Rewriting Roman History: Thomas Corneille’s
La Mort de l’empereur Commode

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If the Roman emperor Commodus (161-192 A.D.) is known today beyond
the confines of the academic study of Roman history, it is most likely
because of Joaquin Phoenix’ portrayal of him as an unsympathetic, patri-
cidal, tyrannical sociopath in Ridley Scott’s film Gladiator.¹ Such a portrayal
might be assumed to be a simplistic attempt to create a suitably black
background against which may shine the ‘idea that was Rome’ as embodied,
inter alia by Russell Crowe as Maximus and Derek Jacobi as Gracchus.
However, whilst there is no truth in the notions that Commodus murdered
Marcus Aurelius or that he died in the arena, although he was assassinated,
there is abundant evidence in contemporary histories to support the por-
trayal of him as a tyrant, and a very unpleasant one.²

Scott is not the first to embody Commodus in dramatic form, Thomas
Corneille having done so with his La Mort de l’empereur Commode.³ As Julia

¹ Dreamworks LLC and Universal Studios, 2000.
² Details of Commodus’ life are to be found in: Dio’s Roman History, with an English
translation by Earnest Cary on the basis of the version of Herbert Baldwin Foster,
9 vol. (London: Heinemann, 1914-1927), 9; Herodian, with an English translation
by C.R. Whittaker, 2 vol. (London: Heinemann, 1969-1970), 1; and The Scriptores
Historiae Augustae, with an English translation by David Magie, 3 vol. (London:
Heinemann, 1922-1932), 1 [hereafter SHA or the Historia Augusta].
Whilst the manner of Marcus Aurelius’ death in Scott’s film is fictional, Dio states
that he did not die entirely of natural causes: “he passed away on the seventeenth
of March, not as a result of the disease from which he still suffered, but by the act
of his physicians, as I have been plainly told, who wished to do Commodus a
favour” (61). Neither Herodian nor SHA suggests suspicious circumstances.
³ First performed in 1657, published in 1659. In Œuvres de Thomas Corneille, tomes
1 à 9 (Genève, Slatkine Reprints, 1970), pp. 254-276. Facsimile of volumes 1 to 9
of the edition offered by Valeyre fils, Paris, 1758, IV, pp. 1-91. References given as
follows (Act & scene; Slatkine page number(s); Valeyre page number(s)).
Joe Carson

Prest has demonstrated recently,\textsuperscript{4} there is not much extant work on the younger Corneille; whilst he was, unquestionably and by common accord, a less talented dramatist than Pierre, not every play he wrote should be dismissed out of hand. Such is the case for \textit{La Mort de l’empereur Commode}: as this article intends to show, this play demonstrates a firm grasp of the histories of the Roman period, coupled with the ability to select salient details from these sources before amending and moulding them into a form which would be palatable for the Parisian audiences of the late 1650s, with the result that what Corneille in essence produced was a \textit{mort de Commode: lue, revue et corrigée}. There are also, although we lack the space to study them here, political undertones in this play which cannot have failed to resonate in a court on the cusp of absolutism and which echo in other plays by the same author.\textsuperscript{5} Additionally, in keeping with the \textit{tragédies romanesques} or \textit{galantes} which are a truer reflection of his ‘serious’ theatrical production up to this time,\textsuperscript{6} there are \textit{salon} inspired discussions between characters on love, constancy and the need to sacrifice one’s love as proof of a true lover’s \textit{générosité}.

Where the ancient sources are concerned, both Dio (c.163-c.235 A.D.) and Herodian (c.170-c.240 A.D.) were contemporaries of Commodus, and both provide eye-witness accounts of selected events from later in his reign. The \textit{Historia Augusta} dates from much later, possibly towards the end of the fourth century. Commodus inherited the Roman Empire in 180 A.D.\textsuperscript{7} on the death of his father, Marcus Aurelius, whom he was accompanying in the German war. There was an attempt on Commodus’ life in Rome probably towards the end of 182, which seems to have been inspired by his sister Lucilla and which was foiled when the supposed assassin, rather than simply stab the emperor, attempted to preface his strike with a statement attributing his action to the senate.\textsuperscript{8} Dio (79) ascribes Lucilla’s motives to her dislike for her husband, Pompeianus, whom she urged to arrange the

\textsuperscript{4} Julia Prest, “Thomas Corneille (1625-1709): beyond the triumvirate”, in \textit{French Studies}, (2009) 63 (3): pp. 323-329. Of the extant work, the most recent monograph is David A. Collins’ \textit{Thomas Corneille: Protean dramatist} (Mouton: The Hague, 1966). For the most part descriptive, the section dedicated to this play (pp. 93-96) indicates no awareness of the ancient sources we identify here.

\textsuperscript{5} There are elements of \textit{Le Charme de la voix} (1658) and \textit{Antiochus} (1666), for example, which seem to be overtly critical of \textit{raison d’état} as a political principle.

