The Wooden Cup of Truth in d'Aubigné's "Princes"

by
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Early in "Princes," the second book of *Les Tragiques* (1616), d'Aubigné introduces a curious symbol for the *esprit* of poets who flatter unjust rulers:

> Ceux de qui les esprits sont enrichis de graces
> De L'Esprit eternel, qui ont â pleines tasses
> Beu du nectar des cieux, ainsi que le vaisseau
> D'un bois qui en poison change la plus douce [eau,
> Ces vaisseaux venimeux de ces liqueurs si belles
> Font l'aconite noir et les poisons mortelles.
> (56)

The discrete elements of this passage seem easy enough to explain. The representation of the gift of poetry as "liquid" is an idea that goes back at least as far as Hesiod's Hippocrene spring on Mount Helicon (*Theogony*). The divine nature of this liquid is also a commonplace, Platonic in origin, and sustained by Renaissance critical doctrine. Cups, obviously, have always had very rich symbolic associations (abundance, life,...)--and so has wood. But less conventional or obvious is the very combination of the elements that constitute the symbol: a cup made from a sort of wood that has the remarkable effect of transforming a divine liquid into poison. As far as I know, this cup has not elicited any critical interest yet.

I would like to discuss the cup in connection with some of the principal concerns of *Les Tragiques*. There is a consensus among critics of d'Aubigné that the first 102 lines of "Princes" contain already in capsule form the ideological and artistic "program" that the poet would express later and at greater length in the verse preface "L'Autheur a son Livre" to the 1616 edition of the entire work (*Les Tragiques: Extraits* 133). The symbol of the transforming cup is really the concluding statement of this "program" and therefore

deserves close consideration.[1] I think that the lack of critical interest in the symbol should be attributed to an unfortunate decision of Garnier and Plattard, the first scholarly editors of *Les Tragiques* in the 20th century (Droz, 1932). In the wake of Garnier and Plattard, the subsequent modern editors of *Les Tragiques* (including Henri Weber, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), all give line 97 of "Princes" as "Ceux de qui les esprits sont enrichis des graces." This line, however, has an early 17th-century variant: "Ils chassent les esprits trop enrichis des graces de l'esprit eternel." I would like to propose that, contrary to Garnier and Plattard's apparent optimism, we do not know which variant had d'Aubigné's final approval. Garnier and Plattard adopted line 97 form the *editio princeps*, thereby rejecting the line 97 of the texts on which they relied for almost all other textual decisions.[2] It was an unusual procedure for them, and they thought fit to justify their emendation:

> La variante [Ils chassent les esprits trop enrichis...] nous parait fausser le sens et la suite des idées, car la comparaison entre l'âme du poète et un vase, ou un liquide precieux se corrompt et devient poison, ne tiendra plus. Elle ne peut s'appliquer qu'aux poètes de cour qui profanent et souillent en eux les dons de l'esprit-et non pas pour ce motif qu'ils chasseraient, comme des rivaux génants, ceux qui sont dignes des Muses.
>
> (*Les Tragiques* [1932] 11,n. 97)

Garnier and Plattard chose the *editio princeps*-variant on the basis of the hypothesis that, surely, d'Aubigné intended the wooden cup to symbolize the *esprit* of *all* poets. The syntax of lines 97-102 in their and all subsequent editions bears this out, for obviously only one class of poets is implied: *ceux de qui*, *qui*, and *ces vaisseaux venimeux* all refer to the same antecedent. The syntax of the rejected variant, on the other hand, clearly distinguishes between *two* groups of poets--which is why the variant must be rejected, again according to Garnier and Plattard. *Ils* namely

