INTRODUCTION

Rotrou’s Theater:

“Dieu Caché, Dieu Visible”

ANY scholars of French Literature look on the seventeenth century as the “Age of Racine.” Recently, Racine himself has come to be regarded as the dramatist of transcendence, in a specifically religious sense. According to Lucien Goldmann, Racine’s is the theater of “Le Dieu Caché.” In it the things of the world (physical attributes, a morality preoccupied with human aspirations and passions) are signs of man’s dissociation from the Divine Ground of Being. In theological terms, the world is more sacrilege than sacrament.

Yet, this “sacrilegious current” is not unique or dominant in the century. Between the Edict of Nantes in 1598 and its revocation in 1685, a strong belief in “Le Dieu Visible”—an “immanentist current,” so to speak—makes itself felt both in formal religious writing and in imaginative literature. Theologically, this literature views the world as a sacrament. To recall a famous literary dichotomy, it will undoubtedly occur to many that, as Racine is by tendency the dramatist of transcendence, so Corneille might be thought of as the dramatist of immanence.

An elaborate expression of both tendencies is to be found in a playwright to whom both Corneille and Racine turned at various moments of their careers: Jean Rotrou (1609-1650). In comedies adapting models in Plautus, semi-pastoral plays adapting L’Astrée, philosophical dramas adapting models in Euripides and Sophocles and Seneca, political dramas adapting a wide variety of historical sources—in all these Rotrou develops
conflict and resolution in virtually the same dramatic and ethical structures found in his most famous play, *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, the tale of a pagan actor converted while playing a convert. When the resolutions give us the world restored to its integrity, his plays express what might be called the "sacramental ethos." When these resolutions are not complete, their very incompleteness recalls those violations of the sacred known as sacrileges.

To forget that the sign of the sacred is only a sign is to profane it; to cherish the sign for itself is to commit sacrilege against what is signified. Many plays show this self-destructive emphasis on the sign itself. The quests in Rotrou's second, third, and fourth acts are often undertaken by the hero or heroine in the disguise of a pilgrim; the resulting mistaken identities and misalliances force many characters to condemn the world as a "sign" of malevolent determinism rather than divine providence. Confronted with the vicissitudes of fate, Rotrou's despairing heroes and heroines often feel compelled to withdraw from the world in stern self-reliance and reflective indifference. This Stoical spirit is to be found in such Christian apologists as Pierre Chartron and Guillaume Du Vair in the closing years of the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth. It had already been sounded in the theater by the religiously concerned Robert Garnier and others. Continuing these religiously based motifs, many of Rotrou's heroes cast brooding doubts on a world order in which all seems disorder or, at best, the senseless "order" of Fortune's wheel. Losing faith, these heroes call on their courage to salvage from destiny at least the quality of *généreux*.

As I said in my book on Corneille, during this period that term conveys far more than its English cognate "generous" or the parallel usage of the term in modern French: "kind," "bounteous," "charitable." In its seventeenth-century usage, *généreux* is closer to its etymological meaning: Latin gens, gentis, f. root *Gen*, *gigno*, that which belongs by birth or descent, a race or clan embracing several families united together by a common
name and by certain religious rites. Orig. only patrician, but, after the granting of the connubium between patricians and plebeians, also plebeian. 2

Stoically responding to fickle fortune, Rotrou's heroes and heroines seek to be généreux in just these terms. Many of Rotrou's heroes are nobly born, and thus automatically behave as généreux. But I cannot say of Rotrou's générosité what I have said of Corneille's: "It is strictly its patrician sense that obtains in Corneille." 3 With its strict pairings on the basis of birth, rank, and station, générosité in Rotrou often finds itself at odds with pairings made by a unity higher than that of the patrician family: by Heaven and according to the tenets of what might be called the sacramental code of chaste desire. Conflicts between this desire and the fate of lovers mismatched in terms of générosité provoke Rotrou's heroes and heroines to their third- and fourth-act gestures of Stoical self-sufficiency or, at times, Neoplatonist transcendence.

