

Depictions of War in the Plays of Rotrou

by
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Even though one of the most common themes in French tragedy and tragicomedy was war, and even though the glorification of heroic conduct was a central feature of dramatic ideology, the treatment of combat raised many types of problems and was far from uniform. Jean Rotrou, one of the most prolific and most successful playwrights from the second quarter of the seventeenth century, can be seen as a representative example of what was possible and acceptable at that time.

Although war-related scenes could be a source of dazzling visual spectacle, the presentation of battle episodes on stage, often done in medieval and Renaissance plays, was abandoned in Rotrou's time. One obvious reason was the adoption of the three unities and the rules of *bienséances* and *vraisemblance*, which militated against the graphic depiction of large-scale violence. But another reason was more technical in nature: troupes with a small number of players and limited resources playing on comparatively cramped stages could not handle such episodes in a way that would be remotely convincing to an increasingly sophisticated public. Even later in the century, with the advent of tragic opera and the resources of the royal court, combat was mostly kept hidden from view.¹

However, during the first half of the century, playwrights found other ways to incorporate elements of war-related spectacle. During the period that used *décor simultané* (juxtaposed sets, each confined to one portion of the stage area), there were several types of decor that could serve for plots centered around combat. Ramparts or city walls allowed for one or both of the following: leaders of the city under attack could appear atop the walls and speak to enemy leaders below, or the space in front of the walls could be used for a verbal confrontation, either before or after a battle. Elaborate tents set up for one or more of the commanders could also convey the atmosphere of battle without having to show actual fighting. In *Antigone* Rotrou uses all of these. We see Polynice, leader of the besieging army,

¹The one exception in the Quinault/Lully corpus is a siege, executed by chorus and dancers, which occurs in Act II of *Alceste*. On the staging of warfare in opera, see my "Guerre et combat dans les premières tragédies lyriques," in *Armées, guerre et société dans la France du XVIIe siècle*, ed. Jean Garapon (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2006; Biblio 17 number 167), 257–66. For the handful of plays from Rotrou's generation that tried to put battle scenes on the stage, see Roger Guichemerre, *La Tragi-comédie*, Paris: PUF, 1981, 182–83.

meeting in his tent with family members, one of whom is another principal commander (I.6); later we see him at the base of the city walls where his sister Antigone will speak to him from above (II.1–2), and still later Antigone and her sister-in-law will come to the “remparts” where the fatal duel has just taken place to locate the body of Polynice and give it burial (III.6). Curiously, in the era of *décor simultané* only one tent could be featured, whereas in the period where unitary decor was the norm there could be multiple tents for tragedies taking place in the vicinity of a battlefield.² The tent was typically wide enough to permit the staging of an interior scene: the entrance flap could be folded back to show the leader meeting with his advisors or with enemy leaders within, as happens both in *Antigone* and *L’Heureux naufrage* (IV.1, V.1). There could be as many as four characters inside a tent at one time, and presumably there were chairs for them to sit on. In *Iphigénie* the tent has a writing table, and there is even an episode where the character inside his tent and another character outside the tent fail to notice each other for a considerable time (I.2–3).

Other elements of spectacle involved costumes and props. Warriors, in addition to wearing military dress, would certainly carry swords and/or other weapons, possibly period- or country-specific, if the troupe could acquire them. Entering companies of soldiers carry banners (*Antigone* v. 352) or the flags captured from the enemy forces (*Dom Lope de Cardone* v. 484), and it is likely that flags were featured in the military procession that opens the final scene of *L’Heureux naufrage*, for which the text specifies trumpets blown by the forces of both sides. Trumpets are typically featured in plays involving heralds, and it is possible that drums were also used in combat-related scenes. The opening scene of *Crisante*, for which the location is not specified, may well have begun with a military procession into the city center, since the dialogue that follows, between the Roman commander Manilie and his chief generals, focuses on celebrating the victory they have just achieved. Standards may have been used here and later in the council chamber scene (IV.3), in the course of which these are mentioned (v. 1070). Obviously, the number of participants in military procession scenes was limited by the size of the troupe, but we know that

²In the *Mémoire de Mahelot* the only two illustrations featuring tents (Hardy’s *La Belle Egyptienne* and Auvray’s *Dorinde* - both tragicomedies) show one tent per play. But later in that document, in Laurent’s listing of decor and props for plays staged during the latter part of the century, there are four tragedies for which multiple tents are listed (Racine’s *Alexandre* and *Iphigénie*, plus Du Ryer’s *Scévole* and Sallebray’s *La Troade*). Of course, all of the latter set of plays feature unitary decor, and the multiple tents often belong to characters on opposing sides of the war. See also Pierre Pasquier’s introduction to his critical edition of the *Mémoire* (Paris: Champion, 2005).

