

LOVE AND WAR:

Court Politics in Nathaniel Lee's *Sophonisba, or Hannibal's Overthrow* (1676)



By Beth Cortese

Nathaniel Lee's Sophonisba, or Hannibal's Overthrow (1676) translates the themes of love, war, and divided loyalty from the original narrative of the Carthaginian political martyr Sophonisba into the context of the tensions in Charles II's Court. Massinissa's difficult position of divided political and romantic allegiance exhibited through his unpopular love for Sophonisba, engages with questions of authority, government, and political and religious allegiance that dominated Charles II's reign. In particular, the influence of Charles II's French mistress Louise de K roualle—to whom Lee's tragedy is dedicated—whose loyalty was cause for concern because of her ties to Louis XIV's Court.

Nathaniel Lee's tragedy *Sophonisba* was first performed in 1675 and published in 1676 during the wake of King Charles II's unpopular relationship with his French mistress Louise de K roualle and promises made to Louis XIV to secretly ally with France and swear Catholic allegiance, though the latter was more of a bargaining tool to gain Louis' favour than a serious commitment as Hutton has observed.¹ The promises that Charles made to Louis were in exchange for financial aid to resolve Charles's debt from military expenditure and to have Louis halt building warships. The financial aid that the English King received from France was a strategy that meant that England would have military funds in the case of a conflict with the French or the Dutch. Charles II negotiated with France in order to curb French naval power so as to preserve the peace promised between Spain and France by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1668) and in doing so, maintain his allyship with Spain, the Netherlands, and Sweden despite the ongoing tension between England and the Netherlands over trade. Charles's ambiguous and shifting European alliances created political and religious uncertainty in England because of France's growing power. Nathaniel Lee dedicates *Sophonisba* to Louise de K roualle, the Duchess of Portsmouth, praising her beauty, stating that her eyes are "more attractive than those of Rosalinda," the love-interest of the General Hannibal in the tragedy, who is a new character introduced to create a parallel plot-structure. Though beautiful and

¹ Hutton 1989, 264.

courageous, Rosalinda in Lee's *Sophonisba* contributes to Hannibal's downfall in the play as he prioritises romantic over martial interest: the parallel plot enhancing the theme of conflicted alliances present in the original story. That Lee dedicates *Sophonisba*—and also his *Gloriana* (1675)—to Louise de K roualle is significant for several reasons. From a theatrical perspective, the dedication to Louise acknowledges the earlier French adaptations of Sophonisba's story by Jean Mairet and Pierre Corneille that the Duchess would have been aware of, paying homage to Mairet, Corneille and to Louise de K roualle's nation. From a political perspective, Louise was at this time established in Charles's Court, having had a son with the King in 1672, and Lee perhaps shows political support for her by dedicating the play to her. Indeed, Lee's tragedy takes the tripartite relationship between Sophonisba, Syphax and Massinissa from Sophonisba's story and paints a sympathetic portrait of women caught up in different political and romantic allegiances. The parallel plots serve to contrast the pairs of lovers, namely the way in which Rosalinda inspires violence and war in the King's nephew Young Massinissa and Hannibal, while Sophonisba inspires peace, honour, and pity in King Massinissa and spectators. In light of Lee's parallel plot of Hannibal and Rosalinda and Sophonisba and Massinissa, this article discusses the way in which Lee's adaptation of Sophonisba reflects the anxieties between England and France and Charles II's relationship with his mistresses. This article reads Lee's adaptation of Sophonisba in view of what has been described as political ambivalence that characterizes his group of Roman plays,² to explore the relationship between Lee's adaptation and the political anxieties present in Charles II's Court during the decade of the 1670s. The article will also examine the changes Lee made in his adaptation compared with earlier versions of Sophonisba's story.

English adaptations of Sophonisba's story

Sophonisba's story of martyrdom, in which she displayed her loyalty to Carthage in the second of the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage by committing suicide to reject becoming a Roman captive, was popular throughout the Early Modern period.³ Compared with the myriad depictions of Sophonisba in French and Italian Art, Literature and Drama, there are just four English dramatists who took inspiration from her story and adapted it:

² Lee 1986, 51; Hume 1977, 313.

³ Sophonisba is praised in Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* (Concerning Famous Women) (1361-62, translation from Italian to English published in 1374), in Petrarch's *Epic Africa* (1397), in Gian Giorgio Trissino's play *Sofonisba* (1515), Jean Mairet's play *Sophonisbe* (1634), Pierre Corneille's tragedy *Sophonisbe* (1663), and the Venetian opera *Scipio Africano* (1664) by Nicol  Miato.

