UNDER THE COVER OF DARKNESS: TERROR AND HORROR IN VOLTAIRE’S ZAÎRE

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ABSTRACT

Wendy Combs: Under the Cover of Darkness: Terror and horror in Voltaire’s Zaïre
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Voltaire’s Zaïre is a curiosity in French theatrical history as a compromise between direct portrayal of violence and the neoclassical tradition of recounting violent acts, resulting in a unique death scene. Voltaire often criticized the delicacy of the French public and claimed that horrific, violent acts can be instrumental in effectively inspiring pity, terror, and even sympathy in the audience, though his tragedies are distinctly lacking in violent acts on stage. Rather than fear of the public’s response or a lack of conviction in his principles, it was strategy that motivated Voltaire to write a death scene for Zaïre which hides the violence through the use of darkness in the theater. The dark stage allows for a more moving death and evokes all of the emotions deemed necessary by Voltaire and contemporary critics, even managing to portray horror without the need for outright, visible violence.
Under the Cover of Darkness: Terror and horror in Voltaire’s Zaïre

During the late 17th century and into the 18th century, French theater found itself limited by the bienséances, including the demand that one mustn’t “bloody the stage” (“ensanglanter la scène,” Teulade 28). It was a general consensus that, with few exceptions, violent acts and deaths could not be portrayed on stage due to the risk of disturbing or inciting the French public. However, violent acts remained at the heart of tragedies and in lieu of dramatic representations of violence, playwrights had other characters narrate acts committed off-stage. Voltaire often criticized this policy and the “délicatesse” of the French public (Voltaire, “Discours sur la Tragédie” 164), and claimed that horrific, violent acts that are "bien ménagées, représentées avec art” (172) can be instrumental in effectively inspiring pity, terror, admiration, and even sympathy in the audience. Despite this assertion, Voltaire’s tragedies are distinctly lacking in violent acts on stage, with Zaïre in particular standing out as an example of a tragedy that goes to lengths to avoid depicting the violence of the eponymous character’s death in detail on stage. However, in this particular play Voltaire manages to walk the line between the neoclassical tradition of recounting violent acts and his own demands to portray it, resulting in a unique death scene.

In this paper, I argue that rather than fear of the public’s response or a lack of conviction in his principles, it was strategy that motivated Voltaire to write a death scene for Zaïre which hides the violence through the use of darkness in the theater. The dark stage combined with the actors’ skill in performing the scene portray a more moving death than those of the neoclassical works that preceded it. This play, which went on to be one of Voltaire’s most successful
theatrical works, introduced a new kind of tragedy for Voltaire, with romance as its subject, and thus required different treatment from the historical tragedies that preceded it. The death scene in Zaire evokes all of the emotions deemed necessary by Voltaire and contemporary critics, such as pity, terror, and sympathy, and even manages to portray horror without the need for outright, visible violence on the stage. It is for this reason that Zaire became such a prominent tragedy in French theatrical history.

The portrayal of violence on the stage has changed a great deal throughout the history of French theater, and it is worth analyzing how and why it has changed in order to better understand the peculiarity of Zaire. Dating back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in France, mystères were often performed which recounted the stories of saints in bloody detail, even to the point where « Il faut du sang » became a motto for how to stage them (Gatton 79). Gore became an essential part of the stories in order to highlight the suffering of the martyrs but also as a secular pastime for crowds who enjoyed public executions and torture (80). These plays led to the invention of many different special effects to simulate realistic violent acts, such as cloth dolls filled with red liquid that bled when they were cut, or wafers with hidden bladders full of red liquid that would bleed as a representation of transubstantiation (82-83). In 1548 the mystères were banned in Paris (though only because of their religious content, not the violence) but continued elsewhere, and in the seventeenth century many mystères were reinterpreted by playwrights such as Corneille without the gore that had been so essential to their style (88).

Midway through the seventeenth century with the movement toward neoclassicism, violence began to be excluded from the French stage, often described by academics in French

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1 It had 480 performances up until 1921-1940, the highest number out of all of Voltaire’s plays (Goldzink 17), as well as the largest number of spectators at 272,145 (11).
literature as a ban on the portrayal of violence. This raises the question of why there was a ban as well as how strict that ban truly was.\textsuperscript{2} The “ban” was not discussed until the 1630s along with the appearance of many neoclassical tragedies, particularly in the criticisms of the first members of the Académie Française. Neoclassicism focused largely on verse rather than action on stage, and therefore violence was recounted and described rather than portrayed. Prescriptive discourses on drama proliferated after the founding of the Académie Française. Many of these discourses discouraged the representation of violence as an affront to bienséance, or propriety. Violent acts were thought to shock the sensibilities of spectators and thereby destroy theatrical illusion. The critics Scudéry, Sarasin, and La Mesnardière were examples of some who denounced bloodiness on the French stage during this decade, particularly after criticism of the violence in Le Cid (Lyons 27).

