IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

The Theater of Jean Rotrou (1609-1650)

By Robert J. Nelson

Ohio State University Press
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Jean Rotrou is France’s neglected classic. Generations of critics have recognized his merits but have done so in a tangential manner. He has been called the “mentor of Corneille” and has been celebrated as the precursor of Racine in classical tragedy and of Molière in classical comedy. That Rotrou can be linked to all three of France’s great classical dramatists has been responsible in part for the respectful neglect of the thirty-five of his plays that have survived from a production assumed to be many times as great.

Mr. Nelson turns to Rotrou in the dramatist’s own setting: the per fervid philosophical and religious atmosphere of the first half of the seventeenth century, a period presumed by some scholars to have prepared the age of Racine, that dramatist of transcendence, in the specifically religious sense, who sees the things of this world as signs of man’s dissociation from the Divine Ground of Being.

Yet this current of “Le Dieu Caché” was not dominant in the century; a strong belief in “Le Dieu Visible”—an “immanentist current,” so to speak—made itself felt in both formal religious writing and in imaginative literature of the period. Indeed, if Racine was by tendency the dramatist of transcendence, so his great rival, Corneille, might be thought of as the dramatist of immanence.

An elaborate expression of both tendencies is to be found in Rotrou, to whose dramatic example both Corneille and Racine turned at various moments of their careers. Profoundly preoccupied with the relation between the human and the divine, Rotrou’s theater of sacrament and sacrilege demonstrates the continuity of, as well as the disparity between, Christianity and the classical heritage.

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1609 - 1650
Peux-tu n'adorer pas ce sexe précieux,
Ce charmeur innocent des âmes et des yeux,
Ce sexe en qui le ciel admire ses ouvrages,
A qui souvent, lui-même, il offre ses hommages,
Et qui força jadis tant de divinité
A venir dans ses mains rendre leurs libertés?
Peux-tu, le cœur libre et plein de tant de glaces,
Voir ces trônes vivants des vertus et des grâces?
Et vois-tu que le ciel, sur ce bas élément,
Se soit fait de soi-même un portrait plus charmant?

CLORINDE (III.1)

Il n'est si haut crédit que le temps ne consomme,
Puisque l'homme est mortel et qu'il provient de l'homme;
Ce qui nous vient de Dieu, seul exempt de la mort,
Est seul indépendant et du temps et du sort.

BÉLISSAIRE (V.2)
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For

ANDREW PAUL AND ALEXANDRA