John Marston, Thomas Nabbes, Nathaniel Lee, and James Thomson. Nabbes's tragedy uses a split-plot structure to contrast Hannibal's military fall with Scipio's success, with the romantic plot secondary to the play's exploration of leadership and power. While Marston and Thomson continue the tradition of celebrating Sophonisba's virtue, bravery, and patriotism, Lee's adaptation is surprisingly ambivalent toward Sophonisba. Marston, Nabbes and Thomson remain faithful to celebrating Sophonisba's patriotism. John Marston's *The Wonder of Women; or, The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606) celebrates Sophonisba as placing Carthage before her marriage to Massinissa—who, though initially aligned with Carthage, becomes allied to Rome—and her heroism in taking the decision to become a martyr for her homeland, declaring eloquently before the senate that “What's safe to Carthage shall be sweet to us” and “'Tis less disgrace to have a pitied loss, / Than shameful victory.”⁴ Marston's Sophonisba is praised for her virtue and bravery, as “the more cold fate, the more thy virtue burn'd” becoming a “loved creature of a deathless fame.”⁵ Marston further romanticized Sophonisba's story by having the separation of Sophonisba and Massinissa on their wedding night as the catalyst of the action, while their reunion in the final Acts of the play is the point at which Sophonisba is pleading to be spared from Roman captivity.

Lee builds on Marston's focus on the romantic plot, yet his version stresses the interconnectedness of political and romantic tensions through its split-plot structure that connects Hannibal's and Massinissa's conquests in love and war. The opening Act contrasts Hannibal's victory with Massinissa's retreat from his martial duties to grieve the loss of Sophonisba's love as he learns that she has married Syphax. Hannibal's and Massinissa's fates are reversed in Act 5 when Massinissa recovers his heroic spirit and allies with Rome and Hannibal's army, by contrast, is forced to retreat, rendering the Roman allies victorious. The two Generals' fates also parallel one another in the romantic plot as Hannibal's love, Rosalinda, is captured and dies, while Sophonisba, Massinissa's love, is saved from capture as she and Massinissa drink poison to save her from capture by the Romans and Massinissa from a lifetime of grief. While Nabbes's *Hannibal and Scipio* (1635) also introduces a love-interest for Hannibal, a lady of Salapia, listed in the playtext as Lady 2, she disappears from the plot after Act 1. In contrast, Lee makes Hannibal's concerns over Rosalinda's fate (also a captive, like Sophonisba) part of the reason for his downfall in battle. Hannibal consults an oracle about Rosalinda's fate in Act 4 after being warned not to delve into his own fate

⁴ Marston 1606, 2.1.111-120.

⁵ Ibid, 5.1.51-53.

and Rosalinda's death on the battlefield causes him to lose his courage during the battle, costing him the victory predicted by the oracle. Hannibal's love story is not present in Classical sources and appears to be Lee's own addition. The parallel love stories also share a similar theme, that of the dangers of mixing private and public life: Rosalinda cross-dresses to participate in the battle, her death distracting Hannibal, while Sophonisba is accused of being an "incendiary" whose "griefs renew'd the War."⁶ In both plots, the women are presented as stepping into a political or martial sphere that should be a male domain in the mind of the characters while military leaders lose sight of their duties because of their love-interests—a theme that Lee continues in *The Rival Queens* (1677).

Nathaniel Lee's *Sophonisba; or Hannibal's Overthrow* (1675)

Sophonisba; or Hannibal's Overthrow (1675) was the second play of Lee's performed on the public stage, following *The Tragedy of Nero, Emperor of Rome* (1674), the first of his Roman plays. *The Rival Queens* (1677), which succeeded *Sophonisba*, became Lee's most popular play. Nevertheless, *Sophonisba* was a moderate success: six performances are recorded between April 1675 and November 1676 during its debut, and the play was revived between 1680 and 1681 during the exclusion crisis.⁷ Lee, however, does not afford the heroine the same presence as earlier French and English adaptations of her original story. Rather than providing certainty that celebrates heroic leadership skills, the dual plot structure of Hannibal and Massinissa's conflicts of love versus duty emphasizes the male leaders' lack of political direction. Lee downplays the patriotism and heroics expressed in other dramatisations of Sophonisba's life, to present a sympathetic yet ambivalent view of the conflicting political and romantic allegiances and forms of authority that characterized Charles II's reign.

Susan Owen has argued that Nathaniel Lee's *Sophonisba* draws on the earlier style of English heroic drama that was adapted from French drama and developed by William Davenant and John Dryden in seventeenth-century England. English heroic drama was characterized by its focus on the "greatness" of monarchs and leaders in their pursuit of fame, military glory, or love, along with the genre's use of rhymed verse.⁸ Massinissa pursues love and fame, Sophonisba pursues fidelity to Carthage, while Hannibal pursues military glory. *Sophonisba*, along with Lee's other Roman tragedies, emphasizes the greatness and virtue of the play's protagonists when confronted with an overwhelming ethical dilemma that centres on choosing

⁶ Lee, 1675, Act 4, 43; Act 2, 13.

⁷ Lennep, Avery, and Scouten 1965, 232, 290.