In addition, the memory of the French Wars of Religion had helped to inspire the “ban” on violence in French theater. In « L’Interdit de la mort sur scène », Merlin-Kajman claims that tragedies in this period « porte sous forme voilée le passé des guerres civiles de religion dans le présent » (Merlin-Kajman 241). She adds that the collective memory of the wars in connection with the many tragedies of the seventeenth century explain the “ban” because without it the theater would lead to unrest and potential danger, as well as the threat of the normalcy of violence in the daily lives of French citizens (249).\textsuperscript{3} Simulated gore pales in comparison to real

\textsuperscript{2} Anne Teulade says in "La décapitation invisible : Le Rejet du sanglant dans le théâtre hagiographique français et espagnol" : "Au début du XVII e siècle il est admis, voire conseillé, d’ensanglanter la scène. C’est ce que préconise Laudun d’Aigaliers en 1597 dans son Art poétique français, lorsqu’il affirme : ‘Plus les tragédies sont cruelles, plus elles sont excellentes’" (Teulade 28) indicating that the ‘ban’ was not as strict as many claim it to be.

\textsuperscript{3} The Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, active from 1897 to 1962 and specializing in horror and gore, is an example of this phenomenon as its productions suddenly seemed ridiculous after the real trauma of the Second World War (Callahan 165). The audience laughed instead of feeling fear or disgust and it seems likely that seventeenth century French theatre would face a similar issue after the violence of the religious wars that had become a part of their daily lives, much like the violence of World War II had been for patrons of the Grand-Guignol.
life atrocities, and the audience’s attention would be drawn to the elaborate gore devices being used (such as the replacement of actors with dummies, or the presence of red liquid filled bladders) rather than the fictional event they represented. The ruptured illusion would inspire undesirable reactions like laughter, perhaps arising from a sense of discomfort about what is being depicted, or perhaps because of a realization of how ridiculously unrealistic the violent effects were. Although the English were comfortable laughing at their tragedies during the seventeenth century, it was deemed too inappropriate for the French public to laugh at tragedy in the same way (Meere 134). Many French critics referred to Aristotle’s description of pity and terror as the desired responses to tragedy when discussing seventeenth century French theater (Steintrager 300), which would be undermined by bouts of laughter during crucial, climactic moments. French tragedy had to be treated seriously and had to maintain an unbroken theatrical illusion.

The restriction on stage violence began to ease in the eighteenth century. According to Renaud Bret-Vitoz in « Le lieu du crime dans la tragédie du XVIII e siècle », more of an English influence on French theater led to more portrayals of violent acts. This influence is apparent in Voltaire’s criticisms of tragedy and his own work, Zaïre; however Zaïre sets itself apart from other eighteenth-century tragedies (including other works by Voltaire) which did more to hide their violent acts rather than attempt to show them. Zaïre is a neoclassical play, written in verse and situated in the Middle East at the time of the Crusades. The eponymous character has been held as a captive in the palace of sultan Orosmane in Jerusalem since childhood. Now grown, she and Orosmane have fallen in love and plan to marry. The arrival of Christian Crusaders, including Zaïre’s brother and father, pose an obstacle to the marriage as Zaïre finds herself torn between love and loyalty to both family and religion. It is an atypical play for Voltaire in that it
focuses on the romance and the theme of religious tolerance rather than the heroism of a warrior or madness of a tyrant. As opposed to the grandeur of historical drama, themes of love, regret, and devastation prevail in this play, particularly in the violent dénouement: Believing that Zaïre has chosen the Christians over himself, Orosmane murders his beloved in an enraged frenzy. This act takes place at the edge of the stage, obscured from the spectator’s view. As a result, the final scenes focus less on the violent event itself than on Orosmane’s emotions and horror in the aftermath of his slaying of Zaïre. His emotions take precedence over those of Zaïre, her family, and her confidante because of his role as our hero and the manner in which we are shown his perspective during the assassination. As our tragic hero he is defined by the violence he has committed in order to establish an investment in his motivations and ultimate fate.

At the center of any tragedy is a hero in whom the audience feels invested. Voltaire voiced many opinions about tragedy and the proper way to move the audience. Carine Barbafieri’s understanding of Voltaire’s critiques of tragedy is that tragic heroes aren’t heroic enough without either a demonstration of bravery (for example, by killing their enemies) or evidence of their madness (such as by losing control and assassinating someone) (Barbafieri 224). When examining Racine’s *Iphigénie* in his article « *Art Dramatique* », he said : “Achille aime Iphigénie…mais il est beaucoup plus fier, plus violent, qu’il n’est tendre : il aime comme Achille doit aimer ” (Voltaire, "Art Dramatique" 75). This quote demonstrates Voltaire’s approval of violence as an essential part of character development in a tragic hero. Despite these assertions, many of Voltaire’s tragedies avoid having a violent climax or obscure it in some way. These scenes are often the most important in the character development of tragic heroes, and

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4 Jean Goldzink claims that Orosmane is definitely not the focus of the tragedy. Although Zaïre is our eponymous victim, I disagree with this claim.
circumventing them could hinder our understanding of and investment in the main characters. It is worth examining Voltaire’s other tragedies in order to better understand his views on tragedy and tragic heroes.

