

The Dramatization of Play: Re-reading *Rodogune*

by

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...le sujet s'y défait, telle une araignée
qui se dissoudrait elle-même dans les
sécrétions constructives de sa toile.
(Barthes 100-101)

In fashion more conspicuous than any other Cornelian tragedy, *Rodogune* affirms its status as a purely theatrical construct (Nelson 139).¹ Not unlike *L'illusion comique*, Corneille's notoriously self-conscious comedy *Rodogune* derives its essential impetus from the pitting of two plays, each against the other: an outer, primary scenario (the drama proper) framing an inner, secondary "fiction" (the mock wedding ceremony of the fifth act). The relentless intercrossing of these two strata of performance gives way to a breakdown of dramatic form and points in turn to the very textual enterprise as a site of disguise, a factory of illusion, a travesty of verisimilitude.²

If in Cornelian theater, the co-existence of inner and outer frames is in and of itself un-singular in nature, the specific demeanors of such co-existence as manifest in *Rodogune* constitute indeed a marker of distinction. For in Corneille's tragedy, the frames of reference are disproportionately deployed, distorted, displaced. Here, the inner fiction, the fiction's fiction, adopts and wields untold power; the text's reality, the stratum of outerness is un-fixed and ultimately undone by its subset. So that the fictional mini-play takes center-stage to the detriment, we might say virtually to the excision of the textual frame.

From the outset, *Rodogune* sets the two worlds of "real" and "real-seeming" in opposition. The ordered world of political harmony and social integration upon which the play opens and in which Laonice believes is but a clever delusion propagated by Cléopâtre. This controlled world of artifice is deemed far preferable to

the disordered "reality" of the past; however, a prioritization Laonice immediately establishes in the exposition. Her initial thematic message of current calm and projected security is linguistically reinforced by adverbs of finality (*enfin*), repetitive assertions (*ce jour pompeux, cet heureux jour, ce grand jour, ce grand jour*) and verbs suggesting definitive closure (*dissiper, étouffer, affranchir, cesser, rompre*)³. In contradistinction to these images of serenity, Laonice's informational récit to Timagène conveying the background necessary for comprehension of the textual phenomenon communicates, both in form and in substance, nothing but turmoil. Laonice's detailed account of past events depicts an unstable, unpredictable, uncontrollable world of shifting fortunes and untrustworthy appearances. Syria's military retreat and apparent defeat, for example, are quickly followed by an aggressive and successful Syrian invasion; in another abrupt reversal, Cléopâtre's first husband Antiochus, presumed dead, resurfaces, seeking new territorial conquests. As if to provide a lexical buttress to this thematic chaos, a semantic fog permeates Laonice's rendering of the past ("*un faux bruit s'y coula*"; "*croyant son mari mort; Le Prince Antiochus ... sembla*", "*se crut assez fort*"). Adding to the disarray, the brothers' embedded intrusions (Antiochus's abrupt entrance in mid-exposition followed by that of Séleucus) add further fractures to an already fragmented picture of recent history.

The perceived distinctions between past disorder and current order are mostly a figment of Laonice's imagination, however. As Cléopâtre reveals in her entrance in Act II, the restoration of order naïvely outlined by Laonice represents no real transformation at all. What Laonice represents no real transformation at all. What Laonice takes for an altered state of reality is in fact only inspired stagecraft, a fictional conjuring of Cléopâtre's invention. In her entrance in Act II, Cléopâtre reveals precisely the degree to which Laonice's perception of "reality" is fundamentally flawed. There is to be no wedding:

coming event not as a ceremonial interlude of social and political harmony, but as vibrant theater, a skillfully executed illusion that masks the real revenge drama about to take place.

The wedding has in fact been fraught with metadramatic overtones from the outset. Within the first seven lines of the play [1, 3, 7], and in several verses thereafter [115, 169, 303, 406, 841], the repetition of the word *jour* emphasizes the fact that the wedding is to take place within twenty-four hours, that is, within the temporal parameters allowed by Classical dramaturgy. The wedding itself is a purely fictional construct, devised by a fictional character, and to be staged for the entertainment of an anticipatory fictional audience:

Laonice, vois-tu que le peuple s'appreste
Au pompeux appareil de cette grande Feste?

LAONICE

La joye en est publique (II, 2)

The elaborate setting (one of the most detailed scenic indications in Cornelian theater), the static solemnity of the occasion, the ritualistic nature of the event itself all contribute to its overall metatextuality, to its function as a marker of self-reflexivity.