DEPICTIONS OF WAR IN THE PLAYS OF ROTROU

extras were sometimes engaged to beef up the spectacle and that these could be drawn from relatives or even servants of cast members.

If combat could not be shown directly, there were several obvious methods to create the sensation of a war environment, depending on whether the scene occurs before or after the fighting. There were a variety of possibilities for showing the preparations for battle. In *Iphigénie* the discussion dominating the first two acts focuses on whether the Trojan War ought to be fought at all, in light of the horrifying demand made by the goddess Diane: namely, that King Agamemnon sacrifice his oldest daughter in order to secure favorable winds. The other leaders strongly endorse the human sacrifice, given their eagerness to fight and, in the case of Ménélas, to recover his kidnapped wife. But Agamemnon is torn between his love for his innocent daughter and his desire to achieve a new level of glory as commander-in-chief of a monumental Greek force. Even the soldiers are allowed to make their views known. In Act IV we learn (through a narration) that the army is defying its top warrior, Achille, who has announced his intention to defend his fiancée single-handedly. In the spectacular fifth act, showing the preparations for the sacrifice of the heroine, a group of Greek warriors is present on stage. Although they say nothing, their position is represented by Calchas and Ulysse and they presumably participate in the scene through gestures.

In *L'Heureux naufrage* we see some of the preparations for a siege, which is ultimately averted. However, Rotrou provides ambiance but very few specifics. The queen summons her top commander to a strategy meeting, which is not shown on stage, and we see a discussion between the leader of the besieging army and two of his top generals, though they talk only about the sudden death of the king's father and the new king's determination to avenge him by prosecuting the war that they have traveled so far to wage. The play does in fact end with a military spectacle, but not that of combat: thanks to a negotiated settlement, the two armies meet ceremonially in the central square, where the marriage between the rulers of the opposing sides is officially declared.

If the battle has taken place prior to the start of the play or occurs during the course of it, the principal way to present those events was through narration. Although audiences were capable of appreciating lengthy speeches if delivered with gusto by a skilled actor, playwrights became increasingly concerned with making such passages integral to the action and not merely bravura set pieces. It is interesting to note that, unlike the single most famous such episode in the drama of the period, Rodrigue's recounting of his battle against the Moors in Corneille's *Le Cid*, Rotrou

PERRY GETHNER

avoided having his heroic young men boast of their own exploits, which might seem immodest. Instead, they recount and praise the deeds of their fellow commanders.

Dom Lope de Cardone is unusual in that two very lengthy battle stories are juxtaposed in the same scene. But the episode is crucial to the forward motion of the plot in that it presents the tense relationship of the two young generals: they are at the same time fast friends who greatly admire each other and rivals in love, constantly ready to duel with each other. They laud each other's exploits and each insists on having a reward bestowed on the other, though neither is willing to declare publicly the reward they both want for themselves, which is the hand of the infanta. A second function of the paired narratives is to illuminate the character of the two rivals, who appear in this scene for the first time in the play. They are undeniably courageous, valiant and charismatic, but they are also incredibly foolhardy, engage in perilous maneuvers that no prudent commander would advise, and even commit immoral acts. Dom Sanche, seeing his forces outmatched, resorts to treachery. He changes clothes with a common soldier, pretends to flee with a hundred picked men, asks to be taken directly to the Castilian commander, claims to have born in Castile and offers him his services. He and his men, as soon as they are placed at the rear of the army, suddenly draw their weapons and massacre the soldiers they have supposedly come to assist, and Sanche personally kills the commander, in what appears to be an assassination rather than a fair fight. This bold strategy, however questionable from the standpoint of the chivalric code, turns the tide of battle, and the king has nothing but praise for it. The combination of self-assertiveness, recklessness and disregard for authority is what will land the young commanders in trouble during the latter part of the play.