Although tragedy was a considerable part of his work, Voltaire’s theatrical oeuvre has largely been forgotten. There were many common themes, for example the change of heart of the tyrant. Tragedies exemplifying this theme avoid staging violent acts through the grace and forgiveness of their former tyrants who are reformed and humanized by abstaining from cruelty, while at the same time elevated to an almost godlike status through the demonstration of their mercy. However, not all violence was prevented by grace, but instead was concealed, as is the case in another of Voltaire’s tragedies, Mahomet. Voltaire manages to hide the violence from the stage through the use of the curtain in its death scene to conceal the murder and avoid bloodshed. His choice to hide the murder is a negotiation with the arbiters of taste of the time who did not want to see gore on the stage, but also a way to direct the emotions of the French public toward the correct characters and develop intérêt in Mahomet as a cruel and mad tyrant despite the fact that he himself did not wield the weapon that killed his archenemy. Although Zaïre also conceals its violent act, Orosmane as our tragic hero and by extension Zaïre as a tragedy are not consistent with either of these styles of Voltairean tragedy and necessitate a more original approach to treat the themes of love and religious tolerance.

Instances of this include: Alzire, where Gusman becomes tender-hearted and ready to forgive Alzire and her lover and show grace; and Genghis Khan in L’Orphelin de la Chine who ultimately forgives Zami and his wife, Idamé (Holland 133).

Mahomet, much like other Voltairean tragedies, presents us with a cruel tyrant as our main character. The titular villain raises the children of his archenemy who thinks they are dead, and encourages the son to kill his father behind the curtain, who then re-emerges to die in front of his children.
Zaïre is not a typical neoclassical play telling a story that takes place during a great war or battle, but rather a sentimental tragedy, meaning that some of Voltaire’s justifications for the use of violence on the French stage do not apply. In a tragedy revolving around a love story, it is not as necessary to demonstrate the hero’s valor, nor would one want to invalidate the theme of religious tolerance by making him a tyrant. If Orosmane were depicted as a cruel and mad tyrant, the audience would have less of an investment in what happens to him immediately after. Voltaire wrote that: “Une pièce de théâtre est une expérience sur le cœur humain…Tout personnage principal doit inspirer un degré d’intérêt. C’est une des règles inviolables” (Voltaire, Commentaire sur Corneille 27-28). If there is no intérêt inspired in the audience then the play has failed, and refraining from depicting violent acts that are essential to our understanding of the tragic hero makes the hero not of any particular interest to the public. Orosmane must commit the murder in a way that demonstrates his complexity as a tragic hero in order to remain sympathetic and a source of sentimentality in Zaïre.

Furthermore, despite his desire for violence, Voltaire considered taste and sentiment to be quite important in writing a tragedy for the French public, which according to many critics in the Académie Française were at odds with bloodshed. He often denounced extraneous love stories, claiming that in tragedies: "un amour qui n'est imaginé que pour remplir le vide d'un ouvrage trop long n'est pas supportable" (Voltaire, "Commentaires" 443). Voltaire criticizes only the love stories that do not ultimately tear at your heart and bring you to tears. Although he wrote many tragedies without love stories, according to Steintrager: “Enlightenment thinkers settled not so much on reason alone as on reason in conjunction with sentiment” (Steintrager 305), meaning that the new challenge presented when his fans demanded a love story only enriched his

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7 La Mesnardière being one of the most vocal critics in his disapproval of violence and horror (Lyons 27)
understanding of tragedy and how to effectively develop intérêt in the characters that express his ideas. When discussing tragedy, he wrote that: "Il faut de la tendresse et du sentiment" (Voltaire, "Lettre à M. de la Roque" 420) and "Il faut toujours donner des passions aux principaux personnages" (Voltaire, "Lettres sur Édipe" (Édipe 368). Zaïre was a key point in a shift to more sentimental tragedies, using horror to complement terror, pity, and sympathy to create more complicated emotional responses to theater. At first glance it seems that Voltaire contradicts himself in demanding tragic violence and then writing a tragedy like Zaïre that refuses to represent a murder on a well-lit stage. Upon further inspection, however, it becomes apparent that Zaïre meets all of his demands with regards to tragedy and is the product of a much nuanced understanding of pity, terror, and horror in tragedy.

