

**The Widow Who Would Be Queen:
The Subversion of Patriarchal Monarchy
in *Rodogune* and *Andromaque***

by
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Qui prétend agir contre l'ordre des choses ne peut
vaincre que par exception.

Paul Bénichou (*Morales du grand siècle*)

The seventeenth century has long been seen as a privileged moment in the passage to modernity. Among the many transformations effected at that time, one can cite the shift from an agrarian to a market economy; the epistemological break from analogy into Classical transparency; the development of a noncontractual Absolutist state from a feudal shared monarchy; and the emergence of a new organization of subjectivity and sexuality in and through the nuclear, patriarchal family.¹ The violent religious and civil wars that took place in France testify to the resistance with which the imposition of this new order of things was met.

“The Widow Who Would be Queen” will examine two of these changes, namely, the advent of the Absolutist monarchy and of the modern family, through an analysis of the representation of the royal widow in plays by Corneille and Racine. I will read the widow as a site of resistance to the political and sexual economies that subtend these early modern institutions. Widowhood is the period of a woman’s greatest liberty, and hence of the greatest possible threat to a social order predicated on her containment. If she is childless, or her children are young, she is (temporarily) the *oïkodespotès* or (tyrannic) head of the house. She is in control of not only the household finances, but also of her body, being for the first time legally able to decide for herself whom, indeed, if, she will (re)marry.

A woman with this kind of authority is especially dangerous if she is Queen. In a patriarchal monarchy such as that in seventeenth-century France, kingship devolves from father to son. The only legitimate way for a woman to exercise power in such a system is as a widow during the minority of her son. This extraordinary situation arose twice in the Grand Siècle, resulting in the Regencies of Marie de Medici and Anne d’Autriche. As fate would have it, both women governed during periods of tremendous strife. The Queens

were perceived (by Richelieu among others) to be threats to the integrity of France, and their wielding of power a monstrous aberration of the divine plan.² The anxiety aroused by the royal widow points to the extent to which the well-being of the State and of the family is tied to a rigid construction of gender differences, a construction that is radically questioned when a woman occupies the place of the father/king. The French Classical stage offers two diametrically opposed portrayals of willful widows which lay bare the stakes in the elaboration of a subservient femininity: Corneille's Cleopatre and Racine's Andromaque.

Nowhere is the malaise generated by a woman in authority given a more forceful representation than in Corneille's play *Rodogune*, which pits two power-hungry women against one another for control of the passive and hapless albeit legitimate male rulers. Cleopatre, Queen of Syria, acts out the Shakespearean adage that "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." Having had her unfaithful husband murdered (he should have learned from Agamemnon that men tarry at war at their risk and peril), she is plotting how to hold onto the reins of power which by all rights should now pass onto the son.³ Rodogune, the fiancée of both Cleopatre's dead husband and of whichever of her twin sons she names as the eldest, is equally determined to be Queen. Both women ask the male heirs to kill the other woman in order to ascend to the throne. Rodogune invites the sons to engage in that most heinous, hence most seductive, of crimes--matricide. Unlike her mythical counterpart Orestes, Rodogune is not punished by the furies but instead rewarded with the crown, for, being young and therefore sexually desirable, she beats Cleopatre at her own game. Rodogune forces Cleopatre's hand; having killed one son, Cleopatre dies with the poison intended for the other, leaving Rodogune and Antiochus to reign.

Andromaque, on the other hand, is the very model of femininity as it is constructed in seventeenth-century France: faithful wife to her husband Hector, the great Trojan hero, even after his death; tender mother who would do anything, even commit suicide, to save her son Astyanax. Wholly without political ambition, she knows that woman, in François Lagarde's words, is not the "dispositaire mais le transitaire du pouvoir politique" (191). In other words, the only legitimate female response to power is to pass it on to a worthy male family member. Andromaque is thus Cleopatre's mirror opposite: to Cleopatre's relentless, murderous drive to the throne corresponds Andromaque's refusal, in honor of her dead husband and her Trojan past, to accept Pyrrhus' offer of a crown for her head, a

lover for her nights, and asylum for her son. Forced in the end to contend with the “the unrealized conflict between fidelity to the past and the inevitable assertion of the needs and choices of the present,” a conflict Richard Goodkin terms “andromachism,” Hector’s widow consults her husband’s spirit and decides to take Pyrrhus as her second husband and then take her own life (228). Surely no one is more surprised than Andromaque when she instead ends up not only alive and faithful to Hector, but a Queen mourning in bewildered earnest her Greek husband and orchestrating his revenge. For as is well known, Pyrrhus, bereft of his guards whom he has sent to protect Andromaque’s son, is ambushed at the altar by a group of Greek soldiers. Widow for the second time, the self-eclipsing Andromaque is acclaimed the Queen of Pyrrhus’ people. Secure in her inviolable integrity, she is free to reign.

