ONE of the most ribald of marriage jokes—wife-swapping—lies at the heart of La Sœur, Comédie (1645). The play thus might seem a throwback to the extreme immanentism of certain early plays. Some support for this view can be found in Anselme’s misgivings about the affection between his children:

Ils en usent pour Noie avec trop de licence;
Et quoique leur amour ait beaucoup d’innocence,
Je ne puis approuver ces baisers assidus
D’une ardeur mutuelle et donnés et rendus,
Ces discours à l’oreille et ces tendres caresses,
Plus dignes passe-temps d’Amants et de Maîtresses,
Qu’ils ne sont, en effet, d’un Frère et d’une Sœur.

(II.2)

However, the “trop de licence” does not prevail here. Rather, sensual license is set in a specifically Christian context in such a way as to suggest that Rotrou, at least momentarily, recaptures the sacramental equilibrium of plays like La Pèlerine amoureuse.

This is apparent in the caresses to which the father improperly objects here. This affection is innocent because it is between a man and woman who love each other legitimately, with the “license” of chaste desire. “Volupté” is not very prominent in the relations between husband and wife. If anything, they behave throughout the play with the kind of affection they falsely claim...
for each other at the outset: “amitié” between brother and sister. The love of Lélie and Sophie for each other is a sublime love. Lélie could not have been first attracted by a more chaste part of her beautiful body: “... La table fut couverte/ Par des mains dont amour avait joué ma perte”; these hands belong to one whose unhappy fate is “infidèle à son sang” (I.3). The very name of this noble but poor creature is a sign of her divine purity: Sophie. Lest we think her wisdom is as secular as the ingenuity of Ergaste, another line of the play reassures us of its Christian character: “Mais dans Sainte Sophie où les Chrétiens s’assemblent” (III.2), says Géronte, by way of telling his brother that he knows Lélie has not been to Constantinople.

This line reminds us that, like Bélissaire before it and Le Véritable Saint Genest right after it, La Sœur is specifically Christian in setting as well as in theme. That the strain of Christian sacramental theology is sacramental is brought out repeatedly. Paradoxically enough, it is brought out even in connection with the hoary joke about wife-swapping. Eraste is shocked at the idea of marrying without possessing his beloved or of possessing her without marrying her. In Ergaste’s plan, Eroxène’s lover fears “d’un double adultère,/ De ce lieu sacré profaner le mystère” (I.3; italics added). However, his orthodox view of the sacrament yields to Ergaste’s more flexible doctrine. A friend can disguise himself (as a priest, presumably) and then, before the assembled parents, officiate at the wedding of Lélie and Eroxène, and of Eraste and Sophie, as a cover-up for the nightly wedding in the flesh of different partners. Naturally, the familiar doctrine of just intentions, of good ends over bad means, justifies the ruse: it is taken not to satisfy “sales désirs” but out of fidelity to one’s first love. Ergaste’s reasoning recalls the Jesuit concept of “intentionalism,” soon to be condemned by Pascal in Les Lettres provinciales. Listening to Ergaste, one can understand why Jansenists and other dévots of the time opposed the idea of frequent Communion. True, sin may not have been a perdurable state of being for them, and the most conservative may have believed that the faithful could be prepared for frequent Communion by the sacrament of penance. Nevertheless, there was
always the danger of sinning by relying on the very high probability of having that sin absolved later. Ergaste's "casuistry" is amusing and ingenious, of course. This is a comedy. However, in the response of the young people, in their sincere wish to respect the sacramental character of marriage itself, we see the spiritualist emphases of Rotrou's more recent tragedies.

Ergaste's intentions nourish a legitimate hope for the happy life here on earth. The high point of the valet's scheming is his deception of Anselme in speaking a made-up Turkish. Coming from Rotrou's model, Della Porta's La Sorella, this scene has long been considered the source of the scene of Turkish tomfoolery in Le Bourgeois gentilhomme. The scheming translator is unable to speak the language he translates, but convinces his victim that "le langage Turc dit beaucoup en deux mots" (II.4). In the situation, Ergaste apparently needs no special grace to achieve his just ends of preserving Lélie's love. "Je ne sais quel génie, en ce besoin extrême,/ Me dictait un jargon que j'ignore moi-même" (IV.1), he tells Lélie. The mysterious force ("Je ne sais quel génie") directing such events in previous plays has acted like divine grace. And in spite of the "sacrilegious" implications of his false-marriage scheme, we might say that grace inheres in Ergaste's genius here. Even more than Le Véritable Saint Genest, La Sœur stresses both human ability and human responsibility in the co-operative act by which man achieves the good.

The stress on human action is closely tied to the idea of acting in the aesthetic as well as the ethical sense. Lélie presents his deception of his father to Eraste and Ergaste as a play. "J'ai fait mon personnage en cette Comédie," he says, but now he needs Ergaste to help him carry on. "Pour ce qui reste, il faut qu'-Ergaste y remédie" (1.3). In keeping with the theatrical motif of all this scheming, we may say that Ergaste is a sort of play doctor.

Not everybody is pleased with his ministrations. When Lydie overhears Eraste seek Aurélie in marriage, she cannot know he is playing a part in Ergaste's play. But she does think he's been making her mistress play a part in a very different play. "O noire
perfidie!” she cries, “ô siècle, ô monde immonde!/ Source en
crimes, en fraudes, en misères féconde!/ Vil théâtre des jeux et
du sort et du temps” (II.7). When Lélie spoke earlier of his
“comédie,” he used the term as it was used in the period: gen-
erically for play. Envisaging a happy ending for himself, his
term might also have been used specifically to designate a com-
edy. On the other hand, Lydie looks on the play as a tragedy
because she does not realize that she is watching a pretense. We
should thus be wary of assuming that we have a coalescence of
planes here. Even Lydie’s reference to “théâtre” shows that her
aesthetic is exactly that of Eraste, who is only playing a part.
She uses theater as a metaphor for illusion, for unreality, for pre-
tense. Compared to true reality, the world is like a play. Reality
for her is now spiritual and transcendental; like many of Ro-
trou’s recent disappointed believers, she would reject this world,
which is subject to fate and time. Like Bélissaire, she links for-
tune to the opposite sex (in this case, obviously, a man): “Un
sexe . . . plus changeant que le sort, moins stable que la roue”
(II.7).

When Ergaste’s false datum breaks down in subsequent de-
velopments, it appears that we are restored to an initial A por-
tion, whose real datum is that of a pretense; it is as if the struc-
ture of the play were B-A-B. When Constance identifies Sophie
as Aurélie, she is not merely seeking to please her son: she is
really welcoming the person she had raised as her daughter!
Constance is less disturbed by this development than her son
because, as she tells him, “Vous n’avez point péché, l’erreur n’est
pas un crime/ Et n’a point fait outrage à ses chastes appas”
(IV.6). Chastity is all a matter of intention. Even when con-
fronted with civilization’s primordially horrifying crime, incest,
the doctrine of intention remains unshaken.

It does so, at least, in this mother whose own intentions have
remained constantly good. The play on her name is even more
persistent than that on Sophie’s. The mother’s constancy has
been that of an unshakable faith in Heaven’s goodness. Heaven
shows that Ergaste’s play had to stop so that Heaven could make
manifest the real A portions of its play. In these, to the comfort
of Lydie among others, Eraste does love Aurélie. Unwittingly, Ergaste has concocted a feint whose false terms turn out to be true: Lélie is to wed Eroxène, the girl he loves as Sophie but calls Aurélie; Eraste is to wed Aurélie, the girl he loves as Eroxène. The coalescence of Ergaste’s and Heaven’s plans suggests a meshing of the planes as in Bélissaire. Nothing could be further from the truth. The aesthetic resemblance is even more crucial in the second half of Rotrou’s theater than in the first. Emphasizing the spiritual, this play, more than any other before Le Véritable Saint Genest, insists on the ethical aspects of pretense not by dissolving planes of real being and false being but by insisting on their distinction.