Pity and terror, the essential responses to tragedy at the time, were very important to Voltaire’s understanding and criticism of tragic works (Steintrager 300). Both of these emotions are particularly notable in the scene before Zaïre’s murder. Voltaire evokes terror by establishing a false sense of tranquility. In this scene, Orosmane describes Zaïre (inaccurately) as guilty and unfaithful, juxtaposed with his claims of his own serenity and tranquility. He cries out as the scene opens: “Ah! Trop cruel ami, quoi, vous m’abandonnez? / Venez; a-t-il paru, ce rival, ce coupable?” (5.8.1516-17), revealing himself to be paranoid and unstable. Corasmin answers that nothing has appeared, to which Orosmane replies:

O nuit! Nuit effroyable!
Peux-tu prêter ton voile à de pareils forfaits?
Zaïre!… l’infidèle…après tant de bienfaits!
J’aurais d’un œil serein, d’un front inaltérable,
Contemplé de mon rang la chute épouvantable:
Conserver mon courage et ma tranquillité;
Mais me voir à ce point trompé par ce que j’aime!... (5.8.151517-25).
Although Orosmane tells us that he would have been serene and tranquil if not for the betrayal, we already know that Zaïre has remained romantically faithful to him. This irony reveals the extent of Orosmane’s delusion, undermining his claims of tranquility and self-control. He is violent, enraged, and delusional, a state which is gradually revealed, first by Corasmin, who exclaims: “Que prétendez-vous dans cette horreur extrême? / Quel est votre destin?” (5.8.1526-27) and eventually by Orosmane, who says: “Prends pitié de ma rage” (5.8.1538), and later warns: “Mais ces pleurs sont cruels, et la mort va les suivre: / Plains, Zaïre, plains-moi ; l’heure approche, ces pleurs / du sang qui va couler sont les avant-coureurs” (5.8.1542-44). What we experience in this scene is the escalation of Orosmane’s delusions and fury to the point where we await a prompt tragic climax. Orosmane’s speech elicits terror since he clearly predicts the violence that will follow and heightens the tension of the last few moments that precede it.

The terror of this scene is amplified by the silence and shadows of the night. Corasmin says to Orosmane: “Non, jusqu’ici nul mortel s’avance/Le sérail est plongé dans un profond silence/Tout dort, tout est tranquille, et l’ombre de la nuit…” (5.8.1529-31). We know the tranquility to be false and realize later that it foreshadows the coming horror since the next scene opens covered in darkness. Orosmane responds in the next line by saying "son horreur me suit" (5.8.1532), indicating that the seeming tranquility and silence in the shadow of the night will be immediately interrupted by something horrifying, preparing the spectators for what is to come. By the end of the scene, there is little doubt that Orosmane will follow through with his threats, but even though his rage is terrifying, it also arouses our pity.
Within the same scene the spectators are able to see Orosmane’s sentimentality before he gives in to his rage and are thus able to feel pity for him. He alternates between addressing Zaïre and addressing Corasmin, demonstrating once more his instability:

Tu ne connaissais pas mon cœur et ma tendresse,
Combien je t’adorais! Quels feux ! Ah, Corasmin!
Un seul de ses regards aurait fait mon destin.
Je ne puis être heureux, ni souffrir que par elle.
Prends pitié de ma rage. Oui, cours…Ah la cruelle! (5.8.1532-38).

He opens up as he describes his passion, and Corasmin is shocked to see Orosmane crying as he descends into his rage and despair. His shock lets the audience know that this is a moment of true vulnerability for Orosmane and that we may understand his tears as genuine. This sudden change in character could be interpreted several ways. It could be a sign of Orosmane’s derangement as he loses all control, even of his sensibility, or it could be that he was putting up a front all along and is finally displaying his true emotions. Either interpretation inspires pity as we catch a glimpse into what he actually feels, and what is left is the vain hope that the sentimentality we were allowed to witness will prevent the horror that is fast approaching.

The results of the interplay of terror and pity in this scene are confusion and conflicting emotions: being terrified and anticipating something horrifying while also knowing that the sentimental Orosmane does not have to become cruel. There is a sense of inevitability that we lament as we watch Orosmane descend into a madness and rage that are predestined but seemingly avoidable. The foreshadowing and general sense of dread and terror that intensify as the scene is performed guarantee that something must happen in the next scene, especially considering the dramatic irony of Zaïre’s innocence and Orosmane’s misconception. However, Orosmane has been humanized by breaking into tears on the stage. He is, at that point, definitely
not a tyrant and could be able to stop himself if it weren’t for the momentum of his delusions and the dark, disturbing setting that propel him toward violence.

The inevitability of the eruption into violence is reinforced by the fact that the entire scene before the murder is riddled with words that foreshadow the coming horror. “Horreur” is mentioned three times in this scene (5.8.1523, 1526, 1532). The word "horreur" acts as a signpost for the spectators, letting them know that what is coming will be horrible and horrifying. Orosmane also mentions the “nuit effroyable” (5.8.1518) and that “un bruit affreux a frappé mes esprits” (5.8.1528). The night is terrifying and the sensation of being struck by a noise transforms the terror and dread into a visceral experience. Additionally, Corasmin says to the crying Orosmane: “je tremble pour vous” (5.8.1545). By saying this, Corasmin acts as a surrogate for the audience, embodying a response to the coming horror by trembling. The scene is not at all tranquil as it claims to be and leaves its spectators nervous and on edge, and the foreshadowed horror in this scene poses a problem for the play as a French tragedy. If it were to be followed by direct portrayal of violence, it would violate dramatic norms by performing a gory scene in an unseemly and potentially unrealistic manner. It therefore is worth examining different positions and strategies for complying with bienséances and vraisemblance that come into play when dealing with a violent subject matter.