⁸ Owen 2002, 34-35, 86; Hume 1976, 193-194.

between one's personal inclinations and public duty or the greater good; in Lee's *Sophonisba* this takes the form of Massinissa's promise to Scipio to assist him in the war and his promise to protect his love Sophonisba—only one of which is possible to keep given Scipio's alliance with Rome.⁹ Douglas Canfield refers to the conflict present in the tragedies of the 1670s as based on the “premise that the nobility have great souls capable of great passion” and argues that Lee and Dryden “mold heroes whose conflicting passions destroy them and ruin their states.”¹⁰ Canfield argues that the dramatic tension between private inclinations and public duty present in tragedies of the 1670s was part of these plays' focus on romantic constancy as a symbol of political stability that ensured patrilineage. The conflict between desire and duty, emotion and reason was increased by the theatrical practice of typecast performers paired in opposing roles, referred to as the virtuous and passionate pairing for actors and actresses.¹¹ Many of Lee's heroic tragedies as well as his horror tragedies, such as *The Rival Queens* (1677), capitalize on and augment this practice,¹² with the company pairing Michael Mohun as the general Hannibal with Charles Hart as King Massinissa in *Sophonisba*, reprising the same stock types of soldier and leader they played in Lee's *Tragedy of Nero, Emperor of Rome* (1674). Similar pairings occurred in the casting for Lee's *The Rival Queens* (1677), with Elizabeth Boutell as the virtuous Queen Statira and Rebecca Marshall as the passionate Queen Roxana, with Mohun as Clytus Master of Horse and Hart as Alexander the Great. The ongoing theme in the play and indeed in Lee's *Gloriana*, *The Tragedy of Nero*, and *The Rival Queens* as Canfield has noted, is “the figure of the hero in decline” and “the transience of glory and the value of love”, acknowledging the elevation of love over war in these tragedies that has been referred to as a conflict of Roman values of fame and glory pitted against “Oriental values of effeminate passion.”¹³ The dilemma of love versus duty that characterises both Massinissa's and Sophonisba's position in the various portrayals of the Second Punic Wars is at the core not only of Lee's plot, but also in his use of language. The parallel plot structure of Sophonisba's martyrdom and Hannibal's overthrow contains a tension between romantic, political, and public interest, and does not display a sense of political pride or patriotism, but of political ambivalence which dominates the play. Unlike Lee's tragedy *The Rival Queens*, in which Alexander the Great's fall into sexual intrigue and desertion of military conquest is the subject of tragedy,

⁹ Chua 2014, 10, 22.

¹⁰ Canfield 2000, 60.

¹¹ Howe 1992, 15.

¹² Danby 2016, 191-207.

¹³ Canfield 2000, 60-63.

the boundaries of passion and reason and of love and war are less well defined and morally demarcated in Lee's *Sophonisba*. In this sense, the repeated use of language that contrasts love and war is a product of both the casting and conventions of 1670s tragedies, but also the tense political atmosphere between England and France and within the Court during the time that Lee's tragedy was written and staged as I shall discuss.

Lee's Source Material

There are subtle differences between the various Classical writings about Sophonisba to do with her relationship with Massinissa and the representation of Sophonisba's and Massinissa's deaths that may account for the varied representation of Sophonisba in dramatic adaptations of her story. In terms of source material, Lee's adaptation generally follows Livy's interpretation laid out in his history of Rome, which provides a sympathetic account of Sophonisba's and Massinissa's relationship in contrast to Appian's more sceptical attitude toward Sophonisba's marriage to Massinissa in his account of Rome's foreign wars. Lee enhances the love story by drawing on Siculus' account, which mentions that Sophonisba and Massinissa were betrothed prior to her marriage to Syphax.

Of the early modern adaptations of Sophonisba, the romantic plot in Lee's version follows a similar focus to Jean Mairet's adaptation from 1634 and John Marston's *The Wonder of Women* (1606), which also focused more on the love story between Massinissa and Sophonisba, along with Mairet's decision to have Massinissa commit suicide due to grief over Sophonisba's death. The main and noteworthy innovation of Lee's adaptation is his dual plot structure of the love story which introduces the character Rosalinda as the lover of Hannibal, enhancing the themes of love versus war and conflicted allegiance in the story. Like Corneille's addition of Eryxe, Lee adds Rosalinda to develop the political plot. Pierre Corneille's *Sophonisbe* (1663) introduces the character of Eryxe as a rival to Sophonisba for Massinissa's attention to express opposing political viewpoints through the women's rivalry as Susan Read Baker observes.¹⁴ In contrast, the result of Lee's innovation of the dual political plot that compares Hannibal and Massinissa through their love-interests, is the sense of political and romantic ambivalence that pervades his adaptation through the sympathetic, yet somewhat ambiguous treatment of Sophonisba's political motivations and judgement of Massinissa's leadership. In this way, Lee's *Sophonisba* offers a more ambivalent political take on the leadership and alliances in the story when relating it to his own political context. Lee's ambivalence persists in his

¹⁴ Baker 1990, 97-99.

treatment of Sophonisba's character; while other versions, such as Corneille's *Sophonisbe* clearly portray Sophonisba as a heroic martyr, Lee's version focuses more on Sophonisba's forced marriage, the love between her and Massinissa, and Sophonisba as a political pawn, thus drawing on the anxieties present in Charles II's Court in his interpretation of her story.