Now, that Sophie really is Eroxène is not brought out until the beginning of the last act. This revelation makes it seem that we have been viewing reality when we have been viewing falsity. Yet, Sophie has not become Eroxène—she is and always has been Eroxène. In the beginning was the word; true reality succeeds seeming reality. All play-acting comes to an end. Orgye penitently reflects on the meaning of the play in which he has been so long an actor. Its first act was written by his brother, Pamphile, but he collaborated in its composition by carrying it out for the sake of money at the expense of sacred love. “Maudite passion,” he says, “dangereuse colère . . . Qui, dessus la raison, donnez l’empire aux sens/ Je crains bien de t’avoir trop crue à mes dépens” (V.3). His penance is obviously not perfect in its contrition; it is an act of attrition: the sinner fears either the loss of material good or the suffering of material punishment. But, as we know, sacramentally speaking, attrition is valid. More importantly in the context, this penance occurs “freely,” not in a state of special grace but in a state of actual grace.

These doctrines of Christian theology are rendered specifically in this play. Reminding him that they are old and thus on the point of dying to this world, Anselme warns Orgye that when dead,

. . . en ce compte exact que nous rendons à Dieu,
La restitution tiendra le premier lieu;
THE THEATER OF JEAN ROTROU

Par elle seulement notre offence s'efface,
Et sans elle un pécheur ne trouve point de grâce.

(V.4)

Like his counterpart in Rotrou's Italian model, Orgye is impatient with such sermons; for him "grace" and "restitution" have distinctly material meanings. But in Rotrou's considerably expanded adaptation of this scene, material considerations are subordinated to Anselme's theology of sacramental penance:

Rendez grâces au Ciel, dont le soin provident,
De cet énorme Hymen divertit l'accident.
Car, quoique vous n'ayez qu'avec répugnance
Consenti cette injuste et funeste alliance,
Vous n'encouririez pas moins un supplice éternel:
Qui pèche, y répugnant, en est plus criminel.

(V.4; italics added)

Unlike the "incestuous" Lélie, Orgye cannot be held blameless for acting in error: the same doctrine of intention inculpates him, for his intention was both real and sinful. Sin is no longer a folie, a deprivation of full being for which Heaven itself is held responsible. The compulsion to do good is as strong as ever, as we see in the "rational" inclination to love each other both in young lovers (Lélie-Sophie, Eraste-"Eroxène") and old lovers (Anselme-Constance, Ergaste-Lydie). But, as Orgye shows, man is responsible for his "rational inclinations"; he can misuse his freedom by sinning.

Through grace, man is redeemed from sin. The last act of this play is a paean to divine grace. The scenes of Orgye's penitential grace yield to the still happier grace of Aurélie's "resurrection" in Sophie and the consequent prospect of the grace of the sacrament of "heureux mariage." Even Orgye is caught up in this communal grace. "Je demande une grâce," Constance says to him; "elle vous est acquise," he replies swiftly and succinctly. The "grâce" in question is the marriage of his true niece, brought
back from captivity and thus bound to cost him 8,000 ducats. He does not flinch at the prospect; his contrition is now perfect; he has made full restitution and become one of this heaven-blessed family.

In *La Sœur* that character who has so often been left unwed and unwanted in Rotrou has become a cynosure of the utmost sacramental significance. Thanks to "un miracle inoui," a sister at last participates fully in the eschatological satisfactions of a universe whose sacramental purity is so well expressed by the very terms of her participation: "... femme et sœur légitime" (V.5).

Equally famous, if not in fact more so, than *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, *Venceslas, Tragi-comédie* (1647), also considered by many critics as Rotrou's finest play. Calling attention to its superb portraits of the royal family, critics liken its author to Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine, and Sophocles, especially in his psychological penetration into the character of the aging king and his restive older son. On the basis of the confrontation between these two in the play's first scene, Voltaire came to his somewhat left-handed praise of Rotrou: that in just fourteen years Corneille had become the master of his own former master in dramatic art. And though they are repelled by what they see as Rotrou's immorality in showing vice rewarded, other eighteenth-century critics are similarly drawn to this play. For most, Rotrou seems at last to break with the jejune psychology of swooning généreux and faultless females. Thus, in his paradoxical view of Ladislas as a detached, insipid spinner of proverbs and preciosities, Fréron stands apart from such admiring critics as La Harpe and Marmontel.

In the very act of objecting to the contradictoriness of Ladislas' character, Marmontel unwittingly points to the inwardness of that character which has so fascinated later critics. Saint-Marc Girardin finds Rotrou as free of his Spanish model in characterization as Crane and especially Lancaster later find him in his dramaturgy. Contrasting Rotrou's play with its model, Rojas' *No hay ser padre siendo rey*, the earlier critic finds in the
expression of jealousy in the two plays the key to the difference between the Spanish and the French theaters. Based less fully on “le sentiment de l’honneur,” the French theater “n’a pas sur­tout dans la jalousie cette inflexibilité vindicative qui est propre au théâtre espagnol. Les héros et les héroïnes de la jalousie française font volontiers le mal qui les venge, mais ils ressentent surtout le mal qui les tourmentent; ils appartiennent plus encore à la douleur qu’à la vengeance.” François Guizot comes to a similar formulation: “Corneille . . . avait peint l’amour combattu par le devoir; mais on n’avait pas encore vu au théâtre l’amour combattu par lui-même, tourmenté de sa propre vio­lence, et tantôt suppliant, tantôt furieux, se manifestant par l’excès de la colère comme par l’excès de la tendresse.” The con­cepts obviously bring Rotrou closer to Racine in the very act of explicitly dissociating him from Corneille. Yet, as we know, Guizot is unjust to Rotrou in saying that we had not seen such “Racinian” complexities in his theater before Venceslas.

If most critics are agreed on the psychological richness of Rotrou’s portraits in this play, they are considerably less agreed on their dramatic and moral significance. Well before Mme de Pompadour asked Marmontel to “rectify” the vices of this fasci­nating dramatic heritage, the Mercure de France stated the view informing Marmontel’s revision of the play: “. . . Dans quelle estime doit être un Prince à qui on impute tous les crimes que la nuit a dérobés aux regards du Public? De pareils caractères ont­ils jamais du être dans une Tragédie? Mais dans le reste de la Piece, les discours et les actions de ce monstre vont plus loin que le portrait.” Yet, from the eighteenth century well into our own, this view of the play has been argued. Curiously enough, it is Marmontel who makes us aware of the relative “goodness” of Ladislas. Because the prince is at the center of action, because he is to mount the scaffold only to be saved by his father at the last minute, says Marmontel, he ought to be of a character to win our sympathy. The reviser thus relieves Rotrou’s text of the “traits odieux” interfering with this interpretation. In and of itself, the procedure could be a naïve disfiguration of the play. Somewhat inconsistently, Marmontel then goes on to change the
structure by having Cassandre punish Ladislas at the end. Later critics have found less discrepancy between original text and structure. Most recently, Mlle Van Baelen has shrewdly wondered if the text of the play before the attack on Alexandre really justifies the traditional maligning of Ladislas’ character. Violent he certainly is, the critic says, but “de quels crimes est-il vraiment coupable”? Ambitious as he is, Mlle Van Baelen goes on, Ladislas nevertheless does not seize power. At most, the text shows him more accused than actually guilty of “les incartades d’un homme jeune et passionné, impatient de vivre et d’agir.”

Mlle Van Baelen’s insight is capital: after nearly three centuries of trying to understand Ladislas out of context, the best place to begin to understand this first angry young man of the French theater is within the context of the play itself and of Rotrou’s theater.

In Venceslas Rotrou weaves many of his obsessive themes in a dramatic form seeming to restore the sacramental equilibrium of his earliest plays. The most recent editor of the play, W. Leiner, follows earlier commentators in pointing to Rotrou’s long-standing prepossession with the very name of the aged king: Venceslas was also the name of the father of King Alfonce in Rotrou’s second play of record, La Bague de l’oubli. As I said of that royal hero, his sacrilegious surrender to “sales désirs” made him a worthy precursor of Rotrou’s most famous lecher, Ladislas. Again, in his second play, Rotrou also showed an early preoccupation with the theme of generational conflict. On at least one of the grounds here dividing Venceslas and Ladislas, the duke of the early play reproached his daughter for a surrender to carnality. The confrontation of father and children has also been a key motif in numerous comedies and tragicomedies (although on somewhat different grounds—usually avarice). Again, on the basis of family relations in many previous plays, Lanson might have written of Rotrou that “Racine l’a beaucoup lu.” Ladislas and Alexandre are “frères ennemis”: like the warring brothers of Antigone, one is a higher self of spirituality and the other a lower self of carnality or worldiness. Again, in the relations between Alexandre and Fédéric, Rotrou
repeats the motif of plays as early as *La Céliane* or as recent as *Bélissaire*: the friends or even master and "slave" are in a bond of *amitié*; they are spiritual twins who vie with one another in *amitié*. Again, many have found echoes of Corneille in Cassandre's plea for Ladislas' head and her supposed eventual acceptance of him "in time." I would add that the "combat amical" of Fédéric and Ladislas resembles that between Antiochus and Séleucus in *Rodogune*. In that play Corneille also gives a defense of "les nœuds secrets," a concept of irrational love very like the concept of "secrets appas" that leads the Théodore of Venceslas to defend her "irrational" choice of Fédéric. In the very names of Théodore and Léonor, Leiner finds still further evidence of Corneille's imprint on Rotrou. Yet, Rotrou's recent use of the name Théodore (*Bélissaire*) and Léonor (*Dom Bernard de Cabrère*) as well as the many motifs I have listed above show that Rotrou is drawing very largely on himself here.