Despite diligent efforts, Cléopâtre's play within a play malfunctions when outside reality intrudes upon the theatrical space of illusion. Just as Antiochus is about to drink from the nuptial cup poisoned by Cléopâtre, Timagène enters with news of Séleucus' death and his half-articulated accusation of "une main qui nous fut bien chère" [693]. The confrontation between competing and contradictory scenarios leads to a crippling fragmentation of the scenic focus and a desperate Cléopâtre struggles to provide clarity in order to allow the illusion to continue. In *The Thousand and One Nights*, the princess uses narrative to save herself from death. In *Rodogune*, Cléopâtre prioritizes things

quite differently. She is prepared to accept death in order to prolong the narrative and bring her self-stylized script to dramatic closure. Endeavoring to prove the contents of the cup harmless, she drinks from it herself. Unfortunately, the effects of the poison manifest themselves too quickly, and Cléopâtre exits, presumably to die offstage.

Her departure takes on revolutionary significance for it leads to a breakdown of dramatic form in repudiation of the Classical ideal. From the outset, Cléopâtre is the fixed point around which all the other characters, consciously or unconsciously, have submissively ambled. She gives definition to the play through the force of her presence; in her absence, all purposefulness, all direction, disappears. The breakdown of order following her exit precludes any further possibility of coherence. The little order that obtains at the heroine's departure provides a moralistic (the castigation of evil) rather than an artistic finish.⁵ Her departure leaves the would-be wedding guests unfulfilled, the crisis neutralized but not satisfactorily resolved, the country with an indecisive and unwilling leader. Stranded in his role as Cléopâtre's creation, unable to move beyond the constrained definition she assigned him, Antiochus anxiously awaits the directing hand of fate to write the sequel to his drama:

Et nous verrons après, par d'autres sacrifices
Si les Dieux voudront estre à nos voeux plus
[propices. (V, 4)

The failure to achieve dramatic closure in either the inner or outer drama leads to an open order of art where conflicts self-extinguish for want of fuel, where expectations of conventional meaning are shattered. *Rodogune's* final scene, wherein plot and subplot meet in climactic confrontation is a blurred focus of disintegration and dispersal. Cléopâtre in her exit and measured demise compels our admiration more than the indomitably mediocre Antiochus who remains on stage, now ruler only by happenstance. In the titular heroine and heroine of Cléopâtre's confrontational mini-

melodrama *Rodogune*, we behold less the spectacle of a triumphant queen than a peripheral and confused pawn of invisible and unanticipated forces. Neither wedding nor coronation takes place, peace remains elusive, and Cléopâtre's thirst for revenge remains unquenched. Cléopâtre dies without remorse, the secondary characters outlast the heroine, if they do not quite defeat, her, and the tragedy closes with no transcendent triumph.

The stress on digression and displacement, the movement towards disunity exemplified by the ever-tangled dénouement confirms a trend at work from the start. Throughout *Rodogune*, with plot and subplot in total discordance, the spectators' interest is continually torn between competing dramas, the outer "revenge" drama and the inner fiction of social and political harmony. Both the exposition and crisis convey images of fragmentation. The exposition with its stratified interruptions, as well as its dual focus on separate and competing scenarios, establishes the tones of dissonance that echo throughout the drama and reverberate beyond the final curtain (Nelson 139-142). The crisis, deliberately indeterminate, bisected by offstage happenings, splits and dissipates the dramatic focus.

But the most disproportionate of situations in *Rodogune* is not the presence of competing scenarios; it is the manner in which the secondary fiction steadily intrudes upon the primary drama of Cléopâtre's revenge, then dominates it outright. In the exposition, the first point of convergence between the two layers of performance, *paraître* scores an early triumph over *être*. It is the fictional wedding, the spectral prospects of peace, the anticipated passage of power that is the focus of interest and attention, and the emphasis on these phantom happenings displaces the immediate referentiality of the drama proper. Cléopâtre's past difficulties and current position engender only cursory references necessitated by dramatic convention. Laonice's informational update to Timagène provides the requisite backdrop for comprehension of the outer drama, but even this initial focus soon dissolves.

Antiochus and Séleucus, the principal players in Cléopâtre's fiction, interrupt Laonice's *récit*, suspending the kinetic thrust of the drama proper in order to lay again stress upon the secondary fiction. When Cléopâtre endeavors to solicit her sons' assistance in the enactment of the primary drama, they steadfastly refuse to cooperate. In the end, the secondary fiction proves far more durable than Cléopâtre ever envisioned or imagined. In the dramatic crisis, with the text visually pitted against itself, the fiction outlasts even its creator, and the constructed subterfuge emerges as an indestructible, throbbing pulse, without cognitive direction, an errant scenario gone out of control.

