Corneille’s queen Cléopâtre figures prominently among the monsters of seventeenth-century tragedy. The playwright calls his villain from *Rodogune* a “nouvelle Médée” (*Rodogune*, 14) and she undoubtedly belongs in the pantheon of evil mothers and dangerous women. It is thus quite logical that the majority of critics tend to emphasize her hateful nature. Yet, despite her evil disposition, Corneille admits to a certain amount of respect for his monstrous creation: “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*, 1)

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1. I am employing the word “monster” in its seventeenth-century sense of “against nature, inhuman.” Consult Wes William’s *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture* for more on the usage of this term. Although he does not exclusively focus on “moral monsters” (Williams, 212) like *Rodogune*, his chapter on Corneille provides excellent insight into the playwright’s representations on monstrosities of all kinds.

2. Her list of transgressions is lengthy and serves as a basic outline of the play’s intrigue: she murders her husband; she withholds the name of their elder twin who should inherit the throne; she tries to convince her sons to murder the woman their father loved (and for whom they also share a mutual passion); she stabs one of her children to death; she tries to poison her other son and her rival at their wedding; she commits suicide while trying to accomplish her double homicide.

3. Miernowski’s claims that for Cléopâtre, “la haine est plutôt le principe directeur de son pouvoir” (Miernowski, 790); Stegmann similarly portrays her as an “héroïne noire et dénaturée” (Stegmann, 598); Pringent claims that she “règne pour haïr” (Pringent, 221); and Scherer goes even further when he asserts that “elle est une des créations les plus grandioses dans le mal” (XXI, Scherer). For an excellent and exhaustive synopsis of all the criticism on *Rodogune* consult the beginning of Reed’s article, “Visual Imagery and Christian Humanism in *Rodogune*.”
79). The playwright’s admiration⁴ for Cléopâtre invites further consideration of her character.

Perhaps it is wise to follow the lead of critics like Sweetser and Muratore, who highlight the Syrian queen’s impressive ability to impose her will. They show that she is not simply a monster dominated by a passionate bloodlust, but also a very strong woman who almost manages to triumph despite her initial position of weakness. Primarily, her strength derives from her remarkable intelligence. It may be her jealousy, anger and rage that motivate her, but she would not be capable of her many nefarious actions without a considerable and noteworthy amount of cunning. She is an exceptional being of both excessive passion and high mental competence and therefore deserves Corneille’s “admiration.”

Although some critics have focused on Cléopâtre’s guile, there has been very little attention paid to her rhetorical skill.⁵ This is a considerable oversight as it is through her mastery of language that her intelligence manifests itself most clearly. While she may use a knife to murder the king and his probable heir, her tongue is the weapon that almost topples the Nicanor dynasty. In a general sense, she shows her rhetorical strength through a keen understanding of her audience. She is a master of manipulating the desires and personalities of her interlocutors in order to better serve her odious goals. In a more specific linguistic sense, she displays an impressive ability to use synecdoche and metonymy in order to both defend herself and to attack her enemies. This second technique highlights one of Corneille’s most ingenious and inventive uses of language: the shifting trope.

**Enfants and amitiés at the wedding altar**

Cléopâtre’s rhetorical prowess is best observed during the last two acts of the play, starting at the moment after she stabs her son, Séleucus. This is the point at which she abandons her initial scheme to seize the crown and resigns herself simply to destroy the Nicanor dynasty at all costs. As she declares in a monologue: “Tombe sur moi le Ciel, pourvu que je me venge”

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⁴ I am using the seventeenth-century meaning of “admiration” that indicates a sense of wonder, surprise and astonishment and does not necessarily imply approval.

⁵ Some critics have touched briefly on her style of discourse, but they most often conclude that she is undone by her own hatred. Harwood puts forth this opinion when she claims that Cléopâtre uses “brilliant rhetorical figures... but her frenzy repeatedly interrupts, thereby destroying the persuasive nature of the discourse” (Harwood, 104).
(vv. 1532). To achieve this vengeance she is required to rely on her verbal cunning. First she must persuade her surviving son, Antiochus, to marry her hated rival, Rodogune. This will set the stage for a wedding ceremony in which she will have both of them drink from a nuptial cup that she had secretly poisoned.