refers to *ces vaisseaux venimeux*, the court-poets: in d'Aubigné's reformed system of thought these are automatically flatterers. *Les esprits trop enrichis*, then, are obviously those *qui one à pleines tasses bue du nectar des cieux*; these poets are the counterpart of the former category, hence they do not flatter but tell the truth and thus really deserve the sponsorship of d'Aubigné's ideological Muse. I believe that this "dualistic" variant should not be rejected so quickly. For one thing, setting up a contrastive typology of poets is a commonplace activity in satiric verse of the type of "Princes,"[3] for the simple reason that the satirizing poet can hardly include himself among those he condemns. Also, the dualistic variant of line 97 creates a strong caesura-like break in line 99, which helps to clear the reader's attention for the unusual symbol of the cup that immediately follows. Consequently, the break adds weight to the symbol and, rather than "fausser le sens et la suite des idées" (Garnier and Plattard), it helps to clarify them. Stylistically, too, the dualistic variant can be defended. One of the salient features of *Les Tragiques* is the echoing of key-words for ornamentation and theme-reinforcement (Buffum 22ff). Usually, the "echo" occurs already in the next or the next + 1 line. This is the pattern that we find in the dualistic version: "ils chassent la vertu" (1.96) is echoed immediately by "Ils chassent les esprits..." (1.97). Both "ils" have the same referent (the "poisoning" flatterers), whereas "la vertu" (1.96) and "les esprits" (1.97) both refer to their (according to d'Aubigné) "truth-bearing" counterparts.

Garnier and Plattard did not discuss the variant of line 97 of "Princes" in the lengthy, scholarly introduction to the first volume of their 1932-edition of *Les Tragiques*, although in more than a hundred pages (pp. xi-cxxii) they accounted meticulously for a very large number of editorial decisions, scribal errors and tricky misprints in the various editions and manuscripts. Obviously, line 97 of "Princes" did not present a major problem to them, because they did not

recognize the potential significance of the cup-symbol that depends on the correct choice of variant for this line. The "argument" in their footnote-justification for the "unitarian" variant again reveals this lack of insight.

If we reconstruct the passage (11.97-102) on the basis of the dualistic variant--which for all we know might very well have had d'Aubigné's final approval--we allow for historical readings that not only enrich the cup symbolism itself but add to the meaning of the entire poem and its con-texts. I will first examine the symbol, and then place it in the dualistic context of the neglected variant.

For example, the question has not yet been raised why the cup is made of wood--although the poet insists on this detail. There is no such wood which has the poisonous property that d'Aubigné ascribes to the wood of his cup, although folklore and myth attribute to some trees (black poplar and elderberry in particular) connotations of death or other negative features.[4] Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (1st century A.D.; especially Books VIII-XXXII) has huge sections on plants and trees and their medicinal properties but does not mention wood that turns a liquid into poison. Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* contains many references to magic vessels as well as to enchanted wood but does not refer to anything like d'Aubigné's cup. The cup with precious contents is of course a very pregnant symbol; its implications range from the Eucharistic cup or the "bitter cup" that Christ wishes would be taken away from Him, over Arthurian matters to medieval magic serpentine-stones, which are supposed to detect poison in a cup. In all these cases, a transformation of the substance in the cup takes place; that this transformation is due apparently to the wood itself seems to be d'Aubigné's invention. This metamorphosis of content connects the symbol of the cup with a whole field of meaning in *Les Tragiques*. The change from sweet liquid to poison in the wooden cup is part of a complex cluster of images in "Princes" that evoke the concept of flattery as poison and relate

it to the commonplace concept of evil and sin as ulcer or bodily infection.[5] The degradation of something pure, the change for the worse, that is suggested by the image cluster is itself connected with the prominent theme of the "inverted blessings" in *Les Tragiques* (Soulié 261). In this case it is the blessing of Heavenly nectar (1.99) which is turned into the curse of aconite poison (1.102). Nectar, itself the product of a metamorphosis, is associated with the activity and the *invention* of a poet as bee, a favorite topos of the Pléiade (Langer 53). The opposition between sweet nectar and aconite poison--or the original unspoiled, divine poetic *invention* and the perverted, court-poetic flattery--can thus be considered a variant of such antithetical oppositions in *Les Tragiques* as between milk and blood, or water and blood. These oppositions are related to the central theme of *le monde à l'envers* in *Les Tragiques*,[6] and the terms of each set of opposites are "liquid" because they are potentially subject to continual metamorphoses.