Far more humorous are the battle narrative episodes in another tragicomedy, *Dom Bernard de Cabrère*, which are spread out over three different acts. Significantly, it is not the narratives that cause laughter, but rather the lack of attention they receive from the on-stage audience. Although the king is delighted by the successful outcome of the recent campaign, which has gained Spain control of Sardinia for the first time, he is constantly distracted and thus keeps failing to reward his most meritorious general, Dom Lope de Lune. In the first act, when Lope himself begins to recount the campaign, the king hears not a word of it. That is because, before Lope can even begin, two messengers arrive with tidings of greater urgency: the king's brother has launched a revolt that requires immediate mustering of forces, and the king's beloved, Léonor, sends him

DEPICTIONS OF WAR IN THE PLAYS OF ROTRU

a letter informing him that she does not return his affection and asking him to leave her alone. The king retains enough presence of mind to tell Lope to submit his petition in writing, but he drops the paper without having read it as soon as Léonor enters the room. Meanwhile, Lope's best friend and fellow general, Bernard de Cabrère, who has risen to the rank of royal favorite, resolves to exert himself on Lope's behalf. Bernard's full-length battle narrative in Act II includes a description of Lope's exploits, but, unfortunately, the king falls asleep right at the moment when Bernard begins to speak of Lope and wakes up only when that part of the narrative is over. The audience later learns the explanation for the king's behavior: he spent the preceding night under Léonor's window, trying to gain her favor with serenades, and as a result has not slept. But the two generals are unaware of this and do not even notice that the king has dozed off. Lope is demoralized when the king bestows generous rewards upon Bernard and upon the other commanders who are named during the final portion of the narrative, but does nothing to acknowledge or reward *him*. The king manages to stay alert during the third narrative passage in Act IV, but this time a series of misunderstandings works against Lope. He and Bernard, under the mistaken impression that the king has taken offense at something Lope has recently done, agree that when Bernard recounts the battle against the rebel forces that has just taken place he should not mention Lope by name, but rather refer to him as a nameless but valiant soldier. The king assumes that Bernard is designating himself by that euphemism, out of modesty, and again he rewards Bernard while doing nothing for the luckless Lope. Nevertheless, the friendship between the two young generals remains firm, despite the difference in the way they are treated and despite the fact that they briefly become rivals in love.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Rotrou's treatment of war is his willingness to call into question the ethos of glory and militarism espoused by many of his protagonists. His major concerns are the use of underhanded tactics in battle and the crimes perpetrated against civilians. In *Crisante*, the Roman general in charge of guarding the captured enemy queen falls madly in love with her and finally rapes her. The second half of the play focuses on her determination to clear her name and take revenge on her assailant, which she eventually does. Significantly, the Roman commander-in-chief agrees with Crisante that the raping of female prisoners, especially those of high rank, is unacceptable, and even the assailant, Cassie, finally repents and publicly takes his own life. By showing the tendency of soldiers to believe that all standards of morality and civilized behavior are suspended in wartime, Rotrou questions the ethos of heroism based primarily on military valor and insists that aggression and

the desire to achieve superiority must be subject to moral limits. Projecting this discussion onto the ancient Romans, seen as the ultimate heroic model by seventeenth-century audiences, makes it especially powerful. Cassie is so highly esteemed by his fellow officers that a number of them plead to have his life spared, insisting that his contrition should suffice as his punishment. When the commander-in-chief confirms the death sentence, the stage direction reads: “tous tirent leurs mouchoirs, et pleurent” (v. 1231).

In tragicomedies unethical conduct in war goes unpunished and is even viewed as justified, provided that the perpetrators emerge victorious, though Rotrou seems more dubious about such things than his characters. In *Dom Lope de Cardone* I have already mentioned Sanche’s use of treachery to win the battle against the defenders of the city walls in Valencia, including what is apparently the murder of their commander. Since Rotrou gives the impression that this is a civil war, rather than a war between two independent and rival kingdoms, one could justify Sanche’s conduct as just punishment for rebels. But far more disturbing is Sanche’s conduct during his mission to rescue the title character. Lope, having succeeded in scaling the walls though none of his men managed to follow, has jumped down into the ranks of the enemy and attempted to fight them single-handed. He is, not surprisingly, badly wounded and near death when reinforcements arrive to save him. But in the process Sanche and his forces massacre everyone in sight, including women and old men. Although he himself describes the scene as “un horrible carnage” (v. 669), not a word is said to criticize this unnecessary act of brute violence. Brief but graphic references to the gory side of warfare also occur in *Crisante* (v. 27–36) and *Dom Bernard de Cabrère* (v. 504–06), though apparently the casualties do not include civilians. Rotrou never loses sight of the unpleasant realities of war, though he refuses to dwell on them.³