The difficulty of her mission is considerable. To succeed she must publicly transform herself from a figure of hatred and discord into one of love and reconciliation. She has spent the whole play outwardly scheming for the death of Rodogune and she must now seem eager to have her as a daughter-in-law. This reversal appears to be an unlikely strategy but her intelligence is not to be underestimated. She knows that both of her remaining adversaries long for peace and maternal acceptance and she knows how to hide her hatred beneath well-chosen words of love.

Her first task is to convince Antiochus that she now accepts Rodogune. Earlier in the play she had demanded of her sons that they murder the Parthian princess, so it seems implausible that anyone could believe in her newfound approval. Yet, she knows her enemies well and her choice to murder Séleucus instead of Antiochus was not made by chance. She understood that the only real difference between the twins is that Séleucus was more despairing and less gullible. As such, he would have been less inclined to believe in such a drastic turnaround. With him out of the way, she is able to exploit the fact that the remaining brother lacks both perception and discernment and that he has unwavering faith in his unworthy mother.

Cléopâtre is so confident in her ability to manipulate Antiochus that she completely reverses her position in the middle of a discussion, and with surprising success. In sincere hatred she declares to her son “Je triompherai, voyant périr mes fils” (vv. 1338), and a few moments later she says with false love “ma colère expire / Rodogune est à vous aussi bien que l’empire” (1354-55). Antiochus accepts this change of heart because he wants to believe that the women are equally loving and accepting of him. Cléopâtre proves to be adept at exploiting this desire.

The Syrian queen must further rely on her persuasive skill to convince the less credulous Rodogune. If she cannot induce the Parthian princess to drink from the poisoned cup then her vengeance would remain unaccomplished. She manages to win over Rodogune by appealing to her own desire for reconciliation and maternal acceptance. She does this through word choice that consistently cloaks her hateful intentions in the terms of love.

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6 Consult Braider for more on this fundamental division between the naïve Antiochus and the resigned Séleucus.
Skye Paine

Cléopâtre opens the wedding ceremony by saying to the young lovers, “Approchez, mes enfants; car l’amour maternelle / Madame, dans mon cœur vous tient déjà pour telle...” (vv. 1559). The usage of this simple epithet “mes enfants,” is more than an elementary example of captatio benevolentiae, it is also a clever echo of an earlier moment in the play. The first words that she addressed to Antiochus and Séleucus were “Mes Enfants, prenez place” (vv. 521). It is worth noting that these are the only two occasions in the play in which Cléopâtre enunciates this term of endearment. She manages to use the same word, enfants, to incite murder and to encourage marriage. In both cases she is artfully using the goodwill of maternal love in order to conceal her murderous desires. Rodogune is easily duped by this claim of an “amour maternelle.” Despite the fact that this woman stabbed her previous fiancé and has repeatedly plotted to kill her, she joyously declares that “tout l’heur que j’espère / C’est de vous obéir et respecter en mère” (vv. 1563-6).

With her children assured of her goodwill, the Queen sends Laonice to retrieve the poisoned wine. When she passes the cup, she once again shows her capacity for manipulating the vocabulary of love. She consciously evokes the brothers’ previously mentioned “sainte amitié” (vv. 81) when she calls the coupe nuptiale “un gage envers votre moitié / De votre amour ensemble, et de mon amitié” (vv. 1592-1594). It is possible that the more discerning Séleucus would not have believed his mother’s abrupt change in temperament, but Cléopâtre correctly judges that her surviving son is terminally credulous. Upon taking the poisoned cup in his hands he cries out “Ciel! Que ne sois-je point aux bontés” (vv. 1595) and Nicanor’s dynasty appears destined for extinction.

La main

Saving the kingdom from this tyrannical future is what can either be called a coup de théâtre or a conveniently timed revelation. Timagène’s surprise proclamation of Séleucus’ murder forces Cléopâtre once again to employ her verbal wits in order to remain the master of the moment. In the scene that