The dualistic variant of the passage implies that there are "bee-poets"--who transform the "heavenly liquid" into nectar, and "alchemist-poets"--who create poison.[7] The end-product depends on the *invention* and the intention of the individual artist. One needs to remember that the really beneficial nectar-poetry, in d'Aubigné's frame of reference, is hardly "sweet," whereas the poisonous flattery usually is. In the programmatic verse preface to *Les Tragiques*, "L'Autheur a son Livre" (414 lines), d'Aubigné urges his poem to be like the uncouth and poorly dressed Danubian peasant who "monstra hideux, effronte,/De la façon non du langage,/La mal-plaisante verité" (11. 22-24). Rather than setting out like most others to achieve fame and wealth by means of flattery and courtly poetry, d'Aubigné's persona also claims in Baroque hyperbolic paradoxical fashion that "Mon plaisir est de leur desplaire" (1.369). This project he will found on the principle of reason: "Amis, je trouve en la raison/ Pour vous & pour eux fruict contraire,/La medecine & le poison" (11. 370-2). Reason, which directs *invention* and the poet's intention, is therefore

dualistic, for it can be directed to a good as well as to a bad end. Poetry (writing, by extension) is considered her in purely Platonic terms as a *pharmakon* (*Phaedrus*): an ambivalent substance with beneficial as well as poisonous qualities.[8] Note that the Danubian peasant will show the unpleasant truth "de la façon," and "non du langage": what counts, in other words, is not so much the medium (Poetry itself) but the mode and intention ("de la façon"). The poet whose *invention* represents "truth" and not flattery becomes by implication a healer, and therefore a true son of Apollo--who is, after all, the god both of poetry and of medicine. By contrast, the poet who abuses the gift by perverting reality--in d'Aubigné's frame of reference: in flattery or in *l'art pour l'art*--is a poisoner, an alchemist. Such an "intentional" reading of lines 97-102 of "Princes" is also consistent with the Platonic idea that the soul is capable of perceiving Beauty only in so far as the soul is itself beautiful. D'Aubigné confirms this in "L'Autheur a son Livre:"

> Ta trenche n'a or ne couleur,
> Ta couverture sans valeur
> Permet, s'il y a quelque joye,
> Aux bons la trouver au dedans;
> Aux autres fascheux je t'envoye
> Pour leur faire grincer les dents. (31-35)

The written or spoken words of evil, debased souls thus pervert genuine Beauty even without deliberately setting out to do so. This perversion or metamorphosis occurs in the wooden cup when the precious liquid is poured into it.

The dualistic variant of the cited paragraph of "Princes" seems therefore in perfect agreement with the ideological intention of *Les Tragiques*, and specifically with the harsh satire against flattering poets in "Princes." The latter are to be excluded from the court of "the Republic:" although they entertain, they pervert the young Guardian by blinding him. The true Republic is sorely in need of other poets, however: to use again Platonic terms, those who serve the mission

of the State by writing sacred hymns and martial songs (*Republic*, III). In *Les Tragiques*, d'Aubigné himself set out to combine the martial and the sacred mission to such a "good" (Platonic) poet. Avoiding direct references to Plato, d'Aubigné collapses the Platonic and the Biblical contexts by means of a reference to David, who is the greatest Judeo-Christian prototype of precisely such an ideologically inspired poet:

> N'avons-nous pas encor'appris
> Par David que les grands du monde
> Sont impuissants encontre nous,
> Et que Dieu ne veut qu'une fonde
> Pour instrument de son courroux?
> (Preface, 236-40)

David, moreover, is *also* a prototype of Christ, so that d'Aubigné, by blending time-levels in typical Baroque fashion,[9] relates himself to the tradition of Christ. And again, the verse preface makes this clear. D'Aubigné may very well emphasize the "rough" and "humble" appearance of his own text, but at the same time he presents it as yet another example of the deceptively and almost incongruously "weak" weapons by means of which the Christian God (or any of His types) smashes powerful enemies: David's sling, for example, defeats the mighty Goliath (11. 239-40), and humble flies and worms defeat the powerful Pharaoh (11. 245-6).

