

Cinna's Political Ambition

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Abstract Cinna's political ambition has received curiously little attention in the extensive critical examination of Pierre Corneille's *Cinna* (1641) over the years. While critics focus on whether Cinna is heroic or not and debate his sincerity when he counsels Auguste to remain emperor (II.1), "ambition" is almost never mentioned in relation to him; rather it is regularly ascribed to Auguste. In this article I trace how signs of Cinna's political ambition are embedded in the text and consider the degree to which it is recognized by the other characters and even by himself. Cinna's ambition is not a constant in the play, but rather decreases in the second half, as the onstage space is dominated more and more by Auguste. Of central interest is the question of the critical blind spot: what in this tragedy makes Cinna's political ambition both present and yet difficult to perceive, and why would Corneille have wanted it so?

Keywords Ambition · Corneille · Cinna · Occultation

Pierre Corneille's *Cinna* (1641) has been the object of much critical examination over the years, but one particular feature has curiously received little attention: Cinna's political ambition. While critics focus on whether Cinna is heroic or not and debate his sincerity when he counsels Auguste to remain emperor (II.1), few propose the word "ambition" in relation to him. Indeed, the circumlocutions and detours employed by critics are fascinating in themselves. Susan Tiefenbrun ties him to "opportunism" (1980, 191), "self-interest," and "egotism" (199); Robert

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Nelson (1965, 325) and René Jasinski (1974, 317) link ambition with the conspirators as a group. Nelson allows that while ambition is primarily the province of Auguste, it is a drive more closely associated with Cinna than with Émilie (1965, 317). Several critics point to the ambiguity of Cinna's actions (Stegmann 1968, 586; Merlin-Kajman 2000, 50; Orsini 2001, 51), but do not present ambition as a contributing factor. I have found only two attributions of political ambition to Cinna, the first in a rhetorical question ("Is Cinna the "true 'neveu de Pompée' [...] or is he an opportunist who espouses Republican ideology to further his own ambitions?" [Baker 1994, 79]) and the second in a speculative aside in the context of a discussion of Auguste ("Cinna vaudrait-il mieux ? Il s'est fait conspirateur par amour et par ambition plus que pour sauver la liberté" [Jasinski 1974, 126]). With these rare exceptions, Cinna is not associated with ambition. In this study I propose to trace the possibilities and limitations of ascribing political ambition to Cinna. In so doing, I hope to arrive at some explanations for this blind spot in critical discussion of the play.

The term "ambition" merits examination. In the context of *Cinna*, ambition refers primarily to the specific desire for supreme power in Rome. The term, however, encompasses a wide range of meanings. As the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694) makes clear, ambition in the seventeenth-century has both a negative and a positive connotation: "Desir excessif d'honneur & de grandeur" and "Se prend quelquefois en bonne part, & on s'en sert pour exprimer un juste desir de faire de grandes actions qui soient dignes d'honneur." Antoine Furetière, in his *Dictionnaire universel*, concurs: "Passion déréglée qu'on a pour la gloire & pour la fortune. Il y a aussi une honneste, une noble, une louable *ambition*, qui fait arriver aux honneurs par le chemin de la vertu" (1690). The paradoxical nature of ambition's moral status is noteworthy. Indeed, the issue is thematized in Corneille's play in relation to Auguste. Implicitly, Auguste's ambition to take power is cast in a negative light through its immediate consequences: proscriptions, assassinations, civil strife. In contrast, Livie justifies the bloody consequences of Octave's ambition by its successful outcome, which has the effect of accentuating the positive side of ambition.¹

In addition to its moral variability, "ambition" enjoys a broad semantic field, including—as Furetière's definition makes clear—*gloire*, that most traditional Cornelian preoccupation, particularly in the tetralogy.² For John Campbell, the term "ambition" encompasses "honour, glory, self-advancement, self-interest, envy and jealousy." (2004, 48). Finally, the relationship between love and ambition is thorny,

¹ Tous ces crimes d'État qu'on fait pour la Couronne,
Le Ciel nous en absout, alors qu'il nous la donne,
Et dans le sacré rang où sa faveur l'a mis,
Le passé devient juste, et l'avenir permis. (5.2.1609-12)

Georges Couton notes that the idea she expresses—the ends justify the means—comes from Machiavelli (Corneille 1980–1987, 1: 1620).