Lee's adaptation reflects the suspicion of the political motives of Charles II's different mistresses. While in other versions, such as Appian's account, Sophonisba's first husband, jealous Syphax, is the character who cautions Massinissa about Sophonisba's motives for marrying him, in Lee's version, Scipio, the consul of Rome and friend to Massinissa, is the character who most articulates suspicions toward Sophonisba and her motives: "Yet for a Woman, and a false one too, / Your Fame, your Faith and Friendship you forego. / Still let the Great of Favourites beware; / They most deceive us, who most trusted are."¹⁵ This is significant because Scipio in Livy's account is framed as a trusted and heroic friend to Massinissa, so placing these doubts in Scipio's mouth, increases the suspicion against Sophonisba. She is even blamed for the war itself: "Whose subtle working Wit wrought all this care, / And with her beauteous griefs renew'd the War."¹⁶ Scipio's lines belie a deep distrust of women's involvement in the political sphere, one that runs throughout Lee's adaptation and relates to the attitudes toward Louise de Kéroualle.

Court Politics at Home and Abroad

The political situation between England and France was an ambivalent one during the 1670s. Indeed, there are elements of the plot of *Sophonisba* that allude to Charles II's current political situation in subtle ways. An example of this is the political intrigue of the historical events in which allegiances shift: Syphax is initially allied with Rome, before becoming an ally to Carthage after being persuaded by Sophonisba. Lee's play begins with Massinissa's uncertainty about Sophonisba's allegiance and unresolved tensions which mean that Massinissa cannot stop thinking about Sophonisba who forgot "all her vows" and holds resonance for the suspicion allotted to the King's newest mistress in 1671.¹⁷ In the following passage, Sophonisba outlines her loyalty to Massinissa, defending her trustworthiness:

Think me not false, though I did Syphax wed,
Who was ever a stranger to my Bed.
Forc'd by my Father's positive command,
I must confess I suffer'd him my Hand:

¹⁵ Lee 1675, Act 2 scene 1, 12.

¹⁶ Ibid, Act 2 scene 1, 13.

¹⁷ Lee 1675, Act 1, 7.

Heaven curse me if I ever granted more;
Cou'd I be his, having been yours before? ¹⁸

She argues that her marrying Syphax was a matter of duty imposed upon her rather than an act of love and refers to an earlier engagement between her and Massinissa. Continuing Lee's focus on the romantic plot and on the suspicions of Sophonisba's motive, Sophonisba's first lines focus more on her individual predicament than that of Carthage, a predicament in which she is the victim of tyranny as she is caught up in the "frighted Senators Decree" as "Rome, and the World, against my life combine."¹⁹ The arrival of Louise de K roualle sparked anxieties and suspicions within Charles's government because Louise was a member of Louis XIV's Court, as a lady-in-waiting to Charles's sister Minette. Within the Court feelings were mixed due to a concern that Louise would act as a spy for Louis XIV and that she would somehow manipulate the King, as expressed by the lexicographer and French exile Philibert-Joseph Le Roux²⁰ in his account of Louis XIV'S reaction to La Chaise's plan to manage King Charles and England through intrigue:

[“]I [Louis XIV] should rather choose to employ the Dutchess of Portsmouth, who has hitherto serv'd me faithfully in several little Affairs, that I have entrusted to her Management; and I am persuaded, she will be no less useful to me in great Ones. She is very nimble, and dexterous in Business, and possesses altogether the very Heart and Soul of the King; and frankly to tell you a Mistress has a Hundred Opportunities, and Tricks, to improve Persuasion, which the most cunning Ministers can never meet with.[”] [“]Sir,[”], (reply'd La Chaise with a Smile) [“]your Majesty may speak knowingly in that particular: I have nothing to object against it. I am also convinc'd, That the Dutchess of Portsmouth is now the only Person that can undertake this Affair with Success.[”]²¹

Scipio's caution about Sophonisba to Massinissa that "they deceive us who most trusted are" carries echoes of the association of women as political manipulators in court settings.²² The anxiety over political allegiance that occurs in the plot of Sophonisba has particular parallels with the current concerns over the King's political and religious allegiance. The Secret Dover Treaty of 1670 drawn up between England and France outlined that Louis would halt his naval campaign, lend England both money and ships, and in

¹⁸ Ibid, Act 3 scene 3, 34.

¹⁹ Lee 1675, Act 3 scene 3, 29.

²⁰ Le Roux was exiled for criticizing Fran ois de La Chaise who was the confessor to Louis XIV.

²¹ Le Roux 1693, 132.