But in the end these "pagan" positions yield to what is virtually a Christian resolution. Rotrou's fifth acts are filled with confessions on bended knee; with restorations to sanity after an illusory enchantment or madness in which a character thinks himself or others dead; with suicides stayed by such "resurrections"; with adjudications by king or father figure. These fifth acts thus manifest an eschatological structure. They sit atop the rest of the structure like scenes of the Last Judgment in the uppermost portion of religious paintings in parish churches. Yet, except for his play about the actor-martyr, most of Rotrou's plays are not literally about the Last Judgment or any other specific Christian motif or tale. Many are about enchanted kings and hapless princesses whose kingdoms are more like pastures than parishes. Others, based on ancient classical drama, are about mythological figures who invoke not the One True God but the "gods," doing so neither in terms of the Trinity nor of the intercessionary, incarnated Member of the Trinity. A few plays are about kingdoms of this world in which the prince hardly seems concerned with the will of God here on earth in the
terms, say, of Augustine's City of God. Rotrou thus seems to continue that process known as "humanism."

Understood as the recovery of the past, Rotrou's theater is "humanistic." However, it is not humanistic in showing the secularization of this inheritance. To assume this is to ignore the real character of Rotrou's adaptation not only of the classical past but of courtly tradition, pastoral literature, and history. The spirit informing many of these adaptations has been called "Humanism" and is connected with the scholarly investigation of the past begun in the Renaissance and continuing in France well into the early years of the seventeenth century. We might designate the investigation as such under the rubric of small-\(h\) humanism to distinguish it from the widespread understanding of capital-\(H\) Humanism as a moral outlook appealing exclusively to man-made instead of God-made laws. This outlook is seen by some scholars to inform French thought not only in the early years of the seventeenth century but well into the "génération classique" itself. Indeed, in *Classicisme et baroque dans l'œuvre de Racine*, Philip Butler finds it appropriate to link the greatest French classic not to the Jansenists but to libertins of the early part of the century like François de La Mothe Le Vayer and Gabriel Naudé. In studying the past with a critical eye on their present, these Humanists seem to concentrate on man's fate in human rather than divine terms. They contribute to a "laïcisation de la vie" in this period, which Jean Dagens has probed so skillfully in his *Bérulle et les origines de la restauration catholique* (1575-1611). Yet, as Dagens himself notes, the "laïcisation" is largely latent in the first part of the century. Its implied separation of the sacred and the profane is fully manifested only in the aesthetics and ethics of the great classical writers of the second half of the century. The first half of the century is characterized more by a "humanisme chrétien" whose "optimisme triomphal" is expressed in a harmony of "Humanistic" and religious outlooks.  

This optimism shines throughout the theater of Rotrou, even in its moments of extreme transcendental doubt on the values of this world. The harmony of the humanist and religious impulses
finally emerges in so tragic a moment as *Iphigénie*, for example. Though presented with great sophistication, *Iphigénie*, like other figures the playwright derives from classical antiquity, sounds themes and strikes poses usually associated with Christian rather than pagan attitudes toward life. Taken from Seneca, Rotrou’s *Hercule* is a dramatic *mise en évidence* of the analogies between the mythological and the Christian drawn by Florimond de Raemond a decade earlier in his *Histoire de l’hérésie:* . . . Vous croyez qu’un Hercule a brisé les portes d’Enfer, et pourquoi ne croyez-vous pas que Jésus l’eût pu faire? Vous dites la vie d’Hercule avoir été tout pénible, qu’il a dompté les plus terribles monstres de la terre: *notre Hercule chrétien* est descendu ici-bas pour détremper et dissoudre le venin de la mort en son sang et chasser le péché du monde. . . . De sorte qu’avec une merveilleuse Providence de Dieu, il se peut dire que la superstition des païens a été *une figure, un portrait, une idée et un dessin pour venir à la vraie Religion*, sans qu’il ait fallu tout changer et innover, chose pleine de péril et danger, mais expliquer avec un sens mystique et saint ce qu’ils entendaient philosophiquement et fabuleusement, pour combattre leur idolâtrie.5

In the context of such defenses of the pagan past, the Christian analogues of Rotrou’s *Hercule mourant* stand out all the more clearly. Going to his glory at the end of the fourth act, he makes a last wish: that his rival for *Iole* be executed. But in the fifth act the ascended Hercule appears in a heavenly light and rescinds his unmerciful command, declaring it the act of a necessarily imperfect vision and ordering the marriage of *Iole* and *Arcas*. The “Christianization” of such motifs is pervasive in Rotrou.