² Micheline Cuénin goes even further than Furetière, viewing *gloire* as the specific objective of ambition (1985, 449). Nelson does not accord *gloire* a positive connotation, but rather discusses Cinna's preoccupation with his own *gloire* in terms of "selfishness" and "narcissism" (1965, 315–316).

and also highly relevant to this play. In the *Discours sur les passions de l'amour* (attributed to Blaise Pascal), ambition is placed in opposition to love: "Les passions qui sont les plus convenables à l'homme, et qui en renferment beaucoup d'autres, sont l'amour et l'ambition : elles n'ont guère de liaison ensemble, cependant on les allie assez souvent; mais elles s'affoiblissent l'une l'autre réciproquement, pour ne pas dire qu'elles se ruinent" (1911). On the contrary in this play, love and ambition appear strangely commingled for both Cinna and Émilie, as will be evident later. As Corneille's theater progresses over the years, ambition will have an ever-greater role in love, devouring it almost entirely by the time we reach *Tite et Bérénice* (1670) and *Pulchérie* (1672).³ In 1660, in a famous line from his *Discours de l'utilité des parties du poème dramatique*, Corneille will forcefully differentiate between love and ambition in favor of the latter: "Sa dignité [the dignity of tragedy] demande quelque grand intérêt d'État, ou quelque passion plus noble et plus mâle que l'amour, telles que sont l'ambition ou la vengeance" (Corneille 1980–1987, 3:124). However, in *Cinna* there is no comfortable dividing line between the two. Both Émilie and Cinna overtly claim a desire for revenge as foundational to their love. Indeed they squabble on stage over whose desire for revenge is responsible for their attachment to one another. In front of the enraged Auguste, Cinna claims: "J'avais fait ce dessein avant que de l'aimer" (5.2.1628). Nonetheless, the audience believes in the sincerity of their love.

Cinna opens on the note of ambition, but one which is tied firmly to Auguste and his desire to be the ruler of Rome. Émilie ascribes her father's death to that ambition: "Que par sa propre main [Auguste's] mon père massacré / Du trône où je le vois fait le premier degré" (1.1.11–12). The verticality of ambition is highlighted by the image of a series of ascending steps.⁴

The earliest suggestion of Cinna's ambition is his role as the leader of the conspiracy to assassinate Auguste. In his long narration of his speech to his fellow conspirators, Cinna demonstrates his oratorical capacity to lead and lays claim to the active privilege of being the first to strike the emperor: "C'est de ma main qu'il prend, et l'encens, et la coupe, / Et je veux pour signal que cette même main / Lui donne au lieu d'encens d'un poignard dans le sein" (1.3.234–236). Cinna's starring role in Auguste's planned assassination is strikingly reminiscent of Auguste's part in the bloody actions that enabled him to acquire his throne. Cinna's self-assertive stance suggests the possibility that he harbors further ambitions once Auguste has been assassinated. His lengthy narrative itself, with its frequent marks of control and

³ Discussing *La Mort de Pompée*, Albert Gérard notes that for Corneille, "love for the sake of ambition is "nobler", more "illustrious", than love for its own sake" (1965, 327). Corneille moves in a completely opposite direction, however, in his final play, *Suréna*, where ambition is explicitly rejected in favor of love.

⁴ Cinna employs a similar image of the consequences of Auguste's ambition in act 1, scene 3:

La perte de nos biens, et de nos libertés,
 Le ravage des champs, le pillage des villes,
 Et les proscriptions, et les guerres civiles,
 Sont les degrés sanglants dont Auguste a fait choix
 Pour monter dans le trône et nous donner des lois. (1.3.216–220).

command, suggests a similar attitude of self-aggrandizement compatible with political ambition.