²² Lee 1675, Act 2 Scene 1, 12.

exchange, Charles pledged to ally with the French against the Dutch, offering support in case of war and to openly declare himself a Catholic. Hutton has argued that this was a strategic “attempt to achieve complete security and open options, by being secretly allied to France and openly allied to the Dutch”, a move that would improve Charles’s financial problems and enhance his “domestic prestige.”²³ Indeed, England had lost more in terms of trade and capital from the Dutch Wars than it had gained. Beauclerk has pointed out that Louise was in some ways used as a bargaining tool by Charles to maintain the façade that Charles would uphold his pledge made in the Secret Dover Treaty of 1670 to publicly confirm his Catholic allegiance because of his Catholic mistress and her connection to Louis.²⁴

The conflicted soliloquies from Massinissa in Lee’s tragedy on the bind he finds himself in because of his promise to Scipio to give Sophonisba to the Romans would have had resonance for the current political situation because of the foreign and domestic pressures of political and religious allegiance that Charles II faced: “O Rome! Oh Heaven! Both equally my Foes. Was ever Heart thus miserably torn?” Massinissa exclaims when confronted with the dilemma of choosing between fulfilling his promise to his military ally or his love.²⁵ Soliloquies such as the above, augment the themes of personal honour and national duty in Sophonisba’s story. Though present in Livy’s account, these take on further poignancy given the criticism of the King’s balancing of his mistress’, his ministers’ and the country’s interests. An example of such a rumour about fear of romantic bias is detailed in Beauclerk’s book which mentions an anecdote in which Louise de Kéroualle is said to have asked the King whether he would prefer to rule without parliament and also which European King was the best, persuading him to answer Louis XIV.²⁶ Le Roux recounts a conversation between Louise and Charles in which she allegedly advises his majesty that Louis XIV’s “Alliance would be most advantageous for your Majesty” with the King giving his “ear to the Duchess in such a manner, as to make her think that he was no way displeased with her Discourse.”²⁷ As Hutton outlines, while Charles’s mistresses were not involved in state matters, they had the potential to influence the King’s opinion and, in the case of Louise, were used by government ministers in this way, arguing that she had aspired to be a Queen and a wife.²⁸ The King’s treatment of Louise, who was given expensive

²³ Hutton 1989, 264, 271.

²⁴ Beauclerk 2005, 172.

²⁵ Lee 1675, Act 5 55.

²⁶ Beauclerk 2005, 224

²⁷ Le Roux 1693, 153.

²⁸ Hutton 1989, 279

presents, did not improve the public's opinion of her.²⁹ Indeed, when Charles II gave Louise's infant son the title of Duke of Richmond—a rank not given to Barbara Castlemaine's sons until they were much older—it was perhaps surprising that a mistress of the King, particularly a French one, was given such privileges. Such anecdotes are representative of the way in which Charles II's mistresses were looked upon with suspicion.

Lampoons and poems from the period portray rivalry between Charles II's mistresses and use this subject as a means to express rivalry between the different nations the mistresses were from. John Wilmot's poem 'Portsmouth's Looking Glass' comments on Louise de K roualle's studied airs, and Edmund Waller's poem about Nell Gwyn, Louise de K roualle, and Hortense Mancini entitled 'The Triple Combat' equates Hortense Mancini with a fight between Italy, France and Britain against a return to Catholicism, with each mistress representing a nation:

Hither at length the Roman eagle flies,
 As the last triumph of her conquering eyes.
 As heir to Julius, she may pretend
 A second time to make this nation bend;
 But Portsmouth, springing from the ancient race
 Of Britons, which the Saxon here did chase,
 As they great Caesar did oppose, makes head,
 And does against this new invader lead.
 That goodly nymph, the taller of the two,
 Careless and fearless to the field does go.
 [. . .]
 For Little Britain these, and those for Rome.
 Dressed to advantage, this illustrious pair
 Arrived, for combat in the list appear.
 [. . .]
 The lovely Chloris well-attended came,
 A thousand Graces waited on the dame;
 Her matchless form made all the English glad,
 And foreign beauties less assurance had [...].³⁰

"The Triple Combat" refers to Hortense Mancini, Charles's Italian mistress, as a "Roman Eagle" and presents Louise de K roualle as an ally to Britain, referring to Brittany, while Nell Gwyn, a native Englishwoman, is cast as the nation's favourite mistress. Louise formed a close working relationship with the minister Danby who was responsible for the Treasury and as Beauclerk

²⁹ The King spent large sums on K roualle in particular, amounting to over 36,000 pounds in gifts and she had been awarded the title Duchess of Portsmouth in 1673. Hutton 1989, 335.

³⁰ Waller 1690, 48-49.