The fiction's indestructibility, or rather, Cléopâtre's inability to control it, constitutes the text's leading image, and the dramatic center of tragic focus. With players and spectators progressively drawn into the beckoning optimism of the created illusion, Cléopâtre's accessoriness to her own creation is rendered painfully apparent. Reduced to player in a fictionalized construct she can no longer control and is in fact controlling her, Cléopâtre watches with dismay and growing frustration as her characters pursue a course contrary to the one she has meticulously mapped out. As she follows a conspicuously downward trend (from deception, to murder, and finally to suicide), she becomes increasingly entrenched in a theatrical fraud of her own making and chief victim in the drama she envisioned and initiated.

Since pretense must fail in order to be distinguished from non-pretense, Cléopâtre's emerging inefficacy, her inability to control the fiction she created underscores the underlying artifice around which the entire drama revolves. The revelation that the dramatic momentum is propelled by fraudulent impulses italicizes the fact that in *Rodogune*, existence is purely a product of design. As a disabused Séleucus discovers, facts are facts only as mediated through Cléopâtre's consciousness:

the poison, her disdainful departure and the play's final lurch towards termination all expose the machinery of representation at the expense of mimetic illusion.

Cléopâtre's self-generated fall is not what renders her unique in Classical (or even Cornelian) tragedy. Failure is, after all, encoded within the very definition of tragic heroism. What distinguishes Cléopâtre's collapse from the unraveled dreams of an Hermione or a Phèdre is that her defeat results directly from her ineffectual attempt to construct a world of illusion and superimpose this world over the text's primary reality. *Rodogune* is ultimately a play about a character whose invented scenario spins wildly out of control (Ehrenzweig 31).⁶ And therein lies *Rodogune*'s most salient and compelling feature. This tragedy merits special attention not because the author claims it as his favorite, nor because of its self-reflexive manner of presentation, nor even its metadramatic overtones. It is of interest because its auto-reflexivity, the dramatization of the construction and destruction of staged illusion, is its only substance. Read as a purely literary phenomenon, or viewed as a purely theatrical construct, *Rodogune* is of limited fascination. But as a dramatic representation wherein a secondary fictional scenario is grafted upon a primary backdrop of dramatic illusion, *Rodogune* becomes a paradigm of the metadramatic text; correlatively, her suicide becomes a cannibalistic dismembering of the text's own reflected image.

In his examination of Cornelian theater, Jean Starobinski notes that Cornelian drama always progresses towards the authentication of the hero, the tragedy culminating at the point where the hero's true self is perceived by others (43). In *Rodogune*, the authentication process discloses a hollow core of counterfeit selves. In the dramatic crisis, both the heroine's conciliatory posture and the wedding she engineered are revealed to be carefully crafted forgeries. But if the revelation of Cléopâtre's

duplicitousness insures her defeat, her failure, that is to say, her inability to bring the outer primary drama to closure, guarantees the success of the secondary fiction.

The triumph of this illusion (Cléopâtre's constructed imposture) over reality (the actual revenge she hoped to actually enact) conveys a subtle, though artfully submerged metadramatic message: the primacy and overpowering force of the created text. Despite repeated corrective efforts, Cléopâtre is unable to control her own creation. The line leading from dramatic heroine to metaphorical dramatist is by no means straight, but it is perhaps not inconceivable that *Rodogune's* message of aesthetic authority, of the primacy of art (a mediated construct) over reality (the unmediated exhibition of orderless existence) constitutes a subliminal metatextual pondering. and if one measure of literature's metadramatic dimension is its capacity to serve as a mirror wherein are reflected the concerns of literary creation itself, *Rodogune* surely exhibits such a tendency. *Rodogune* demonstrates how even the most meticulously thought-out schemes can malfunction; how dramatizations can be sabotaged by ostensibly servile characters. Even the title of the drama, which, in the view of Michael Issacharoff, constitutes an abbreviated replication of the dramatic structure as a whole, suggests the de(con)structive, almost self-annihilating, force lurking just beneath the surface of all dramatic creativity (42). Cléopâtre's titular displacement by the woman who was intended to be her victim encapsulates the entire textual phenomenon. She who was entrusted with the power of nomination, becomes an un-named, metonymical object ("une main qui nous fut bien chère") (Albanese 10); the object of the fiction (*Rodogune*) becomes the principal subject and agent of her enemy's demise. The focus of power is decentered (visibly rendered by her inferior position in the seating configuration of the final act); the heroine appears strangely impotent.