His structural model is also found in his own practice. This observation is perhaps surprising in view of the apparent break with what Knutson calls the rule of "no surprise" in Rotrou. That rule seems suspended in the most famous and perhaps most widely admired scene of this or any other play of Rotrou: Ladislas' discovery that he has actually slain not Fédéric but his younger brother. In a striking departure from the play he imitated, Rotrou is said to have concealed from the audience and characters onstage the identity of the victim until it is announced by Cassandre. Yet, we may wonder if the break with previous practice is so apparent here. Details of language and aspects of the dramatic development indicate that when Ladislas first appears at this point, the audience knows that the real victim has, in fact, been Alexandre. However, the kind of knowledge in question does not provide information. That kind of knowledge is of the head, and in this play, Rotrou does not provide so much of it to his audience as he usually does. Nevertheless, he provides far more crucial knowledge here: of the heart. The heart tells the head that it is bound to be wrong, especially in heeding what is the overheard. Knowledge of the head creates a suspense based on curiosity and excitement, the emotional cli-
mate appropriate to tragicomedy. Knowledge of the heart creates a suspense—or, more accurately, an apprehension—based on anxiety and fear, the emotional climate appropriate to tragedy. Rotrou creates this climate masterfully in this scene. When the old king cries “O Dieu! L’Infant est mort!” (IV.6), his outburst tells us what we did not want to know but already felt in our “heart of hearts.”

This dire news was as bound to be actualized in this moment as happy news was bound to be actualized in the resurrection scenes of earlier plays. Symbolically, in seeking to kill Fédéric, Ladislas is killing his brother: the lower self is killing the higher self—the carnal destroys the spiritual. This is a rueful inversion of the twin motif, for the king-to-be (builder of cities, in the myth) slays the spiritual part in which the civilizing resources of the “self” are said to lie. But the evidence for apprehension concerning the real identity of Ladislas’ victim is both implicit in the mythical “structure” of the play and dramatically explicit as well. As early as the first scene, Ladislas threatens not only his spiritual frère-ennemi, Fédéric, but his biological frère-ennemi as well: “Pour mon frère, après son insolence,/ Je ne puis m’emporter à trop de violence” (I.1). Indeed, doubly enraged by his brother’s support of Fédéric and open challenge to himself, Ladislas ominously portends the key event of the play by specifically setting himself against his brother in a mood of bloody vengeance:

Mon frère contre moi veut prendre sa querelle,
Et bien plus, sur l’épée ose porter la main!
Hal! j’atteste du Ciel le pouvoir souverain,
Qu’avant que le soleil, sorti du sein de l’onde,
Ote et rende le jour aux deux moitiés du monde,
Il m’ôtera le sang qu’il n’a pas respecté,
Ou me fera raison de cette indignité.

(I.1)

This threat of fratricide broods over the entire play. The possibility of its realization is made only greater by the very scheme
in which Fédéric and Alexandre have joined forces to frustrate the author of the threat. These spiritual frères-amis are worthy successors of such priggishly pure heroes as Dom Bernard and Bélissaire from Rotrou's recent plays and Ménechme-Sosicle from his early plays. In the political structure Fédéric, like Bernard, is of greater prowess but less station than Alexandre, the counterpart of Lope here. Again, when Fédéric reproaches his royal friend for thinking him capable of really wanting his friend's mistress, we see that he is loyal both as généreux and chaste lover. Like Lope, Alexandre is intimidated before the king, but the Bernard-like Fédéric speaks up—deferentially, to be sure, but articulately (except when he is interrupted by the angry Ladislas). He has concocted a "dessein" of traded identities because he must suffer the vice of his virtue: he is a perfect généreux, compelled to secret action only because the subterfuge "obeys" the desires of his royal friend. Like Genest, Fédéric feels compelled to drop the subterfuge in the name of truth, and he comes to this decision in a verse strikingly like Genest's: "Il faut lever le masque et t'ouvrir ma pensée." The duke urges Alexandre to speak up, to show himself for what he is: "De l'artifice enfin, il faut bannir l'usage,/ Il faut lever le masque, et montrer le visage" (III.2; italics added).

The advice not only recalls Genest's strictures against fiction, it also recalls that for Ladislas in theory, and for Venceslas in practice, kingship implies the opposite. He had learned from his father, Ladislas said to the latter earlier, that the art of governing meant: "Mettre bien la franchise et la feinte en usage,/ Porter tantôt un masque et tantôt un visage" (I.1; italics added). The parallel between the line of Fédéric and Genest reminds us that pensée and visage are in a virtually sacramental relationship: the face is the sign of thought, and what is signified is far more important than the sign. But for the king and his older son, the two are in a sacrilegious relationship: the face is at times but a mask of thought. Théodore, too, shows herself to be of a kind as well as kin in the matter: she conceals her love for Fédéric. In doing so she is more pathetic than blameworthy, somewhat like earlier queens in Rotrou. But she is not alto-
gether blameless. In importuning Cassandre to accede to Ladislas, she is using the tenets of générosité to satisfy a private rather than a public motive.

In his adolescent hesitation, Alexandre, too, shows himself a part of this family. He and Cassandre reflect a suspicion of the carnal itself that predates even Rotrou’s most overtly religious play. Cassandre rejects the reformed Ladislas because he first wanted her as an object of what the old king calls his “folles amours” (I.1) and what she calls his “sales plaisirs” (II.1). According to Alexandre, in his proposal of marriage, Ladislas only follows this unworthy desire: “On peut voir l’avenir dans les choses passées/ Et juger aisément qu’il tend à son honneur,/ Sous ces offres d’hymen un appas suborneur” (III.6). Obviously, for Alexandre and his beloved, marriage is of the utmost spiritual significance (as it was for the converted Adrien in Rotrou’s famous play-within-a-play). Yet, the young prince cannot follow his fellow actor’s advice here to “lift the mask,” and declare his love for Cassandre under his own name. In this concealment lies still further dramatic foreordination of his death at his brother’s hand. Names and other “conventions” point to essential realities for these généreux, and this leads logically to the ethic of fully open and fair relations with everybody. Therefore, concealment is wrong according to the codes by which the lovers claim to live: générosité and chaste desire. Their love does not violate a principle concerning rank and station. To Ladislas, Cassandre even proudly asserts of the man she loves: “... Son sang ne doit rien au sang dont vous sortez” (II.2).

As the language reminds us, her lover’s blood is of that very blood Ladislas threatened to shed before the day was out. And as that day comes to an end, we might well remember that still purer figures have suffered unjust death in Rotrou’s theater (e.g., Bélisaire).