When these two plays are read together, a certain troubling irony surfaces. They present us with two women, each of whom would be queen over her own dead body. For Cleopatre, all the scheming and plotting in the world, even regicide and infanticide, are not enough to accomplish her goals. She ends up as her own sacrifice, drinking the poison intended for her son and her rival. Andromaque wanted only to be left alone to mourn her cherished Hector and raise their son. Seeing no other way to remain faithful to her sense of herself, she prepares to die at her own hand. At the end of the play, despite herself, she has the crown, a people, her son, a clear conscience and a new love to ponder and mourn. Joyously acclaimed Queen of Epire, she carries off Cleopatre’s (and Clytemnestre’s) daring, “unnatural” plan—but without wanting to. Thus each woman is deprived in key ways of what she so ardently desired, by having her own plan backfire on her. What then is the moral of these two stories of widows who would be queen? And what can their respective fates tell us about the relentless coming into being of Absolutism and the patriarchal family? about the construction of femininity and female desire?

Cleopatre has been decried ever since her appearance on the French stage.⁴ Recently, in Mitchell Greenberg’s analysis, she has been seen to represent the old order of things, a “monstrosity” that would refuse the “progress” of patriarchal monarchy and primogeniture, one that hearkens back to a more chaotic, mythic feudal system.⁵ Like, Doreena Ann Stamato, however, I believe it is possible to read the figure of Cleopatre with more sympathy. And like Corneille, who preferred this play above all others he wrote, I confess to no small admiration for what the playwright termed

Cléopâtre's "grandeur d'âme."⁶ Indeed I argue that one can interpret her undermining of the monarchy and its cornerstone, the nuclear family, as a form of resistance to Absolutism, a resistance that cannot be incorporated into either the aristocratic feudal past or the "bourgeoisified" Absolute future, precisely because both forcibly exclude it.

Cléopâtre's real crime, after all, is neither the murder of her husband/king nor the poisoning of her sons. What marks her as an outlaw is her decidedly unfeminine desire to reign, her displacement of all maternal affection onto the throne, which she tellingly woos as the "délices de [son] coeur" (II, 2. 476). This love for the crown is the source of her misdeeds and of the indignation she arouses in many spectators. For in loving her empire above all else, in deeming a life without it worthless ("Mais enfin on perd tout quand on perd un empire" IV, 3. 1271) she usurps the place of the legitimate male ruler and deprives him of her love and support.

Paul Bénichou argues that by acting in this way, Cléopâtre disregards the dictates of both common and heroic prudence by issuing forth to the world a challenge she cannot honorably meet. But, one must ask, what is that challenge and what keeps Cléopâtre from meeting it? We learn from her conversation with Laonice in Act II that it is Cléopâtre who ruled the country during the absence of her husband, successfully preventing Tryphon from usurping the throne. And it was she again who held the reigns of power when the country imposed on her as second husband Nicanor's brother Antiochus. Cléopâtre devised the stratagem of imprisoning Rodogune in order to buy more time to save her empire when Antiochus' death left her without an army. And she alone seems aware of how disastrous the terms of the treaty with Rodgoune's brother are for her country.⁷ In stark contrast, Nicanor had long since abandoned the country, and the sons are too love sick to pay it any notice. Moreover, according to Timagène, their governor, the princes are completely ignorant of what has transpired in the country during their long absence.

Given how seriously and competently Cléopâtre has conducted affairs of state, it seems clear that the reason for failing to live up to the stakes she set herself lies not in a lack of courage, capability, or intelligence. Rather she is dishonored because her considerable talent at governing goes against what Bénichou calls the "nature of things," a nature that reserves such power for men. Cléopâtre does not succeed in her gamble for the throne, and even if she had, Bé-

nichou assures us, her singular victory would have been morally worthless: “Qui prétend agir contre l’ordre des choses ne peut vaincre que par exception; semblable victoire, si par hasard elle se produit, ne saurait avoir une valeur d’exemple; et ce qui n’est pas exemplaire ne vaut rien en morale” (41-42).