has argued, the “cabal” that formed between Montagu, Arlington and Harvey in support of bringing Hortense and the King together was to weaken the control of Louise, who along with other ministers was influencing policy at home and abroad.³¹ Waller had been an MP for various constituencies. In 1624 Edmund Waller became MP for Ilchester and MP for Hastings in 1661. Waller, as a good friend of Buckingham’s, would have been informed of matters in the Court. The ancient Roman context is referred to in the poem, with the battle being a battle between the beauties overseen by the Gods, emphasising the influence of Charles’s mistresses in the penultimate line: “Beauty the Sceptre sways.” The poem’s title is rather fitting considering European political relations during the 1670s and perhaps refers to the Triple Alliance between England, Sweden and the Dutch Republic. This alliance was created in 1668 to end hostilities with France and Spain in response to France’s growing power in Europe. Relations between France and England at this time were a balancing act of trade and power designed to safeguard against France’s growing influence that was an anxiety in this period: “France, which (not many years since) was so weak and feeble, that it trembled at the very Name of the Dukes of Burgundy, should now be so potent, as to contrast the mightiest Powers of Europe.”³² Slingsby Bethel, who had previously been an MP in the Long Parliament and a member of the Commonwealth’s Council of State, commented on Charles’s situation, “as the French King striveth for the Protectorship of the Romish profession, so it is surely the King of England’s Interest, to render himself (wherein he can have no opposition) the General Protector of the Protestant Religion; whereby he will become more formidable, and glorious, then he can by other means.”³³ Poems such as Waller’s, along with the writings of political commentators at the time, demonstrate the way in which the private reputations of Charles II’s mistresses became part of the public, political discourse. The anxiety about France’s political influence coupled with fears about a return to Catholicism as the dominant faith were displaced onto Charles’s mistresses. It is perhaps no coincidence that while the situation of “The Triple Combat” between mistresses had been occurring at Court, Lee chooses the tripartite conflict of love and war between Carthage, Numidia, and Rome from Sophonisba as his subject.

³¹ Beauclerk 2005, 259.

³² Bethel 1679, 1.

³³ Bethel 1671, 33-34. Bethel was critical of both Cromwell’s policies and those of Charles II’s supporters.

Representing Sophonisba: Continuities and Differences

Yet, in Nathaniel Lee's treatment of the themes of love and war and his adaptation of the events of the Second Punic War, the characters are not particularly heroic. The public discourse of suspicion expressed toward women in the Court at the time may explain Lee's ambiguous portrayal of Sophonisba's motivations for marrying Massinissa and his decision to focus more on Sophonisba's martyrdom as a nuptial gift than as a heroic and politicized act. The final Act places much more emphasis on her marriage, as she toasts her husband before her death: "Undaunted to my Lips the Draught I lift, / 'Tis to my Lord, this is his Nuptial Gift."³⁴ In Lee's version, Massinissa is the one who instigates and supplies the poison for the act of martyrdom that Sophonisba performs. In contrast, Corneille's version has Sophonisba send the poison back to Massinissa and suggest that he take it, showcasing her strength and pride. The framing of Sophonisba's death in Lee's adaptation ultimately magnifies the love between Sophonisba and Massinissa, positioning Sophonisba as both a tool and victim of political alliances (especially when she references her "forced marriage" to Syphax). Sophonisba's hatred of Rome and her independent heroism expressed in other versions of the story by Corneille and Thomson are not present in Lee's play.³⁵ This important distinction generates sympathy for Sophonisba who becomes the focus of the conflicts and anxieties about monarchs who prioritise romantic interest over the duty to govern, as Massinissa laments the burden of kingship but is content to withdraw from its responsibilities. Warren Chernanik has argued that Lee's political stance was "far from straight-forward", while Laura Brown has observed that Lee's works express an attitude of uncertainty towards monarchical power, and Anne Hermanson argues that Lee's tragedies are concerned with "the pathology of kingship", a perspective that comes through in the play's discussion of war and sympathetic treatment of Massinissa's political effeminacy.³⁶ In this way, Lee's adaptation engages with the anxieties faced by the country about whether future monarchs would be loyal to their subjects' interests, but ultimately, does not question the monarch's authority or elevate the political rebellions of allegiance from Sophonisba and Rosalinda in the war.

³⁴ Lee 1675, Act 5, 58.

³⁵ Morcillo has commented on the prevalence of Sophonisba's hatred of the Romans in Corneille's tragedy. Morcillo 2020, 74.

³⁶ Chernaik 2010, 95. Chernaik argues that after 1682 Lee showed loyalist sympathies, while his earlier works displayed Whig sympathies; Brown 1981,76; Hermanson 2014, 84.

Comparing Lee's Sophonisba with earlier adaptations of her story reveals his different portrayal of the heroine. The following extract, taken from Act 5 scene 3 of John Marston's *The Wonder of Women*, helps to show how Lee downplays the glorification of Sophonisba. Each extract treats the moment that precedes Sophonisba's martyrdom differently:

MASSINISSA. Bondage—Roman bondage!
SOPHONISBA. No, no!
MASSINISSA. How then have I vow'd well to Scipio?
SOPHONISBA. How then to Sophonisba?
MASSINISSA. Right, which way?
Run mad!—impossible!—distraction!
SOPHONISBA. Dear, lord, thy patience; let it maze all power,
And list to her in whose sole hear it rests
To keep thy faith upright.
MASSINISSA. Wilt thou be slaved?
SOPHONISBA. No, free.
MASSINISSA. How then keep I my faith?
SOPHONISBA. My death
Gives help to all.
From Rome so rest we free;
So brought to Scipio, faith is kept in thee.