The first act, however, offers no clear signs that Cinna envisions himself upon the imperial throne. The political consequences of the planned assassination as presented in Cinna's narrative seem clear and universally desired: a return of Rome to a republic. Indeed, Cinna wants to be known as a "libérateur" (1.3.251) and promises his peers that "Avec la liberté Rome s'en va renaître" (1.3.226).⁵ Cinna's motives for engaging in the assassination plot are of course muddled by Émilie's personal desire for revenge, which Cinna has made his own as a condition to win her love. Neither character acknowledges that the amalgam of private and public motives might be problematic or that hiding the former behind the latter has moral implications.⁶ Thus Cinna appears at this early point in the play to be acting out of love for Émilie and a desire to see Rome a republic once again, two motives that while not incompatible, belong to starkly different domains.

The confusion of motives intensifies in act 2 scene 1, the lengthy deliberative scene that sees Cinna counsel Auguste to remain on the throne rather than step down and allow Rome to return to a republic. Much has been written in an attempt to sort out whether or not Cinna is sincere in his defense of the empire and Auguste's role therein. In his two major oratorical moments (1.3 and 2.1), Cinna argues two opposing political stances: first for the republic and then for the empire. The two positions seemingly cancel each other out, leaving only Cinna's love for Émilie. Characters who act strictly out of love, such as Pertharite, Syphax (*Sophonisbe*), or Massinisse (*Sophonisbe*), are strongly looked down upon in Corneille's theater. As we saw above, Corneille demands something more "mâle" than merely love to construct a tragedy. Indeed Cinna shows himself to be something more than a creature of love when he counsels Auguste: his arguments give evidence of political astuteness and considerable reflection on the subject of governance.

Cinna's ambition provides a different path to consider his confused motivations and his seemingly irreconcilable speeches. We see signs of Cinna's ambition in the starring role he accords himself in the assassination and also in the leadership he shows in his speech, galvanizing his fellow conspirators. In the second act, Cinna assumes the indirection of the skilled courtier.⁷ Cinna's motives become ever more confused in the second and third acts, but his persuasive skills are very much in evidence in act 2 scene 1 as he convinces Auguste to remain on the throne, much to the surprise of Maxime and the

⁵ Émilie, too, imagines herself inspired by the goal of Rome's liberation. "Et faisons publier par toute l'Italie, / «La liberté de Rome est l'œuvre d'Émilie»" (1.2.109–110).

⁶ Hélène Bilis calls Cinna "an intentionally deceitful character" (2013, 77); Orsini notes that Cinna lies to his fellow conspirators, at least by omission, and that we can never know how much of his speech to them was sincere (2001, 50–51). See also Jean Boorsch (1941, 131).

⁷ Whereas Cinna approaches his ends indirectly in act 2 scene 1, his speech to the conspirators in act 1 scene 3 is *presented* indirectly; he speaks not to them, but to Émilie, and uses both direct and indirect discourse to convey his earlier words. Furthermore, it is Corneille's choice to present one scene indirectly through a lengthy narrative and the other directly on stage. See also Hélène Merlin's discussion of the different rhetorical forms that the two speeches take (1998, 53).

audience. Cinna will argue that he was employing indirection so as to ensure Rome's revenge against the tyrant as well as its liberation.⁸ There is a second possibility of indirection motivated by ambition underlying Cinna's arguments to keep Auguste on the throne. At first glance it would seem implausible that Cinna would seek to maintain Auguste as emperor if he had designs on his throne. Yet Cinna may take a long view concerning his prospects; he may believe that Auguste will eventually accord him a path to power. In either case—as the avenging assassin of a tyrant or the passive recipient of the emperor's beneficence—Cinna's counsel that Auguste must remain on the throne favors his own ambition, and in ways that Auguste's mere abdication would not. Reading ambition in Cinna's character provides an avenue, albeit certainly not a perfect one, to compensate for the fact that the audience never learns which form of government he truly prefers. How else may one reconcile the careful thought which must necessarily have preceded Cinna's rhetorical eloquence with his almost sophistical self-contradiction?