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7 This is not the first time that Corneille presents the unlikely mother-daughter coupling of Cléopâtre and Rodogune. Before leaving Syria, Séleucus despairingly laments Rodogune’s murderous proposal saying: “Que le ciel est injuste! Une âme si cruelle / Méritait notre mère, et devait naitre d’elle” (vv. 1051-52). Cléopâtre’s later appropriation of this symbolic parentage is concrete example of how she can take previous indicators of evil and transform them into symbols of goodness through rhetorical manipulation.
The Fall of a Brilliant Monster

follows this announcement Antiochus is forced to conclude which woman killed his brother. Braider writes that the new king Antiochus is “called on to serve as the Solomonic Judge” (Braider, 148), and it is indeed most useful to conceive of the fourth scene of the fifth act as a trial. Twice Cléopâtre refers to her son as “mon juge” (vv. 1711 and vv. 1724), however, he is clearly not happy with this new responsibility. With his natural optimism and faith in those around him irrevocably crushed, he seems incapable of deliberating. In his consternation he demands: “Ôtez-moi donc de doute” (vv. 1690). The women, who appear to be equally murderous, must distinguish themselves one from another so that he will not (in his very legalistic terminology) “Confondre l’innocente avec la criminelle” (vv. 1697). The women will defend themselves as though they were lawyers in a court of law, representing themselves as clients. As is often the case in law, the successful lawyers are those who have best mastered the tools of rhetoric and Cléopâtre will show off her acumen in the “trial of the hands.”

The judgment of Antiochus is necessary only because of the vague and elliptical nature of Séleucus’ last words. Their ambiguity derives from the fact that he does not directly name the killer but instead relies on synecdoche.8 He says:

Une main qui nous fut bien chère  
Venge ainsi le refus d’un coup trop inhumain  
Régnier, et surtout, mon cher frère,  
Gardez-vous de la même main. (vv. 1643-1646)

Although the audience knows to whom the guilty main belongs, Antiochus has only been exposed to the vacillating public face of the women in front of him. His task is ultimately to judge who is guilty by determining the possessor of the guilty hand.

In rhetorical terms, la main in Rodogune moves back and forth between metonymy and synecdoche.9 It is an example of a Cornelian shifting trope, in

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8 For additional articles on the usage of synecdoche in Rodogune please consult Muratore and Braider.

9 Due to the fact that the difference between the two tropes has been the source of many heated debates, I will define the distinction as it relates to my discussion of Rodogune. A metonym involves a relationship of contiguity that is not necessarily literal. Couronne is an unambiguous example taken from the play. In the first act, Laonice comments on the virtue of the twins by asking “Peut-on plus dignement mériter la couronne?” (vv. 211). The crown represents the future king because it is associated with being the regent. Synecdoche is similar, but the relationship between the trope and what it represents is more literal. Most often the part replaces a whole. Cléopâtre provides a clear example of this figure of speech when she declares that “Le fer m’a bien servie” (vv. 1508). She is using fer to replace
which the playwright will use the same word to carry two separate figurative meanings. The synecdochical sense is most often less abstract, more specific and more violent, while the metonymical sense is more vague and less tangible. Corneille was writing in a theatrical era with an intentionally limited vocabulary and a strong aversion to substitutive figures of speech like metaphor and simile, so this dynamic language usage is a testimony to his linguistic inventiveness in a time of stylistic restriction.

As a metonym, *la main* is used throughout the play to represent the abstract manipulative power that both of the women possess over the princes. They each have hands that try to direct the brothers into doing their bidding. It is a word that serves to group the two women together and not to distinguish them apart. Thus, Séleucus’ final warning to his brother to that he guards himself from “la même main” (vv. 1646) appears to be of little use.

In reality, however, Séleucus’ word choice will serve the judge Antiochus quite well because he is employing the *hand* not merely as a metonym, but also as a synecdoche. When employed in this manner, it is not describing a vague controlling force but a real extension of an existent body that commits an actual deed: the murderous part replaces the villainous whole.\(^\text{10}\) In this form, the shifting trope of *la main* is a distinguishing word that describes definitive acts of deadly aggression and it only applies to one of the women. Antiochus’ task is to determine which of the two women possess both the metonymically manipulative and the synecdochically murderous hand.

From the outset of the play, Corneille associates Cléopâtre with the violent synecdochical sense of the *la main*. The first time the word is uttered is when Laonice uses it to describe the king’s murderer: “Le Roi meurt, et dit-on, par la main de la Reine” (vv. 263). This is an unambiguous attribution of guilt through synecdoche. Unable to escape the truth of her homicidal actions, Cléopâtre will seek to divert responsibility through a cunning usage of the *hand* figure. When she admits to her sons that she killed their father, she says, “Rodogune, mes fils, le tua par ma main” (vv. 630). This is Cléopâtre at her most clever. In confessing that she killed Nicanor with her synecdochical *hand* she simultaneously implies that Rodogune was the metonymical *hand* that pushed her to stab. In this one utterance she is