As we can see in Marston's version, Sophonisba is the hero of the piece; it is she who saves Massinissa's word and reputation, whilst becoming a martyr for Carthage, offering her own death as the solution to their situation. Sophonisba puts her loyalty to Carthage before her marriage, yet displays her love for Massinissa by protecting his honour. The play's closing lines reinforce Sophonisba's heroism and exceptional nature, referring to her as "Women's right wonder, and just shame of men" as her body is placed on display as a moving spectacle.³⁷

Similarly, in Corneille's version, Sophonisba's bravery and patriotism comes across strongly:

SOPHONISBA (to Massinisse).
Quoi? J'irais mendier jusqu'au camp des Romains
La pitié de leur chef qui m'aurait en ses mains ?
J'irois déshonorer, par un honteux hommage,
Le trône où j'ai pris place, et le sang de Carthage ;
Et l'on verrait gémir la fille d'Asdrubal
Aux pieds de l'ennemi pour eux le plus fatal ?

What? That I should go begging to the Roman camp

³⁷ Marston 1606, Act 5, Scene 3, no page number.

for the pity of their Chief, who would hold me in bands?
That I should dishonor, by paying shameful homage,
The throne that I possess, and the blood of Carthage;
And that Asdrubal's daughter should weep, wail and moan
At the feet of their enemy, their mortal foe?³⁸

Corneille communicates Sophonisba's disgust at the thought of begging in front of the Romans along with her pride as a Carthaginian. As Susan Read Baker has observed, Corneille's Sophonisba "loves Carthage more than any husband."³⁹ The clarity of Sophonisba's political motivations and the play's political commentary in Corneille's adaptation, along with Sophonisba's strong love for Massinissa as presented in Marston's tragedy both become more ambivalent in Lee's play.

In stark contrast, Lee's depiction of this moment in the story is framed quite differently, with less focus placed on Sophonisba as the hero:

MASSINISSA. Thou must, oh that I live to speak it! die.
SOPHONISBA. Blest sound! We shall not then to *Rome* be led; [...]
Speak Death again, my Guard and sure Defence;
It bears a mighty sound, and mighty sense.
MASSINISSA. O keep thee there, now while thy Virtues glow,
And dart Divinity, I'll give the blow.
Come forth, *Menander*, with those fatal Bowls,
Whose Juice, though it be the Body's force Controls,
Revives the Mind, and slakes the thirst of Souls.
Enter Menander with two Bowls
SOPHONISBA. What means my Royal Love?
MASSINISSA. By your bright self, by all the Powers above,
No Angel's Eloquence my Soul shall move
To die with thee, and thy dear honour save.⁴⁰

In Lee's version, the solution to the problem is determined by Massinissa rather than Sophonisba. In Acts 3 and 5 Massinissa mentions her death as a last recourse to avoid Sophonisba being captured by the Romans. Yet before this, Sophonisba's confidante is petitioned by Sophonisba to poison her if she is captured, it is Sophonisba's friend then in Lee's version, who urges her to ask for Massinissa's mercy.⁴¹ When Sophonisba asks him to "Speak [of] Death again", she refers to this earlier conversation and shows her courage

³⁸ Corneille 1663, 4.5. Translation supplied by Guðrún Kristinsdóttir in the department of French Literature at the University of Iceland and rhyming in English carried out by myself.

³⁹ Baker 1990, 104.

⁴⁰ Lee 1675, Act 5 scene 3, 57-58.

⁴¹ Lee 1675, Act 3, 29.

through her willingness to die. The emphasis is placed on the couple's relationship: Massinissa's misunderstanding of why Sophonisba had to marry Syphax and this scene inspires sympathy for two lovers who express their devotion through a suicide pact. The death of the two lovers differs from Marston's version in which Massinissa is alive at the end of the play and regains his fame, while praising Sophonisba and ensuring that she will be remembered. The pact in Lee's version, however, downplays Sophonisba's sacrifice and bravery because Massinissa is the one who will her "dear honour save" instead of Sophonisba preserving Massinissa's honour and her own as in Marston's version. While this scene is consistent with the desire for more sentimental scenes in tragedies, which grew extremely popular in the 1680s and 1690s, it is a curious choice to have Massinissa overshadow Sophonisba's heroic moment—the one she was most famous for in Classical and Early Modern Literature—in this scene. The brave women in Lee's *Sophonisba*: Rosalinda and Sophonisba are more contained and domesticated in his play, Rosalinda's and Sophonisba's stories are framed as ones of primarily romantic love in which the loyalty between husband and wife is to be admired.

When compared with the political discussion that occurs between Eryxe and Sophonisba in Act 1 scene 3 of Corneille's *Sophonisbe* about the authority of Kings compared with the Roman Senate, Lee's women are less politicized. Lee's focus on domestic relationships rather than politics is also part of a more general distaste for war that is expressed by the heroes throughout the play. Hannibal and Massinissa emphasize the destruction caused by the war. Hannibal laments that "Heaven's high Wall / Each God look'd down, and shook his awful head, / Mourning to see so many thousands fall, / And then look'd pale to see us look so red" prompts a reflection on the trauma and bloodshed of the Civil War.⁴² Indeed, Anne Hermanson in her study of English horror tragedies, observed that the trauma of the Civil War was expressed in tragedies from 1670s and 1680s.⁴³ Lee's *Sophonisba* displays a clear reticence towards war:

KING MASSINISSA. Yet War contracts a guilt;
And the brave grieve when many Lives are spilt:
Love like a Monarch, merciful and young,
Shedding no Blood, effeminates the strong;
But War does like a Tyrant vex us more,

⁴² Lee 1675, Act 1 scene 1, 2.