Neo-Classical theater’s requirements for bienséance (propriety) and verisimilitude sometimes contradicted each other, especially in the portrayal of violence. Strategies to depict violent acts without shocking bienséances varied. As Emmanuelle Hénin remarks: "il est possible d’être blessé sur scène et d’aller mourir en coulisse, ou à contrario, de venir mourir sur scène à condition d’avoir été blessé derrière la tapisserie" (Henin 20). These approaches hid the
death so as not to shock the audience, while still attempting to perform it in real time rather than recount it later. However one English critic, Joseph Addison, had stated that "le meurtre derrière la tapisserie est ridicule et invraisemblable" (Meere 124). Shying away from the representation of violence damages the verisimilitude of the play as a whole, including recounting the act in verse. When discussing what he considered to be the best plays in his article “Art Dramatique,” Voltaire critiqued the predominance of verse over action, stating that : “Parmi ces chefs-d’œuvre, ne faut-il pas donner, sans difficulté, la préférence à ceux qui parlent au cœur sur ceux qui ne parlent qu’à l’esprit ? … il faut plus que de la beauté. Il faut se rendre maître du cœur par degrés, l’émouvoir, le déchirer, et joindre à cette magie les règles de la poésie, et toutes celles du théâtre” (Voltaire, "Art Dramatique" 66). The beauty he describes here refers to the beauty of well written verses which, in his opinion, are not enough. Traditional neoclassical plays where heroism resided only in the speech of the characters are thus inadequate since the audience was offered no ocular proof of heroism to inspire an intérêt, or investment in a hero, and there is no reason to believe that they are as heroic as the play claims they are. Although placing tragic violence in verse adheres to the bienséances, it neglects the demands of vraisemblance and detracts from the illusory experience of watching a play, leading to the need for representation.

Nonetheless, as Michael Meere observes, during the seventeenth century it became clear that there was a hierarchy of violence whereby "certains évènements peuvent être représentés, comme les coups ; pour d’autres, tels que les meurtres, c’est plus difficile, et pour d’autres encore, c’est absolument impossible" (133). Violent acts at the more extreme end of the hierarchy like murders or mutilation are direct instances of horror since they require gore in order to be realistically performed on stage, and were thus considered to violate the bienséances by evoking horror rather than terror. John Lyons describes the argument of terror versus horror
as “a battle of modernity against the horror of antiquity” in his analysis of La Mesnardièr’s criticism of horror (Lyons 29), where La Mesnardièr described two types of horror that one encounters: "La première est une Passion qui nous fait abhorrer le vice par une haine constante, vertueuse, et qui nous plait…la seconde est un mouvement plein de dégoût et d’aversion, qui offense et blesse notre âme" (La Mesnardièr 324). Though the former sounds like an effective use of emotion in tragedy, the two types of horror are difficult to separate and distinguish from one another, making the use of horror risky. In order to stage horror through violence, the act would have to avoid being disgusting or disturbing while remaining realistic enough to support the illusion of the spectacle.

Terror, on the other hand, involves committing the violent acts off stage and then recounting them in the past tense to avoid the more uncomfortable feeling of horror. If the violent act described in verse were to be committed on stage, the sentiment would change from terror to horror, indicating that the two emotions are separated mostly by the manner in which we experience them. When the audience witnesses a horrifying death and feels uncomfortable and even disgusted by what they’ve seen, they avert their eyes and the entire play becomes pointless as it has failed to maintain the public’s investment in its characters and the overall experience. Lyons explains this discomfort as “the body’s rather than the mind’s reaction to some perception” (Lyons 27) which then evokes “a form of empathy, communication from body to body” (28). This kind of physical feeling distracts the public from the verses which play an important role in a neoclassical play as well as from the emotions and message conveyed by the play. Despite this challenge, it is impossible to deny tragedy’s origins in horror. Lyons states that: “The playwright’s challenge is not so much to eliminate horror totally from tragedy as to place it at an appropriate remove in order to temper horror’s precedence over the other emotions”
(34). Steintrager similarly asserts that sentimental tragedies are “the product of the abjection of terror. A denouement that simply shocks with its cruelty would block pity. Horror…can be invoked as long as it is only projected or otherwise occluded” (Steintrager 304). It is for this reason that traditionally the violent acts could be in the plot or even in the wings of a neoclassical play, but not on stage, though later playwrights were able to be more creative with their depictions of horror.

