

Le Cid Re-Examined: une pièce spéculaire?

by
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Pierre Corneille's best-known play, *le Cid*, has evoked controversy and criticism from its inception to the present century. Scudéry and others assailed its plagiarism of Guillén de Castro's *Las mocedades del Cid* and its "failure" to adhere properly to the *bienséances* and the other theatrical restraints imposed on seventeenth-century playwrights. Subsequent schools of drama and criticism have examined, re-examined and dissected it from the standpoint of structural, mythological, psychological and, of course, traditional analysis, and it seems that at present there should be little left to say about it. By and large, critics have rejected the notion that it contains any historical references, save those already found in Guillén de Castro's model. A paper with such an approach once submitted to a "learned journal" was rejected with the mere one-line criticism: "History in the *Cid*—out of the question." But does merely stating that there is no historicity completely rule out its presence? To a limited extent, this article intends to contradict previous, predetermined views.

Is *Le Cid* a *pièce spéculaire*? We should perhaps define our terms before we answer this question. Let us take the adjective *spéculaire* in the etymological sense of *speculum* or mirror. A mirror is not reality in the historical or sociological sense of the word, but merely a reflection of such reality. The Larousse dictionary defines the adjective *spéculaire* thus: "Se dit des minéraux composés de feuillets brillants" and it refers also to *hallucinations spéculaires* as "hallucination dans laquelle la malade se voit lui-même devant lui, comme dans un miroir." Webster defines the substantive "mirror" as "a smooth surface that reflects the image of objects..., anything that gives a true representation or description, something to be imitated

or emulated; [a] model, a crystal used by fortunetellers, sorcerers", and as a transitive verb "to reflect, as in a mirror, give or show a likeness of." The key to the proper definition of this term lies not in exactitude or sameness, but rather in reflecting and images, for a mirror does not re-create, but instead represents its object. The quality of the reflected image depends on the nature of the mirror itself and may be a true, approximate or distorted reflection of the model. Moreover, the varying degrees of absence or presence of light will also determine the quality of the likeness.

Corneille has chosen as his apparent model Guillén de Castro's best-known play, *Las mocedades del Cid*, which reflects the life and times of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar and chooses from his early years his most salient deeds. The Spanish play thus mirrors the Cid; it does not tell all about the early years, but rather chooses those images which seem the most outstanding and represents them in dramatic verse. Rodrigo is magnified in a distorted mirror, which makes him appear bigger than life-size. The historical man is the model and the character is his reflected image, a likeness of the original, yet somehow different. The play reflects only that which is within its scope as a mirror reflects an aspect of reality. Corneille draws upon this reproduced model for his own reflection of the Cid and at best, his play will be a likeness of a likeness of the original Rodrigo.

How much Corneille has drawn upon *Las mocedades* is subject to debate. Georges de Scudéry's *Observations sur le Cid* (1637) reproaches Corneille for his plagiarisms and for having translated the Spanish play into French (among other literary "crimes"), while Corneille's *Lettre apologétique* (1637) defends his play and accuses the critic of exaggeration: "Vous m'avez voulu faire passer pour simple traducteur, sous ombre de soixante et douze vers que vous marquez sur un ouvrage de deux mille et que ceux qui s'y connaissent n'appelleront jamais de simples traductions" (847). The extent of the borrowing lies somewhere between the extremes of 72 lines and complete translation, and

assuredly *le Cid* does not reflect the same images as *Las mocedades*. The concave and convex mirrors distort their models and highlight certain features at the expense of others. Corneille's mirror hides most of the physical violence, the multiple locales and the disunity of time under a polished surface of exaggerated pride and Herculean deeds performed in rapid chronological succession. No duels, no on-stage battles, no kiss for the leper and no reprieve for the hero. Instead of the non-specific, but protracted chronological frame for his deeds found in the Spanish *comedia*, Rodrigue learns of his father's dishonor, challenges and kills the offender, visits the grieving Chimène, fights and defeats an invading army, revisits Chimène, fights her champion, Don Sanche, and appears triumphant at the end, all during a twenty-four hour interval which leaves him little time to eat, rest and use the privy, truly a superhuman feat. This reflected image seems more of a caricature as seen in a distorted mirror.