This reading leads us into the more conventional Christological connotations of the cup with precious liquid. The heavenly liquid that is poured in it can refer to the blood and sacrifice of Christ, the value and significance of which are perverted--in the opinion of d'Aubigné--by the Church of Rome and the French monarchy. The *wood* then acquires the symbolic undertones related to Christ (the Cross-tree) or, in a more general Christian sense, to the Tree of Knowledge. The latter association is picked up in lines 370-2 of the later added "L'Autheur a son Livre," where the poet literally refers to "la raison" as a *pharmakon*: "Amis, je trouve en la raison/ Pour vous

& pour eux fruict contraire,/ La medecine & le poison," this "raison" is a fruit, i.e., the "apple" of the Tree of Knowledge, which is indeed "poison" (since hunger for knowledge and reason caused the Fall) but at the same time also its own medicine (*felix culpa* is a construct of reason). Reason is thus associated with the Death as well as the Regeneration of Man. What matters is the use one makes of Reason. The startling symbol of the cup, and the metamorphosis that takes place when the liquid is poured, not only conclude this capsule-view of a doctrine that was very dear to d'Aubigné but rephrase it in the form of a condensed meta-physical, intellectual conceit.

Metamorphosis has been considered a very important theme for d'Aubigné's poetry in general and for *Les Tragiques* in particular, but the implications of the cup symbol in "Princes" for this theme have not yet been discussed. No doubt the most important "metamorphosis" in the context of the religious wars and debates in the 16th and 17th centuries was precisely Transsubstantiation itself, for more than any other point of controversy between Catholicism and Protestantism on the one hand, and among various Protestant denominations on the other, the question of Transsubstantiation reflected the complex relationship between appearance and reality. D'Aubigné's personal involvement in these religious controversies, his introduction of the *cup*-symbol in "Princes," and the concern with appearance-versus-reality (flattery versus honesty) that is so fundamental in the satire of "Princes," allow the reader to re-examine the passage under discussion in the light of the Transsubstantiation question.

Within the formula "Hoc est corpus meum" a change of name occurs ("hoc" becomes "corpus meum"), and this change of accident results in a simultaneous change of essence, for in Catholic doctrine, the host *actually* becomes the Flesh, the wine becomes the Blood (Langer 90). According to d'Aubigné, to believe that such a transformation *actually* and literally occurs is to believe in superstition and magic. Transsubstan-

tiation must therefore be seen as nothing less than a Satanic attempt to substitute materialism for symbolism. In terms of signs, one might say that Catholicism, by maintaining that words cause a transformation, refuses to separate the material, visible signifier (the Augustinian *sacramentum*) and the invisible signified (the Augustinian *res sacramenti*).[10] D'Aubigné, on the other hand, follows Calvin in asserting that the signifier and the signified remain separated.[11] This is a dualistic interpretation, for the bread and the body of Christ are not seen as *identity* but as *similarity*. The point for the present study is clear: the Court poets against whom the diatribe in "Princes" is directed (d'Aubigné's "enemies") are Catholic, and there is an obvious connection between their poisonous abuse of language (which transforms Reason/the gift of the Spirit/Poetry into base flattery) and the "poisonous" doctrine of Transsubstantiation (which transforms Christ's spiritual words and His presence into base matter).[12] The reference to "L'Esprit eternel" in line 98 is also highly significant in this respect. The Holy Spirit is namely an essential partner in Calvin's and d'Aubigné's interpretation of the Last Supper (*Cène*). the "unitarian" variant adopted by Garnier and Plattard makes little sense in this respect, whereas the dualistic variant presented in this work clearly states that the "good" poets are chased away and suppressed by "evil" poets precisely because in the opinion of the latter, the former have been *too much* blessed by the Holy Spirit. (Let us remember that d'Aubigné was in exile at the time of writing.) The "good" poets--among whom d'Aubigné's persona must of course be counted--are "good" because they have been blessed with the gift of the Word, *Parole*. Calvin and d'Aubigné assimilate *Cène* (in the spiritual sense, not in the Catholic material sense) and *Parole* through the shared agency of the Spirit. *Cène* and *Parole* are namely the same sort of thing, i.e., a means of communicating Faith. Grace is communicated in either way through the Spirit, who sanctifies the sacramental act "comme l'audition de la Parole". At the same time, "le Christ même, communiqué à la Cène, est la Parole éternelle de Bien" (Fragonard 705). The cup symbol in "Princes" offers

again a relevant insight. Through their bad/poisonous intentions, the flattering poets transform the Word of the Spirit, which is intended to bring Life, into "aconite noir et poisons mortelles." That d'Aubigné's persona should not be confused with these, that there is a dualism of poets, is indicated, again, in "L'autheur a son Livre," which introduces *Les Tragiques* to the reader in the metaphor of a child born in the tomb of exile. The text itself, d'Aubigné's *Parole* inspired by the Spirit, therefore represents (new) Life that will overcome Death. D'Aubigné as a self-conscious poet here surpasses the ideological framework of Calvinism by assigning to his own Parole/text the power of the Holy Spirit:

> le texte peut amener le lecteur à une connaissance du Créateur, il peut exiger de lui une réponse d'affection, et il pourra finalement distinguer entre élus et condamnés. Le poète a poussé la parole poétique jusqu'à ses points extrêmes: la lecture du livre transforme effectivement la réalité.
>
> (Langer 26).

The act of reading becomes in itself sacramental and--so d'Aubigné hopes--an occasion for Grace and conversion. Hence d'Aubigné's functional rhetoric of persuasion throughout *Les Tragiques*, his insistence on the 'healing' power of the "rough, harsh" words that will nevertheless bring joy "aux bons [lecteurs]" (1. 34), his condemnation of the "sweetly ornamented" (in the style of the 16th century) but ultimately poisonous poetry of the flatterers at Court. Hence also his intriguing use of the cup symbol--the rich connotations of which can only be fully appreciated in the dualistic variant of the discussed paragraph.

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Notes

[1]When d'Aubigné's fellow-Protestant John Donne sermonizes about flattery and ill-meant writing, he, too, uses the metaphor of a drinking vessel and precious liquid:

> ...so it is, when the heart of the speaker doth not answer his tongue; but God forbid but a true heart, and a faire tongue might very well consist together: As vertue itself receives an addition, by being in a faire body, so do good intentions of the heart, by being expressed in faire language. That man aggravates his condemnation that gives me good words, and meanes ill; but he gives me a rich Jewell and in a faire Cabinet, *he gives me precious wine, and in a clear glasse, that intends well, and expresses his good intentions well too.* [my emphasis] John Donne, *Sermons* 80.18.176. (Grierson 124)

Commenting on line 148 of Donne's "Satyre IIII".

[2]The textual history of *Les Tragiques* is as follows:

--*Les Tragiques...donnez au public par le larcin de Promethee*, Au dezert par L.B.D.D. 1616. (Editio Princeps, usually indicated as "A").

--second edition s.l.n.d. (Geneve, around 1623?), indicated as "B".

--Manuscript No. 158 of the Tronchin Archives (Bibliothèque universitaire, Geneve), indicated as "T". This ms. probably served to prepare "B".

--Manuscript No. 160 (a fragment of "La Chambre doree"), indicated as "T 160".

--Manuscript No. 1216, Harleian Fonds, British Museum (an imperfect copy of "T").

Garnier and Plattard based their text on a methodical comparison on "B" and "T," but they resorted to "A" for the paragraph of "Princes" that I am discussing.

[3]As, for example, also in John Donne's "Satyre IIII."

[4]Black poplars are associated with the death-goddess Persephone and her Western realm (Pausanias X.30-3). See Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Myth 51.7.

[5]Snake-imagery abounds in the early sections of "Princes:" lines 2, 78, 91, 108, 110. There are also many references to poisonous waters and infected liquids throughout "Princes:" lines 152, 201-2, 215-6, 340, 389, 395-6, 417, 433-4, 949-50, 760, 797-9.

[6]Jacques Bailbé discusses this at length in his book (q.v.).

[7]Poets are called alchemists in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* V.i.115-118.

[8]See Derrida's analysis of the Platonic concept in "La Pharmacie de Platon".

[9]Lowrie Nelson, Jr. discusses the treatment of time in Baroque poetry.

[10]This subject is extensively discussed by Marie-Madeleine Fragonard (697-729).

[11]Remarks on sacramental doctrine in d'Aubigné's "Lettre à Mme. de Bar" (1600) (a reflexion on the 'false' miracles and 'sophisms' defended by the Catholics) are discussed in Fragonard, 699ff.

[12]The "baseness" of the actual transformation is expressed by d'Aubigné in equally negative terms, e.g.

in *Vers satiriques* where he assimilates the Host and excrement (Fragonard 724).

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