In the notion of the day’s end, we have the most explicit evidence leading us to know the real identity of Ladislas’ victim. Warned by the duke of Ladislas’ impetuosity, Alexandre finally decides to put aside “les droits de la nature” in order to commit himself totally to “amour.” Love is obviously the highest law
for these lovers. Chaste desire tends to place Heaven in a transcendental relation to the natural law of family loyalty. The transcendence is not so absolute as in other cases in Rotrou, of course, for Alexandre does show that the world is of some value. Through its forms, one shows one's spirituality and so, "Je prends loi de Cassandre, épousons dès ce soir (III.2; italics added). He still hesitates, however, asking the duke to continue to deceive ("trompons") everybody else for a few more days "jusqu'à ses domestiques." This allusion to Cassandre's servants satisfies vraisemblance even as it offends the bienséances: it explains why the duke would be within Cassandre's palace in the dark of night, offending the strict proprieties by which we would expect so pure a princess to live. Yet, the allusion to a wedding in the flesh that very night must weigh equally for the attentive spectator. Its significance weighs even more heavily when it is reiterated in the next scene. Cassandre emerges from Théodore's room in great distress because of the princess' wish that she accept Ladislas. To comfort her, Alexandre says even more decisively:

Coupons dès cette nuit tout accès à ses vœux,
Et voyez sans frayeur, quoi qu'il ose entreprendre,
Quand vous m'auriez commis une femme à défendre,
Et quand ouvertement en qualité d'époux,
Mon devoir m'enjoindra de répondre de vous.

(III.3; italics added)

These words will echo in the heart of the spectator, who later listens as Ladislas describes how he gained access to Cassandre's apartment in order to slay him who answers as the husband he had heard she had taken that very night. The night conceals more from Ladislas than it does from the troubled spectator. The latter's apprehension must only increase at the end of the scene when the duke makes still one more allusion to this night in which one brother's marriage will only push the other to a homicidal ardor: "Prévenez dès ce soir l'ardeur qui le transporte" (III.3; italics added).
Further premonitions of fratricide are less explicit, but no less significant. Dreams have always had high predictive value in Rotrou. Like Valérie's dream in *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, Théodore's turns out to have a truth that even she did not suspect. It is a brother's head she sees "flying off" at a murderous blow. Ladislas tells us that he knocked on Cassandre's door "au nom du Duc," and we remember that when we last saw the duke and Alexandre, they had resolved to abandon their exchange of names. Théodore's shock at this news may momentarily still the heart's gnawing knowledge that the victim is really someone else. The gnawing starts again with the arrival of the king. Once again, Venceslas broods on his declining years and declining power. He seems considerably less sure of himself than he has in previous scenes. The atmosphere of uncertainty impends dire events. Thus, Fédéric's sudden appearance does not reassure us as similar "resurrections" have in early Rotrou plays; it increases our apprehension of the truth. This becomes still more acute when Fédéric is followed by the plaintive Cassandre. She does not announce immediately the name of the victim, as one might expect given the horror of the crime. Instead, she demands justice first, reviewing in a long speech the quality of one brother as compared with the lack of qualities in the other. These "delaying" tactics on the part of the dramatist only constitute the finishing touch of all the delaying tactics which satisfy our apprehension that "O Dieu! L'Infant est mort!" Indeed, had we not been warned in our hearts that it was Alexandre and not Fédéric who was to die? Had not the assassin himself threatened to shed before the day was out not the blood of his rival but of his brother? The consequences of the mask worn by Fédéric-Alexandre have come to term at a familiar point in a Rotrou play. The dramatist is true to his usual dramaturgy in this crucial scene of revelation.

He is also true to it in the larger structure of the play. The deception by Ladislas and Fédéric is the false datum giving rise to the "illusory" developments of the B portion of this play. As in *Le Véritable Saint Genest* and almost every other play by Rotrou, the second, third, and fourth acts of the total play con-
stitute the middle portion of an A-B-A structure. Alexandre’s
death is undoubtedly gruesome, but the death of an innocent
victim of deception or error is not new in Rotrou, as both Crist-
ante and Bélisaire have shown.\textsuperscript{13} This particular resemblance
suggests that on either side of the B portion we might find A
portions in which death and murder are justified in the light of
a larger spiritual design. Looking at the end of the play, Morel
has already perceptively demurred from the persistent condem-
nation of Ladislas and the view that the play is perforce tragic:

Marmontel (et la plupart des commentateurs qui l’ont suivi)
trouvaient choquant que dans les derniers vers de la pièce La-
dislas exprimât son espoir de conquérir le cœur de Cassandre.
Il se méprenait sans doute sur la véritable nature du person-
nage, dont la générosité pleinement manifestée efface aux yeux
de Rotrou tous les crimes antérieurs. Il se méprenait aussi sur
la nature de cette pièce, qui, malgré les situations tragiques
qu’elle comprend, est une tragi-comédie.\textsuperscript{17}

Morel sees Ladislas’ ascension to the throne as “symboliquement
la résolution des conflits intérieur et extérieur auxquels le dé-
roulement de la pièce a fait assister le spectateur.”\textsuperscript{18} The ending
is perhaps not so clean-cut in its symbolism. Nevertheless,
Morel’s view of the symbolic value of the ending does corre-
spond to what the dramatist probably thought he was convey-
ing. In the process of relating the familiar B portions of the play
to the specific rule of “no surprise” in the canon, I have already
indicated many of the thematic constants giving weight to this
view. A close reading of the A portions of the familiar dramatic
structure lends even further weight to it. Let us look at the play
in those parts.

In the earliest verses of the play, Rotrou has begun to move
away from the transcendental theses of his most recent plays:

\begin{verbatim}
J'attends toujours du temps qu'il mûrisse le fruit
Que pour me succéder ma couche m'a produit;
Et je croyais, mon fils, votre mère immortelle,
Par le reste qu'en vous elle me laissa d'elle.
\end{verbatim}

(I.1)
Recent transcendental heroes (Genest, Bélissaire) renounced time altogether. But here, Rotrou’s aged king restates the view of time as rehabilitative, so central in his theater of immanence. Linked to this positive view of time is still another metaphorical notion from that theater: natural processes are evidences of the immanent divinity, actualizations of the fruit of full reason, of the potential lying in the seed of innate virtue. Still further, immortality is conceived not in terms of a transcendent realm to which the soul alone is transported but in the notion of generational continuity in the biological processes. In the king’s disappointment with his son for his purported lechery, so at variance with his mother’s goodness in beauty, we return to the premises of plays like La Pèlerine amoureuse. “Mais, hélas! ce portrait qu’elle s’était tracé,/ Perd beaucoup de son lustre et s’est effacé,” the king goes on. As in the plays from the theater of immanence, Rotrou seems undisturbed by the transcendental doubts on the value of art and images of nature uttered by Genest just before his death. The beatific vision of a good woman is a sign of grace inherent in the world of things and men. The concept is considerably less simplistic than it was in early plays, of course. Here, for example, Venceslas sees his wisdom as directly connected with the process of aging. In this aging, the son and others see signs of another “natural” consequence of being—not the growth but the loss of efficiency in natural faculties. The debate between father and son on this score even has certain cynical overtones to which I shall want to return in my final assessment of the symbolic significance of the total structure. But for the moment it is important to note that there is nothing irredeemably wicked about the son’s doubts about his father’s effectiveness as king.

Nor is there anything irredeemably wicked about the crimes with which he is charged. Mlle Van Baelen’s insight that, within the running time of the play itself, Ladislas is not guilty of any crimes is to the point. The critic overstates her case, perhaps, for the young prince has been guilty of lecherous desire in his initial desire for Cassandre. But like the “instinct” that drives many earlier unchaste lovers in Rotrou, his is not fatal. The
queen of *L’Innocente Infidélité* saw her royal fiancé’s instinct as the temporary and passing compulsions of youth. Here, too, the “instinct enragé qui meut ses passions” (III.7) is attributed to his youth. “Croyez-vous que le Prince en cet âge de feu,” Léonor begins, in trying to soothe the princess awakened by her dream, “Où le corps à l’esprit s’assujettit si peu. . . . ” She goes on to ask, “Cherchez-vous des clartés dans les nuits d’un jeune homme?” (IV.1). Well before this, the prince himself attributes his passion to his youth. “Ma jeunesse, d’abord, porta ma passion” (II.2), he pleads, having come before Cassandre in that spirit of repentance that has always redeemed faithless lovers in Rotrou. Telling Cassandre that he now seeks in her “une épouse et non une maîtresse,” he pleads further that she give herself “au repentir profond,/ Qui détestant mon crime, à vos pieds me confond” (II.2). Like the hero of *La Belle Alphèdre*, Ladislas begins the play with the reputation of a lecher; but very early in the action, on bended knee, he is redeemed of that charge. He repents and resolves henceforth to love Cassandre only as he should always have loved her—chastely and religiously:

> Car, enfin, si l’on pèche, adorant vos appas,
> Et si l’on ne vous plait qu’en ne vous aimant pas,
> Cette offence est un mal que je veux toujours faire,
> Et je consens plutôt à mourir qu’à vous plaire.

