Jean Rotrou (1609–1650) 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,” but, as in a famous judgment by Voltaire, the mentor is said to have become only the pupil’s own pupil. He 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 in part responsible for the respectful neglect of his long canon (thirty-five extant plays surviving from a production presumed by some to be many times as great). For a tradition prizing generic purity, Rotrou has been too easily drawn to all dramatic genres, especially to the genre that is the despair of classical purists: tragicomedy.

In recent times, critics have attempted to correct centuries of neglect. By stressing certain plays or isolated aspects of his total work, various critics have reminded us of Rotrou’s intrinsic worth. They have also related him more independently but no less favorably to his great contemporaries. The provocative existentialist study of eight plays in Jacqueline Van Baelen’s Rotrou: le héros tragique et la révolte has fruitfully expanded the range of critical attention beyond the trilogy in which Rotrou’s tragedy has been too long circumscribed (Le Véritable Saint Genest, Venceslas, Cosroès). Again, stressing Rotrou’s technical inventiveness more than most critics, Harold C. Knutson has analyzed still another genre in Rotrou in his The Ironic Game: A Study of Rotrou’s Comic Theater. The brilliant, ambitious study by Francesco Orlando, Rotrou: Dalla Tragicomedia alla tragedia, extends the franchise of the “serious” to
Rotrou's tragicomedies as well as to his tragedies. Finally, over the last decade, in a number of incisive studies, Jacques Morel has perceptively linked theme and dramaturgy as he situates Rotrou in the development of French thought and especially of French classical tragedy. His assiduous study of the playwright has just culminated in the publication of his doctoral dissertation *Jean Rotrou: dramaturge de l'ambiguïté*, which appeared even as the manuscript of this book was being read for the Ohio State University Press. I have thus been unable to integrate here specific insights from M. Morel's superb book. However, having had an opportunity to read the latter while my own was in press, I believe it correct to say that our studies are different in approach but complementary in results. Each concludes that Rotrou's vision is unitary throughout the canon, particularly with respect to the major themes that Morel studies in the early part of his study.

Like Hubert Gillot's study of Rotrou's "théâtre de l'imagination" somewhat earlier in this century, these recent studies do much to correct the stinting evaluation of Rotrou passed on from one generation to the next since Voltaire's somewhat off-hand remarks. This restoration has also been stimulated by the more general re-evaluation of French classical literature over the past three decades. The studies of Orlando and Knutson owe much, for example, to recent interest in the relation of the baroque to the classical.² Mille Van Baelen profits from the perspectives of phenomenological criticisms as these have been brought to bear on French literature of the seventeenth as well as other centuries.

My own study profits, I trust, from this general re-evaluation as well as from the particular studies of Rotrou in the various aspects indicated. Attempting a comprehensive re-evaluation of the dramatist here, I have been drawn more to those studies that first seek to situate the dramatist in his own times. It has seemed to me that by understanding Rotrou first in that perspective, we can then see in what way he may be related to the literature of later times—not only our own but of the nineteenth century in particular, when, as Jules Alciatore, J. Jarry, Emile
Deschanel, and others have shown, romantics like Stendhal found much in common with "Corneille's mentor."

To the extent, then, that my scholarly research and critical imagination have made it possible, I have turned to Rotrou in his own setting. This is the perfervid philosophical and religious atmosphere of the first half of the seventeenth century. In that setting Jean Rotrou grew to manhood and wrote the long canon containing that fine play on an actor converted while acting. *Le Véritable Saint Genest* is considered the most impressive example of his genius and one of the most expressive signs of an enduring religious outlook. This vision endures, in fact, as the explicit expression of ultimate truth *per omnia secula seculorum* for one-sixth of the world’s population at this very moment. I have, to some extent, explored aspects of this "eternal philosophy" both before and since Rotrou’s time. However, my professional conscience has guided me in this exploration. I have tried to avoid the tone of the breviary, concerning myself with earlier and later forms of this philosophy only to show its relevance to seventeenth-century French drama, notably to Rotrou’s theater of immanence and transcendence.

I am not concerned with establishing an exact influence of orthodox theology on Rotrou. There is a philosophical consonance between Rotrou’s vision and that of certain of his contemporary co-religionists, particularly the Jesuits in their opposition to the Jansenists. But any attempt to establish this connection with precision is subject to caution on two counts. First, too little is known about Rotrou’s early life and education. His biographers (Abbé Dom Liron, Henri Chardon, Thomas Frederick Crane) know only that at about the age of twelve, the future dramatist left Dreux to continue his studies at Paris and that in the great city he won the approval of his professors. Of the latter, the name of only one is known: Antoine de Bréda, professor of philosophy. M. de Bréda seems not to have impressed the well-known compilers of French ecclesiastical and religious history. My colleague, Professor Frank Paul Bowman, a savant of French ecclesiastical history, upon whose impressive resources I called in this matter, has also been unable to advance
our knowledge of M. de Bréda. I am grateful to Professor Bowman, and I trust he will not feel that his assiduous researches on my behalf have been pointless in view of the second caution I now raise in the matter of possible influences upon Rotrou. In general, the concept of influence should be used in the flexible spirit called for by Lionel Trilling in his famous essay, “The Sense of the Past”:

In its historical meaning, from which we take our present use, influence was a word intended to express a mystery. It means a flowing-in, but not as a tributary river flows into the mainstream at a certain observable point; historically the image is an astrological one and the meanings which the Oxford Dictionary gives all suggest “producing effects by insensible or invisible means”—“the infusion of any kind of divine, spiritual, moral, immaterial, or secret power or principle.” Before the idea of influence we ought to be far more puzzled than we are; if we find it hard to be puzzled enough, we may contrive to induce the proper state of uncertainty by turning the word upon ourselves, asking, “What have been the influences that made me the person I am, and to whom would I entrust the task of truly discovering what they were?”

With this caution in mind, I prefer to see a consonance of viewpoints between Rotrou and certain of his contemporaries, rather than an influence of those viewpoints upon him.