Rather than just remove horror completely from tragedies as critics like La Mesnardière suggested, playwrights such as Crebillon père, Voltaire, and Houdar de la Motte found other ways to occlude direct horror. Crébillon père was considered to be a master of using horror in tragedy\(^8\) with *Atrée et Thyeste* often believed to be his best work. Voltaire said of *Atrée*: “Ils ont cru que la délicatesse de nos dames s’effrayait trop de voir présenter à Thyeste une coupe remplie du sang de son fils. Ils se sont trompés. Ce sang, qu’on ne voyait pas, ne pouvait effaroucher les yeux…Cependant, on la voit avec un plaisir mêlé d’horreur” (Voltaire, "Commentaire sur Corneille“ 15-16). Crébillon’s horror is acceptable and does not undermine the other emotions of terror and pity because we do not actually see the blood. Rather, we experience horror vicariously through a character who is actually seeing and experiencing the gore, and our *intérêt* or investment in the characters is intensified. The horror exemplified by Crébillon père was lauded by Voltaire as a demonstration of Crébillon’s skill in maintaining feelings of terror and pity and how much the public became invested as a result. Despite this praise, he felt that other features of Crébillon’s work counteracted the *intérêt* gained by his

\(^8\) According to Steintrager, Crébillon père was a specialist in *l’horreur* (298) and his plays belonged to the genre terrible or genre noire. Crébillon was associated with a form of horror that was presented in a way that did not overwhelm the spectators and did not undermine pity (299).
masterful use of horror. Even so, Crébillon had a lot of influence on Voltaire and ultimately remains one of the few success stories of horror on the French stage. Another example of horror succeeding on the French stage is Antoine Houdar de La Motte’s *Inès de Castro*, described by Steintrager as using: “horror as a projection: a promise that goes unfulfilled when the execution is stayed by a peripeteia so touching that the role of father replaces the figure of the king” (301). The king imagines the potential gory future and the audience watches his horror, experiencing it while removed from the corporeal sensation that visible violence would inflict on them. The king’s cruelty and brutality “turns into sentimentality” (301) as a direct result of the redirected feelings of horror.

Voltaire’s *Zaïre* shares much in common with *Inès de Castro* especially in the way that it displaces the horror away from victim’s body by keeping the bloodshed out of the sight of the audience. Both plays manipulate what the public can see to avoid direct portrayal of horror as a solution to the paradox of balancing propriety and verisimilitude. *Zaïre*’s usage of the dark stage and the wings of the theater are a key part of Voltaire’s strategy to solve this paradox and is arguably more successful than the other plays featuring displaced horror. The stage direction at the beginning of Scene IX describes the characters as “marchant pendant la nuit dans l’enfoncement du théâtre.” Thanks to the foreshadowing in the previous scene, the audience would be wary of the sudden darkness and false sense of tranquility. It is unclear where and how much light there would be to illuminate the faces of the actors, so the scene would likely rely on

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9 Voltaire claimed that: “Le grand défaut d’*Atrée* est qu’on ne peut s’intéresser à la vengeance raffinée d’une injure faite il y a vingt ans. On peut exercer une vengeance exécrable dans les premiers mouvements d’une juste colère. Mais élever le fils d’un adultère sous le nom de son propre fils pour le faire manger en ragoût à son véritable père quand cet enfant sera majeur, ce n’est là qu’une horreur absurde” (Voltaire, *Commentaire sur Corneille* 8). We do not feel the fury, madness, or desperation behind the villain’s vengeance without seeing the moment that had caused it. The amount of rage that should accompany such a horrifying act is thus unrealistic and, according to Voltaire, is ridiculous and ineffective as a result.
their voices and actions to convey their emotions. When the murder is committed, Orosmane stabs Zaïre, and a stage direction indicates that she falls and dies in the wing of the theater while crying: “Je me meurs, o mon Dieu!” (5.9.1561), a performative exclamation that renders her death all the more shocking as we both hear it and just barely see it in the darkness. By hearing Zaïre’s dying voice, the audience feels pity, terror, and is able to indirectly perceive her horror as it happens without having to see it. The dark stage hides the blood and violence which would have improperly horrified the audience and drawn attention to Zaïre as the source of the horror: a corporeal, visceral horror. The dark stage also renders the death more authentic than if it were only in verse or behind a curtain since it is more easily incorporated into the story and transpires the way you would expect an actual murder to. Finally, it allows the spectators to experience horror in a positive way that contributes to their understanding of the play and the characters, which would have been lost if Zaïre were restricted to portraying only terror and pity.

