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Women in Corneille's *Le Cid* and Diderot's *Le Fils naturel*

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The role of women in literature and society has been ever evolving and has also varied between writers and even individual works. In both society and literature, women have often been either marginalized or idealized. In this essay, I will focus on the works of French writers Pierre Corneille and Denis Diderot, specifically their plays, *Le Cid* (*The Cid*, 1636) and *Le Fils naturel* (*The Natural Son*, 1757). In terms of the role of women in these two plays, there are marked differences regarding their significance as characters and their expected feminine roles as well as how they interact with the men of the plays. In *Le Cid*, Corneille gives his main character, Chimène, a vital role in the plot. She is a character who is treated with equity in relation to men and, interestingly, even takes on some masculine qualities in the play. However, Rosalie, Chimène's counterpart in Diderot's *Le Fils naturel*, only plays a peripheral role and is underdeveloped as a feminine presence.

It is impossible to ignore the similarities that exist between Rosalie and Chimène. They both express their distress over love and marriage, but that is truly where the similarities end. In fact this shared angst does not do much to connect them as specifically female characters because the men of the plays, in particular Don Rodrigue of *Le Cid* and Clairville of *Le Fils naturel*, share the same concern. Despite this similitude, the enactment of each female character is distinctively different, as is their individual importance to their stories.

The differences between Chimène and Rosalie are most evident in the type of conflict that the women experience in their respective roles. For Chimène the conflict results from the loss of her father at the hands of her lover. She feels the need to avenge her father, but this revenge can only be achieved with the death of another person she loves. As C.J. Gossip observes, she "sees herself as in league with her father's murderer and thus betraying his spirit" (278). The complexity of her situation is made even clearer when she cries, "Ah! cruelle pensée! Et cruelle poursuite où je me vois forcée! Je demande sa tête, et crains de l'obtenir: ma mort suivra la sienne, et je le veux punir!" [Ah, cruel thought! And cruel pursuit to which I see myself forced! I demand his head, and fear to obtain it. My death will follow his, and I wish to punish him!"] (3.3). She feels the weight of the death of her father, the man who helped give her life. But she also fears the death of Don Rodrigue, the man she loves, and she fears that the misery of her situation will only be exacerbated by it.

Chimène's core conflict is between love and honor. The fact that she must choose, or even has the ability to choose between the two is remarkable

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considering her role as a woman in the setting of medieval Spain. For the most part, in a patriarchal society, the honor of women is not considered important. Honor is only reserved for men. Instead, virtue is seen as the quality that needs to be closely guarded and protected in women. But with Chimène, we see a different kind of woman, a woman who shares concerns mirroring those of men. After Don Rodrigue has killed her father in a duel that was the consequence of the insults directed at his father, Chimène expresses her understanding of her lover's position. She says to Don Rodrigue, "Je sais ce que l'honneur, après un tel outrage, demandait à l'ardeur d'un généreux courage: tu n'as fait le devoir que d'un homme de bien; mais aussi, le faisant, tu m'as appris le mien." ["I know that honor, after such an insult, demanded the ardor of a noble courage. You have only done the duty of a good man, but, by doing it, you have taught me mine"] (3.4). Chimène recognizes Don Rodrigue's actions as those of a dutiful son, but forgiveness is not engendered from her understanding. Her love for him battles with her own sense of duty. Clair Carlin remarks, "Chimène's waffling between love and honor represents a high form of moral development" (50). Chimène is not easily swayed to forgiveness and acceptance as a result of her love, but rather her commitment to her own filial duty and honor challenges her love for Don Rodrigue.

Chimène's emphasis on her honor is especially poignant when one considers the situation of Rosalie in *Le Fils naturel*. She too wrestles with indecision in her life. She is Clairville's betrothed, but she begins to question her love for him when she meets Dorval. She says of her situation, "Amant qui m'était alors si cher! Clairville que j'estime et que je désespère!" ["Lover who was then so dear to me! Clairville whom I respect and whom I despair!"] (4.1). Her conflict is disparate from that of Chimène; they are both forced to choose between two men, but Rosalie's choice of whom to love pales in comparison to Chimène's choice between honor or betrayal.