In *Dom Bernard de Cabrère* the principal hero’s exploits also involve an element of duplicity. In order to end a protracted siege, Lope de Lune pretends to be a deserter fleeing a tyrannical ruler, alleges that he has been mistreated by his own side, and to make this charge more believable he wounds himself in the face and in the chest. He then gains admission to the enemy city and wins over a group of citizens who secretly open the gates to admit the forces of the other side. At least this stratagem, though explicitly compared to the one used by the Greeks against the Trojans,

³Jacques Morel notes that the savage nature of heroism in Rotrou’s protagonists can lead either to criminal acts or magnanimous exploits, even for the same character, and that the bloodshed and brutality associated with combat never seem to trouble them (*Rotrou dramaturge de l’ambiguïté* [Paris: Klincksieck, 2002], 78–80).

DEPICTIONS OF WAR IN THE PLAYS OF ROTRU

does not involve mass slaughter of civilians or the assassination of the commanders.

Another area in which Rotrou could be seen to question war is his choice of plots where the cause of the conflict is flimsy or at least questionable. In *Iphigénie* Agamemnon and Clytemnestre express doubts about the rationale for the Trojan War and strongly object to the condition set by the gods in order for the army to reach Troy. The appearance of Diane at the dénouement confirms both the justice of the gods, since the heroine's life is spared, and the justice of the war, which Diane assures the Greeks they will win. But the play ends on a note of dramatic irony, since the audience knows that Agamemnon's hope of returning home to "goûter un long repos" after the travails of warfare (v. 1914) will not be realized; instead, the cycle of violence will be perpetuated and destroy the Greeks' own families. In *Antigone* the war pitting two brothers against each other is viewed by all the other characters as shocking and unnatural, and several family members try desperately to prevent the final battle from taking place. The uncontrollable hatred between the brothers leads to their deaths and to those of nearly their entire family. In *L'Heureux naufrage* the conflict derives in large part from plot devices typical of tragicomedy (misunderstandings, disguise, coincidences, flight of lovers and their pursuit by the girl's family) and can be quickly resolved by a diplomatic marriage. The military conflict in the two late tragicomedies is sparked by rebellions, and these are speedily put down.

Because wars are typically fought for political reasons, both their conduct and their outcome reveal the competence, or lack thereof, of the rulers and their commitment to justice and order. Usually the conclusion of a war, or its prevention, leads to a desirable political outcome: a capable monarch is installed or reinforced, and there is reason to believe that this person will keep the land stable and safe.⁴ In *Antigone* the dénouement is unusually bloody and somber and the country remains stuck with a tyrant, though he is severely punished by the suicide of his last remaining son and faints in despair in the play's final moments. Salmacis in *L'Heureux naufrage* makes some serious lapses in judgment but she is not tyrannical, and her mistakes are caused by love, which in the world of tragicomedy is viewed as an acceptable excuse. She allows herself to be so consumed by

⁴Given that France was involved in the Thirty Years' War during most of Rotrou's dramatic career and that he composed his final play just after the outbreak of the Fronde, audiences presumably viewed many of these plots in light of current events and the playwright may have chosen some of his subjects for the same reason. (But that is a topic I plan to treat elsewhere.)

passion that she makes undignified offers to the man she loves, even indicating a willingness to abdicate and follow him to another country if he feels unequal to the burden of sharing her throne. And she unjustly condemns him to death when she believes that he has fought a duel over another woman, though the fact that the execution is halted just in time keeps her hands clean. The negotiated settlement that averts a war allows her to retain her title and a measure of dignity through marriage to the new Epirot king. However, the real power will pass into the hands of her husband, who seems to be a more rational and more capable ruler. In *Dom Bernard de Cabrère* the king reforms at the end, agreeing to marry the woman he loves but has previously tried to win only as a mistress, and also belatedly promising to reward a meritorious general whom he has repeatedly slighted. In *Dom Lope de Cardone* the king is capable and scrupulously fair, but also weak and dependent on the strength and loyalty of his top generals. The face-saving solution whereby he condemns the generals to death for violating his order not to fight a duel but pardons them at the last minute actually bolsters his authority: it allows him to display both impartial justice and clemency, while making the young warriors realize that they are indeed subject to royal authority and cannot simply act on their own. In *Crisante* the victorious Roman commander vindicates the honor of Rome by punishing a rapist in his ranks. Meanwhile, the defeated king of Corinth, who has managed to survive the Roman invasion, disgraces himself by failing to even consider further resistance to preserve his kingdom's autonomy and by wrongly suspecting the honor of his wife; when he finally realizes his error he commits suicide. To this extent war can be seen as a kind of purification, ensuring that those leaders who can combine military might and good governance are the ones to survive.⁵