That this is unhistorical in the work of a seventeenth-century playwright of classical tendencies must be reopened to question. Here, much depends on the way one reads cultural and literary history after the Edict of the Parlement of Paris of November 17, 1548, which proscribed “la Passion de Nostre Seigneur, ne aultres mystères sacrés,” while permitting “aultres mystères profanes, honnestes et licites.”6 In time “mystères profanes”
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would seem a contradiction in terms; by the end of the seventeenth century, in fact, it will especially seem so to the highest French churchman of his time, Bossuet. In *L’Evolution de la tragédie religieuse classique en France*, Kosta Loukovitch recalls Corneille’s self-consciousness in daring to present a religious play to the “lettrés” (*Polyeucte*). In the century between the Edict and Corneille’s famous play, subjects from the Christian religion were relegated to the private theater of school, convent, and study, and the public theater was, with few exceptions, secular. Humanism, particularly in the recovery of pagan mythology, is presumed to have abetted this tendency, with literary men as well as theologians agreed on the separation (often the two parties to the agreement were found in the same man). As Loukovitch sees it, Ronsard and other genuinely pious literary men unwittingly fostered the separation of the religious and the profane at the expense of true piety. They seemed unaware of what other contemporaries, especially certain theologians, feared: the recrudescence of paganism. Catholic and Protestant theologians uttered this warning, with the Council of Trent taking a particularly strong lead in the matter, as Loukovitch has shown.

And yet, among theologians as well as literary men, other voices were being heard. The “advance guards” of Trent itself, the Jesuits, were especially active in using the theater, both in profane and religious subjects, for educational and recreational needs. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, Jodelle’s *Cléopâtre captive* or Garnier’s *Marc Antoine* were played in a monastery for girls. At the turn of the century, the literary theoretician Vauquelin de la Fresnaye proposed a literary conversion of pagan antiquity:

He! quel plaisir serait-ce à cette heure de voir
Nos poètes chrétiens, les façons recevoir
Du tragique ancien? Et voir à nos mystères
Les païens asservis sous les lois salutaires
De nos saints et martyres?

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Vauquelin would not Christianize ancient subjects, of course; he prefers to have Christian subjects written in the dignified manner of antiquity. But he is convinced that, had Christ been known to the great writers of antiquity, they would have celebrated Him in the way modern Christians should. Here in this fin de siècle literary theoretician is the spirit of a reconciliation between antiquity and Christianity of the kind found in the Hercule of Florimond de Raemond and of Rotrou, a third of a century later. Within that third of a century at least some of the libertins, finally attacked by Pascal and others, felt it possible to forge a Christian epicureanism. Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), whom many consider the fountainhead of libertinage, was and remained a Catholic priest. Even while Jansenius and Saint Cyran were shaping the positions that would inform Bossuet’s much later strictures on the theater, other pious clerics found it possible to reconcile Word and World with an “optimisme catholique.” Contrasting this spirit to the “sévérité protestante” in the period 1580-1625, René Bady finds its best representative in Le Père Richeome, the author of a Christian treatise on death:

Certes le P. Richeome peut être dit optimiste. L’admiration, l’enthousiasme, dont nous avons déjà vu plusieurs auteurs témoigner à l’égard de l’homme considéré comme le chef-d’œuvre de la création, atteignent chez lui à leur comble. A son tour il loue la beauté du corps humain et montre la convenance symbolique qui existe, selon lui, entre toutes les parties et les différentes facultés de l’âme.

Death is not real to this exegete of the theology of salvation. But life is no less real to this same cleric, for whom “en la face reluit spécialement l’image de l’âme.” This concept of the human face as analogue of the beatific vision is one that recurs frequently in Rotrou. The dramatist gives artistic expression to a liberal, ecumenical theology represented by several contemporary prelates. Their influence has been seen by a learned historian as one of the causes for reformist movements like Jansen-
ism, L’Oratoire, and the “cabale des dévots.” Within the church itself, writes Alfred Rébelliau, several prelates, “doctes et beaux esprits, fils de la Renaissance, séduits par les succès de Pierre Charron et de Saint François de Sales, s’ingéniaient à ‘humaniser’ la théologie, l’apologetique et la controverse, ou bien, à l’exemple de l’oratorien Baronius et des jésuites Bellarmin et Sirmond, s’enforçaient dans l’érudition ecclésiastique.”