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Timocrate} (1656, publ. 1658) and \textit{Bérénice} (1659) are properly \textit{romanesque}, deriving, respectively, from episodes in La Calprenède’s \textit{Cléopâtre} and Scudéry’s \textit{Le Grand Cyrus}.

\textsuperscript{7} Dio, 73; SHA, 201-03; Herodian, 21.

\textsuperscript{8} Dio, 77; SHA, 273; Herodian, 49. The sources differ as to the identity of the foiled assassin.
attempted assassination. Herodian (47) asserts that the motive was Lucilla’s jealousy of Crispina, her brother’s new wife, who now enjoyed the imperial privileges which she had herself enjoyed until his marriage. The Historia Augusta (271) suggests, albeit unconvincingly, that Lucilla’s motive was more noble, arising from revulsion at the depravity of her brother. As a result, along with the predictable execution of all participants, suspected participants and most of their families, Commodus exiled his sister to Capri where she too was subsequently executed.

Leaving the running of the empire to others, Commodus gave himself over to pleasure, “rioting in the palace amid banquets and in baths along with 300 concubines, […], and with minions, also 300 in number” (SHA, 275). He also liked to disport himself in the arena, variously killing substantial numbers of wild and exotic animals, or appearing as a gladiator or charioteer, actions, as all three sources are at pains to point out, entirely unbecoming of an emperor. The biographies are equally candid when it comes to Commodus’ brutality, providing litanies of the executed and murdered. Dio wryly remarks:

I should render my narrative very tedious were I to give a detailed report of all the persons put to death by Commodus, of all those whom he made away with as the result of false accusations or unjustified suspicions or because of their conspicuous wealth, distinguished family, unusual learning or some other point of excellence. (85)

Commodus descended further into megalomania, termed madness by the contemporary historians, by insisting that Rome be renamed Commodiana in his honour and that all the months should bear one of his names (cf. Dio, 101-103).

He was finally assassinated on 31st December 192. In all three accounts, Commodus is poisoned then strangled, although the sources vary in their attribution of motive. According to the Historia Augusta (305) the plot was undertaken by “Aemilius Laetus, prefect of the guard, and Marcia, [Commodus’] concubine” in the interest of the state, arising from an accumulation of bad omens combined with the plotters’ distaste for Commodus’ depravity, favouritism and murderous madness. More significantly for Corneille’s purposes, Dio and Herodian attribute Commodus’ death to the unquestionably less noble, but perhaps more compelling motive of self-preservation,

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9  As such, her presence at Commodus’ death in Scott’s film is historically inaccurate.
10  Perrenis, until about 184, then Cleander, until 189, both of whom set about making themselves very wealthy until they overreached themselves and fell terminally foul of the emperor.
11  Dio, 91 passim; Herodian, 99-103; SHA, 293-97.
the emperor having decided on the death of yet more citizens, among them Marcia, Eclectus and Laetus.\footnote{Dio, 115-17; Herodian, 111-21.} Dio, it is true, suggests that there is more than this at play: “Laetus and Eclectus, displeased at the things \textit{[Commodus] was doing}, and also inspired by fear, in view of the threats he made against them because they tried to prevent him in acting in this way, formed a plot against him” (115, my emphasis). They also make Marcia their “confidant” (Dio, 117). The “things” which displeased Laetus and Eclectus included, specifically, Commodus’ intention to emerge for the end of year festivities from the gladiators’ barracks, not the imperial palace, thereby debasing yet further the office of emperor.

Herodian narrates events in much greater detail, taking this unbecoming intention as the starting point and explanation for the events which would unfold. In his version, Commodus first reveals his intention to Marcia “his favourite mistress” (111) who “fell on her knees earnestly begging him with tears in her eyes not to bring disgrace on the Roman empire” \textit{(ibid.)}, all to no avail. Laetus, the praetorian prefect, and Eclectus, the chamberlain, are summoned and ordered to make preparations for Commodus to spend the night in the barracks. They, too, try to “dissuade him from any action unworthy of an emperor” (113). One of Commodus’ character traits, made clear in all three histories, is his visceral dislike of contradiction or argument, a dislike fundamental to Herodian’s version of events, because the emperor, irked by the remonstrations of the others, “wrote down [on a writing tablet] the names of those who would be executed that night. Heading the list was Marcia; then Laetus and Eclectus, followed by a great many leading senators” \textit{(ibid.)}. The writing tablet having been picked up by his favourite boy lover while Commodus was in his bath, it came into Marcia’s possession at which point self-preservation for her, then Laetus and Eclectus became the sole motive for the assassination.\footnote{N.B.: \textit{SHA} also makes mention of a writing tablet, but not in the context of Commodus’ assassination, and much earlier in the account: “He had planned to execute many more men besides, but his plan was betrayed by a certain young servant, who threw out of his bedroom a tablet on which were written the names of those who were to be killed” (287).}

Once Commodus had been killed, Helvius Publius Pertinax, one of the few to survive Commodus’ reign from among the councillors \textit{(amici) appointed to his son by Marcus Aurelius}, was made emperor.