If the French dramatist disclaims close borrowing from the Spanish, what then does he reproduce in *Le Cid*? For a partial answer, we must turn to his "discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique." In addition to the "sentences et instructions morales" (822), he compares himself to a painter who reflects reality:

La seconde utilité du poème dramatique se rencontre en la naïve peinture des vices et des vertus, qui ne manque jamais à faire son effet, quand elle est bien achevée, et que les traits en sont si reconnaissables qu'on ne les peut confondre l'un dans l'autre, ni prendre le vice pour vertu. ... Le succès heureux de la vertu en dépit des traverses et des périls, nous excite à l'embrasser, et le succès funeste du crime ou de l'injustice est capable de nous en augmenter l'horreur naturelle, par l'appréhension d'un pareil malheur (823).

The playwright claims to depict vices and virtues, but whose are they, those of Rodrigue, Chimène and Don Gomès or those of his own contemporaries? One may argue that these personages are universal types and therefore applicable to any age, country or situation. Lanson does not believe they are based on Corneille's contemporaries, the "d'assez tristes seigneurs," but instead they stem from "communauté d'inspiration" (131-132) with Descartes, apparently based on something "in the air" of the age.

If we accept that the characters are indeed universal types, we see a continuation of the mirror concept. Rodrigue serves as a model for the valiant and honorable noble, the ideal of medieval chivalry. A young boy (and the Spanish title of *Las mocedades* leaves no room for doubt that he is still a boy) without combat experience challenges the experienced court champion (or *campeón*), defeats him in a duel in which Rodrigue emerges miraculously unscratched, then leads an army of faithful retainers (even though he has never before participated in warfare practices) against the Moors and emerges a second time unscratched and finally in the second duel of his life defeats Chimène's champion whom he disarms in combat for the third miraculous time in twenty-four hours, again without a scratch. The image of the ever-victorious warrior who remains untouched by enemy blows reflects the ideal knight of the Middle Ages as well as of the seventeenth century; Richelieu and Louis XIII certainly hoped their soldiers would carry the day with a minimum of casualties. Rodrigue has not only the force of an experienced warrior, but also the honor. Although he has a personal stake in not killing the count, his family will collectively lose its honor and self-esteem, and as a private person, he will be unworthy of Chimène. If he mends his family's dishonor, he may also lose Chimène. The latter too finds herself in a dilemma, for she must seek the death of the man she loves; if she does not, she will lose her honor and become unworthy of Rodrigue. Both protagonists place their honor above their own happiness and seem to hope they will fail in their

defense of honor. Both are models or representations of the honor-bound individual and are exemplary people not only in the sense of examples, but also in the sense of being worthy of imitation. Rodrigue and Chimène are reflections of Guillén de Castro's Rodrigo and Ximena, but as models of honor, they serve to be reflected upon and mirrored by those who wish to become outstanding *âmes fortes*. A seventeenth-century spectator ideally might have wished to become a mirror image of either one, who in turn mirrors literary prototypes.

While most critics readily accept the exemplary nature of Corneille's characters, they will also hesitate to see reflections of specific seventeenth-century non-literary types. While contemporary historical interpretations of *le Cid* may seem inappropriate, there are several interesting coincidental reflections of seventeenth-century France which the play may mirror. Various French kings and ministers had attempted to suppress dueling, the nefarious pastime of the nobility, which tended to deplete their ranks and deprive the state of military leaders. Much of seventeenth-century history is filled with observations of dueling and more interdictions. As early as the turn of the century, the playwright Antoine de Montchrestien killed an opponent in single combat and quickly fled into exile in order to avoid prosecution (July 21; Boisard 254-261). Still, apart from the dead or wounded loser, duelists violated the laws with impunity until the time of Richelieu. The great cardinal-minister passed his share of interdictions and successfully prosecuted violations; those who escaped the swordsman's lunge did not escape swift justice followed by unrelenting capital punishment. Nineteenth-century popular novels and plays are filled with historical victims of Richelieu's justice, and the association of the cardinal with iron-fisted authority is manifest in works such as *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, *Cinq-Mars* and *Marion DeLorme*. Corneille uses extreme caution in his depiction of the duel so as not to antagonize the cardinal-patron. Don Gomès provokes the duel through his affront to Don Diègue, and attempts to

goad the *vieillard* into crossing swords. The slap is a surrogate sword-stroke and although Diègue does not directly respond, the count will pay for his audacity with his life. Rodrigue apparently gets away with murder, for he challenges and kills the offender of his family's honor, but he does not escape totally unpunished. Chimène demands justice from the king and when this fails, attempts unsuccessfully to kill Rodrigue through her surrogate, Don Sanche. Rodrigue lives in continuous danger from the count's retainers and family, who may seek a vendetta against the young man and his family. The warning the dramatist gives his contemporary would-be duelists is this vengeance. Should the offenders escape Richelieu's vigilance, they may not escape the victim's family.