Throughout the century others protest the ready reconciliation of the natural order and its Author. Nor are the protesters all Protestants. True, like many of his Catholic contemporaries, the dramatist himself often defines Sacrement in the limited sense reported by Furetière in his famous dictionary toward the end of the century: “Sacrement, se prend quelquefois absolument pour le mariage.” But in the very years that Rotrou’s company of fictional characters were compromising the divine and human orders by limiting “le sacrement” in this sense, La Compagnie du Saint Sacrement was applying its own uncompromising spirituality to the human order. As Rébelliau has shown, this secret society of both lay and ecclesiastical membership, active from 1627 to 1666, devoted itself to acts of “amour et charité” in the name of sacramental faith. For this “company” le sacrement was the Holy Eucharist, and the Society’s spiritual sacramentalism can be grasped in the very fact of its secrecy. Under certain conditions not even the Eucharist itself was to be visible, according to one of its precepts. Whether from piety or caution, the stamp of such devout thought left its mark on the classical writers of the second half of the century. Pointing to Racine’s pious renunciation of Bérénice, Bossuet comes close to proscribing the theater itself. And though at some remove from the “dévots,” Boileau found himself at quite a remove in his Art poétique from the conciliatory proposals of Vauquelin three-quarters of a century earlier: “[Et] fabuleux Chrestiens, n’allons point dans nos songes/ Du Dieu de vérité, faire un Dieu de mensonges.”

We continue to be affected by this classical bias. Even philosophical critics who protest the separation of art and life have been ready to accept the post-Reformational separation of art
and the "other life." Our critical autonomy from religious frames of reference for literature is post-Reformational. Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Marxism, Existentialism, Freudianism, all have seemed legitimate references for elucidating the literature of seventeenth-century France. But many students of the period hesitate to adopt a religious reference. It is as if Pascal, Racine, and other writers of the period wrote anywhere but within the religious context of their own times. It is as if, in returning to the mythological religion of antiquity resuscitated by "humanism," dramatists were attempting to rekindle the fires of paganism. If so, they were not alone. As the Pascal of Les Lettres provinciales knew, their pagan spirit was easily matched by that of theologians of more than one order. I make this observation not to take sides with Pascal and his cosectarians but to show that in "Christianizing" Hercule and the Menaechmi, for example, Rotrou finds himself at one with some of his religious cosectarians who speak from realms other than art. Pascal and his partisans might find that Rotrou overstates, in both time and space, the catholicity of the Christian view that this world is a part of God's goodness. But these "catholic" viewers might also find that Pascal in his views understates Christianity itself: the religion of mercy that redeems fallen man.

These humanist universals as retrieved in a Christian context enable us to understand Rotrou's theater. Not that these universals cut him off from antiquity. His plural gods look in two directions. Rotrou uses the plural dieux instead of Dieu because of the growing pressure of the bienséances that proscribed the use of the singular even in a subject where the setting is presumably Christian. To us the convention seems empty; we read the detour sign as if it directed us away from, instead of toward, something. But it directs us toward Rotrou's religious present, first of all. Between the Edict of 1548 and Bossuet's Maximes of 1694, many of the greatest playwrights turned directly to the Judeo-Christian tradition: Garnier (Les Juifves); Corneille (Polyeucte, Théodore); Rotrou (Le Véritable Saint Genest); Racine (Esther, Athalie). Rotrou also turns specifically, but less programmatically, to the dramatic integration of the
Christian God in other “secular” plays: Bélissaire and La Sœur. Parlementary edicts, sacerdotal strictures, and secular bienséances do not divide the artistic sensibility. In his entire theater Rotrou is often profoundly preoccupied with the relation between the human and divine. At times the playwright exceeds the doctrinal bounds of the sacramental theology whose premises inform his work both explicitly and implicitly. But in this and other excesses, he only shows the internal tension of that theology itself. His plural gods look back to Christian as well as to pagan antiquity. In his theater the concepts of sacrament and sacrilege show the continuity as well as the disparity between Christianity and the classical heritage retrieved by humanism.