(II.2)

The sinner is not forbidden to worship, and none worship so spiritually as Rotrou’s reformed “sacrilèges.” His father’s most frequent term for his lecherous penchant is *caprice*, and, in fact, that penchant is no more than a passing whim as it turns out.

For Ladislas, Cassandre is finally more than a whim: she is as much his beatific vision as Théodore is Fédéric’s. This comes out especially in the spirit with which he seeks “punishment” for the death of his brother. Quite rightly, he argues that he could claim innocence of this crime. Like Constance in *La Sœur
when confronted with her son's presumed incest, the criminal claims, "Je pourrais . . . m'excuser sur l'erreur" (V.5; italics added). His sister adds that it was dark, besides. Again, as his infidelity through lust was rendered innocent by virtue of youth and repentance, so his fratricide is shown innocent by virtue of circumstances (the dark night) and his different intention. Intentionalism is a reasonable basis of justice in Rotrou's essentialistic ethic. I am aware of the dubiety of Ladislas' reasoning here on the evidence of the play itself. I might anticipate my conclusion to a certain extent by pointing out that his intentionalism and its implied notions of freedom are contradicted by Ladislas right after the crime itself: "De tout raisonnement je deviens incapable" (IV.2). But for the moment I wish to relate Ladislas' intentionalist argument to the theme of redemption to which Ladislas has been linked in so many other motifs before the murder. He is not guilty, he claims, yet he wants to be adjudged guilty because his mistress demands it. Such paradoxical devotion is perhaps horrifying, but it expresses the spiritual dedication to Cassandre that Ladislas has shown since the moment he appeared in the play. With Fédéric's appearance after the report of his death and Ladislas' spiritual regeneration we have two symbolic resurrections that, in a sense, make up for Alexandre's real death. In his devotion Ladislas loses his contradictoriness and thus joins the ranks of the rigidly pure "family" of characters found in Fédéric, Alexandre (with the reservations I've already noted), and especially Cassandre. A chaste généreuse, pure under each of the codes of Rotrou's sacramental ethos, Cassandre shows that in not loving her with such spirituality, Ladislas would offend the divinity itself.

If Ladislas is rehabilitated chiefly as a "private person," this is not to suggest that he is still somehow at fault as a généreux. We might expect that his devotion to Cassandre will also redeem his offenses to amitié against both his brother and his father's vassal. This is the gist of Morel's evaluation of the last act. Yet, given the hierarchies of générosité, we may wonder if Ladislas is basically wrong to feel insulted by the ascendancy
of Fédéric. Ladislas behaves like the firstborn son of a royal family on most occasions in the running time of the play itself; his passionate self-assertion is in keeping with his position. Many critics have found the role of Fédéric and Rotrou’s “invention” of Théodore insipid. Yet, as Sarcey recognized nearly a century ago, their relationship is crucial here: “Il était au seizième et au dix-septième siècle admis, comme vérité incontestable, qu’une princesse du sang royal ne pouvait, sans déchoir, épouser un homme dans les veines de qui un sang royal n’aurait pas coulé.”\(^1\)\(^{19}\) Saint-Marc Girardin notwithstanding, honor is as important here as in the Spanish play. Its key witness is Fédéric. Hence his silence, which enables him to play his pretense of love for the lesser Cassandre. And hence, more importantly, the basis for Ladislas’ jealousy of him. Ladislas considers that the vassal usurps his prerogatives in loving the Princess of Cunisberg as much as he usurps them in taking his place in political affairs. It is a mistake to read Ladislas’ enmity for Fédéric in the political realm as if it were a consequence of his unrequited love and jealousy. The relation between so-called public and private emotions here is one we have already found in Rotrou: “Quoi, Cassandre sera le prix d’une victoire,/ Qu’usurpant mes emplois, il dérobe à ma gloire.” The loss of the beloved here is not an underlying cause but a “last straw.” The insults Ladislas feels in one realm are causally independent of those felt in the other. Nevertheless, both derive from his exalted sense of self according to the twin codes of Rotrou’s universe. In the state of disgrace in which he is slave to his passions, Ladislas is an ineffective ally of his father. The disordered reason deprives its sufferer of a sense of reality in all his pursuits. This is the brunt of Venceslas’ reproaches to his son in the first act. However, restored to reason by repenting his real crime (the lust for Cassandre), he is eligible for kingship and, as king, “n’hérite point des différends du Prince” (V.9).

The potential kingliness of Ladislas was shown in the first two acts: in the attribution of his “sins” to a transitory stage of youth; in his repentance; in the very possession of what his father calls “le secret pouvoir, d’un charme que j’ignore” (I.1;
by which people cherish him even in criticizing him. This secret power is contrasted with the “instinct enragé” that leads Ladislas to his sacrilegious disrespect for the chaste Cassandre. The redeeming power in Ladislas resembles the redemptive grace of previous “sacrilèges” that was rendered by the formula “Je ne sais quel génie.” Again, the designation of this power as charme reminds us of the compelling, benevolent power of sacramental beauty in earlier Rotrou figures (including men, as in La Belle Alphèride). This charm is Ladislas’ actual grace in the initial A portion of the drama. Its potential is actualized through his freely chosen act of perfect contrition on two different occasions in the play, once before and again after the murder. Previous critics need not have looked to the denouement of Le Cid for the “influence” at work on Rotrou in order to determine how he arrived at his “happy ending.” They had only to look to Rotrou himself.

And yet, the “happy ending” seems forced; the whole play seems forced—a nostalgic, flawed attempt to recapture the vision of the youthful plays. Drawn by the force of Ladislas’ character and by the mere notion of “rehabilitative time” in the denouement, many critics have failed to pinpoint the really disturbing effect of this strange play. Undoubtedly, it is a tragicomedy if looked at as if the title were Ladislas. But the title is Venceslas, and it is basically a play about the old king’s effort to reconcile fatherhood and kingship. He does not succeed. This is the real tragedy of the play. In the first scene, the father looks for the prince and future king in Ladislas:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Toutes vos actions démentent votre rang,} \\
\text{Je n’y vois rien d’auguste et digne de mon sang;} \\
\text{J’y cherche Ladislas et ne le puis connaître,} \\
\text{Vous n’avez rien de Roi que le désir de l’être.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1.1)

But in the aftermath of the dark night of fratricide, the old king finds only his son. Significantly, coming upon his son
in the midst of that terrible night, the first words the brooding old man addresses to Ladislas are: "Mon fils? . . . Hélas! . . . Est-ce vous Ladislas" (IV.4). Alas, for "je ne lui puis être et bon père et bon roi" (V.5). This dilemma comes back with such insistence that one is astonished that critics have become more indignant with the rewarded criminal than with the judge who gives him that reward! Ladislas is far less, and Venceslas far more, "criminal" than has been believed.

To be sure, the total action seems designed to absolve the father as well. "Lors," he had warned his son, calling attention to the danger of continuing his profligacy, "pour être tout Roi, je ne serai plus père/ Et vous abandonnant à la rigueur des loix,/ Au mépris de mon sang je maintiendrai mes droits" (I.1). Ladislas reminds us of Créon in saying that he preferred his hate to his quality as potential king (I.3). And the old king again reminds us of Créon in arguing that the stability of his power demands that he punish his son for what he clearly considers his crime: "Mais à l'état, enfin, je dois ce grand exemple,/ A ma propre vertu ce généreux effort" (V.4). There is something weak in this argument from raison d'état and self-interest. The argument is heard later, too: Venceslas asserts that in showing his horror of vice by punishing Ladislas, he will prove the legitimacy of the people's choice of him as king (V.5). In one sense this weak argument shows that the son was right in accusing his father of being an indecisive ruler (I.1). Furthermore, the argument is bound to crumble when Théodore, Fédéric, and Cassandre herself acknowledge that "reasons of state" dictate a quite contrary action. Of course, in seeing the play from Ladislas' point of view, the king's hesitancy happily leads him to that illumination in which he sees the justice of saving his son. In this light, he is a Créon who discovers his error in time and so saves his "defendant" from the injustice to which he has blindly condemned him in an abuse or misunderstanding of royal power. Even from Venceslas' point of view, this play would then fit nicely into what Aristotle considered the best of the four kinds of tragic action: " . . . When someone is about to do an irreparable deed through
ignorance, and makes the discovery before it is done. . . The last [fourth] is the best, as when in the Cresphontes Merope is about to slay her son, but, recognizing who he is, spares his life.” (The “rule” obviously applies as well to Hercule mourant, when the ascended god-man spares Arcas.)