Also notable is the different way that the women establish relationships with the men in these plays. The relationship between Chimène and Don Rodrigue becomes conflicted after the murder of her father, but instead of maintaining stereotypical roles that normally govern male-female relationships, the traditional roles of male superiority and female inferiority are reversed. Reminiscent of the tradition of courtly love, Don Rodrigue becomes subordinate to Chimène. He says, "Mon juge est mon amour, mon juge est ma Chimène." ["My judge is my love, my judge is my Chimène"] (3.1). He puts himself at the mercy of a woman, not the mercy of a king or other men. He further explains the complexity of his situation: "Je mérite la mort de mériter sa haine, et j'en viens recevoir, comme un bien souverain, et l'arrêt de sa bouche, et le coup de sa main." ["I deserve death for deserving her hate, and I am coming to receive

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it from her, like supreme good, both the sentence from her mouth and the blow from her hand”] (3.1). Despite the fact that Don Rodrigue feels that his actions were justified as those of an obedient son, he does not feel that he deserves Chimène’s understanding for his plight. He only yearns for her revenge, an act that would make them equals.

Chimène neither surrenders to the wishes of Don Rodrigue, nor submits to the wishes of the king, Don Fernand. The king wants marriage for Chimène and Don Rodrigue, but she defies him and instead demands vengeance for her late father. When the king sends Don Rodrigue into battle, Chimène says to Don Fernand, “Je demande sa mort, mais non pas glorieuse, non pas dans un éclat qui l’élève si haut, non pas au lit d’honneur, mais sur un échafaud.” [“I demand his death, but not a glorious one, not in brilliance which raises him so high, not on the field of honor, but on the scaffold”] (4.5). Here is another conflict for this heroine. Not only must she come to terms with the death of her father at the hands of her lover, but she also challenges the wishes of the king. Chimène seeks to do what she views as just and right based on her own ideas and personal opinions. She clearly has a mind of her own and is not controlled by the desires of the men in her life. By insisting on her own honor, a historically male attribute, and by not obeying the king, Chimène doubly challenges patriarchal authority. While we, in our day, see such independence on the part of a woman character as positive, we have to keep in mind that Corneille’s play enacts a time at the end of feudalism where royal authority only began to establish itself. In Corneille’s *Le Cid*, the king is depicted as a positive character and a benign ruler, who is nevertheless threatened by the female protagonist’s assertiveness. The threat to the new authority of the king is thus feminized. Interestingly, Chimène represents paternal authority (her father’s claim to be avenged), while challenging the paternalistic authority of the king.

Rosalie’s relationships with men in Diderot’s *Le Fils naturel*, on the other hand, are distinctly different. Her primary concern in life is determining which man she should marry. In sum, her only interests are in Clairville and Dorval. She has no concerns of her own about doing what is right, but rather is preoccupied with attaching herself to whichever man she finds most attractive at the time. And unlike Chimène, her opinion of which man will be the best husband for her is easily swayed despite the strong feelings she seems to have for Dorval. When Dorval asks her the price of her virtue, all the convictions she expressed earlier in the play, her desire for Dorval and not Clairville, lose their force. Dorval says to her, “Je vais donc vous parler du seul moyen de vous réconcilier avec vous, d’être digne de la société dans laquelle vous vivez, d’être appelée l’élève et l’amie de Constance, et d’être l’objet du respect et de la tendresse de Clairville.” [“I am therefore going to talk to you about the only way to reconcile with yourself, to be worthy of the society in which you live,

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to be called student and friend of Constance, and to be an object of respect and affection for Clairville”] (5.5). After Dorval's appeal, which Rosalie accepts willingly and does not rail against, she states, “Je sais enfin où le bonheur m'attend.” [“I know at last where happiness awaits me”] (5.3). She adheres to the traditional rules that value a woman's virtue as her most prized possession. Valerie Crêtaux Lastinger interprets this apparent lack of feminine independent thinking as follows: “For Diderot, the woman question... is not so much, ‘what does woman want?’ but rather ‘what can woman say?’” (132). Whereas the conflict in Diderot's play is caused by Rosalie's expressing her own desires, desires that diverge from contemporary social expectations for women, she is easily brought back into the patriarchal fold by Dorval's stern rebuke. The patriarchal status quo is rather effortlessly reestablished at the end of Diderot's play.

Both Chimène and Rosalie feel the pressure of patriarchal society working to marginalize them and render their desires subordinate by virtue of the fact that they are women. Rosalie adheres to her expected and accepted feminine role, doing little to make waves in the world in which she lives besides yearning for a man she cannot have and then acquiescing to the wills of the men in her life. As a result, she remains in the periphery of the story and never fully develops as a character. In contrast, Chimène has a depth and strength that Rosalie lacks. Chimène, too, yearns for marriage and love, but the conflict of her situation, the choice between honor and love, bestows her character and her role with an importance that Rosalie does not share. She challenges what is expected of her as a woman, thus challenging the patriarchal authority that is meant to govern her role in society and propelling her to the forefront of the story. In her, we see a feisty heroine who holds her own in a masculine world and dares man to see the world from her perspective.

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