Several of Cinna's specific arguments in act 2 scene 1 support an interpretation that Cinna seeks to eventually replace Auguste. Cinna contends that success confers legitimacy regardless of the means employed to acquire the throne. By disculpating Auguste in this fashion Cinna suggests a path that he himself may seek to follow. He argues for the value of time as well (the emperor is on the throne for life while a consul has but a year), a stance that only makes sense when considering Cinna's potential ambition in terms of the long view. Auguste may remain on the throne, but it is a stable throne worth waiting for, and the extended duration of Auguste's reign may be an anticipatory projection of Cinna's own imaginary reign. Finally, and most notably, Cinna's ambition is manifest in his insistence that Auguste consider naming an heir.

Indeed, Cinna's potential ambition is most directly favored by the rather loose system of imperial familial ties. In contrast to the rigid system of primo-geniture for royal succession that Corneille knew in his day, Roman practice is far more flexible. As John Lyons notes, "the empire repudiates the biological succession" in favor of "the more abstract concept of ... worth" (1996, 75); Julius Caesar adopted Auguste and thereby moved him into "a prominent position from which he could enter the conflict for Caesar's heritage" (1996, 81). Cinna may seek the same favor from Auguste, a man without sons. The possibility of such an elevation is supported by Auguste's decision to give Émilie, a young woman whom he refers to repeatedly as his daughter, to Cinna.⁹ The emperor goes so far as to present his gift of the young woman in terms of political equivalency:

Bien plus, ce même jour je te donne Émilie,

Le digne objet des vœux de toute l'Italie,

⁸ "[J]e veux l'affranchir ensemble, et la venger" (2.2.653); Cinna goes on to assert that it is not possible to "Guérir un mal si grand sans couper la racine. / Employer la douceur à cette guérison. / C'est en fermant la plaie y verser du poison" (2.2.678–680).

⁹ "Elle tient la place de Julie" (2.1.638); "Et toi, ma fille, aussi!" (5.2.1564); "Ô ma fille! Est-ce la le prix de mes bienfaits?" (5.2.1595); "Aime Cinna, ma fille, en cet illustre rang" (5.3.1711).

Et qu'ont mise si haut mon amour et mes soins,

Qu'en te couronnant Roi, je t'aurais donné moins. (5.1.1469–1472)

Auguste thereby subtly underscores both his understanding of Cinna's ambition and, more openly, of Émilie's political market value.

Cinna alludes more clearly to the possibility of adoption when he asserts the need for a named heir. He explicitly favors a hereditary transmission of power that accommodates adoption:

Sylla quittant la place enfin bien usurpée

N'a fait qu'ouvrir le champ à César et Pompée,

Que le malheur des temps ne nous eût pas fait voir,

S'il eût dans sa famille assuré son pouvoir. (2.1.593–596)

Cinna exhorts Auguste: "Donnez un successeur qui soit digne de vous" (2.1.620). In some sense we may understand Cinna's political ambition as passive: he wants to receive the throne from Auguste, just as he is seemingly happy to receive Émilie from him.

Lineage is of course a fundamental reference for legitimizing one's actions and choices. Émilie is obsessed with avenging her father. Perhaps more to the point in terms of ambition is the fact that Cinna is the grandson of Pompée, a fact that he uses to define and inspire himself in his speech to the conspirators; Cinna's conduct (specifically the assassination) "Fera voir si je suis du sang du grand Pompée" (1.3.238). It may be worth noting that Pompée will enjoy a significant role in two other of Corneille's plays. In *La Mort de Pompée* he is briefly a figure of defeat before his assassination; thus his political ambitions have come to a bad end. In *Sertorius*, on the other hand, Pompée's ambition is manifest in his willingness to divorce his wife to curry favor with the emperor Sylla. While, as noted above, the importance of birth is reduced in the context of imperial succession, both Cinna nor Émilie are deeply attached to their own ancestry and unwilling until the dénouement to set aside the imperatives of revenge to which it gives rise.

