Seventeenth-Century French Commemorative Verse
Subversive Subtexts

by
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Can poetry be commanded into being? This was the question raised by the genre of official poetry, one which each of its practitioners had to address whenever setting pen to paper. That so little of this body of verse appears viable today would seem to answer this question in the negative. True poetry is best served by inspiration, not imperative; hence, the genre itself seems inherently thankless. Of course, rulers who wanted their accomplishments extolled in appropriately grandiose style were not concerned with such niceties as the true nature of poetry. They simply wanted encomiums in verse, and obeisance to their wishes was duly forthcoming.

But what was the attitude of those called upon to produce these versified panegyrics? For herein lies the key to understanding the problems inherent in this genre. For a curious dynamic is to be found within this body of verse. Unlike other poems in which the poet has only his muse as guide, in the official poem, this muse has to serve a prescribed end. Accordingly, even if the poet is genuinely devoted to the ruler in question, even if his lyrical outpourings spring from emotions heartfelt and sincere, their expression is still willed from without. It is true that there may be total harmony between emotion and obligation; nonetheless, there is a subtle difference between a sentiment voluntarily expressed, and the same sentiment expressed upon command. And if there should be no such harmony, the dynamics of the poem become even more complex. Perhaps the poet is not wholehearted in his admiration for his sovereign; or perhaps he subconsciously resents having to subsume his muse to an official purpose. In such cases, a fissure appears in the solid bond between courtisan and monarch, creating

an aesthetic tension within the subtext of the poem itself. It is this subtextual tension which we wish to examine here, as seen in the commemorative poetry of Malherbe and Boileau. Both of these poets continued the long-standing tradition of writing hymns of praise to their respective monarchs. Yet, their resultant encomiums are oftentimes not exactly what they seem; in truth, these poems possess a subtext which subverts their purported aims.

Ultimately, the predominant factor in this subversive process is the poet's conception of himself and his art. For wasn't the poet as exalted in the literary domain as he who bore sceptre and crown? It is not surprising then that the poet might chafe at adopting the subaltern posture inherent in the commemorative poem, particularly if he had a lofty vision of his own worth. Certainly Malherbe had no lack of such vision. A fiercely proud and arrogant man, he did not fail to proclaim his august stature as the greatest poet of his age. And yet this preeminent poet was also an official poet, which meant he had to conscript his genius to the service of his rulers, Henri IV and Louis XIII. Dutifully he sang their glories, as well as those of other royal personages of the day. And yet, through all that, Malherbe was not about to sway in the slightest from his own elevated self-image. In fact, he went on to assert it triumphantly within the very context of his own official verse. Following the lead of classical and Renaissance poets who had vaunted their own merits while commemorating others, Malherbe ended up writing encomiums which celebrated himself as much as they did the ostensible subjects of his works, if not even more. In so doing, the poet not only measured himself alongside a monarch, but came to appropriate a good share of the laurels as well.

His *Ode au roi Henri le Grand* is one such poem; its structure and development increasingly bring to light the poet's true concerns and priorities. At the start of this lengthy piece, the poet plays the part of loyal subject, faithfully lauding the grandeur of his king.

Henri IV is praised to the skies, his victories on the battlefield celebrated in the most unstinting terms:

> Et toutefois, ô merveille!
> Mon roi, l'exemple des rois,
> Dont la grandeur nonpareille
> Fait qu'on adore ses lois...