Rotrou's concern for maintaining order and stability leads not just to the praise of good rulers but also to the condemnation of civil war or other forms of civil disorder, which are invariably crushed. In a world where legitimate kings enjoy special divine protection, challenges to their authority must never be allowed to succeed. In *Dom Lope de Cardone*, where the plot is totally fictional, the conflict between Aragon and Castile, which in historical reality were independent kingdoms, is presented as a civil war, and the forces loyal to the king of Aragon win a quick and decisive vic-

⁵Rotrou's political theory, like that of contemporary playwrights, included an endorsement of the divine right and absolutism principles, though not without major reservations and concerns. For a fuller discussion, see Morel, *Rotrou dramaturge* 92–108; André Stegmann, *L'Héroïsme cornélien, genèse et signification* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1968), 2: 370–408.

DEPICTIONS OF WAR IN THE PLAYS OF ROTRU

tory. Even in *Dom Bernard de Cabrère*, where the main characters are taken from history, Rotrou communicated his basic message by altering a key circumstance from the Spanish play that he used as his primary source: instead of quashing a rebellion in remote territories held in Sicily and on the Italian mainland, the king must put down a revolt within his own land and led by his own brother. The victory of the forces loyal to the king is swift and decisive. The enemy army is quickly decimated, and the killing of their commander makes the survivors instantly lose heart. Although some Castilians fight alongside the rebels, the episode is presented as essentially a civil war. In *Antigone*, while Polynice is roundly condemned for starting a war against his native city, regardless of the legitimacy of his claims to the throne, Créon is likewise condemned for his impious decision to leave the body of Polynice unburied. That act not only offends the gods, but also shows his refusal to try to heal the wounds of civil war through forgiveness and reconciliation.

Another area where Rotrou explores the tense connection between warfare and politics is the relationship of rulers to their military commanders. In some cases the monarch is himself the lead general, whereas in other cases the general is separate from the ruler and viewed as a potential challenge to him. Having a division of labor may be fraught with peril, but it is still preferable to letting the king combine the two roles. Indeed, every time it is the king himself who leads his troops into battle, things do not go well. The most disastrous case is in *Crisante*. Although the Corinthian king Antioche never specifically states that he commanded his forces in the abortive struggle to free Peloponnesian Greece from Roman domination, no mention is made of any other leader, so we must assume that he served as his own chief general. While it cannot be held against him that he lost to the superior might of the Roman legions, Antioche merits condemnation for having fled his city with a few followers just before the Romans destroyed it and then making not the slightest effort either to ransom or to rescue his wife, who is being held captive. Far from thinking and acting like a hero, Antioche spends practically all his time on stage lamenting. He believes that he was defeated only because the gods were punishing him for the sins of his subjects, and he never takes any of the blame. Even in his final speech, just before he commits suicide, he thinks only of personal matters (he expects to join his wife in a better world where they will at last be free from persecution by the Romans), while giving no thought to the subjects he leaves behind. He is thus a model of both an inept general and an inept king, unable to govern in either peace or war.

PERRY GETHNER

Equally ineffective, though far less blameworthy, is the Epirot king Thaumasis in *L'Heureux naufrage*. When his daughter elopes with the man she loves, rather than accept the diplomatic marriage that he has arranged for her, he takes decisive action: he pursues the fugitives with his army and declares war on the queen of Dalmatia, who has granted them refuge. But no sooner has he set up camp outside the capital city and given the order to conduct a siege than he suddenly drops dead. One of his generals, Achante, praises the king for an active career in the course of which he won many victories. Moreover, if, as Achante suggests, Thaumasis was advanced in years, the fact that he was willing to continue commanding his troops at an advanced age is another cause for commendation. Of course, since this is a tragicomedy, the king's death is providential: his daughter, Floronde, being very close to her brother Cléantes, who is the new king, easily negotiates a settlement that allows the war to be avoided. Cléantes will marry the Dalmatian queen and allow his sister to wed the man with whom she eloped. Thaumasis is an example of a king who is both a conscientious ruler and able commander, but he is the blocking figure in a love story and so must be gotten out of the way.