Cinna seems to reject any political ambition when speaking with Maxime immediately after the scene of deliberation: "que sa [Auguste's] peine étonne / Quiconque après sa mort aspire à la Couronne" (2.2.661–662). But Cinna's honesty in this scene is open to question because he has not yet revealed to Maxime the truth of his situation as it concerns Émilie. It is thus difficult to gauge the degree to which Cinna is posturing in his statements to his perplexed co-conspirator. But leaders and leadership are clearly on Cinna's mind. A few lines later, Cinna reopens the space for a positive leader: "Mais nous ne verrons point de pareils accidents / Lorsque Rome suivra des Chefs moins imprudents" (2.2.671–672). The plural of *chef* suggests a return to a republic, yet does not preclude a role for Cinna himself.

The first two acts of the play contain numerous hints of Cinna's ambition, but hints that the audience alone must perceive because no other character makes any suggestion that Cinna harbors such motivation. Act 3 marks a point of reversal,

where Cinna's ambition begins to lose its drive in favor of an ever more passive stance, and where others begin to accuse him of seeking to rule in Auguste's place.

Act 3 opens with just such an accusation. Euphorbe warns Maxime:

Craignez tout d'un esprit [Cinna's] si plein de lâcheté.

L'intérêt du pays n'est point ce qui l'engage

.....

Pensez-vous avoir lu jusqu'au fond de son âme?

Sous la cause publique il vous cachait sa flamme,

Et peut cacher encor sous cette passion

Les détestables feux de son ambition.

Peut-être qu'il prétend après la mort d'Octave,

Au lieu d'affranchir Rome, en faire son esclave. (3.1.744–754)

Euphorbe's argument could not be clearer or more logical. The speaker, however, is problematic. Euphorbe is Maxime's *mauvais génie*, who urges his master to betray the conspiracy and his confederates in order to obtain Émilie. His rhetorical goals thus make the informational content of his discourse suspect. It is nonetheless the case that this most politically astute and Machiavellian of characters lays out clearly the mechanism of concealment and political ambition in Cinna that we have seen hinted at earlier.

It complicates matters that Act 3 is also the moment of Cinna's greatest indecision, expressed largely as a binary internal conflict: should his loyalty go to Émilie or to Auguste? He describes his dilemma to Maxime in a surprisingly frank fashion, given that Maxime is his co-conspirator. Cinna excuses his hesitations by alleging that they are just last-minute jitters (3.2.822–832) and he makes no explicit reference to any ambition. Yet the obsessive image that preoccupies him is one that relates directly to that aspiration:

Il me semble surtout incessamment le [Auguste] voir

Déposer en nos mains son absolu pouvoir,

Écouter nos avis, m'applaudir et me dire:

«Cinna, par vos conseils je retiendrai l'Empire,

Mais je le retiendrai pour vous en faire part». (3.2.807–811)

The “nous” becomes “moi” as he speaks, and, tellingly, the last two lines are the only ones repeated in the entire play. Unsurprisingly, Maxime seeks to strengthen Cinna's resolve; at the same time however, he perceives and responds to the ambition implicit in Cinna's statement above: “N'écoutez plus la voix d'un Tyran qui vous aime, / Et veut vous faire part de son pouvoir suprême” (ll.845–846). Thus Maxime as well has become aware of Cinna's potential ambition for power.