A grasp of this detail is important when it comes to understanding how Thomas Corneille moulds his version of events from what was available to him. Antoine Adam, who is often quite scathing in his observations on the
younger Corneille, has already provided a partial synopsis of the plot of La Mort de l'empereur Commode:

Commode s'est épris d'Helvie, fille de Pertinax. Elle le repousse. Il fait savoir qu’en conséquence Pertinax mourra. Elle cède alors mais pendant la cérémonie du mariage, elle essaie de tuer Commode [...]. Compromettant devant Commode, elle le brave. A la fin on découvre que le tyran a décidé la mort de Pertinax, de ses filles et de la moitié des sénateurs. On se débarrasse du monstre avec une coupe empoisonnée, et se voyant près de mourir, il préfère se poignarder. (343)

This is at best a simplification of a much more complex and interesting cast of characters. Helvie's sister, to whom Adam alludes obliquely, plays a substantial role in the play and is called Marcia; Corneille also includes two other significant male characters not mentioned by Adam: Lætus and Électus. That Corneille should have used these names, and chosen Pertinax as the pater familias, indicates already that he is familiar with the original histories. Furthermore, and before one progresses any further than the list of characters, Thomas Corneille's attempt to mould these personnages to the tastes of his day becomes immediately evident. Firstly, Marcia is no longer a concubine or mistress, but a daughter of one of those appointed among the amici by Marcus Aurelius, thereby significantly elevating her status. Lætus and Électus rise above the mundane levels of praetorian and chamberlain, with an invented character, Flavian, replacing the former as capitaine des gardes de l'empereur. Helvie is also an invention, although the use of one of the familial names of the historical Pertinax suggests that Corneille was familiar at least with the Historia Augusta, as it is the only work to name him fully: “Publio Helvio Pertinaci pater libertinus Helvius Successus fuit”.

In addition, the plot is much more complex than Adam indicates. In the first act, it is Marcia, unashamedly covetous of the position of empress, who is supposed to be marrying Commode, while her sister is scathing regarding his tyranny:

Helvie

[…] dans les cruautés qu'il nous fait éprouver
Qui peut souffrir son choix semble les appuyer.

Marcia

[...]

Il est vrai que Commode a d'injustes maximes,


15 SHA, 314, translated as “Publius Helvius Pertinax was the son of a freedman, Helvius Successus” (315).
Mais le trône, ma sœur, appaise bien des crimes,
Et peu dans les plus noirs verroient assez d’horreur,
Pour y refuser place auprès d’un empereur. (I.i; 257; 14)

Interestingly, both sisters will remain true to these sentiments as events unfold until the need for self-preservation obliges Marcia to change her position at the beginning of the final act.

Corneille further complicates matters by his adaptation of the roles of Lætus and Électus, who become, respectively, the amants of Helvie and Marcia. Moreover, Commode wishes to marry his sister to Lætus with the result that in the initial situation each of the proto-couples seems to face a potentially disjunctive obstacle created by the wishes of the emperor. As a consequence a dilemma is created for each couple, opposing, in properly cornelian (Pierre) style, duty and love.

Alongside the invention and distortion of historical characters, there are many historical allusions culled from the sources underpinning Corneille’s exposition, which facilitate the creation of the character of the tyrant and of the atmosphere of repression and fear which surrounds him. This use of apparent fact allows Corneille room for manoeuvre when it comes to the vraisemblance of some of his characters’ behaviours, motivations and actions.

In the first instance, Marcia, seeing in her marriage recognition of their father’s service alongside the other amici, remarks that he is the only one left alive: “Et de ces vieux amis resté seul aujourd’hui | C’est le zéle de tous qu’il récompense en lui” (ibid.; 15). The idea of the sole survivor is to be found in Herodian: “[Pertinax] was also the only one of the respected councillors left to Commodus by his father who had survived execution” (131). Helvie’s immediate riposte to her sister’s assertion, “Soit qu’il ait craint le peuple, ou respecté son âge, | Dites qu’il est le seul qu’ait épargné sa rage” (TC, ibid.), might equally have been suggested by the subordinate clauses which finish the sentence from Herodian begun above: “[...] execution, perhaps because Commodus stood in awe of his prestige as the most highly honoured of all the companions and generals of Marcus, or perhaps because his poverty kept him alive” (ibid.). The grammatical structure of the first of Helvie’s lines replicates Herodian where the notion of fear, or awe, is also present. The Greek original (less diacritics) reads η δια σεμνοτητα αιδουμενοζ η ωζ πενητα τηρησαζ (130). Here, the soit / soit opposition of the French is present in the η / η construction, while the particle αιδουμενοζ, along with the gloss attributed to it by Whittaker (“stood in awe of”), may also carry a sense of fear, and especially of not flouting

\footnote{Whittaker points out Herodian knew this not to be true (130, n. 1).}
social conventions, which one might reasonably surmise to be at the root of qu'il ait craint le peuple in Corneille’s text. The essential dialectic as constructed by Corneille is, then, clearly present in the ancient source.