⁴³ Hermanson 2014, 33.

And breaks those Hearts, which Love did melt before.⁴⁴

Massinissa is haunted by the damage done to young men and their families by war and is keen to retire from power, referring to lust for power turning men into “Murderers of the Field.”⁴⁵ While Douglas Canfield interprets lines such as these and Massinissa’s retreat from public life in the tragedy’s closing lines as part of the aristocracy’s “leisure to retire from public life and contemplate the transcendence of its values,” there is more at work here in Lee’s discussion of war.⁴⁶ Discussion of Lee’s *Sophonisba* has tended to focus more on the representation of Kingship and Lee’s political stance, rather than the portrayal of war and its relationship with the events at the time.⁴⁷ The situation in England following the Restoration was by no means settled in terms of opposition to Charles II’s authority, which came from the Whig party who distrusted Charles’ Catholic leanings and feared a return to the absolutist form of monarchical government the country had experienced under his father. Matters were not improved by the general distaste for further European wars that Charles II entered into, namely the Dutch wars in 1664, 1672 and 1674. Charles II’s difficulty in balancing his finances, his misguided hope that England would ultimately benefit from an alliance with France against the Dutch, and his penchant for proroguing parliament were recipes for uncertainty in foreign and domestic relations, with England losing more than it gained from the Dutch Wars.

Adapting Sophonisba’s Story for different Political Contexts

The main reason for the different portrayal of the women in Lee’s adaptation, namely, the downplaying of their role in politics is part of Charles’s relationships with his mistresses at the time. The ambivalence surrounding Sophonisba’s motivations combined with a dual plot structure in which courageous women are treated with suspicion in Lee’s adaptation speaks to the suspicion surrounding Louise de K roualle and Charles II’s other mistresses. Indeed, Sophonisba’s story has signified different things to different nations at different times; Marston’s adaptation in 1606, which introduced the witch figure of Erictho appealed to James I’s paranoia about witches and the witch fever that gripped Europe, while Corneille’s *Sophonisba* was produced at a time when France was expanding its power and colonies, with the French rebelling against the moves that made the

⁴⁴ Lee 1675, Act 1 scene 2, 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid, Act 1 scene 2, 4.

⁴⁶ Canfield 2000, 63.

⁴⁷ Owen has discussed Lee’s political leanings, while Canfield, Brown, and Hermanson have focused on the portrayal of the monarchy in Lee’s tragedies. Owen 1996; Canfield 2000; Brown 1981; Hermanson 2014.

monarchy more absolutist under Louis XIII and Louis XIV's reigns, meaning Sophonisba would perhaps have been a powerful figure, one that raised questions about authority. Politically, we can see very different resolutions at the end of the tragedy between Marston's *Sophonisba* and Lee's version; while Massinissa is alive at the end of Marston's play, Lee has Massinissa's nephew and heir killed in a jealous battle, reflecting the very different political climates, with Marston writing at the beginning of the Stuart line and Lee writing during a period of political and religious anxieties surrounding succession. It is therefore no coincidence that Lee's play, with its discussion of allegiance and the destruction of war, was revived in 1680 when the country was gripped by concerns about a Catholic rebellion along with fear of another Civil War. We can see how Lee appropriates Sophonisba from other European dramatists and translates her story into his own national context.

Sophonisba's story becomes a vehicle for different dramatists to comment on their nation because of the celebration of Sophonisba's rebellion, virtue, bravery and loyalty to her country against the power of the Romans, particularly in periods in which relations between monarchs and subjects were more unstable as when Corneille and Lee are writing. As a female exemplar in Classical and Renaissance writings, Sophonisba's role in the Punic Wars is a timely subject for Lee during an age in which women were obtaining more public power: actresses gaining popularity as celebrities, along with the King's mistresses' influence on ministers and on public feeling. What we see in Lee's version is a much more uncomfortable relationship with influential women positioned in the public sphere of politics and this may be a reason why ultimately Lee's version of Sophonisba focuses more on Massinissa's devotion to Sophonisba and Hannibal's love for Rosalinda, rather than patriotism and heroism, knowing that conflicted love would be more likely to arouse pity in spectators than patriotism. The situation is of course very different in James Thomson's portrayal of Sophonisba who rails against the Romans, her language full of hatred for them and patriotism for her country in a period of greater political stability, with Britain as a colonial and trading power. Lee's version of Sophonisba is interesting for the way in which he draws more on the romantic plot from Livy, Mairet and Marston, yet leaves the judgement of how the King should govern ambiguous, along with the extent to which Sophonisba truly loves Massinissa or is motivated more by her own desire to avoid becoming a Roman slave. Reading Lee's *Sophonisba* in light of Charles II's relations with France and the anxieties that gripped England sheds light on Sophonisba's muted portrayal and the distaste toward war displayed in the play when compared with the other English adaptations of Sophonisba.

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