Doreena Ann Stamato has couched Cléopâtre’s refusal to acquiesce to the patriarchal order of things in more contemporary feminist terms. Her astute analysis of the striking similarities in the heroism of Horace and Cléopâtre leads her to conclude that the difference between them lies in the place assigned to them in the power structure. She notes dryly that Cléopâtre’s problem is neatly encapsulated by reversing Simone de Beauvoir’s celebrated assertion that “On ne naît pas femme, on la devient (13).” Cléopâtre is born a woman and is viewed as such by her society, but she never becomes one, that is, she never understands what becoming a woman entails. Her murder of her husband and the attempts to kill both of her sons are eloquent and spectacular refusals of the only two legitimate roles—wife and mother—delegated to such perfect, in the sense of completely developed, women (536).⁸

“If Corneille’s heroines were asked to furnish an answer to Freud’s famous question—‘What does a woman want?’—the answer,” Harriet Allentuch has claimed, “would seem to be, at least in this fictional universe, what a man wants: a sense of self-determination and even of superiority” (108). Cléopâtre is of course an example of the disastrous consequences that ensue from such cross-dressing. Andromaque, on the other hand, offers a different response to the question of what she wants. “What do you want us to want?” she seems to be saying. (It only sounded like Greta Garbo’s plea, “I want to be left alone.”) The successful path to femininity, to a man’s heart, and, it would seem, to power is to be what men want you to be. Andromaque would then seem to be the antithesis of a radical “feminist” critique of patriarchy. Unlike Cléopâtre, she has successfully completed that hazardous path to womanhood that Freud elaborated in such detail. She has forsaken her mother and fully aligned herself with the father-figure, Priam, his substitute, her husband Hector, and their son Astyanax. Andromaque’s consummate skill at suppressing any desire of her own and eclipsing herself in favor of her husband and son can be seen as embodying the strategy Luce Irigaray describes as mimicry, as masquerade. And this strategy, it would seem, is handsomely rewarded: Andromaque becomes queen.

Despite the difference in the style of their self-effacement, Rodogune is akin to Andromaque. As Greenberg has noted, she is a “perfectly absent, and therefore unthreatening, blank” (*Subjectivity* 104) who allows herself only the desires patriarchy assigns to her: “Plus la haute naissance approche des couronnes, / Plus cette grandeur même asservit nos personnes; / Nous n’avons point de coeur pour aimer ni haïr / Toutes nos passions ne savent qu’obéir” (III, 3. 867-870). Although she repeats this maxim of feminine virtue several times, refusing initially, for example, to name which of the twins she loves (III, 4. 927-938), Rodogune does indeed dare to both command and love: she offers herself as prize to the son who would follow in Oreste’s footsteps by murdering his mother the Queen to avenge his father the King, and she confesses her love for Antiochus, first to us, then to him. Rodogune’s ascent to the throne despite these significant lapses from the dictates of her rank and sex leads one to conclude that perhaps rhetorical fidelity to the feminine condition suffices, especially in the context of Cléopâtre’s extraordinary crimes of “lèse patriarchie.”

Hermione is equally adept at articulating the limits to her power, as for example when she explains to Oreste that “L’amour ne règle pas le sort d’une princesse / La gloire d’obéir est tout ce qu’on nous laisse” (III, 2. 821-22). We know only too well that Hermione is acting in bad faith here, for it is indeed love that is both dictating her actions, and ruling her fate. Unfortunately for her, neither having one’s love coincide with one’s assigned husband nor obeying the commands of the fatherland and one’s father can guarantee a princess’s happiness, for Pyrrhus, another prisoner of love, refuses to honor such a tradition, preferring instead the glory of obeying his captive, Andromaque.

It is no doubt significant that Andromaque and Hermione, whose desires would both be satisfied were Pyrrhus to respect the traditions of the past, resort to suicide, that is, self-sacrifice, as the ultimate means of safeguarding their feminine honor. Andromaque’s courageous decision to honor herself is not, Harriet Stone insists, required of her by her vows to her first husband; it would, moreover, deprive her son of his link to his Trojan past (292). Suicide does, however, allow Andromaque to step outside of an existence spent in strict obedience to her duty. Such a project is unprecedented within the terms of Andromaque’s situation and the conventions of Classical representation, Stone argues, and for this reason takes place off-stage, “on the other side of representation, outside tradition and in a new history” (293).

Nonetheless, while Hermione is at least successful in this final decisive act, Andromaque's plan is foiled. However glorious Andromaque's choice is, it is rendered moot, for, like Cléopâtre, she is outmaneuvered: "The Greeks kill Pyrrhus, thereby denying him, as well as Oreste, Hermione, and Andromaque, the opportunity to perpetrate on the altar the all-important act of self-determination" (Stone 295). While this analysis sees all of Racine's characters as equally frustrated in their quests, Antoine Soare favorably singles out Pyrrhus. In a provocative but compelling interpretation of the event that precludes Andromaque's suicide, Soare argues that Pyrrhus comes up with a strategy even more secretive and cunning than Hermione's revenge and Andromaque's planned suicide: his own self-sacrifice. "[C]e sont les Grecs qui ont décidé de tuer Pyrrhus: une tragédie (politique) est en cours; Hermione veut en fausser la signification [...] la marquer par la passion." The end result is "un suicide expiatoire consommé sous les apparences d'un crime passionnel" (160). Hermione and Oreste thus take on the guilt for a crime they wish they had committed.