This continuity is especially difficult to grasp in what Gabriel Vahanian calls our “Post-Christian era of the death of God.” According to Vahanian, we are past the Christian era when “not only theologically and philosophically, but culturally as well, the reality of God was taken for granted and was the starting point of both reflection and action.” One may not agree with Vahanian that “every culture rises from a ‘substratum of religiosity’.” However, as the historian Pierre Chaunu has maintained, seventeenth-century culture certainly remained profoundly religious. “Le XVIIe siècle, comme tous les grands siècles,” he writes, “est fondamentalement théologique. . . Tout le siècle cherche Dieu.” The fundamentally theological character of the century gives a special resonance to what we have come to think of as “merely literary” or “dramatic” motifs and “poetic” conceits. Given the century’s religious substratum, in Rotrou terms like grâce, indulgence, pénitence, sacrilège, charmes, pieux office, divin visage, célestes attraits, etc., and motifs like the ascension into Heaven (Hercule and Iphigénie), résurrection (in too many plays to mention here), descentes aux enfers (L’Hypochondriaque and L’Innocente Infidélité) take added force from specifically theological uses of them in the period. In particular, the tension between sales (or lascifs) désirs and chastes désirs in almost every Rotrou play is “dramatic” in a virtually Christian sense. Now, for Christians who

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return to the history of the early church for guidelines, this means a special enmity for “la concupiscence de la chair.” In Rotrou’s time, within the Roman Catholic church itself such Christians were to be found chiefly among the Jansenists. Because Pascal’s greatest works, Les Lettres provinciales and Les Pensées, were written in the mid-1650’s, many literary scholars tend to situate Jansenism in the second half of the century. Yet, Jansenius himself, Saint Cyran, Arnauld, and the Pascal of the “affaire de Saint Ange” were active in the period of Rotrou’s career (1630-1650).

Sacramentalism, then, provides a basic philosophic framework for studying Rotrou’s theater. This does not mean that Rotrou’s work is a catechetical application of the decrees of the Council of Trent or of the doctrines of sacramental theology. Many plays of the first half of his career, in particular, exceed the most liberal interpretation of these sources. Thus, in Hercule mourant and Les Sosies, the playwright might be said to overstep the bounds. But this excess is best understood in light of both the literary and religious modes of the plays. From a literary point of view, the plays are “serious”—Les Sosies, in particular, is hardly the satirical play Molière made of the same motif. From a religious point of view, support for the immanentist theses of both plays can be found within the religious community of Rotrou’s time (a point I have already anticipated in the case of Hercule mourant). We may thus wonder if Rotrou really does overstep the bounds. Similarly, at his most transcendental moments—for example, Bélissaire and Le Véritable Saint Genest—Rotrou clings to the immanentist verities of his early theater. This, too, is in keeping with a literary-religious tradition that accommodated the things of this life with those of the afterlife.

Through the framework of sacramental theology, we can probe more profoundly into the theater of Rotrou—its ideological position, psychological mood, and artistic practice. In a purely religious context, that framework was being severely challenged from within by an otherworldly emphasis and from
without by a very worldly emphasis. In a purely literary context, the framework was being challenged by a classicizing tendency. However, in Rotrou's time these challenges themselves point to the continuing vitality of the accommodation between the religious and literary traditions. For the dramatist and many of his greatest contemporaries, the virtually Christian motifs I study in detail in this book were accepted intuitively, as it were. This is not to deny in these artists a keen sense of this world in all its naturalness. However, it is to remind us that for them, the natural was what might be called "incarnational" rather than "naturalistic." They viewed the natural in light of the heritage bequeathed by Christ and continued in the works of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Francis de Sales.

As unobtrusively, as pertinently, as respectfully as possible, I have drawn on this religious heritage to illuminate the theater of Jean Rotrou. In the same spirit, I have also drawn on his theater to illuminate the heritage itself.