In all three of the tragedies that Rotrou based on classical mythology, the king is a distinguished warrior but a less than admirable ruler. In *Hercule mourant*, the title character is a superhero whose exploits stun the world. In addition to his twelve labors, he has frequently led troops in combat, though for the purpose of conquest, not self-defense. However, his military successes lead to problems at home: he attempts to wed a captive princess by force, he orders the execution of the captive prince whom she loves, and he lies to and mistreats his loving wife. Déjanire's desperate attempt to regain her husband's affection will, ironically, cause his death. In *Antigone*, the young king Ætéocle leads his own troops into battle and does a competent job, but the war that he has provoked is unjust, since it involves an unnatural combat between two brothers with an equal right to power. His mother Jocaste denounces him for his excessive ambition, which calls into question his self-serving claim that, though he was willing to avoid bloodshed and yield the throne to Polynice, his subjects would not let him do so: "Le peuple aime mon règne, et craint sa tyrannie" (v. 84). Following a climactic duel in which the two brothers kill each other, the kingdom passes into the hands of their uncle Créon, who turns out to be an even more odious tyrant and who apparently lacks the military skills demonstrated by his sons and nephews. As for Agamemnon in *Iphigénie*, while no one disputes his prowess, his behavior in war is notoriously brutal: Clytemnestre accuses him of having married her at sword-point after slaughtering her first husband and her sons. As commander-in-chief of the

DEPICTIONS OF WAR IN THE PLAYS OF ROTROU

Greek forces, his behavior is no more admirable, since he endlessly hesitates about his course of action and spends much of the play either quarrelling with or being manipulated by other characters. Although Rotrou grants him the last word in the play, his smug declaration that he has satisfied the gods by his zeal and that he can claim credit in advance for the fall of Troy rings hollow.

Because of the difficulty in combining the two types of command, extended discussions of the mutability of fortune linked to success or failure in war are mostly confined to plays where the king is his own commander. To be sure, the fascination with the baroque themes of the confusion between appearance and reality, truth and illusion, the theater and real life, rationality and insanity, and power and powerlessness, distinguishes his entire corpus starting from his very first play, *L'Hypochondriaque*.⁶ *Hercule mourant* opens with a monologue in which the title character laments the fact that his success in the recent war has been overshadowed by his unrequited passion for a princess whom he has captured in that war: he has enslaved others only to become himself a slave of love. Hercule's sense of servitude, contrasting with his superhuman strength and valor, is not limited to his amorous failure. He likewise complains of Junon's constant hostility to him, which has forced him to undertake a series of difficult exploits that ought to finally win him the place he deserves among the ranks of the gods, and yet this prize has so far been denied him. In *Crisante Antioche*'s lengthy discussion of the mutability of fortune is inspired by the frustration of having lost a war. The fall is indeed spectacular: the Corinthian king has in the course of one brief war lost his glory, his kingdom and his wife. In *Antigone* mutability is linked to the gods' inexorable, but often confusing decrees, which at times promise a speedy and relatively pain-free end to the conflict in Thebes, but which ultimately spell the extinction of the entire royal house. In *Iphigénie* the powerlessness of the Greek army, and in particular of its commander-in-chief Agamemnon, derives from an oracle in which the goddess Diane demands his daughter Iphigénie as a sacrifice. This leaves Agamemnon, ostensibly the most powerful of the Greeks, in a painful position where he must renounce either his leadership position or his feelings as a father. The title character herself insists on the powerlessness of mortals in the face of the gods, who are capable of foiling the designs of the strongest humans, and she finds her only source of power in moral fortitude, willingly accepting her role as

⁶ Jean-Claude Vuillemin, *Baroque et théâtralité: le théâtre de Jean Rotrou* (Paris, Seattle, Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1994; also the introduction to Vuillemin's critical edition of *L'Hypochondriaque* (Geneva: Droz, 1999).

PERRY GETHNER

martyr in order to secure a victory for the Greek forces. The main example of complaints about mutability of fortune made by a champion, as opposed to the king or his allies, comes from Lope de Lune in the tragicomedy *Dom Bernard de Cabrère*, and here the topos is exploited for comic effect. The irony is that the young general, inevitably victorious in battle and assisted by an influential friend at court, keeps failing to receive the rewards he deserves for his valor. However, his bad luck in this area is solely due to the fact that the king is distracted by his stormy love affair with a lady in court, and once this is resolved and the king realizes his error, he promises to make up for his past neglect. The audience, realizing that the situation is not beyond hope, can thus appreciate Lope's seemingly tragic outbursts as examples of parody (on the stylistic level) and illusion (on the thematic level).