The sense that dramatic fictions have a life of their own constitutes a curious fact of theatrical production. Traditional playwrights have always worked within the

most uncontrollable of the literary genres (Larthomas 38-39). The lyric poet speaks intimately to readers he directly addresses; the novelist, who manipulates attitudes at will using a variety of narrative ploys, cajoles readers with the mediating presence of an obedient narrator (Laan 5-6; 319). The Classical dramatist, on the other hand, obliged to downplay his presence, cannot rely on subjective commentary to mold the spectator's reaction (Ubersfeld 22).⁷ The dramatic course, once embarked upon, is unalterable; scene must follow scene with Aristotelian inevitability, giving the impression of a self-generating spectacle that obeys only the laws of its own internal mechanism (Duvignaud 3).⁸ Dramatic force gains momentum exclusively from the perceived conflicts of interest or emotional friction between the characters on stage (Veltrusky 80).⁹ These conflicts and collisions engender in turn other actions and reactions which, in the well-made tragedy, culminate in the seemingly inevitable re-establishment of order in the final act. Having set events in motion, then, the Classical dramatist becomes very much the hostage of a construct that subversively and progressively limits his options.

Cléopâtre, too, confronts the inexorable toll of expiring power as she labors -- in vain -- to keep her script on track. In the end, the inner fiction emerges as the real victor and its triumph over the enemy (in this case, the outer reality of premeditated murder) perversely parodies Corneille's most critically commented comedy, *L'illusion comique*. For whereas in *L'illusion* characters playing the part of actors appear invincible, in *Rodogune*, characters playing parts assigned by another character triumph, by default, over their drafted demise. Nevertheless, whereas in *L'illusion comique* magic and theater are a means of deliverance for all concerned, in *Rodogune*, theatrical experimentation proves far less salutary for Cléopâtre. But then, in the early years of pure potential, Corneille no doubt took the word "play" far less seriously than at the time of *Rodogune*. In the final scene of *L'illusion*, violence and death give but

the illusion of tragedy. In diametric opposition, *Rodogune's* anticipated wedding scene provides only the illusion of comedy. Cléopâtre's would-be drama, her plans for an illustrious and public vengeance never materialize and *Rodogune's* closing scene leaves us only with the dislocated remnants of the blighted design that was Cléopâtre's *illusion tragique*.

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Notes

¹In *Rodogune*," notes Nelson, "Corneille gives full vent to his love of invention, manipulation, and theatricality."

²Jean Rousset, in his painstaking analysis of the Baroque, pays particular interest to theatrical imagery in Seventeenth-century French texts. See, in particular *La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France ; Forme et Signification* ; and *L'intérieur et l'extérieur*.

The metadramatic device of drawing attention to the drama's seams of production has been most thoroughly examined in the following works: Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*; James A. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama*, and *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriade*; Jackson I. Cope, *The Theatre and the Dream: from Metaphor to Form in Renaissance Drama*; Robert Egan, *Drama Within Drama: Shakespeare's sense of his Art in King Lear, the Winter's Tale and the Tempest*; Robert J. Nelson, *Play Within a Play: The Dramatist's Conception of his Art*; Sydney Homan, *When the Theatre turns to Itself: The Aesthetic Metaphor in Shakespeare*; Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*; June Schlueter *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama*; and Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*.

³All references are to the 1946 edition of *Rodogune* by Jacques Scherer.

⁴Ralph Albanese Jr. offers some cogent insights into this process of nomination in his article "Nomination et Identité dans *Rodogune*."

⁵Jaques Maurens takes Corneille's comments on the ending at face value, and interprets Cléopâtre's suicide as an example of Corneille's neo-stoical vision of man's response to Divine justice.

⁶In Anton Ehrenzweig's view, all art has this rather slippery characteristic: "It seems that art, almost perversely, creates tasks that cannot be mastered by our normal faculties. Chaos is precariously near."

⁷Anne Ubersfeld suggests that this is perhaps the distinguishing feature of dramatic production (in relationship to the other literary genres).

⁸"Le dramaturge est toujours le voyeur diligent des êtres qu'il a projetés devant lui", notes Jean Duvignaud.

⁹Notes Jiri Veltrusky: "Dramatic plot thus appears as a continuous stream behind the language. Its progression is bound up with the flow of time: once dramatic plot is set in motion, the flow of time alone is enough to make the reader feel that it progresses uninterruptedly and irresistibly, even when the flow of language weakens or stops altogether so that the flow of time becomes the sole vehicle of the progression of the plot."

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