Although all the characters had what might be called "pretensions to agency," it is Pyrrhus who determines the outcome. Prompted perhaps by what Goodkin has described as Andromaque's "movement of conscious non-choice" (239), Pyrrhus "chose" to ignore the repeated warnings of Greek discontent, thus deliberately leaving himself defenseless. In so doing, he set the stage for his murder and, more importantly, planted the seeds for the improbable blossoming of Andromaque's love for him. As Soare notes, "Le suicide d'Andromaque aurait consommé un divorce là où l'immolation volontaire de Pyrrhus immortalise une union" (160). Hermione's assessment of Pyrrhus would seem to substantiate Soare's claim, for according to his jilted fiancée: "Il veut tout ce qu'il fait" (III, 3. 846). Pyrrhus succeeds not only in stealing Andromaque's thunder, but Hector's place in her widow's heart, as the original versions of the play make clear: "Vous avez trouvé une sanglante voie / De suspendre en mon coeur le souvenir de Troie [...] / Et ce que n'avait pu promesse ni menace, / Pyrrhus de mon Hector semble avoir pris la place" (V, 3. Editions de 1668 and 1673). In the final scene, Pylade describes Andromaque as a devoted widow presiding over Pyrrhus' funeral rites, ironically paying him the ultimate tribute that was denied to her first husband Hector by none other than Achilles, Pyrrhus' father.

This final image of Andromaque as a commanding royal widow is, of course, as unfaithful to classical accounts as Corneille's ver-

sion of Cléopâtre is to his historical sources.⁹ But whereas Corneille took great pains to ensure our horrified response to Cléopâtre's will to power (and, since Rodogune repeats her ultimatum, what may be interpreted as Rodogune's contamination by her), Racine is able to offer, apparently without shocking la bienséance, a positive portrayal of a Queen Regent. One might wonder why this singular example of gender reversal—the King killing himself in order to be loved, the Queen “perhaps” orchestrating his and her revenge—was not only tolerated but acclaimed by Racine's public. Following the logic of Richard Goodkin's argument that Andromaque chooses not to choose, and Antoine Soare's reading of Pyrrhus' death as a suicide, I would argue that Andromaque's palatibility derives from her acceptance of her new husband's wishes. For just as Hector's last words continued to inspire her actions after his death, so now do Pyrrhus's choice and the resultant unspoken claims on her determine her present course of action. Andromaque can well wonder how it is that Pyrrhus could effect such a remarkable change in her (“Ce que n'avait pu promesse ni menace, Pyrrhus de mon Hector semble avoir pris la place”), but those familiar with the dictates of femininity in seventeenth-century France can hardly be surprised. Everything in the order of things that disallowed the fulfillment of Cléopâtre's unnatural love for the throne prepared Andromaque to make room in her heart for one more male ruler.

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NOTES

¹ For a cogent examination of the effect of all of these changes on French seventeenth-century literature, see Mitchell Greenberg *Subjectivity* (12).

² See Cardinal de Richelieu, *Testament politique*, ed. L. André (Paris: Laffont, 1947). 113, 128, and Greenberg *Subjectivity* (5).

³ The historical sources used by Corneille give differing accounts of the death of Cleopatre's husband Demetrius, known as Nicanor, and of her son Seleucus. Corneille selects the versions that place Cléopâtre in the guiltiest light, and then accentuates that guilt both by altering key aspects of the historical record (e.g., Rodogune as fiancée and not widow), and by inventing “des incidents surprenants” (the bloody ultimatum each woman gives to the princes). See Corneille's “Examen” of 1660, and the article by McGregor.

⁴ See, for example, the reactions of Gotthold-Ephraïm Lessing in his 1768 *Dramaturgie de Hambourg* and of Jacques Scherer, quoted in Michel Cégretin's Bordas edition of *Rodogune*.

⁵ See the chapters on *Rodogune* in *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry* and in *Subjectivity and Subjugation*.

⁶ "...tous ses crimes sont accompagnés d'une grandeur d'âme qui a quelque chose de si haut qu'en même temps qu'on déteste ses actions on admire la source dont elles partent" (*Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique*, 1660. 22).

⁷ Moreover, as McGregor has pointed out, both *Rodogune's* and *Cléopâtre's* kingdoms are about to be engulfed by Rome; resisting the advent of a powerful centralized State or the merger of two kingdoms could, in many circumstances, be construed as very positive and courageous actions.

⁸ *Cléopâtre's* spectacular will to power and independence can, for example, be seen as the most extreme form of the refusal of marriage and children that was advocated by some of Corneille's female contemporaries, such as *Madeleine de Scudéry*, but was ridiculed as too Precious by Molière.

⁹ In Euripedes' and Virgil's accounts, she is Pyrrhus' slave and the mother of Pyrrhus son, Molossos. Astyanax was killed in Troy.

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