Further evidence of Corneille’s willingness to use the ancient sources to create the atmosphere of oppression is to be found in the incorporation of other details from those sources. We have mentioned, above, the implication of Lucilla in a plot against her brother and her subsequent demise as a result of this. Corneille adduces this fact, although, again, Helvie and Marcia view events differently:

Helvie

En effet, sa fureur au meurtre toujours prête,
Des meilleurs citoyens n’a pas proscrit la tête,
Et nous n’avons pas vû ce cruel empereur
Tremper dès-lors ses mains dans le sang de sa sœur.

Marcia

De cette indigne sœur l’orgueilleuse manie
D’un injuste attentat fut justement punie,
Lucilla conspirant crut trop sa passion,
Et sa mort était dûe à son ambition. (ibid.; 258; 16)

In this instance, Helvie’s biting irony is met with an interpretation of events which seems to be heavily influenced by the manner in which Herodian presents them (cf. supra, p. 2). The orgueilleuse manie and ambition of Corneille’s text are an effective means of conveying what Herodian remarks upon: “But with [Commodus’] marriage to Crispina, precedence was bound to be assigned to the wife of the emperor. Lucilla was angered by this honour paid to Crispina, which she considered to be an insult to herself” (47).

Helvie is not prepared to back down, and her immediate response continues the borrowing from the ancient sources: “Et sur quelques soupçons, si j’en crois un bruit sourd, | L’impératrice même eut un destin bien court” (ibid.). Importantly, the source here is not Herodian, although Corneille has been rather coy about the “quelques soupçons”: “His wife, whom he caught in adultery, he drove from his house, then banished her, then put her to death” (SHA, 277); “Commodus also put Crispina to death, having become angry with her for some act of adultery” (Dio, 79). In this case, therefore, since Herodian does not mention this, it seems reasonable to conclude that Corneille was not working from a single source, but must have been familiar with at least one of the others. We can also see further evidence of his

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17 My thanks are due to Dr Alex Long of the School of Classics, University of St Andrews, for assistance for this article with nuances in ancient Greek.
willingness to temper the more sordid details of the source texts in keeping with the tastes of his audience.

Finally in his attempt to use the exposition to give as complete an introduction as is possible to Commodus’s character, Corneille turns to what the histories record as the emperor’s desire to emerge for the celebrations of the festival of Janus, not from the imperial palace, but from the gladiators’ quarters. Once again, and for the purposes of consistency of characterisation and dramatic tension, the sisters’ perspectives do not completely tally, however, we notice that Corneille’s Marcia is less sure of herself when she finds herself opposing Commodore’s desires:

Helvie

Ce grand titre pour lui n’est plus qu’une ombre vaine,
Tel qu’un gladiateur il descend dans l’arêne;
Et jaloux de cet art qu’il croit justifier,
Dans ce vil équipage il veut sacrifier.

Avec sa lâche troupe il doit aller au temple.

Marcia

Je lui fis voir dés hier ce dessein sans exemple;
Mais comme en son pouvoir il en trouve l’aveu,
Qui veut le partager doit le combattre peu. (ibid.; 16-17)

We have already cited Herodian’s description of Marcia’s entreaties to Commodus (cf. supra, 4) and it is possible to see Corneille’s vil équipage and lâche troupe as having been suggested by Herodian’s μονομαχοι καὶ απεγνωσμενοι ανθρωποι (110). Dio mentions Commodus’ desire to “issue forth both as consul and as secutor from the gladiators’ quarters; in fact he had the first cell there”. The Historia Augusta does not specifically mention his plan for New Year’s eve, but it does report that he “moved his residence from the Palace to the Vectilian Villa on the Caelian hill” (303), the Vectilian Villa, according to Magie, being the “school for gladiators” (302, n. 2).

To add further weight to the notion of the inappropriate nature of Commodus’s desire to appear with the gladiators, Corneille carefully includes the disapproval of both Laetus and Eclectus as recorded in Herodian (111-13) and Dio (115-17). Unlike the female characters, the men are allowed by Corneille to express their sentiments directly to the emperor, sentiments which are couched very much in terms of the concern of Rome regarding the propriety of her emperor’s actions and for his safety.

18 Translated by Whittaker as ‘gladiators and desperadoes’ (111). απεγνωσμενοι conveying the notion of desperation might especially be associated with the lâche troupe in Corneille.
Électus

[...] si Rome se plaint, ses murmures secrets
Ont pour but votre gloire, et non ses intérêts.
Dans un grand empereur elle tient tout auguste,
Elle sait qu’il n’est rien qu’il n’ait pu rendre juste;
[...]
Mais elle souffre enfin si-tôt qu’elle contemple
Le rebut de la terre enflé de votre exemple,
De vils gladiateurs dans l’opprobre vieillis,
En oser hautement paroître enorgueillis. (I.iv; 260; 24)

Corneille even makes it seem as if Commode is acquiescent to the demands of the people, but his words are very deliberately weighted in order to commit himself to nothing. Speaking to Laetus, he gives the order:

Vous, faites qu’on apprête
Tout ce qui de Janus peut ennoblir la fête,
Ordonnez-en la pompe avec un plein éclat,
Et, sur-tout, ayez soin d’assembler le sénat. (ibid.; 27)

By the end of his first act, Corneille has already shown substantial skill in using the details of Commodus’ life as presented to him in the three histories we believe he was using for reference. Not only does he use the source material to help him create an atmosphere of oppressive fear based on the behaviour and character of the tyrant, but he sensitively tempers the factual excesses of the sources to make his creation palatable to his audience.