The following scene is Cinna's sole monologue. The audience has every right to expect that if Cinna hopes to acquire the throne one would learn of it here. Cléopâtre reveals her hidden ambitions in her monologues in *Rodogune*, as does Camille alone on stage before confronting her brother in *Horace*. The fact that Cinna makes no such mention in a dramatic context that calls for candor suggests that my hypothesis may be incorrect. However, the situation is a complicated one. First, as we noted earlier, ambition has a strong association with *gloire*. So we may espy Cinna's ambition hidden in the statement "La gloire d'affranchir le lieu de ma naissance" (1.878). Second, Cinna's praise of Auguste in his monologue takes a significantly self-centered turn:

.....un Prince magnanime,

Qui du peu que je suis fait une telle estime,

Qui me comble d'honneurs, qui m'accable de biens,

Qui ne prend pour régner de conseils que les miens. (3.3.881–884)

Ambition is certainly consistent with such egotism. Finally, this is a deliberative monologue, concerned not with revelation but with making a choice. But Cinna arrives at no final decision, intending instead to take his quandary to Émilie. Cinna employs an elevated vocabulary in this scene, language that his confusion, indecision, and frustration do not seem the equal of: *digne, glorieux, noble, vertu, honneur, âme généreuse, gloire, magnanime, honneurs*. The inappropriately elevated vocabulary works to suggest that he is not capable of being honest with himself at this juncture. Thus his ambition may remain hidden in this monologue, even to himself. Furthermore, Cinna is no longer the masterful rhetorician of the first two acts.¹⁰ In tandem with his oratorical skills, it would seem that the resolve upon which any ambition must rely is disintegrating.

Émilie too accuses Cinna of ambition in the third act. We have already seen evidence of Cinna's tendency toward self-aggrandizement and how such self-regard relates to ambition. In his unsuccessful confrontation with Émilie (3.4) he again accentuates his own importance: "Et pour vous l'immoler [Auguste], ma main l'a couronné" (3.4.956). When Cinna unsuccessfully attempts to convince Émilie to abandon her vendetta by describing all of the indirect power that Auguste's favor bestows upon them both (3.4.983–988), Émilie sniffs out Cinna's hidden motives. She does not hesitate to use the word "ambition": "L'indigne ambition que ton cœur se propose! / Pour être plus qu'un Roi tu te crois quelque chose!" (3.4.989–990). However, just as Euphorbe's attribution of ambition to Cinna is

¹⁰ M. J. Muratore finds that once Cinna no longer wants to kill Auguste, his rhetorical skills decrease substantially (1990, 264).

colored by his own rhetorical goals, so too does Émilie's displeasure affect her interpretation of Cinna's motivations.

The third act is clearly the moment at which Cinna's ambition is both the least and the most in evidence. Having lost his conviction and clear sense of direction, Cinna seems to have largely abandoned the political ambition he concealed in the first two acts. His potential for attaining power or *gloire* has crumbled under Émilie's scorn and his own indecision. Yet others perceive Cinna's ambition for power for the first time. It is as though, in this transitional act, Cinna were no longer in control of the mechanisms he used in the first two acts to keep his ambition hidden. By Act 4, as the play shifts decisively to Auguste, any ambition the younger man may still harbor has become moot.

Before discussing the final confrontation between Auguste and Cinna, in which the latter's ambition comes to the fore again, I would like to call attention to a curious detour that the subject of ambition takes in the fourth act. Cinna does not appear on stage at all in act 4. Having lost its anchor—Cinna—the concept of ambition seems to attach itself to the most unlikely object available: Livie. When Auguste's wife tries to counsel her husband as he suffers from his own state of confusion and indecision, he lashes out at her for her suggestion that he show clemency to the conspirators: "Ayez moins de faiblesse, ou moins d'ambition" (4.3.1256), he chastises her; "C'est l'amour des grandeurs qui vous rend importune" (4.3.1261). In the context of this play, Livie is an entirely inappropriate target for such accusations.¹¹ She herself notes the ambition that motivated the conspirators, asserting that they "[o]nt voulu s'ennoblir par de si hauts projets" (4.3.1208). Perhaps the ambition she credits to the conspirators reminds Auguste of the ambition he himself exhibited as Octave, an ambition that led to much bloodshed and more recently, numerous assassination conspiracies. Eager to push the idea away, he tars Livie with his own characteristic. Earlier Auguste makes it clear that his feelings about his own ambition to reach the throne have become decidedly ambivalent: "L'ambition déplaît quand elle est assouvie" (2.1.365). Here in act 4 the very absurdity of Auguste's accusation against Livie makes the spectator consider ambition more closely.