Both illuminations emerge from a long series of plays that (1) are uneven in quality and (2) show a definite change of emphasis, if not of fundamental idea, with respect to the key motifs of immanence and transcendence. I have, therefore, selected only certain plays for extensive analysis, giving brief commentary on the others in the notes. I have also divided the plays according to major religious tendencies as follows (title in capital letters indicates that the play is the subject of extended analysis):

I. LE VÉRITABLE SAINT GENEST

II. L'Hypocondriaque, LA BAGUE DE L'OUBLI, LES Ménechmes, LA CÉLIANE, LA DIANE, LA PÉLERINE AMOUREUSE, AMÉLIE, LA CÉLIMÈNE, LE FILANDRE, L'HEUREUSE CONSTANCE, LES OCCASIONS PERDUES, LA DORISTÉE, HERCULE MOURANT, L'HEUREUX NAUFRAGE, L'INNOCENTE INFIDÉLITÉ, CLORINDE,
For plays analyzed at length, I have provided a résumé of the plot in a footnote at the outset of the analysis. (The reference indexes in the text followed by R alert the reader that the note contains the résumé.) Those familiar with Rotrou scholarship will see that, except for *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, *Crisante*, and *La Sœur*, I have followed the chronology established by Lancaster.23 (The order in Viollet-le-Duc’s edition of the complete theater is extremely erroneous, according to Lancaster.) The changes in position, especially for *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, should be explained here, since they bear in general on any approach to all of Rotrou and, in particular, on the approach I have adopted.

Any scholar attempting a comprehensive interpretation of Rotrou’s entire theater must confront the “respectful neglect” of most of the plays. Moreover, even within the trio of plays for which he is best known, *Le Véritable Saint Genest* is set apart for many scholars. It is a “sacred” play, whereas *Venceslas* and *Cosroès* are “profane.” This distinction seems invalid, reflecting, as I have indicated, certain preconceptions of our “post-Christian era.” Furthermore, in specifically religious terms, though the play on the converted actor is transcendentalist in tendency, it does show Rotrou clinging to the immanentist notions of his supposedly “profane” theater. Therefore, because of its probable familiarity to most of my readers, and because of its typical interplay of major themes, I have began with *Le Véritable Saint Genest*.

In discussing this play as well as all other plays, I have used
the terms the plays themselves provide in deriving religious concepts. Nevertheless, where especially appropriate, I have referred to the religious climate outside Rotrou’s theater. Also, for readers interested in special aspects of the religious themes involved, I have included an appendix giving a brief etymological and historical review of such key notions as sacrament and sacrilege.

The changes in position of Crisante and La Sœur are also related to my study of themes. The changes are not intended as corrections of Lancaster’s generally shrewd solutions of the problems in dating Rotrou’s works. As I explain in greater detail at appropriate points, the changes are relatively slight from a historical point of view. However, thematically they are of some significance: the transcendentalist Crisante is surrounded in time by immanentist plays. With some reservations, a similar relation applies to La Sœur. This time, however, the comedy’s immanentist tendency is at odds with the transcendentalist spirit of Bélissaire and Le Véritable Saint Genest, which precede it among the major plays I analyze at length. In varying degrees these thematic swings, from play to play, are to be found throughout Rotrou’s theater. However, these minor swings are part of a more significant major swing. Rotrou’s theater can be divided into three major moments: an early period of immanence, a later period of transcendence, and a final period of ambivalence in which we find the playwright yearning for the immanentist verities of his youth. Because Crisante seems to me to anticipate the theater of transcendence and La Sœur anticipates Rotrou’s final ambivalence, I have discussed them in the appropriate, coherent context of plays that they anticipate.

For purposes of this study, I consider Dom Lope de Cardone Rotrou’s last play. I do not discuss L’Illustre Amazone, attributed to him by some editors and critics. Nor have I discussed Rotrou’s collaboration as one of Les Cinq Auteurs of La Comédie des Tuileries and L’Aveugle de Smyrne. I have illustrated some themes through Rotrou’s non-dramatic poetry, but have not been concerned with his verse as such here or in
the plays. I have been somewhat more concerned with dramatic form. In this connection, I have profited especially from the work of Lancaster, Schérer, and Knutson.\textsuperscript{23}

Rotrou is an important writer who has lived too long in the critical shadow of his great contemporaries. An effort to shed an "independent" light on all of his work is not without its risks. Some readers may feel that my choice of major plays should have been different. However, I trust all readers will find that the coherent vision I study in these plays will compel a long-overdue return to Rotrou.