When the king and the hero are separate, the relationship does not have to be adversarial. Indeed, it can lead to friendship and partnership, as is the case in *Le Véritable Saint-Genest*, where Dioclétian promotes his leading general, Maximin, to the rank of co-emperor, as well as making him his son-in-law. Mention of the hero's exploits is limited to a few lines in the emperor's opening speech: Maximin, he explains, had already impressed him with his remarkable exploits, but the younger man's most recent victory, by which he subdued the empire's last remaining enemies, has made him worthy of the highest possible reward. Maximin accepts with grace and modesty, protesting that he does not deserve the hand of his beloved Valérie (nor, in his view, does anyone else), and he is concerned that his lowly origins may cause the subjects to despise him. Dioclétian waves away these objections, and there is total harmony between the two men for the rest of the play, which quickly moves on to other subjects (the glorification of the acting profession, a miraculous conversion to Christianity).

In several other plays the king has unqualified admiration for his chief general, and conflict arises only because of amorous intrigue involving another member of the royal family. Thus, in *Bélisaire* the Byzantine emperor Justinien ends up condemning the title character only because his evil wife Théodore, whose advances the general has spurned, falsely accuses him of attempted seduction. Given the intensity of his friendship with Bélisaire and his knowledge of his wife's evil nature, Justinien's sudden reversal of course is baffling and the protagonist's death shocking. But in any case there is never any envy on the part of the ruler or any thoughts of rebellion on the part of the subject. In *Venceslas* the tension is caused by the obsessive hatred shown by the crown prince, Ladislas, to the chief

DEPICTIONS OF WAR IN THE PLAYS OF ROTROU

general, Frédéric, whom he (incorrectly) believes to be his rival for the affection of the princess Cassandre, and whose favor with the king he views as a threat to his own position at court. Significantly, when Ladislas ascends to the throne in the play's final moments, he experiences a moral conversion, which allows him to start behaving responsibly and to restore Frédéric to favor.

In the two final tragicomedies, the tension between king and generals is unplanned and again results from amorous intrigue. In *Dom Bernard de Cabrère* it is the king whose passion prevents him from paying proper attention to the narration of his commanders' exploits. Although he is genuinely grateful and rewards them handsomely, especially Bernard, he inadvertently overlooks the valiant but unlucky Lope de Lune, who eventually leaves the court in despair. In *Dom Lope de Cardone*, it is the two young commanders whose amorous rivalry leads them to disobey a royal order, with near fatal results. Yet, whether the king's lack of participation in the wars is due to lack of interest (in the earlier play the king appears to be young enough to lead his own troops) or to advanced age (in the latter play), there is no jealousy on the part of the ruler and no dangerous political ambition on the part of the generals.

One may well wonder why, given the importance of the conflicts between kings and champions in the plays of his contemporaries Corneille and Du Ryer, Rotrou chose to present the problem only in a muted form. Unlike the more subversive Du Ryer, who did not hesitate to show evil kings who flaunt their tyranny, break their promises, humiliate or persecute their subjects for no reason, and show no respect for the gods, Rotrou kept his rulers relatively conscientious and well-meaning, even though not always impeccable in their conduct. Du Ryer's constant focus on the conflict between envy (on the part of rulers or courtiers, or both) and merit is again largely absent in Rotrou.⁷ Envious men at court who try to harm virtuous protagonists are motivated primarily by amorous rivalry, and in each case even that is misguided. Ladislas, himself a distinguished warrior, feels jealous of Frédéric because he believes that the other man is in love with, and is preferred by, his beloved Cassandre, but that turns out to be untrue. Dorismond in *L'Heureux naufrage* tries to assassinate Cléandre because he believes that the young foreigner is wooing the woman he himself is pursuing, but in fact Cléandre is only pretending to woo Céphalie (though she prefers him to her original suitor.)

⁷ On Du Ryer's tragedies, see especially James F. Gaines, *Pierre Du Ryer and his Tragedies: From Envy to Liberation* (Geneva: Droz, 1987).