Finally, in act 5 scene 1, Auguste confronts Cinna with his crime and accuses him of seeking the throne for himself.

Quel était donc ton but? d'y régner en ma place?
 D'un étrange malheur son [the state's] destin le menace,
 Si pour monter au trône et lui donner la loi
 Tu ne trouves dans Rome autre obstacle que moi,
 Si jusques à ce point son sort est déplorable
 Que tu sois après moi le plus considérable,

¹¹ Corneille and much of his audience knew, of course, that the historical Livie was indeed ambitious, excessively so. To pursue that extra-textual line of reasoning, however, is as pointless as to note that Agamemnon could not have sent Oreste on a mission to Sparta in *Andromaque* because Clytemnestra would have killed him well before he could do so. In *Cinna* Livie is selfless and prophetic, not ambitious.

Et que ce grand fardeau de l'empire romain
Ne puisse après ma mort tomber qu'en ta main.

(5.1.1509–1516; see also 1518–1530 and 1535–1538)

Auguste goes on at great length about the absurdity of what he presumes to be Cinna's designs on the throne. On the one hand, this speech should be the most credible association of ambition with Cinna, far more so than either Euphorbe's or Émilie's. As the exemplar of the trait, Auguste is well placed to recognize ambition in Cinna. And yet, Auguste's vision may be clouded as well. In his anger at the younger man's betrayal, Auguste may make the accusation as a way to humiliate Cinna. Even more important is the fact that Auguste is not yet aware of Cinna's love for Émilie and his promise to her to avenge her father's death. Once she comes on stage and Auguste learns of their relationship, he doesn't mention ambition again. One explanation for Cinna's conduct (love, promise, revenge) seemingly replaces another (ambition). What Auguste does not perceive is that both explanations may coexist. Cinna may act out of love *and* out of ambition just as both Cinna *and* Émilie are finally responsible for the assassination plot, an accord that they come to with much difficulty in act 5 scene 2 after each seeking credit for themselves alone.

Cinna's political ambition is largely crushed by the end of the third act; whatever aspirations he had to replace Auguste on the imperial throne are lost in the weeds of his emotional confusion. How ironic then that in the final scene of the play Auguste bestows upon him, not merely his pardon and Émilie's hand, but a political promotion as well ("Reçois le Consulat pour la prochaine année" [5.3.1710]). In a sense, Auguste encourages ambition in Cinna through that further gift. Earlier in the fifth act Auguste points clearly to the mechanism of Cinna's thought that allowed him to mistake the emperor's patronage for his own worth and merit:

On t'honore dans Rome, on te courtise, on t'aime,
Chacun tremble sous toi, chacun t'offre des vœux,
Ta fortune est bien haut, tu peux ce que tu veux,
Mais tu ferais pitié, même à ceux qu'elle irrite,

Si je t'abandonnais à ton peu de mérite. (5.1.1518–1522; see also 1527–1532)

Cinna may again make the same error, may again be tempted to believe himself worthy of the throne. Livie's prophecy, however, guarantees that there will be no further assassination plots, that Rome will live happily and prosper under Auguste's rule.

I have argued that there exist multiple signs of Cinna's political ambition in the play and that ambition figures plausibly as one of the factors motivating Cinna. The question remains: why has his ambition elicited so little critical notice? I would like to suggest several possible explanations.