The monarch's military prowess is described in appropriately stentorian, hyperbolic style:

> Tel qu'à vagues épandues
> Marche un fleuve impérieux,
> De qui les neiges fondues
> Rendent le cours furieux;
> Rien n'est sûr en son rivage;
> Ce qu'il trouve, il le ravage;
> Et, traînant comme buissons
> Les chênes et les racines,
> Ote aux campagnes voisines
> L'espérance des moissons. (130)

Stanzas of similar content and tone follow one another in solemn procession. The king could hardly be presented in more adulatory terms, which culminate in the proclamation:

> Qui sera si ridicule
> Qui ne confesse qu'Hercule
> Fut moins Hercule que toi? (131)

Malherbe next exhorts the king to continue to carry on the battle—to raze, pillage, and destroy until the last of his enemies are smitten. Such are the sentiments of a loyal patriot wishing nothing but greatness for both his monarch and country. But there is more than just patriotism and fealty behind the poet's declamations, as is revealed in the poem's final stanzas. For here we see that it is not the glory to be granted either country or monarch which inflames the poet's zeal, but rather the glory that he himself will be afforded:

Ce sera là que ma lyre,
Faisant son dernier effort
Entreprendra de mieux dire
Qu'un cygne près de sa mort;
Et se rendant favorable
Ton oreille incomparable,
Te forcera d'avouer
Qu'en l'aise de la victoire
Rien n'est si doux que la gloire
De se voir si bien louer. (134)

Without any warning then, the focus of the poem has shifted. The poet has assumed center stage, perhaps the role he has coveted all along. Having resolutely acquitted himself of his official duties, he can now preoccupy himself with his foremost concern: himself. To claim himself to be the source of the king's greatest satisfaction in victory is to undermine the usual monarch/subject hierarchy; for the king becomes the one beholden to the courtier. The shift in the poem's focus has indelibly altered the poem's subtext. Although ostensibly the monarch is still being glorified, the text is undercutting this glory, and transferring it to the poet. In a sense, the official commemorative purpose of the poem has been cast aside, for the poet has assumed the limelight. And once he has appropriated it, he retains it until the very end of the piece. The fact that the poem was supposed to be singing the praises of Henry IV seems to be but a dim memory as the poet goes on to philosophize on the superiority of poetry to all other concerns. Adopting the role of sage and advisor, he warns his sovereign not to set store in the commemorative power of palaces and monuments. They will offer no lasting memorials to his name, as they will erode with the passage of time, like countless other structures through the ages. It is only the poet who can provide the king with the key to immortality:

Par les Muses seulement
L'homme est exempt de la Parque;
Et ce qui porte leur marque
Demeure éternellement. (134)

The final lines of the poem present themselves as an apotheosis of glory; but it is not the king born aloft in the chariot, but the great Malherbe:

> Je défendrai ta mémoire
> Du trépas injurieux;
> Et quelque assaut que te fasse
> L'oubli par qui tout s'efface,
> Ta louange dans mes vers,
> D'amarante couronnée,
> N'aura sa fin terminée
> Qu'en celle de l'univers. (135)

This is decidedly not the proclamation of a poet who wants for self-esteem. And it is just this self-esteem which has caused this *Ode au roi Henri le Grand* to develop in the way that it does. What the poet has done in this ode is to transform praise of sovereign into praise of self, thereby providing a vivid illustration of how the very premises of official verse could be undercut to serve the poet's own ends.

If Malherbe was textually both willing and able to usurp a king's preeminence, then it logically follows that he wouldn't have the slightest reluctance to do so with respect to a king's mother. Thus do we see the same process recur in his *Ode à la reine, mère du roi sur les heureux succès de la régence.* As in the previous poem, the queen is initially paid the homage that is her due. Hyperbole is bestowed generously upon her:

> O Reine, qui pleine de charmes
> Pour toute sorte d'accidents
> As borné le flux de nos larmes
> En ces miracles évidents;
> Que peut la fortune publique
> Te vouer d'assez magnifique
> Si mise au rang des immortels,
> Dont la vertu suit les exemples,
> Tu n'as avec eux dans nos temples
> Des images et des autels? (154)

These rapturous words are followed by a plea for peace, and a vision of a golden age for France:

Que vivre au siècle de Marie,
Sans mensonge et sans flatterie,
Sera vivre au siècle doré. (156)