\(^\text{10}\) Corneille frequently employs the synecdochical meaning of the hand to incarnate definitive acts of deadly violence. *La main* is used synecdochically in 20 out of the 26 total times that it is spoken figuratively in the play.
employing the power of rhetorical tropes to accept responsibility while avoiding blame.\footnote{Cléopâtre makes reference to her appendage two more times throughout her murderous plea implying that it was acting on the behalf of Antiochus and Séleucus. First she says “Et si ma main pour vous n’avait tout attenté” (vv. 633) which is then shortly followed “De cette même main qui vous a tout sauvé” (vv. 637). Once again, she accepts physical responsibility while deflecting moral guilt.}

Cléopâtre further manipulates the symbolic hand during her legal defense before her \textit{juge} in the fifth act. Corneille establishes the importance of the trope in the mother / son dynamic during their dialogue that immediately precedes the trial. After the queen falsely changes her mind and blesses the marriage of the young lovers, her son says, “La main qui me blessait a daigné me guérir” (vv. 1366). The optimistic prince is overjoyed to see that the metonymical \textit{main} that once sought to keep him apart from his beloved is now uniting them. The actual metonym has not changed in its fundamental manipulative meaning, but there is a reversal in the perception of its intent. Cléopâtre learns from Antiochus’ joyous credulity. In the trial she recognizes that she must be seen as possessing a benevolently metonymical hand that gently pushes toward love. It is a micro linguistic detail that reflects the macro strategy of her careful inversion of \textit{être} and \textit{paraître}.

The \textit{trial of the hands} starts in earnest with Antiochus’ demand: “montrez-moi la main qu’il faut que je redoute” (vv. 1691-2). The rhetorical task is clear for the women: they must prove that their hand is solely metonymically controlling and not synecdochically violent. Cléopâtre demonstrates that she is up to the difficult task with her very first lines of defense: “Puisque le même jour que ma main vous couronne / Je perds un de mes fils, et l’autre me soupçonne” (vv. 1703-4). She wisely paints her \textit{main} as a kind metonymical force that is trying to crown her son and not herself.

Later in the trial Cléopâtre shifts the meaning of \textit{main} back to its more brutal synecdochical sense. Importantly, she only applies this significance when alluding to Rodogune. Referring to her rival she says: “Il voudra se garder de cette même main” (vv. 1726). In her appeal to the judge Antiochus, hers is the \textit{main} that represents the benevolent ideal of the loving mothers guiding force putting her son on the throne. On the contrary, her rival possesses the murderous and more literal \textit{hand} that stabs. Through this cunning division of figural meaning, she hopes to persuade her credulous son and win the case. Corneille presents her as a master of the shifting trope.
Le sang

La main is not the only word that Cléopâtre adapts for her own purposes. The common rhetorical figure of le sang is also given a new meaning in her defense. Like la main, the word carries a more negative and violent connotation in its synecdochical form than it does in its metonymical usage. Corneille establishes this difference several times throughout the play. He shows the power of the shifting trope perfectly during a key interchange between the brothers when they lament their mother’s murderous proposal. First Séleucus uses blood in its more violent synecdochical sense: “Je donnerais encor tout mon sang pour le sien” (vv. 703). In this way it refers to one’s life force and with its loss comes death. In his response to this Antiochus uses sang in its less violent metonymical meaning of “pertaining to family lineage” when he laments that their mother intends to “souiller la source de mon sang” (vv. 713).

Its presence in this more intangible metonymical form helps to remind the spectator and the reader that much of the play’s plot is based on blood ties and betrayal of those same binds. Cléopâtre herself uses it in this manner just previous to the trial calling Antiochus “les restes de mon sang” (vv. 1512). The queen is wise to employ this meaning because it highlights Rodogune’s otherness. She is not just a foreigner, but she is also the only character of the quartet who is not part of Nicanor’s bloodline.

Cléopâtre also employs the more violent synecdochical meaning of sang as a weapon against the Parthian princess. She does this in the trial when she claims that Rodogune “a soif de mon sang, elle a voulu l’épandre” (vv. 1715). In this quotation she moves sang toward its more brutal implication of life force and uses it to distinguish herself further from her rival.