Although Zaïre is the victim of the murder, she is not our focus. Instead, we fixate on Orosmane, who has attracted our intérêt after crying and demonstrating his inner turmoil during the death scene. As the scene unfolds and the characters break the silence of the night, a stage direction lets us know that Orosmane has drawn his dagger after line 1555. Soon, his speech tells us that he drops it. This choice highlights the dropping of the dagger as being more significant than the drawing of it, as Orosmane’s line “ce fer échappe de ma main” (5.9.1556) along with the action of the dagger actually being dropped on stage calls attention to this action. The dropping of the dagger lets the audience know that Orosmane is faltering, that he doubts what he intends to do and is horrified by the thought of doing it. Dropping the dagger increases the public’s intérêt in Orosmane because they hope in vain that he will not go through with his act of vengeance and that he will recognize Zaïre’s innocence. However, we already know that Orosmane is not in
control of his own actions and is being driven by a tragic fate. By dropping the dagger he shows his struggle against destiny and rage that he ultimately loses, and betrays his feelings of horror as he loses control.

One of the principal reasons for Zaïre’s successful use of horror is that it is the characters rather than the audience who directly experience the horror of the murder, while the spectators watch and sympathize. Therefore the skill of the actors in portraying the characters is essential to successfully realizing this tragic dénouement. When discussing how to portray horror on stage, Lyons cites the example of the characters Orestes and Electra, who experience horror during a performance:

By experiencing this sentiment themselves, within the world of the tragedy, they seem to discharge a function of disapproval which would otherwise have been passed on to the audience. Horror seems acceptable and even praiseworthy when it is performed. Therefore, within the tragic spectacle, it is rather the horrible than horror itself which should be banished or at least contained. (Lyons 36)

In a similar manner, Zaïre hides the horrible on the darkened stage and in the wings while expressing the horror through its characters, namely Orosmane. Since the speech of this scene is very fragmented and lacks substance compared to the rest of the play, the actors can express the character’s horror through the use of pantomime and inflection of their voices to compensate for what the text is lacking. For example, in the verses where Orosmane drops his dagger, he says:

Qu'entends-je! Est-ce là cette voix
Dont les sons enchanteurs m'ont séduit tant de fois?
Cette voix qui trahit un feu si légitime?
Cette voix infidèle, et l'organe du crime?
Perfide!...vengeons-nous...quoi! C'est elle! Ô destin!
Il tire son poignard.
Zaïre! Ah dieu!...ce fer échappe de ma main (5.9.1554-59).
Here we see the shift in his speech from longer sentences to shorter exclamations, most of which are only two syllables. These exclamations switch the focus from the content of the verse to the manner in which it is being performed.

Physical and verbal performance is key to the creation of pathos. Of course, these elements are not fully indicated in the text and vary between productions. Voltaire does not indicate the type of inflection that would be used, nor how long a cry would be held out, leaving the lines up to interpretation. It is not very difficult to imagine the influence of the actors’ performances on the death scene, especially considering that the lights and dialogue are not as distracting and the audience has only shadows and vocal inflection to rely on. Through the actor’s voice and visibly affected manner, Orosmane would be both terrifying and pitiable as he talks to himself with repeated cries and enacts an internal conflict driven by his delusions and the lack of agency in his own fate. The pantomime and other small movements indicated by the stage directions and speech would turn the moment when Orosmane drops the knife into a spectacle of horror and internal strife. The actor’s choice of inflection, volume, and level of emotion would have a great effect on how that moment is perceived, as well as any pantomime that might just be visible enough on the darkened stage, with potentially haunting results.

The actors in a play are able to read between the lines and "par le biais de la pantomime, le comédien devient l’auteur d’un autre texte théâtral, qui potentialise ou ‘améliore’ le texte écrit. Il se fait dramaturge, au sens moderne du terme, ou metteur en scène” (Pascal 66). Different readings of the same scene could produce completely different responses from an audience. Pantomime was noted as being used in the love scenes of Zaïre, and it was said that one actress playing Zaïre "double le message linguistique explicite de la tirade par un second message,"
transmis par la pantomime” (63-64). An example of the potential for effective pantomime with more tragic emotions is in Scene VIII before the murder. When Orosmane is crying, our understanding of his emotions would likely be determined by the choices made by the actor, making him seem possessed and out of control, or tender and vulnerable. When Orosmane says “Plains-moi” (5.8.1543) it is as though he is speaking directly to the public and asking them to empathize with his very real pain. A strong actor playing Orosmane and giving a convincing performance of his sadness and despair would increase the audience’s intérêt in him and establish feelings of pity and compassion that otherwise might be lost through a flat reading of the text. Voltaire said in his “Discours sur la Tragédie” “Le théâtre, soit tragique, soit comique, est la peinture vivante des passions humaines” (Voltaire, (“Tragédie” 179), which implies a necessity for actors to emote well when performing their roles. This becomes especially important during the death scene, when sound and the outline of characters on the stage become more influential than the visual aspects and verse of previous scenes.