After his exposition, Corneille effectively leaves the ancient histories aside as sources for action or historical detail until he reaches his dénouement. However the plot complications of the nœud, mostly not addressed by Adam, depend in no small part for their credibility on the atmosphere as created by the exposition and its use of the sources. In the second act, Commode reveals he regards Marcia as little more than an arriviste, speaking of “L’impatient orgueil de son ambition” (II.v; 263; 38), going on to reveal shortly afterwards to Lætus that his true love is for Helvie. This single peripeteia is to have far-reaching consequences, not the least of which is the creation of more multiple dilemmas of which the elder Corneille might easily have approved.

In the first instance, Commode reveals his passion for Helvie to Lætus, who is of course in love with her. The immediate effect of this action is to increase our sympathy for the already stricken Lætus, given that he is
already sacrificing his love for Helvie in order to marry Commode's sister. The emperor then compounds the agony by charging Lætus with the task of being the bearer of these happy tidings to Helvie, although one might argue that Corneille misses a trick here, in that, unlike Racine's Pyrrhus when he makes Oreste his messenger boy, Commode is not aware of his rival's passion. Nevertheless, Corneille still manages the dramatic irony (and the *comédie grinçante*) of the situation with some skill in Commode's words:

\[
\text{Enfin, pour lui ôter cet amour glorieux,} \\
\text{Lætus, c'est sur toi seul que j'ai jeté les yeux.} \\
\text{Va charmer ses désirs avec cette nouvelle;} \\
\text{Plus le bonheur est grand, plus la surprise est belle,} \\
\text{Contre toute apparence on aime à s'élever. (II.iv; 263; 39)}
\]

Corneille follows the logical progression of the Commode / Helvie plot according to the manner in which he has drawn their characters, in that Helvie rejects Lætus' embassy out of hand, and then Commode himself, when he appears, hints at the iron fist beneath the velvet glove:

\[
\text{Mais songez que l’amour est sensible à l’outrage,} \\
\text{Et qu’à se trop permettre on peut tout hazerder,} \\
\text{Quand l’esclave qui prie a droit de commander. (III.ii; 266; 49)}
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Ultimately, in keeping with his character, and in another manner which prefigures the situation in *Andromaque*, he resorts to emotional blackmail, creating a dilemma which pits Helvie’s filial duty against her revulsion for the ways of the tyrant, although, again unlike Pyrrhus, he does not communicate the threat personally, preferring to leave it to Flavian, who reveals that he has strict instructions concerning Pertinax, should Helvie not accede to Commode’s wishes:

\[
\text{Par la perte d’un pere il croit mieux vous punir;} \\
\text{Et si pour son hymen vous n’êtes toute prête,} \\
\text{Je ne puis le revoir qu’en lui portant sa tête. (III.iii; 267; 53)}
\]

Unlike Pyrrhus, again, we feel that Commode would have no hesitation in carrying out his threat, so skilfully has Corneille breathed life into the monster portrayed in the ancient sources.

Thus far, the dramatist has not yet fully exploited the conflictual situations which his principal *peripeteia* had created, since he has yet to present us with the woman scorned. After exposing Helvie to the full

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19 There is nevertheless an element of pragmatic self-preservation in his agreeing to marry this unnamed sister.

20 At the end of III.iv (267; 54), she laments: “O nature, ô devoir, où me réduisez-vous?”.
menace of Commode’s brutality, he brings Marcia immediately into the fray to engage in a jealous spat with her sister, whom she does not believe to be acting in the defence of their father’s life, but rather out of sororial spite. This then engenders a further situation in which parallels may be drawn with Andromaque. As will be the case for Hermione and Oreste after Pyrrhus’ final rejection of the former, Marcia, in a fit of jealous pique, and feeling that Commode’s rejection of her is a stain on her honour, makes herself the prize of the vengeance she demands of Électus, to wit, the murder of the head of state. Corneille’s character, however, while not as conflicted, might be considered to be more calculating than Racine’s, in that she uses a deliberately masculine line of reasoning when trying to persuade Électus, going beyond the simple jealous rage of Hermione:

Dans le honteux revers qui dégage ma foi,
Le rebut d’un tyran est indigné de toi.
Purge-le par sa mort d’une tache si noire,
Pour l’oser accepter, rens-moi toute ma gloire. (III.vi; 268; 58)

As far as the male characters are concerned, like Oreste, Électus is reticent, although his reticence is not as a result of qualms over regicide, and is more due to a dilemma which, again, pitches his heart against his duty, the latter born out of loyalty to an emperor who has treated him well:

Marcia
Que devient ta vertu? Que devient ton amour?