A summary of Cléopâtre’s rhetorical defense shows that she constantly places Rodogune under the more literal and violent synecdochical meanings of words. She presents the Parthian princess as having the stabbing hand that wants to rob Antiochus of the figurative crown upon his head. She implies that Rodogune possesses none of the good and binding kind of abstract metonymical blood, but instead that she wants to spill as much of that very same synecdochical blood in its more literal sense.

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12 For point of reference, Le Sang is used synecdochically in 17 out of 22 times it is uttered in a symbolic sense throughout the play.
Rodogune’s rhetorical failure in defense

In this mock court, Rodogune seems to be completely incapable of responding to Cléopâtre’s rhetorical brilliance. In her first line of self-defense she acknowledges her failure in saying, “Je me défendrai mal” (vv. 1735). Instead of meeting Cléopâtre on the same battlefield by favorably distinguishing herself from her rival, she mostly presents herself as saddened and shocked at being accused.

Rodogune’s own attempts at using metonymy and synecdoche in order to defeat her enemy are wholly ineffective. She introduces the word bras, a common military figure of strength, without success. She declares to the queen: “votre bras au crime est plus fait que le mien” (vv. 1750). This seeks to imply that Cléopâtre is guilty of murdering Nicanor. This is an unwise strategy because the stabbing of the king refers to a different crime that confuses the judge Antiochus. The credulous and gullible son has yet to discover who killed his father and this accusation furthers his consternation.13 Rodogune is thus displeasing the judge since he has specifically asked the women to relieve him of all his doubt and confusion.

Rodogune’s rhetorical failure is best seen in her disastrous usage of le sang. She announces: “Vous demandiez mon sang, j’ai demandé le vôtre / Le Roi sait quels motifs ont poussé l’une et l’autre” (vv. 1755-6). In this statement she makes several fatal mistakes. First, she equates herself with her rival and thereby fails to distinguish herself whatsoever. In so doing, she completely ignores the task given to her by her judge. More importantly, Rodogune accepts Cléopâtre’s usage of the shifting trope of blood that puts her in line with the more literal and violent synecdochical usage of the word. She is letting the queen frame the debate by accepting her terminology. Finally, she is also tacitly reminding her judge that she is not of his blood in its metonymical familial-binding sense.

At the end of this pathetic performance, Rodogune perceives the failure that she herself had predicted: “Mais, Seigneur, vous n’écoutez pas!” (vv. 1766). He replies “Non, je n’écoute rien, et dans la mort d’un frère / Je ne veux point juger entre vous, et ma mère” (vv. 1767). Antiochus’ refusal to judge manifests a Séleucus-like despair and resignation. In his utter disillusion, the naïve brother has finally understood his own blindness. His attempt to discover the difference between the women has failed, and all he confronts now are two similarly odious alternatives: they are both guilty. This represents a success for Cléopâtre, whose rhetorical skill, in combina-

13 His credulity is so great that he doubts her guilt despite the fact that she had previously admitted to the murder.
tion with her rival’s verbal incompetence, maintains the perceived equality between them and prevents her own indictment.

The triumph of the Syrian queen is nearly complete. Her goal is to ensure complete destruction of the Nicanor line, and her success will come when the disenchantment of the surviving prince transforms itself into a death wish. In his consternation he plans to follow through with the marriage and to allow whoever stabbed his brother eventually to murder him. He tellingly expresses his new morbid sensibility by referring to *la main*. He announces his indirect suicide to his departed brother: “Cher frère... La main qui t’a percé ne m’épargnera pas / Je cherche à te rejoindre, et non à m’en défendre” (vv. 1773-74). The idealistic prince finally resigns himself and even embraces the more literal and violent synecdochical usage of this symbol as the *hand that stabs*.

**Rodogune learns from the master**

It is in this despairing state of wild abandon that Antiochus takes the nuptial cup. If he takes one sip Cléopâtre would finally avenge herself and satisfy her passionate bloodlust. Only Rodogune’s interjection prevents this tragic dénouement. In the moments that follow she outsmarts Cléopâtre for the first time in the play. Most importantly, she does it using tactics learned from her opponent: she manipulates Antiochus’ desires and displays a masterful usage of words.

Rodogune’s surprisingly successful counter attack begins when Antiochus asks for the poisoned cup. Her goal in this short interchange is to bring Antiochus back to his senses. If she can convince him that there is a happy ending in sight – one that does not end in the liquidation of the Nicanor line – then she will eventually win. The difficulty for the Parthian princess is that the perception of parity has reached its apex. The women are equally murderous and the only minor difference between the twins (Séleucus was more despairing) is undone by Antiochus’ hopelessness. Rodogune’s success depends on the surviving prince regaining his own individuality from his brother by once again being hopeful, trusting, and loving.