But in the value system of Venceslas, Rotrou has added one argument too many to the reasons compelling the king to spare his son:

Pour ne vous perdre pas, j'ai longtemps combattu,
Mais ou l'art de régner n'est plus une vertu,
Et c'est une chimère aux Rois que la Justice,
Ou régnant à l'Etat je dois ce sacrifice.

(V.4)

Kingship is apparently the virtue of rule, not the rule of virtue; kingship here demands that the king punish the murder of Alexandre. Yet, earlier for this king, virtue had nothing to do with the circumstances of Ladislas’ homicide or the consequences of the prospective execution. To arguments from positive law, the king opposed the argument of absolute law. The latter is now seen to conflict with the natural law of paternal affection. We are reminded that, as in the case of Antigone and Iphigénie, for Rotrou natural law has always been defined in terms of Catholic theology. The king is God’s power on earth. That the Polish king is elected here does not affect the validity of the concept of divine right that informs, or should inform, a king’s behavior. Justice demands that Ladislas pay for his crime. That there is a crime according to the natural, innate (or immanent) conscience is somewhat obscured by Ladislas’ appeal to intentionalism. But in this play there nonetheless has been a real effect of misintention (as there was not in the imputed incest of La Sœur): Alexandre has been killed. More importantly, Ladislas has committed a crime in the abuse of his reason. Ladislas cannot have it two ways: the moment after the act, he cannot claim that an uncontrollable consequence of a mad passion deprived him of his reason and then claim
later that it was all due to a mistaken identity. To argue in this latter fashion is to say that, could he have seen that Alexandre had answered, he would have withheld his blow. This suggests premeditation and responsibility. These are the grounds explicitly informing Genest's assent to grace. Less explicitly but no less clearly, these are the grounds underlying the king's apposition of kingship and virtue in his first judgment of his older son's action. In his earlier advice that his son confess his sins to Heaven, the king is well aware that the excuses of positive law (the dark, the "murmure du peuple," etc), have no status before Heaven's absolute law:

Allez vous préparer à cet illustre effort;
Et pour les intérêts d'une mortelle flamme,
Abandonnant le corps, n'abandonnez pas l'âme;
Toute obscure qu'elle est, la nuit a beaucoup d'yeux,
Et n'a pas pu cacher votre forfait aux Cieux.

(V.4)

In the end, Venceslas himself does not heed this stern, innate imperative of divine justice. He heeds another "natural" law: paternal feeling. As we have seen, the two have been increasingly at odds throughout Rotrou's canon. With its law of love, chaste desire in the theater of immanence seemed to lead to a logical connection between conjugal love and the "natural law." In the denouement of Hercule mourant, there was no necessary contradiction between natural love and its divine source. However, the emphasis most often fell quite naturally on the material expression rather than the spiritual reference. In Rotrou's theater of transcendence, the spiritual reference of chaste desire tended to be stressed. Virginity was increasingly prized and worldly marriage sublimated as the partners expressed themselves in fraternal and sisterly affection for one another. In Venceslas this sublimation has already been noted in the love of Alexandre and Cassandre. But in the feelings that finally move the father to protect his older son's life, we see a return to the linkage between "natural love" and the
immanent deity. The old king ends where he had begun: by linking the latter code and its public imperatives to such notions as his wife’s beauty being immortalized in her son. Venceslas breaks the sacramental equilibrium into its two components: kingship stresses the power of the spirit or of virtue; fatherhood stresses the power of natural feeling or love. There being no divinity appearing from on high to reconcile the antinomy, the French Venceslas is compelled to admit with his Spanish model that “no hay ser padre siendo rey”. The “new law” of charity or mercy supersedes the old law of justice whenever they are at odds.

As the king yields to the father, one suspects that Rotrou might be seeking to return to the religious terms characterizing the resolution of Hercule mourant. The concept of “grace” is as persistent in the final scenes of this play as in La Sœur, for example. The last act begins with Théodore demanding that Fédéric ask her father “au lieu de notre Hymen, la Grâce de mon frère” (V.I). But one begins to doubt the spirituality of this “grace” as it is insistently linked to a number of purely material concerns. Fédéric is really moved by an ulterior motive, but he adds still more dubious colorations to the grace he asks: “L’état qu’il doit régir lui doit bien une grâce,” he tells Venceslas, and then goes on to say that the blood of the infant alone had been shed by Ladislas, but the shedding of Ladislas’ own blood will “wound” the entire state. Théodore speaks of “pitié” (like Hercule) but she seems to consider it on a par with reasons of state, self-interest, and so on. Finally, the king himself confirms the implicit argument here that virtue has little to do with the grace he is asked to grant. He poses a choice between a crown upon his son’s head or the taking of that head. “Il vous en faut pourvoir, s’il vous faut pardonner,” he tells his son. “Et punir votre crime ou bien le couronner.”

Obviously, Venceslas is convinced that his son is still guilty. However, as he goes on, one sees the ambivalence in Rotrou’s conception of this character and of the whole play. At first, Venceslas argues from reasons of state, including the people’s “lesson” to him: “Voulant que vous viviez, [qu’i]l est las que je
règne.” As Antigone showed us, the people were not always considered so wise. Yet, Venceslas’ reasons may be the signs of the immanent will of God and they may tie in still further with the Christian notion of the triumph of mercy over justice whenever these two seem to be at irreconcilable odds. But the king continues by separating his notion of absolute justice, a law that is really supernatural, from the people’s notion of justice: “La Justice est aux rois la règne des vertus,/ Et me vouloir injuste est ne me vouloir plus.” One might still believe that the king is saying: for me to slay you would be an injustice incompatible with the royal reign of virtues and so the people are right not to want me. But then the king goes on to illuminate his uncomprehending son of his real meaning: “Qui pardonne à son Roi punirait Ladislas,/ Et sans cet ornement ferait tomber sa tête” (V.9).

By definition, a king can do no wrong, nor can he suffer, as king, the imputation of any wrongdoing. The notion is sacramental. High station is the sign of pure spirit. We are reminded that in Corneille, kings are seldom found guilty of wrongdoing: this is attributed to their evil counselors. Few men can tolerate the thought that the highest exemplars of mankind can be guilty of evil. As Kantorovicz has shown, medieval political theory resolved this dilemma in the concept of the king’s two bodies: the physical body, which was corruptible (and, at times, corrupting), as distinguished from (but not necessarily opposed to) the spiritual body. Yet, seldom has the concept been applied so cynically. It is evoked not only after the fact of a king’s crime but before the fact of his coronation in order to preserve his physical body after the fact of its corrupt act. As king, the murderer will be beyond the reach of the law. The higher law is used in order to preserve the lower law. The relationship is far more tragic than the death of Ladislas. The play is properly called Venceslas, for it is the old king’s tragedy.

At the height of the familiar eschatological euphoria of this scene, we seem to have had the abdication of sacrament and the coronation of sacrilege. Most critics of the play are convinced that the former king’s invocation of rehabilitative time
and the new king’s “courteous” hope mean that, as in *Le Cid*, Cassandre will accept her husband’s murderer in marriage. Undoubtedly, seen in connection with so many other motifs, this final one suggests that Rotrou was trying to write of a res-sacramentalized universe of the kind found in his earlier plays. Yet, one cannot escape the gnawing evidence of the play itself that the restoration is tragically imperfect. Time is not evoked here in the imperative of Corneille’s adjudicatory king: “Laisse faire le temps, ta vaillance et ton roi” (*Le Cid*, V.7). Rather, this former king proposes the notion in an almost tentative fashion, as if aware of the feebleness of such an agency in the face of the loss Cassandre has suffered:

Cassandre

Puis-je, sans un trop lâche et trop sensible effort,  
Epouser le meurtrier, étant veuve du mort:  
Puis-je.

Le Roi

Le temps, ma fille.

Cassandre

Hal quel temps le peut faire?