Within the structure of Act IV, scene 5, Corneille inserts a less subtle criticism of the practice. King Fernand pronounces against the count's indiscretion and tries to exempt Rodrigue from having to face needless further danger. He tells Chimène:

Cette vieille coutume en ces lieux établie,
 Sous couleur de punir un injuste attentat,
 Des meilleurs combattants affaiblit un Etat,
 Souvent de cet abus le succès déplorable
 Opprime l'innocent et soutient le coupable.

Dueling only assures the success of the more skillful antagonist, but does not assure the justice of his cause. Corneille's warning seems more appropriate to the seventeenth century, during which time the practice was rampant, than during the Middle Ages, when dueling energy was directed toward warfare or settlement of international differences. Should anyone miss the implications and applications of the play's context, one cannot overlook or disregard the direct statement above. The three trials by combat which Rodrigue must face during the play bring him victory and renown, but each carries the potential of his death. The fact that Chimène erroneously believes him dead initially after the battle with the Moors and the single

Rodrigue a blanket pardon for his deed. Chimène's complaint is summarily dismissed. She has nothing to offer the state, while Rodrigue holds great potential. Corneille presents an indirect warning to Rodrigue and to all the cardinal's agents not to overestimate their importance. Gomès thought himself indispensable and now he is gone; there will always be someone who can replace the irreplaceable. The aftermath of this play's production would prove ironic for the dramatist. A jealous would-be dramatist named Cardinal Richelieu would withhold his favors for a while from Corneille and the latter had to struggle to re-enter the former's good graces. Corneille was not indispensable to the cardinal either.

The denunciation of the duel and the supremacy of *raison d'état* are but two of the historical coincidences in the play. Corneille strongly supports the concept of absolute monarchy and freely distributes aphorisms throughout the work. Raymond Lebègue points out that our dramatist was non-partisan in his private life and ineffectual and inarticulate as a practicing lawyer, yet as a playwright he showed himself a forceful advocate of various political views for which he argued on paper with great success (8). Despite Gomès' criticisms of don Fernand's monarchy, Corneille iterates throughout the drama faith in a generalized concept of absolutism. L'Infante Urraque's attraction to Rodrigue is held in check by Léonor's reminder of her rank and her duty to distance herself from mere subjects. Don Diègue's praise of the king's choice of a tutor shows confidence in a system where the sovereign is above political influence and can hence choose freely the best and the most competent rather than attempt to please a special interest group. His observation that "Un monarque entre nous met quelque différence" (I, iii) implies that Fernand's choice is wisely and divinely sanctioned.

Even the antagonist Don Gomès acknowledges the theoretical superiority of the monarchy: "Le Roi peut à son gré disposer de ma vie" (II, i). Don Arias warns him not to tempt fate, but to submit to the royal will:

"Il [Fernand] a dit: 'Je le veux'; désobéirez-vous?";
Arias further elaborates:

Quoi qu'on fasse d'illustre et de considérable,
Jamais à son sujet un roi n'est redevable.
Vous vous flattez beaucoup, et vous devez
[savoir
Que qui sert bien son roi ne fait que son devoir.

Vous devez redouter la puissance d'un roi.

Mais songez que les rois veulent être absolus
(II, i).

When Don Fernand learns of the count's refusal to submit, he apostrophes him with absolutist threats and promises to show the superiority of the sovereign:

Qu'il soit brave guerrier, qu'il soit grand
[capitaine,
Je saurai bien rabattre une humeur si hautaine.
Fût-il la valeur même et le dieu des combats,
Il verra ce que c'est que de n'obéir pas (II, vi).

In Act One, the count's abilities are spoken of in the past, present and future, but Fernand relegates them to the subjunctive and his own powers to the future. The subjunctive is generally a dependent tense, which in this case depends on the sovereign's will. The king is above all others and must watch out for his people's well-being, at least, as he perceives that well-being:

Un roi dont la prudence a de meilleurs objets
Est meilleur ménager du sang de ses sujets;
Je veille pour les miens, mes soucis les
[conservent,
comme le chef a soin des membres qui le
[servent.