Électus
L’une et l’autre a sur moi toujours le même empire,
Mais leurs droits sont divers, et c’est dont je soupire,
Puisque des deux côtés mon cœur trop combattu,
Voulant tout par amour, n’ose rien par vertu. (ibid.)

Ultimately, while Électus’ reaction remains more ambiguous than will be Oreste’s, Corneille unfortunately fails to manage his situation effectively, his black and white portrayal of the tyrant overcoming the subtleties of developing the dilemmas of the other characters.

As Adam indicates, Helvie does indeed attempt to assassinate Commode, in the entr’acte between acts three and four, ostensibly therefore during the marriage ceremony. Corneille thus creates a dilemma for his emperor, a dilemma which might be intended to render him less antipathetic, but

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21 It is worth noting that Collins draws a parallel (97-98) between the behaviour of Marcia and that of Émilie in Cinna. Such a parallel overlooks the significantly more spiteful nature of Marcia’s desire for vengeance, more akin to Hermione’s jealousy, and the generally less sympathetic nature of the character drawn by the younger Corneille.
which above all allows the dramatist to indulge himself in an extended antithesis:

[Mon cœur] a beau se résoudre à prononcer contre elle,
S’il la connoit coupable, il la voit toujours belle,
Il cède à des attrait qu’il ne peut soutenir;
Et, punissant son crime, il craint de se punir. (IV.i; 269; 62)

Commode even attempts to reason that Helvie is not the principal guilty party, if paranoia can be called reasoning, by attempting to convince himself that she cannot be acting alone, and must therefore be subject to the desires of other conspirators, Lætus being the most likely candidate. The potentially rich dramatic seam of the juxtaposition of a tyrant’s paranoia with a lover’s desire to exculpate the object of his passion may be intended to engage us a little more with the character, but Corneille is incapable of sustaining for long such sophisticated levels of dilemma, making paranoia the almost immediate victor by having Commode decide that Flavian, the faithful captain of his guards and his interlocutor in this first scene, is the only person he can trust. The dramatic irony inherent in this decision will only become clear later when even Flavian is moved to betray his master.

As Adam has also indicated, Helvie stands up to Commode, but there is more to her position than Adam allows for, since she resolutely defends her actions as being on behalf of Rome rather than herself. Whilst Corneille moved away from the ancient sources until the dénouement, there is perhaps a memory of their content in Helvie’s words during her confrontation with Commode, when she blames his lack of control over those he has appointed to rule in the provinces as being the reason he is feared and hated in equal measure. She asks him to cast his eyes over those provinces:

Vois-y, vois-y par tout ce funeste ravage
Qu’exercent d’autre part l’avarice et la rage,
Lorsque de ton pouvoir leurs tyrans revêtus,
Se font de tes forfaits d’éclatantes vertus;
Et que, pour t’imiter dans tes noires maximes,
Regardant tes sujets comme autant de victimes,
Ces demi-souverains par de lâches rigueurs,
S’en immolant les biens, t’en dérobent les cœurs. (IV.ii; 270; 66)

All three of the source histories deal with the manner in which both Perennis (Perennius in Herodian) and Cleander abused their positions of power while the emperor indulged himself in pleasure,\textsuperscript{22} unaware of their exactions on the people, apparently in his name, and it seems reasonable to

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. supra, 3, n. 10.
conclude that Corneille has used their, sometimes quite detailed, accounts to fuel Helvie's republican rhetoric in this instance.23

By the middle of the fourth act, Commode has convinced himself that he is surrounded by conspirators, Électus included, although Marcia persuades herself that she has won the emperor back from her sister, seemingly blind to the inherent ambiguity of his declaration:

Mais j'atteste les dieux que rien n'est plus capable
D'altérer de ce cœur le decret immuable,
Et que l'effet demain justifiant ma foi,
Vous serez hors d'état de vous plaire de moi. (IV.iv; 271-72; 71-72)

The events of Corneille's final act are heavily influenced by the ancient sources, quite substantially modified in order not to offend the mores and tastes of his contemporaries, and, again, Adam's description does not do the author justice. This act opens with Marcia “tenant les tablettes de l'empereur”, followed by a list of intended victims which must have been influenced by Herodian, who is the only source to go into such detail: “Heading the list was Marcia; then Laetus and Eclectus, followed by a great many leading senators” (113). In Corneille, Marcia is talking to Lætus:

Le barbare! A sa haine abandonner ma vie!
S’immoler Électus, vous, Pertinax, Helvie,
Et, pour porter sa rage au dernier attentat,
Proscrire en même temps la moitié du Sénat! (V.i; 273; 77)

There is surely little coincidence in the fact that Corneille should have used the three persons offered to him directly by Herodian before inserting firstly Pertinax, then his own invented character into the list in advance of the unnamed senators.