If the stage had been well lit, it would have drawn attention to Zaïre as the source of horror through her bodily affliction. Instead, with Zaïre out of sight we immediately focus back on Orosmane as he begins to doubt his actions and asks: “Qu’ai-je fait?” (5.9.1563). After the death scene, it is no longer Orosmane who discusses his rage and cruelty, but Nérestan and Fatime. Orosmane instead proclaims his horror and sadness. Orosmane’s moment of remorse and horror at his own actions after the murder would cause the spectators to feel not only pity and sympathy over his tragic fate, but an acceptable form of horror reflected from his face and voice that would improve their investment in and enjoyment of the play. Instead of empathizing with the murdered Zaïre, the text and stage directions call attention to Orosmane’s mental affliction after having killed her, allowing an experience of horror that is at an appropriate
remove from the horrible act, much like those elicited in the works of Crébillon père and Houdar de la Motte, and since the horror is performed rather than portrayed, it is a positive addition to the play and advances character development. Orosmane’s horror furthers the audience’s intérêt in him as a tragic hero by calling his motives and emotions into consideration so that when he ultimately commits suicide in the final scene, it leaves a lasting impression and inspires a complicated emotional response from the spectators.

In the last scene, Nérestan and Fatime condemn Orosmane for having murdered Zaïre, offering an unsympathetic view of his character. Nérestan cries out: “Ah ! Que vois-je ! Ah ! Ma soeur ! / Zaïre. elle n'est plus ! Ah ! Monstre ! Ah ! Jour horrible !” (5.10.1582-3), highlighting the perceived monstrosity and horror of what Orosmane has done. Orosmane is called “Barbare” (5.10.1585) and cruel (5.10.1596, 1608), demonstrating that Fatime and Nérestan perceive the horror of Zaïre’s death, but not Orosmane’s horror and turmoil as a result of his own actions. Since the previous scenes have established Orosmane’s sentimentality and we have the unique experience of seeing only Orosmane’s horror, Nérestan and Fatime’s claims of monstrosity are called into question. Corasmin as well, who has acted as a stand-in for the audience, remains sympathetic to Orosmane’s plight during the last scene. When Orosmane realizes what he has done and approaches Zaïre’s hidden body, Corasmin says: “Hélas ! Seigneur, où portez-vous vos pas ? / Rentrez, trop de douleur de votre âme s'empare” (5.10.1622-23), indicating how visibly affected he seems to those who are familiar with his emotions. The feelings of terror and horror performed by Nérestan and Fatime are further undermined by Nérestan’s claim: "Elle offensait notre dieu, notre loi ; / Et ce dieu la punit d'avoir brûlé pour toi" (5.10.1593-4). This makes it seem as though it was not Orosmane who committed the horrible act, but God, redirecting some of the blame.
Nevertheless, we are still inclined to blame Orosmane and be horrified by what he has done (as conveyed by Nérestan and Fatime) until the very end of the last scene when he tries to absolve himself of the crime by showing grace toward the Christians and ultimately committing suicide. He tells Corasmin: “Qu'on détache ses fers. écoutez, Corasmin, / Que tous ses compagnons soient délivrés soudain. / Aux malheureux chrétiens prodiguez mes largesses ; / Comblés de mes bienfaits, chargés de mes richesses, / Jusqu'au port de Joppé vous conduirez leurs pas” (5.10.1625-29). His last decisions are selfless acts juxtaposed with the other characters’ continued disparagement of not only his behavior but his nature as well. The result is confusion about how to react to Orosmane, though ultimately the audience, who has seen more of his sentimentality and personally felt horror than the other characters, is left with a sympathetic response. Orosmane, though briefly delusional, is still human, and although he is not Christian like the spectators who watch the play, there is a connection as a result of his strife and the horror that he has performed that transcends religious differences. Through his mental anguish in reaction to the horror he is at once committing, witnessing, and performing, Orosmane is converted from almost-tyrant to pitiable victim, a character that is more likely to evoke compassion, sympathy, and acceptable, empathetic horror.

As a play about religious tolerance, Zaïre encounters different challenges from those of other tragedies, especially when attempting to properly represent violence and horror as a pivotal component of its climax. Voltaire’s other attempts at romance, religious tolerance, and horror in tragedy were not nearly as popular or well-received by critics as Zaïre and failed to prompt speculation or discussion the way Zaïre did since they lacked the balance of emotions created by the intricate death scene and more importantly the performance of those emotions. Moreover, Voltaire combines the attributes of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theatrical tradition,
antiquity and modernity, in a way that he likely wouldn’t have been able to devise if he had
written it at another, less transitional point in French theatrical history. He offers a solution to
the paradoxes of portraying violent acts on the French stage, highlighting how Zai're stands apart
from other French tragedies in its understanding of sensibilities and how to construct a character
that people will truly invest themselves in. Zai're succeeds not only as a tragedy but as a
sentimental tragedy, though it still remains a curious part of Voltaire’s oeuvre. It remains one of
the few times when terror, horror, and sentimentality have interacted so cooperatively in a
French tragedy.
WORKS CITED