D'ailleurs l'affront me touche: il a perdu
 [d'honneur
 Celui que de mon fils j'ai fait le gouverneur;
 S'attaquer à mon choix, c'est se prendre à moi-
 [même
 Et faire un attentat sur le pouvoir suprême
 (II, vi).

The playwright believes in the efficacy and inviolability of absolute monarchy, but allows to remain the unchallenged possibility that an individual monarch may make mistakes. He is cautious enough not to pursue the analogy too far, owing to the efficient power of king and cardinal. Contemporary audiences, however, knew what some of these mistakes and abuses were and for Corneille to have named them would have invited personal disaster upon himself and his career.

Rodrigue risks the king's displeasure when he leads his retainers into battle without royal authorization and, had he failed, he would have paid for his presumption with his life. His success, however, amazes a grateful sovereign, who dismisses this "crime" along with the duel, since Rodrigue's act has saved the kingdom. *Raison d'état* in *le Cid* as well as in seventeenth-century France pardons all, since it is for the royally-perceived common good.

The character of Chimène seems to reflect a contemporary situation. She is torn between duty and loyalty to her family as well as her affection toward Rodrigue and the five acts of the play show the dichotomy of her feelings. This situation is documented not only in *Las mocedades* but in most previous historical and literary pieces. It seems no small coincidence that in 1637, Queen Anne of Austria found herself in a similar position. Her father, Philip III of Spain, had been at war on and off with her husband, Louis XIII of France, and Anne faced the crisis of deciding to which one she should give her

loyalties. Throughout much of her marriage, she vacillated between one and the other (her loyalty to Philip III was transferred to her brother, Philip IV, upon the former's death) and she was thought to have been in intelligence with Spain on several occasions against her own husband. While Chimène has a champion in Don Sanche, Anne of Austria was suspected of liaisons with a series of personal "champions," including the English Duke of Buckingham, another one of her husband's enemies.

Rodrigue strikes us as an upstart, perhaps an opportunist, who sees in the Moorish attack the chance to advance himself and his family's cause at court. Even if Rodrigue has unselfish motives, his father, who is physically weak but aggressive with words, sees the opportunity to expand the family fortunes by ingratiating his son with the king. At the court of Louis XIII, there were Concini, Cinq-Mars; both fell from grace and even Richelieu's hold was tenuous at times.

Le Cid does not seem to be an isolated example in Corneille's production of a mirror of contemporary society. Despite Stegmann's denial of application (268), we note in *Cinna* the recurrent theme of disorders and civil wars and the plea for clemency. In *Horace*, there is the grisly fratricide for *raison d'état*, in which the murderer is merely condemned to live with his conscience with no other restriction in his activities, a "sentence" not unlike that meted out to certain cardinal's agents. *L'illusion comique* seems to depict the daily life of the *comédien*. *Oedipe* contains maxims of royal absolutism and criticism of religious superstitions and depicts royalty in terms of incestuous relations; one must recall that Louis XIV's mother was Anne of Austria, Philip III's daughter, and his wife, Maria Teresa, was Philip IV's daughter (and hence Philip III's grand-daughter). Philip III himself was born of the marriage of Philip II and his own niece, another Anne of Austria; Philip III likewise had married a close relation and incest seemed to be the curse of the day. *La Conquête de la Toison d'Or* was

written to commemorate the marriage of Louis XIV and María Teresa (Marie-Thérèse) and its lengthy prologue praises peace between France and Spain. Most plays relate universally-applicable truths and events, but some of these events seem to have particular relevance to the seventeenth century.

Is *le Cid* a *pièce spéculaire*? In the sense of reflecting its source and life in general, it is a good mirror. If one takes the view that the play is a hallucination, in which the spectators can identify with the characters and in a sense, see themselves in front of themselves like "une hallucination spéculaire," the work also fulfills the definition of *spéculaire*. In the sense of a true representation, critics may debate how clearly *le Cid* reflects seventeenth-century life, although most will find some general truths depicted. *Le Cid* shows us a Rodrigue who will be imitated. While there is no crystal used by an astrologer, fortune-teller or sorcerer, Corneille had used this device in *L'illusion comique* and Corneille as a sorcerer-playwright uses *le Cid* as a crystal with which to reflect images of life. In this qualified sense of *spéculaire*, speculum and mirror, we speculate the *le Cid* is indeed a *pièce spéculaire*.

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