As of this point, while following the essential chain of events in the sources, especially Herodian, Corneille moderates the details. In the first instance, the manner in which Commode’s list of those to be executed comes into Marcia’s hands is changed significantly. In Corneille, in keeping with the dramatic irony mentioned above, it is Flavian who, disgusted by the emperor’s behaviour, communicates the tablettes to Marcia:

si par un faux zèle,
Flavian à son maître eût craint d’être infidèle,
S’il n’eût pas trahi les ordres inhumains,
Mon aveugle injustice achevoit ses desseins. (ibid.; 78)

23 Herodian, 51-85, who writes specifically of Cleander: “the Romans hated him because they held him responsible for their troubles and loathed his never-ending greed for money” (77); Dio, 89-99; SHA, 275-83.
Such honourable behaviour is likely to have been much more palatable to a seventeenth-century audience than the account of Herodian which imputes homosexual paedophile behaviour to Commodus:

After writing on the tablet he left it on the couch, thinking no-one would come into his room. But he forgot about the little boy, who was one of those that fashionable Roman fops are pleased to keep in their households running around without any clothes on, decked out in gold and fine jewels. Commodus had such a favourite whom he often used to sleep with. He used to call him Philocommodus, a name to show his fondness for the boy. (115)

The boy, having picked up the tablet, “by some extraordinary chance […] happened to meet Marcia” (ibid.), who, on retrieving it, discovers Commodus’ intentions. Therefore, not only does Corneille’s version of events do away with salacious details unsuitable for his contemporaries’ tastes, it also, whilst attributing honourable intent to Flavian,24 removes the substantial element of chance inherent in Herodian’s account, thereby replacing fate with human will.

As is the case in all of the histories, Corneille’s conspirators first administer poison to Commode, however it is no longer Marcia who passes him the poisoned chalice, but Électus. Perhaps, like Racine some years later with Phèdre, Corneille considered this to be behaviour unbefitting his female character, it being enough that she was an active conspirator. Nevertheless, he retains one important detail in that he attributes the actions of passing and accepting the chalice to an habitual action, based on Herodian, according to whom Marcia “normally mixed and handed the emperor his first drink so that he could have the pleasure of drinking from his lover’s hand”, which he happily does on this occasion “toss[ing] it off without a thought”25. Corneille introduces the idea of the habitual action, and a notion of doubt, first: “Si, contre sa coutume, un scrupule incertain | Lui faisoit refuser la coupe de sa main” (ibid.; 79). Marcia’s worries are soon calmed by Électus: “Un plein calme en ses yeux déguisant son courage, | Il a pris sans soupçon le funeste breuvage” (V.ii; 274; 80). As such, Corneille has, to a certain extent, sanitized events in terms of the behaviour of his female character, whilst remaining relatively true to the facts as presented in the ancient histories.

24 Flavian’s character is further redeemed when it transpires that should anything go wrong with the plot, he is standing by to kill Commode himself: “Flavian qui l’observe assure l’entreprise” (V.ii; 274; 80).

25 119. Dio says that the poison was administered by Marcia “in some beef” (117). SHA is unspecific.
It is worth noting, before we come to Commodus's last moments, that Corneille nevertheless ensures Marcia's involvement in matters, allowing her proudly to proclaim her part in affairs to Commodus: “[…] à Rome Électus voulant prouver sa foi, | T’a donné le poison qu’il a reçu de moi” (V.iv; 275; 84). This comes as a neat codicil to a remark previously made by Corneille's emperor, which might also be seen as an acknowledgement by the dramatist that he has used known written sources, imbuing it with a subtle level of irony:26

je veux que l’histoire
Avecque tant d’éclat en consacre la gloire,
Que ce que de mon sort elle voudra marquer,
Sans nommer Marcia, ne se puisse expliquer. (ibid.; 274; 83)

Finally, as is the case in the sources, although, once again, Corneille is careful not to follow them to the letter, it is not the poison which finally kills Commodus. In all three instances, the poison seems not to be terminal to Commodus' existence, with both Herodian (121) and Dio (117) suggesting that he regurgitated the majority of it, Dio also speculating that he may have taken an antidote. As a result, the conspirators send in an athlete, named by Herodian and Dio as Narcissus, to finish the job by strangling Commodus to death. In Corneille, once Commodus begins to feel the true effects of the poison, he takes his leave of the other characters, and his demise is eventually reported in properly classical style in a récit by Flavian, in which Corneille’s emperor remains true to his character to the bitter end:

Dieux, dont l’être n’est dû qu’à notre folle erreur,
A-t-il dit d’une voix qu’animoit la fureur,
Vains dieux, aveugles dieux, dont la jalousie envie
Destinoit le poison pour la fin de ma vie,
Malgré vous jusqu’au bout je réglerai mon sort,
Et vous démentirai jusqu’au choix de ma mort.
Là, saisi d’un poignard, sa rage impatiente
Presse à coups redoublés la mort qu’il voit trop lente;
Et goutez au moins ce bien, s’il se perce le flanc,
Qu’au moment qu’il expire il voit couler du sang. (V.vii; 275; 87)