It is at this point that the poet puts his poem on a new course, as he reflects upon the characteristics of this Golden Age. And this reflection provides him with the perfect opportunity to shift the poem's focus away from the queen and onto himself. For it goes without saying that poetry will be a mainstay of this brilliant time, and the greatest poet of the day will be its most glorious practitioner. Having gone off in this direction then, the ode ends with the poet's enshrining himself in the most exclusive of Pantheons:

Et quand j'aurai peint ton visage
Quiconque verra mon ouvrage
Avoûra que Fontainebleau,
Le Louvre, ni les Tuileries,
En leurs superbes galeries
N'ont point un si riche tableau.

* * *

Mais l'art d'en faire les couronnes
N'est pas su de toutes personnes;
Et trois ou quatre seulement,
Au nombre desquels on me range,
Peuvent donner une louange
Qui demeure éternellement. (157)

The sovereign on the throne may change, but Malherbe remains ever the same. And as far as his official verse is concerned, it matters not what path he seems to be setting off on, all roads lead eventually to his own personal Rome. This road is once again taken during the reign of Louis XIII, in the poet's *Ode pour le roi, allant châtier la rébellion des Rochelois*. Once again, the king is met with the same sort of tribute as that granted his predecessors. He is given bounteous

praise, chanted as "le plus grand des rois." He is enjoined to crush the forces of rebellion. Yet, the poet still reserves the privileged poem's end for his own concerns. He is an old man now, chagrined that he cannot participate in the battle ahead. There is nothing he can do but sing the king's praises in verse. But, as he reasons, what greater gift could a monarch desire? For if one were to listen to the poet, his genius is as great as ever; if anything, his self-image has only magnified with time. For at the conclusion of this poem, as at the end of his life, the poet's self-glorification reaches its zenith:

> ...et ton front cette fois
> Sera ceint de rayons qu'on ne vit jamais luire
> Sur la tête des rois...
>
> * * *
>
> Le fameux Amphion, dont la voix nonpareille
> Bâtissant une ville étonna l'univers,
> Quelque bruit qu'il ait eu, n'a point fait de
> [merveille
> Que ne fassent mes vers.
>
> Par eux de tes beaux faits la terre sera pleine;
> Et les peuples du Nil qui les auront ouïs,
> Donneront de l'encens, comme ceux de la Seine,
> Aux autels de Louis. (162-63)

As this and the preceding examples illustrate, official poetry could provide fertile ground for a poet seeking to glorify his own persona. And just as Malherbe used the genre to serve his own ends, so too, Boileau was able to subvert the form's original intent in favor of his own preoccupations as poet. While Malherbe asserts the preeminence of poetry with unabated seriousness, Boileau succeeds in arriving at the same conclusion with a lighter touch. It is now the Sun King on the throne; and once again, his victories are to be immortalized in verse. Boileau is the one ascribed to the task; but he has other things on his mind as he writes his *Epître au roi*.

France has successfully invaded Holland; but it is not the greatness of the victory which preoccupies the poet as he begins his epistle. No, it is rather the difficulty he must face in trying to incorporate the harsh sounds of Dutch town names within the mellifluous confines of French verse. What the king will find then as he begins to read this poem is not grandiloquent incantations marveling at his conquest. Rather, for the first forty verses of the piece, his attention will be drawn to a litany of the poet's complaints about the thankless nature of his enterprise:

> En vain pour te louer, ma muse, toujours prête
> Vingt fois de la Hollande a tenté la conquête;
> Ce pays, où cent murs n'ont pu te résister,
> GRAND ROI, n'est pas en vers si facile à
> [dompter.
> Des villes que tu prends les noms durs et
> [barbares
> N'offrent de toutes parts que syllabes bizarres,
> Et l'oreille effrayée, il faut, depuis l'Issel,
> Pour trouver un beau mot, courir jusqu'au
> [Tessel.
> Oui, partout de son nom chaque place munie
> Tient bon contre le vers, en détruit l'harmonie
> Et qui peut sans frémir aborder Woërden?
> Quel vers ne tomberait au seul nom de
> [Heusden?
> Quelle muse, à rimer en tous lieux disposée,
> Oserait approcher des bords du Zuiderzée?
> Comment en vers heureux assiéger Doësbourg,
> Zutphen, Wageninghem, Harderwic,
> [Knotzembourg?
> Il n'est fort, entre ceux que tu prends par
> [centaines
> Qui ne puisse arrêter un rimeur six semaines;
> Et partout, sur le Wahal, ainsi que sur le Lech,
> Le vers est en déroute, et le poète à sec. (131)

So as to make the poet's task easier, perhaps the king should have taken care to conquer a country with more euphonic names. It is not until these poetic problems are addressed that the king can finally see the

subject of the poem turned to himself, as he is described in the stately style he might expect. But beneath the surface of this pompous praise, the poet's true concern continually lingers, until, refusing to be suppressed, it breaks forth anew:

> Du fleuve ainsi dompté la déroute éclatante
> A Wurts jusqu'en son camp va porter
> [l'épouvante;
> Wurts, l'espoir du pays et l'appui de ses murs,
> Wurts!...ah! quel nom, GRAND ROI! Quel
> Hector
> [que ce Wurts!
>
> Sans ce terrible nom, mal né pour les oreilles,
> Que j'allais à tes yeux étaler de merveilles!
> (135)

The poet's sudden exclamation at the horrible sound of "Wurts" does more than create a moment of levity in the poem. In truth, this outburst effectively puts an end to the singing of the king's praises, and sends the poem back upon its original track; a consideration of the exigencies of poetry. And once the poem veers off into this different direction, it does not revert to its previous course. In symbolic fashion, then, poetry itself comes to upstage and supercede the monarch.

A similar scenario occurs in another of Boileau's epistles to the king. Here again, the beneficence of the sovereign is given full due, but in a decidedly backhanded fashion which serves to undercut the glorification process. As in his previous poem, the poet offers his compliments as a series of complaints. He finds his muse does not lend itself to stentorian hosannas; he feels his talents better suited for satire. Thus, he begins his poem with as much imprecation as proclamation:

> Grand roi, cesse de vaincre, ou je cesse
> [d'écrire.
> Tu sais bien que mon style est né pour la satire;

Mais mon esprit, contraint de la désavouer,
Sous ton règne étonnant ne veut plus que
[louer. (153)

From the start of this poem, then, a perspective is established that is egocentric with respect to its author. It is the poet himself who is the true subject of this epistle; the king is a secondary figure who is viewed only in the light of his demands upon the poet's abilities. The poem is thus constructed as a series of protestations at the difficulties inherent in commemorative verse. When Boileau does find time to laud the king's accomplishments, the praise is offered in indirect, ironic fashion. To evoke the king's goodness, for example, the poet laments the fact that the monarch isn't wicked—for wickedness would lend itself much more easily to the poet's satirical gifts: "Aisément les bons mots couleraient de ma veine!" But as the Sun King is not wicked, the poet must suppress his natural bent:

Mais toujours sous ton règne il faut se récrier.
Sans cesse à t'admirer ma critique forcée
N'a plus en écrivant de maligne pensée. (154)

What we see here then is that praise of the king is indeed forthcoming; but the ironic manner in which it is presented removes it of all its lustrous trappings. The poet has thus created an uneasy and paradoxical subtext in which the art of praise works to subvert the act of praise.

In ironic fashion then, the monarchs who were glorified in the various examples of seventeenth-century French commemorative verse focused upon here were essentially no more than pawns in the poets' game. For in their own domain, it was the poets who wielded the power. And in their hands, commemorative verse was transformed into a genre in

which they ultimately commemorated themselves and their art. In the context of their official verse, it was poetry itself which emerged as unofficial king.

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