PERRY GETHNER

It is not until his final play that Rotrou chooses to tackle head-on the problem, likewise raised by Corneille, of the king whose reign is insecure and who must decide how he can cement the loyalty of the champion on whom he depends for his survival. It can hardly be a coincidence that this is the only play Rotrou composed during the period of the Fronde, when the conflict between the upper echelons of the nobility and the monarchy erupted into civil war. In fact, in *Dom Lope de Cardone* the king faces problems with multiple commanders. His own son, Dom Pèdre, previously distinguished himself in campaigns on two continents, but the latter has become so distraught over his rejection by the woman he loves that he refuses to take part in subsequent wars, even the current one which is taking place in his own land. The king, hoping to cure him of his depression and his inertia, offers him any reward he likes, not excepting the throne. As for the two younger generals who have taken over command from the crown prince, Lope and Sanche, he likewise offers them a reward of their choice, although, since both are in love with the king's daughter, it will be hard to satisfy them both. Being both just and realistic, the king recognizes his dependence on these remarkable leaders and questions whether he can do enough to display his gratitude. Following the recital of Lope's exploits, he wonders aloud: "quelle reconnaissance/ Peut ici m'affranchir du défaut d'impuissance?/ Lui puis-je offrir un prix à sa vertu pareil?" (II.4.676–78).

As in *Le Cid*, the Corneille play it most resembles, *Dom Lope* features two conflicting views of loyalty on the part of the top commanders. The title character is more respectful and more supportive of the principles of absolutism, arguing that the king is the perfect embodiment of rigid and impartial judgment, and that his threat to execute them if they disobey his express command not to fight a duel over the infanta must not be disregarded (IV.2.1204–11). Sanche argues, at much greater length, that they should consider themselves exempted from obedience to the king's order because 1) the dictates of honor and of love take precedence, 2) a "beau crime" better marks the intensity of passion than a cold and weak respect for authority, 3) kings often issue decrees that they do not expect or even wish to see obeyed, 4) the king would not dare execute men who have won such glorious victories in his service (IV.2.1212–32). As it turns out, the king does insist on the supremacy of his orders and condemns Lope, the winner of the duel, to death. Despite a series of appeals for clemency, he argues that it is thanks to his constant insistence on maintaining justice and the supremacy of royal authority that he is both cherished and feared, and he is concerned that laxness in this regard would lead to chaos throughout the realm (V.4.1706–11).

DEPICTIONS OF WAR IN THE PLAYS OF ROTROU

Again, as in *Le Cid*, the character who has openly placed the demands of personal honor over obedience to the ruler is the loser in the duel, thus symbolically reaffirming the primacy of absolutist ideology. At the same time, however, Rotrou shares Corneille's sympathy for the heroic mindset. The willingness to act independently, take risks, defy authority when it gets in the way, and to create oneself as a fully heroic individual – all these traits make Sanche and Lope the most dynamic characters in the play and inspire admiration for them. The king himself has to struggle with himself to carry out the condemnation of men whom he both esteems and needs, and he is greatly relieved when he is finally forced to act on his real desire to spare them.

Yet another crucial resemblance to *Le Cid* is the linkage between the two sources of the heroic mindset: heredity and sensibility, to use Prigent's terms.⁸ The need to prove oneself and to surpass oneself, especially in combat, comes equally from allegiance to family tradition and from the chivalric need to become worthy of the beloved. This gives considerable leverage to the king, whose need for valiant commanders to win his wars gives the hero a chance to prove himself, and who also has the power to bestow upon the hero the hand of his ladylove. At the same time, the fact that the realm is in grave danger helps imbue the hero with a strong sense of purpose. This is true for both of the final tragicomedies, where there is real or apparent civil war.

It is clear that Rotrou, as a political conservative and a protégé of both Richelieu and Mazarin, was determined to promote a vision where royal authority is always, though often belatedly, reaffirmed. There can be no excuse for monarchs to disobey the gods or for even the greatest heroes to disobey the monarch, and no form of civil disorder may be tolerated. War may be necessary, but it is not to be excessively glorified, and the warrior class has to know its place. Heroism, while still valued, is subjected to questioning. Rotrou's tragicomedies always end with the state restored to peace and stability, whereas his tragedies often end with the prospect of chaos and devastation for the realm, as well as for the protagonists, but

⁸ See Michel Prigent, *Le Héros et l'Etat dans la tragédie de Pierre Corneille* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986).

PERRY GETHNER

even in the darker plays the frequent references to the gods hint at the possibility of a proper resolution at some future date.⁹ Though his universe, like France during the Fronde, seems to maintain only a precarious hold on stability, his fascination with the theme of divine providence keeps the plays from ending in total despair and allows for glimmers of hope.

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⁹ On the imprecision of Rotrou's generic markers, see Bénédicte Louvat-Molozay, "La tragédie de Rotrou au carrefour des genres dramatiques," in *Le Théâtre de Rotrou*, ed. Pierre Pasquier, *Littératures classiques* 63, 2007, 61–70.