This alteration to the details of the historical sources may have been effected in part, at least, for the purposes of bienséance, it being truly ignominious, not to say ignoble, for the character of an emperor, even if he

26 It is the case that those sources, especially Dio, would have been familiar to the educated contemporary reader and theatre-goer, thereby rendering the irony immediately effective. The irony is only evident today after not insubstantial exegesis.
Joe Carson is a tyrant, to die such a sordid death as strangulation, especially if meted out by a mere servant. Moreover, his eventual hastening of his own death through the much more noble act of stabbing himself might be seen as an attempt in some way to redeem the character, were it not for the fact that he is beyond redemption, a fact underlined by his defiantly blasphemy's last words. Furthermore, and more importantly than any notion of bienséance, this account of his demise serves further to alienate the character from the audience, even in death, in keeping both with the thoroughly unsympathetic portrayal of him by Corneille, and with the unambiguous depiction of him as a loathsome despot in the historical sources. In addition to the blasphemy, Corneille cleverly, and finally, and thus emphatically, in Flavian's account reminds us of the character's blood lust (il voit couler du sang) coupled with his desire to be in absolute control (choix de ma mort). The blood which flows is that of neither tragic victim nor tragic hero: it is the blood of the criminal, the despot, which, as it drains, so returns her dignity to Rome, true victim of the tyrant.

By not attributing any tragic value to Commode, we differ from Collins, who attempts to find something, anything, tragic in the character, whilst at the same time completely ignoring any aristotelian precepts. Firstly he observes that:

the tragic sense in [Corneille's] plays arises not from an accident, not directly from an unfortunate event, not even from the spontaneous outburst of grief occasioned by such an event, but finally from the victim's lucid comprehension of his failure. Thomas Corneille's most striking heroes and heroines die fully appreciating the causes which have brought about their destruction. [...] in his better plays Thomas Corneille conceived of the tragic as the full consciousness of futility. (183-84)

Commode's suicide thus becomes his noblest gesture, since, “having failed in all else, here at least was a victory and a release” (184). This is not entirely consistent with what he had earlier written; describing Commode as a “villainous hero” (91) being a villain “first of all” and a hero “incidentally, accidentally, or, to be perfectly exact, only theatrically” (92), he next remarks: “[Commode] is the hero because the tragedy celebrates his death and because he acts positively and defiantly toward the accomplishment of his ideals. He is villainous because his means are perfidious, treacherous, and perverse” (93).

It seems as if Collins is convinced that since the title of the play mentions Commode, and that the play is given as a tragedy, then the eponymous character must therefore somehow be the tragic hero. This interpretation strikes us as rather naive, at best. Even if one were to forget Aristotle completely, Commode has absolutely no redeeming features. In an
aristotelian sense, he is the antithesis of the tragic hero, being entirely bereft of any characteristics which might encourage the spectator to identify with him. Racine's famous distillation of the aristotelian notion of a \textit{bon	ext{é} médiocre} is completely absent since Commode is possessed of no \textit{bon	ext{é}} to start with. As such he becomes an even more monstrous anti-hero than Cléopâtre or Médée.

Collins, it is clear, was either unaware of, or chose to ignore, Corneille's ancient sources; it is equally clear that he is attempting to impose, anachronistically, a twentieth-century mode of thinking. Corneille's text is not about futility, it is about the dangers of tyranny, of despotism, of, dare one say it, absolute rule. If we are to accept the play as a tragedy, then the tragic characters would be Laetus, Électus and, especially, Helvie. All of these characters at least have to face up to dilemmas, opposing love and duty, not of their own making and in a situation over which they had no initial control. Corneille's Marcia does not count here, being too one-dimensionally self-centred.

Of these central characters, Helvie is surely the most interesting as she is Corneille's invention. In purely romanesque terms, she helps to create one of the two proto-couples threatened by Commode's desires. But she is much more than a functional object to balance the plot. She is an idealised embodiment of Rome and Roman values, those of Pertinax and Marcus Aurelius; she serves as a constant counterpoint to her sister's greed for position, and is horrified by the notion that she should become the emperor's wife, since to do so would be to abandon Rome and her Roman principles. She, as weak and powerless as Rome, strikes feebly at Commode in an attempted double liberation; finally, she has no part in the conspiracy, but is freed by it. As Corneille's symbolic invention, once the tyrant has been removed, she can return to being the obedient daughter of a benevolent father in the same way that the citizen owes obedience to a benevolent emperor, where father and emperor are rolled into the person of Pertinax.

The value of such an allegorical character can only fully be appreciated with a knowledge of the historical sources which have been used quite extensively by an author who is aware of the need to make those sources correspond to contemporary mores, and who sees in those sources an exemplary warning of the dangers of tyranny.

\footnote{There might be an argument for seeing it more in the tragicomic mould, where the threat to the lives and well-being of characters is removed \textit{in extremis}, allowing a “happy ending” for those so menaced.}