The first is structural. Partial to antithesis throughout his career, Corneille favors strong binary internal conflict in his construction of characters during the period of the tetralogy. Rodrigue, Chimène, and L'Infante in *Le Cid*; Sabine and Curiace in

Horace; and Polyeucte and Pauline in *Polyeucte* are all painfully divided between two irreconcilable alternatives. In *Cinna*, all characters experience such conflicts. Auguste is torn between his private desires (abdication) and his public responsibility to remain emperor, Cinna between his allegiance to Émilie and loyalty to Auguste, Maxime between fidelity to the conspiracy and betrayal of the plot so as to acquire Émilie; even Émilie struggles to maintain her dominant desire for revenge against concern for her beloved Cinna. Beyond the internal conflicts are the larger ideological ones undergirding the entire play: which form of government is better for Rome, the republic or the empire? how best should a leader govern, through revenge or clemency? All issues are framed in binary terms. Cinna's ambition may obscure itself quite simply by virtue of its not being part of his character's primary binary (that is, choosing between loyalty to Émilie or Auguste). If Auguste, Émilie, and Maxime all operate within the parameters of a binary conflict, why should Cinna be any different? In other words, ambition appears as a superfluous excess in the construction of Cinna's character, given the norms of the play. The audience may thus be blinded to this third element in *Cinna* by the multiplication of binary dilemmas facing him and everyone else.

A second possibility involves the relationship between Cinna and the emperor. Perhaps the similarity of Cinna's ambition to Auguste's camouflages the former, allowing Cinna's designs to hide behind the far more imposing paternal figure who is the current Roman emperor. Auguste is explicitly associated with the term ambition early in the play.¹² The fact that Cinna's ambition appears in no way the equal of Auguste's—Cinna's is hidden, subject to emotional confusion, and relatively passive—helps to keep it in the shadows. Furthermore, this hypothesis has the advantage of duplicating the structure of the play. Just as Cinna's ambition is not as strong as Auguste's, Cinna himself loses ground to the emperor as the play progresses. Indeed, the central focus of the tragedy is patently transferred, as many have noted, from Cinna to Auguste.¹³

A third explanation is not unrelated to the transfer of the play from Cinna to Auguste. Is it not plausible that Cinna's ambition remains occulted because it comes to naught? While struggling against his subservience to Émilie (or at least to the promise he gave her), he loses sight of any desire to destroy and replace Auguste. Similarly, his gratitude towards Auguste has the same effect of outweighing any ambition-fueled desire to assassinate him. In thrall to one or the other or both Émilie and Auguste, Cinna loses the resolve act on his own behalf, and thus his ambition dwindles.

As an aside, we may note that, while ambition is widespread in Corneille's theater, particularly after the tetralogy, the term has a distinctly greater presence in three plays: *Pertharite* (1651), *Tite et Bérénice* (1670), and *Pulchérie* (1672). Each play treats ambition differently, of course, but in each of the three it plays a significant and in no way hidden role. What is striking is that these are three of the

¹² In act 1 scene 2 Fulvie says: "Tant de braves Romains, tant d'illustres victimes / Qu'à son ambition [Auguste's] ont immolé ses crimes" (1.2.89–90).

¹³ Consider that in the first three acts of the play, Cinna speaks 482 lines to Auguste's 80, while in the final two acts, Cinna's contribution has been reduced by over 90 % to 47 lines, while Auguste's has ballooned to 313.

least successful or esteemed plays that Corneille wrote. Political ambition as a dominant feature in the construction of a character does not seem to be the most propitious path for a dramatist to take, perhaps because of its pejorative associations, perhaps because the spectator does not find it, unlike love, to be a sympathetic passion. It is possible that Corneille was wise to hide Cinna's ambition while making his love quite clear, so that the audience might sympathize with him.

Finally, I suggest that Cinna requires an association with ambition because Corneille insists that his plays deal with something more elevated than merely love (see quote above). Cinna's commitment to the republic is limited and probably questionable. He wavers between his love for Émilie and his emotional attachment to Auguste based on gratitude. Ambition, despite its dubious moral standing, at least suggests loftier goals, thus allowing less sentimental members of the audience to find him not merely a simpering tool in others' hands but at least potentially heroic.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Georges Forestier would agree: "La pièce est avant tout, sur le plan de l'intérêt dramatique, le lieu d'un affrontement entre deux personnalités héroïques" (2004, 18). See also Alain Riffaud (2011, 28–29).