crime, as though she had the power to stop it.

If Nitétis, at the end of Act III, has mentally separated Cambyse as ruler from Cambyse as husband and decided on her course of action, it is never explicitly revealed. She does not appear in Act IV whose conclusion brings news of a popular

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rebellion. Apprised of the revolt, Nitétis reappears in Act V and explains to Mandane her efforts to save Cambyse even though, once again, she realizes she has little chance of success: “Eh bien que dans l’état où le sort me réduit, / Je dusse de mes soins espérer peu de fruit,” (1215–16). Nonetheless, the queen takes charge of the palace guards, leads them to free Phameine, then guides them to the king. At this point, Nitétis returns to the palace (1220–60) discovering, only after Prasitte’s arrival near the end of the play, that the king commits suicide rather than face what he believes to be a mutinous mob (1341–50).

Throughout the final act, Nitétis insists that she suppresses all other motivations and acts only for the welfare of Cambyse. Yet, the narration of her rescue operation shows her more preoccupied by her duty as a wife than as a loyal subject to the king:

J’apprends que mon époux était presque aux abois.  
A peine ce récit a frappé mon oreille,  
Qu’au milieu de mon coeur mon devoir se réveille;  
Il ne me souvient plus des injures du roi,  
J’oubliai tout, Princesse, hors les lois de ma foi. (1240–  
44)

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Ce prince [Phameine], mes désirs, ma crainte, mon  
courroux,  
Tout [céda] dans mon âme au péril d’un époux. (1247–  
48)

Her final words, which dispel any immediate hope of marriage with Phameine and omit any reference to her ascending to the throne (1359–86), seem consistent with her character throughout the play. Nonetheless, I would like to entertain two questions by Nina Ekstein, which may reveal other forces at work.

Ekstein asks: “Who is responsible for Cambises’s death? Shouldn’t she [Nitétis] have known better than to send Phameine to save him?” (219). In other words, what can (or should) Nitétis reasonably believe the king’s state of mind to be when he encounters the forces ostensibly sent to protect him? Furthermore, what exactly are Nitétis’s intentions given the likelihood she no

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longer sees Cambyse as a legitimate sovereign and the fact that she seems to be acting in that capacity? Nitétis makes no statement on these matters, but an examination of the chain of events that leads to that meeting provides evidence she knew or should have known the king would die one way or another. First, amidst the chaos of the popular revolt, Nitétis assembles the palace guards:

Que la garde effrayée abandonnait la place  
 A cette criminelle et vile populace.  
 Où courez-vous, leur dis-je, où courez-vous soldats?  
 Pour calmer votre effroi, venez, suivez mes pas; (1225–  
 28)

That is, the queen rallies a squadron that has already proven its cowardice in the face of attack. Next, her first mission for these soldiers is to liberate Phameine. Freeing a prisoner of the king in time of insurrection, without his permission, is certainly a disloyal, if not treasonous, act. Moreover, Nitétis does not force his release intending to make him leader of a garrison to protect the king, for her immediate instinct is to hide him (1214). Soon after, she seemingly changes her mind: “Il ne me restait plus qu’à ménager sa fuite” (1237). Clearly, these are the actions of someone who either disregards her duty to the realm or sees herself as responsible for it.<sup>13</sup> Only upon learning her husband is in distress and doubtless vulnerable to attack (1240, referenced above) does she decide to lead Phameine and the guards to Cambyse, presumably to help him. To summarize, instead of leaving Cambyse’s fate to chance, she decides to allow a suitor, whom she still loves and whom Cambyse has sentenced to torture and death, to direct a band of armed and disloyal men to the king with instructions to shield him against an angry mob. Finally, conveniently, she leaves.

Prasitte provides the only other specific details about what happens next, assuring everyone that while Phameine was the monarch’s only defender (1341), the king committed suicide

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<sup>13</sup> She refers to the squadron of guards as “ma troupe” (1249) and is hailed as “reine” four times during the last act (1293, 1321, 1338, 1346).

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believing Phameine to be an attacker (1347–50). This could mean that Cambyse does not see or misjudges Phameine's role in the *mêlée*, but, more interestingly, suggests that the queen's paramour is the only combatant who follows her instructions.<sup>14</sup> Under these circumstances, it is quite unlikely Nitétis could not foresee regicide as the final outcome.<sup>15</sup> Even though there is no explicit textual proof she intends to precipitate Cambyse's demise, her quick thinking in a chaotic moment highlights an uncanny capacity to remain open to multiple possibilities. Nitétis rejects the either/or mindset that one must always openly choose between mutually exclusive alternatives, which is the crux of much seventeenth-century tragedy. Refusing to accept a narrow-minded, black-or-white mentality enables her to see myriad options and allows her to find a way to at least project respect for her husband *and* to serve the *raison d'État* by ridding the kingdom of a tyrant while preserving her life, lover, friends, and honor.

Within the historical framework of the *raison d'État*, it would be difficult to find male characters of the era more pro-State than the women depicted in these plays. Although some of these heroines are more audacious in their actions and thinking than others, they all stand out from the men by their ability to entertain multiple solutions to a dilemma where their male counterparts usually only envision two. Parthénie's choice to see king and husband as one has little effect on the outcome of the play but offers a fresh perspective on an old dilemma. Bérénice will find no accolades for eventually adopting what is essentially the typical male response to the *raison d'État* yet remains a bold leader for seriously considering an alternative approach to such a challenge. Although more noteworthy for their intentions than their completed actions, Laodamie and Nérée inject the neglected

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<sup>14</sup> Prasitte's entire account of the conflict could, of course, be suspect because, as Mandane's fiancé and a supporter of Nitétis, he has an interest in recounting a version of Cambyse's death that maintains the queen's innocence.

<sup>15</sup> While Desjardin's text makes no allusion to Charron's list of acts permissible to a sovereign, Nitétis's actions could be seen as authorizing a secret execution (Church 76).

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dimension of sisterly compassion into the *raison d'État* equation. Finally, Nitétis executes the daring move of temporarily seizing power to save her people from the clutches of a megalomaniacal tyrant, then makes the glaringly un-male decision to relinquish that power. Clearly the *raison d'État* provides more reasons to some than to others.

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