To achieve her aims, Rodogune expresses a newfound ability to manipulate language in her opening plea to the gloomy Antiochus. She declares, “Ah! Gardez-vous de l’une, et l’autre main... Craignez de toutes deux quelque secrète haine” (vv. 1782, 1784). The genius of her tactic is that she is no longer fighting the apparent equality. She could not beat Cléopâtre at this game and so she changes tactics. She accepts the violent synecdochical usage of *la main* and acknowledges that either woman could be the killer.
By tolerating the appearance of similitude, she is helping to fight Antiochus’ despondency. She is relieving him of the duty of judgment and is instead asking for a kind of retrial. She implores him to “tout refuser” (vv. 1786), which absolves him of the task of adjudicating that he had just abandoned. This shows that Rodogune’s has learned from her rival how to exploit her interlocutor’s desires. He longs for harmony and so she leads him to believe that there is no discord or difference between the two women that he loves. This trial has shaken his fundamental faith in humanity and her magnanimity is the first step to restoring it.

The paradoxical possibility of dual guilt also permits the potential existence of dual innocence. When Rodogune exculpates Cléopâtre by saying to her “Je n’accuse personne, et vous tient innocent” (vv.1787), she is giving Antiochus the hope that he so dearly desires. She implies that the entire trial may have been a mistake and that it is possible that neither woman is responsible for the murder. The credulous son wants this unlikely resolution so badly that it causes him temporarily to suspend his fatalistic plan to drink from the poisoned nuptial cup.

Rodogune’s unexpected triumph is complete when she proposes that a maid drink from the cup in order to prove that its content is nontoxic. She is careful to cloak this tacit accusation behind the appearance of simple concern. If it appears too accusatory, then the juge may revert to his previous state of suicidal despondency. She justifies the distrustful act saying: “On ne peut craindre trop pour le salut des Rois” (vv. 1790). She is clearly masking the être of suspicion behind the paraître of precaution, and the inversion of truth and appearance finally works in Rodogune’s favor.

This is also the only instance where the Parthian princess outmaneuvers her cunning rival. Her proposal to verify the contents of the cup puts Cléopâtre into an untenable position. If the maid dies then Antiochus would know once and for all that his mother is a monster. The only way for the Syrian queen to ensure the extinction of the Nicanor line is to drink it herself and to hope that the poison acts slowly enough to allow the rest of them to imbibe it with her. It does not and she expires in front of the young lovers. The two women are as violently separated as the two men and the kingdom can continue with dynastic certainty. The queen’s intellect had served her well until her unwanted student was able to use her own techniques to outduel her at the most crucial moment.

Les pieds

Oronte, the Parthian ambassador, has the penultimate speech in the play and in it he sums up the moral and rhetorical outcome of the drama. He
declares to Rodogune and Antiochus: “La coupable est punie, et vos mains innocentes” (vv. 1836). The entirety of the argument in this paper is summarized by this deceptively short sentence. For the first time in the play, the heir to Nicanor sees that there is a clear and discernible guilty party. The perceived equality between the queens, so long manipulated by Cléopâtre, has been brutally terminated by the queen herself. The violent synecdochical usage of les mains makes its final appearance and it acquits the Parthian princess once and for all. Now Antiochus knows that Rodogune does not possess the stabbing hand that his brother so confusingly warned him of in his dying words.

With all of the possible murderous mains in Rodogune, there was ever only one. It belonged to the dangerously intelligent monster of a mother who used it to kill her husband, her son and now herself. This cunning maternal abomination now suffers her only defeat with the literal and synecdochical blood in her veins infected by poison as the metonymical blood of Nicanor is poised to endure forever.

Yet, even in her dying moments, this master rhetorician is cognizant of the symbolic power of the shifting trope. In her last words Cléopâtre employs a different body part: les pieds. She says: “Sauve-moi de l’affront de tomber à leurs pieds” (vv. 1830). She uses “feet” in both their synecdochical connotation as a part that replaces the whole and its metonymical sense that implies submission to a victor. By perishing off-stage on her own terms she once again saves herself the ignominy of being on the weak side of a trope. She controls language even if she can no longer dictate her own fate.

Works Cited