And this is all we hear from Cassandre. The play quickly comes to an end with Ladislas’ hope that his “soumissions” will weaken her scorn, and with the former king’s calls for the “dernières tendresses” toward the dead son and the praise of his own worthy successor to the throne. Over the gallant conditional of the young king and the hopeful imperatives of the old king, there hangs the pall of Cassandre’s haunting interrogative. As she doubts time, one remembers her earlier lament in falling into tears when recounting Alexandre’s murder: “En cet endroit, Seigneur, laissez couler mes larmes;/ Leurs cours vient d’une source à ne tarir jamais” (IV.6; italics added). This promise
of eternal, if tearful, fidelity reminds us more of Andromaque than Chimène: in the resolute Cassandre as in the resolute Andromaque one feels that the "larmes" are also "armes." One thinks of Crisante, who was similarly determined to revenge the violator of her honor.

Ladislas has not actually raped Cassandre, of course. But he has done so in spirit, and this is just as bad for her. Moreover, he has murdered her husband. It is true that Cassandre does relent in her demand for Ladislas' head. As she heeds the reasons of state ("le bien public," she calls them), those critics who see a parallel with the denouement of Le Cid might find support for their thesis. Still further support might be found in the way in which the old king thereafter persistently includes Cassandre among those whose reasons he finally heeds: "Oui, ma fille; oui, Cassandre; oui, parole; oui, nature!/ Oui, peuple, il faut vouloir ce que vous souhaitiez" (V.8). But Cassandre's motives here differ from those of the others mentioned by Venceslas in this moment of illumination. In her surrender to reasons of state, her concluding paradoxical combination of lassitude and resolve has not been sufficiently remarked:

Je me tais donc, Seigneur, disposez de la vie,
Que vous m'avez promise et que j'ai poursuivie,
Au défaut de celui qu'on te refusera,
J'ai du sang, cher amant, qui te satisféra.

(V.6; italics added)

Crisante comes to mind once again: having been deprived of her honor, she slew herself. Occurring in those rare plays of Rotrou in which another threat of bloodshed has issued in real bloodshed, Cassandre's threat should not be taken lightly.

Understanding Cassandre's role better than he did Ladislas', Marmontel, in his revision more than a century later, had Cassandre slay herself. "Ma grâce est en vos mains," he has the repentant Ladislas tell Cassandre. "Voilà donc ton supplice," she tells him, thrusting a dagger into her breast. The irony on the word "grâce" is especially consistent with the données of
Rotrou’s play. Nevertheless, one wonders if Marmontel has grasped the real grandeur and profundity of Cassandre’s intention to commit suicide. One can conjecture that it would be on the very night of her wedding to Ladislas that she would deprive him of herself. However, any denouement other than that actually composed by Rotrou betrays the significance of the play and its place in Rotrou’s canon. In its hesitancies, Venceslas shows the playwright longing for the immanent verities of his early plays, but clinging to the somber transcendence of his most recent ones.

In *Cosroès*, Tragédie (1648), one critic has said Rotrou looks back to Corneille’s *Rodogune* and *Héraclius* as well as forward to that dramatist’s *Nicomède*. He also looks forward, another critic has said, to “the greatest creations of Racine.” The most recent editor of the play is reminded of *Hamlet*, and Lancaster is reminded of Saint Germain’s *Timoléon* (1639). Certainly, such parallels do come to mind readily. As in *Nicomède*, an old king is beset by his wily second wife to name their child his successor, thus disinheriting the legitimate heir, the king’s son by his first marriage. Again, Syra does resemble Corneille’s Cléopâtre, the ambitious queen who is also obliged to drink the poison she has prepared for her stepson in *Rodogune*. To this resemblance we might add the parallels between the sets of brothers in both plays: Mardesane resembles Séleucus (at least until he usurps Syroès’ power), and Syroès is a somewhat more complicated counterpart to Antiochus. In still another possible echo of Corneille, Narsée’s dilemma is comparable to Chimène’s in *Le Cid*: each finds that her lover has attacked her parent. On the other hand, noting such “pre-Racinian” motifs as the hesitancy of the young hero of this play, Orlando finds that Rotrou at last breaks with his usual “tempo della metamorfosi” in order to depict “quello dell’ oscillazione”.

These parallels are helpful in understanding these other plays and, for my purpose here, *Cosroès* itself. However, within Rotrou’s own theater, even more helpful parallels can be drawn for this purpose. As Schérer has noted, the theme of royal revolt is
anticipated in *Antigone*, *Iphigénie*, and *Venceslas*. In the latter, Schérer also notes, "Rotrou rencontre pour la première fois des conflits entre proches parents qui sont assez violents pour aller jusqu’au meurtre et qui mettent en jeu l’ambition, l’amour et des conceptions morales et politiques dérivées." Schérer might have made the connection still more close: "J’aime mieux conserver un fils qu’un diadème" (V.9), the old king of the earlier play declared in abdicating; "Et ma tête à ce prix ne veut point de couronne" (V.4), says Syroès. The son has usurped Cosroès’ throne only to learn that the final consequence of his act must be the command to execute his father. Cosroès offers a corollary to the lesson of *Venceslas*: one cannot be son and king. Here, too, numerous features suggest that the author might have posed the conflict only to resolve it through familiar religious concepts. But the resolution is perhaps even less successful here.

True, as Schérer and Orlando have remarked, by omitting Cellot’s didactic Christian allusions in his reworking, Rotrou has, in one way, “de-Christianized” the story. Yet, with the possible exception of *Bélissaire*, Cosroès comes closer than any “secular” play in Rotrou to the special Christian way of looking at the tension between divine justice and divine mercy. Marde-sane will reign, says the old king, “par le char éclatant du Dieu que je révère” (II.1). His image is the familiar one of God the Heavenly King in whose name the kings of the earth rule. Kings of the earth are regarded as the divinity immanent in the things of God’s creation. This comes out more in the reign of Syroès than of his father, as I shall bring out below. For now, I wish to stress that Syroès’ reign conveys a religious sense not only of justice but of charity. Recalling the officer sent to arrest his father, Syroès asks: “Condamné par mes pleurs, quel Dieu pourra m’absoudre?” (IV.2; italics added). A God of mercy is evoked in terms of a sacramental penance, even as a message of “pitié” by Hercule, another penitent son, recalled the same sacrament and its absolving grace. The overtones in both plays are Christian. Of course, the relation of justice to mercy is very different at the end of *Cosroès*. Rotrou’s final tragedy does not
present the clearly re-sacramentalized universe found at the end of his first tragedy. Here, one of these divine attributes prevails over the other in the realm of men. One feels that the only place justice and mercy can be reconciled is on high, in the heaven of saints rather than in the earth of sinners. However, before we explore this transcendental stress of the final moments of Cosroès, it will be interesting to see how the dramatist clings in almost every prior moment to the immanentism of his early plays.

Syroès’ indecisiveness seems to make him “new” in Rotrou’s canon for many critics. Yet, the theme is not new. Like many a previous hero, Syroès hesitates to act in a B portion of the play because he is confronted with a tension between values he had assumed to be reconciled in an initial A portion of the play. Characteristically, the tension rises because of a false datum. Indeed, there are two data whose falsity some critics tend to dismiss: first, Narsée’s presumed identity as the daughter of Syra and, second, Syra’s own report of Syroès’ “threat” to her at the end of the first scene of the play. Since the latter is the least significant and the simpler to deal with, let us consider it first.

The debate between stepmother and stepson takes place according to the strictest interpretation of générosité. In the first two verses of the play, Syra charges Syroès with being “indigne” and “insolent,” for he is born of lesser rank than she and her son. She contends that her son is the truer heir because each of his parents is of higher rank. Syroès is not unaware of Mardesane’s dignity; he respects that son, he tells his adversary, because he sees in him “votre image” (I.1). We are on the grounds of immanent belief found at the beginning of Venceslas. However, on related grounds—primogeniture and patrilineal succession—Syroès opposes the queen’s ambition. When Syra counters that his mother was of lesser rank than she, Syroès acknowledges that his mother may not have been “sœur, fille et veuve de Rois,” but she had a prior dignity: the first love of his father. Chaste desire is invoked here as in Rotrou’s theater of immanence: it is to be respected first whenever love and duty, nature and convention, charity and justice seem to be at odds. From the outset,
Syroès states the conflict that arises, in a different form, when he is asked to judge his father. But, for the moment, Syroès does not see any contradiction between the two codes. In an allusion to the divine, he reminds us that ambition like the queen's has always been sacrilegious in Rotrou:

Il [Mardesane] prévoit le péril des trônes usurpés,
A leurs superbes pieds il voit des précipices,
Et sait que des Tyrans on fait des sacrifices,
Il sait qu'il est au Ciel un Maître souverain,
Qui leur ôte aisément le sceptre de la main,
Et dont le foudre est fait pour ce genre de crimes,
Pour tomber en faveur des Princes légitimes;
Le crime lui plairait, mais la punition
Lui fait fermer l'oreille à votre ambition.

(I.1)

Standing apart from Heaven in this ambition, Syra stands aside from the “earth” as well. The co-operative relation between heaven and earth characterizes all of Rotrou’s theater. Even in extreme moments of “transcendence,” his heroes find it hard to view the things of this world as contradictory signs of divine intention. In varying degrees all of Rotrou’s heroes have seen the world as a sacramental sign. At all points in the action, Syroès’ so-called inaction is due to his scruples as a believer in the twin codes of the sacramental ethos. He is vindicated in this faith by all the signs intended to vindicate Ladislas and other heroes in Rotrou. Hired assassins can no more carry out the orders of Syra here than could the assassins, also hired by a vengeful queen in Bélissaire. Like Léonse or Narsès in that play, Sardarigue tells Syroès that he is so indebted to the prince for his bounty that he cannot arrest him; horrified by the murderous proposals of Syra, Hormidaste and Artanasde quit her service in order to join with Syroès. Again, the people are on Syroès’ side as they were on Ladislas’. All this smacks of raison d’état, to be sure. When Syroès echoes Venceslas’ litany of motives (“Oui, Princes, oui mes droits, oui Perse, oui mon Pays”
NOSTALGIA FOR IMMANENCE

[I.4]), the syntactical parallel may add to the feeling that this prince's usurpation is as illegitimate as Venceslas' abdication. Yet, raison d'état is much purer here than in Venceslas, for it is guaranteed by the purity of Syroès.

(I am "reading" the play at this point to show its strong resemblance to Rotrou's early plays. I am aware that, in the end, the young usurper blames himself for the "maudite ambition" [IV.2] that his father attributes to himself earlier [II.1]. I shall return to this complexity in my final assessment.)

Syroès stands opposed to Syra. True, their names resemble each other, suggesting a oneness of self. But if so, we have the familiar divided self of Rotrou's theater of immanence: Syra is the lower self and Syroès the higher. This relation is repeated still more conventionally in the motif of the stepbrothers: the frères amis who become frères ennemis, as in Venceslas. Here, the richness of Rotrou's symbolic imagination is striking. Mardesane inherits the bad blood of both parents and thus succumbs to "maudite ambition," whereas in Syroès the good blood of the mother overcomes the bad blood of the father. The real mother is also opposed here to the stepmother: the rang and sang, in dramatic conflict in terms of générosité or justice, are reconciled in terms of chaste love or charity. Syroès' goodness through the mother also stands against the "evil" that some critics attribute to the king's counselors. Palmyras, in particular, has been especially suspect for his deviousness and ambition. There is no doubt that the minister is shrewd and opportunistic. He placed his own child in the crib of a dead princess in order to insure high fortune for that daughter. He suggests to the young prince that "le Ciel est inutile à qui ne s'aide pas" (I.3). We suspect that his advice comes from very different motives from those that inspired Genest's similar view on divine will and human responsibility. Still, Palmyras' "opportunism" cannot be viewed with the strictures leading Orlando to find "inaccettabile l'idea de considerare un Palmyras 'strumento' della Provvidenza."

A father's substitution of one infant for another to insure the prosperity of his child was the key to the providential ending of La Sœur. Even accepting
THEATER OF JEAN ROTROU

Palmyras' conduct as sacrilegious, the whole history of Rotrou's theater suggests that one can hardly doubt the possibility if not the probability that he is now using a "malheur" as the instrument of benevolent determinism.

The realistic advice of Palmyras (Heaven helps the self-helping) seems less casuistical on the lips of the pious captain of the guards, Sardarigue: "Le sort vous aidera, mais prêtez-lui les mains" (II.4). In the same speech Sardarigue also evokes the hallowed concept of rehabilitative time. Syntactically, the advice links Syroès (and all who support him) to such pure heroes as Genest and Fédéric (Venceslas):

Issu du grand Cyrus et de tant de Monarques,
Prince, de vos aieux conservez-vous les marques;
Il est temps de paraître et temps de voir vos lois
Dispenser les destins des peuples des Rois.

(II.4; italics added)

"Il est temps de passer du théâtre aux autels" (IV.7), said the converted Genest; "il n'est plus temps d'aimer sous un nom emprunté," Fédéric told Alexandre. The essential dynamic of all of Rotrou's theater—the movement from potential to actual, from non-being (or incomplete being) to full being—characterizes Cosroès as well. And it must be emphasized that being is appearance: "Il est temps de paraître" is Sardarigue's advice here. In a sacramental universe appearance and reality coincide, for signs and names, words and deeds are not merely "nominal"; they are real. The opportunistic Palmyras himself follows this dynamic: after hearing his daughter, Narsée, attack him as an enemy, he cries, "O Nature, il est temps! Que tu mettes au jour secret de vingt ans . . . (IV.4). In time, what had to be, is; the truth comes out.

Cosroès proves the thesis in its negative expression as surely as Syroès proves its positive. From the old king's first words we hear the ancient theme that vice is its own worst punishment. In those words we are also reminded that the sufferings of "hell" are real: "Ce corps n'a plus d'endroit, exempt de vos
blessures,” he tells the “noires divinités,” who are “des vengeances du Ciel ministres effroyables”. He evokes the image of nature’s monsters (“vos couleuvres”) as still other agents of this heavenly vengeance. Now, Bélissaire, too, evoked nature’s monsters as his enemies. Yet, the consonance of images could not dramatize more radically the difference between Rotrou’s theater of immanence, recalled here, and the theater of transcendence in Bélissaire. In the latter play, monsters and other “commun debris de la nature” were to be found everywhere. In Cosroès, the sacrilegious old usurper alone suffers the “morsures” of such creatures in the “remords éternel” that Heaven sends him in punishment for his deed (II.1).

Usurpation is presented throughout the play in this light. Before he succumbs to ambition, Mardesane describes the same vice in his mother as “illusions . . . belles visions . . . un beau songe.” In one of the most striking appositions of Rotrou’s theater, Mardesane speaks disdainfully of “ce fantôme puissant,/ Ce pouvoir usurpé” (I.2). It was to this phantom power that Cosroès had given himself twenty years earlier and to which once again he succumbs with his “esprit altéré d’un père furieux” (I.3; italics added). Against this altered reason, Syroès rightly declares: “J’ai pour moi la raison, le droit et la nature” (I.3). He is speaking primarily according to the tenets of générosité, by which “nature” or natural law is really the law of Heaven. This law is implanted in the hearts and minds of men and “contingently” visible in such institutions as primogeniture and patrilineal heritage. Now, Cosroès had not exactly violated this law through his usurpation; he had only anticipated his inheritance in assuming the throne. He is nonetheless guilty of sacrilege, for he slew his father. Like many an earlier sacrilege in Rotrou, he broke the fused codes of chaste desire and générosité. The law of love was and is the higher one, as we see in Cosroès’ remorse and in Syroès’ reluctance to slay his father: “. . . De ma vie enfin je hasarde la course,/ Si mon impiété n’en épuise la source” (I.3). The explicitly religious concept of piety is linked in the play most often with the law of love. Syroès is unable to violate this
religious injunction, but his hesitations on this score are signs of an inner strength. Among well-known critics of the play, Lancaster is unique in attributing to Syroës relative strength of character.\(^{30}\)

Strength against sacrilege flows from a virtuous, rational understanding of reality and a fullness of being. Surrender to sacrilege shows a deprivation of reason and an incompleteness of being. The concept had already been implicit, of course, in the injunctions by both Palmyras and Sardarigue that Syroës help heaven in its work. The corollary of this notion is that freedom is not really a choice of ends but of means. To think it involves a choice of ends is to presuppose that ultimate reality is divisible or that one can sanely refuse to follow the "natural inclination" to do good. These are the concepts of freedom and rationality underlying the dramatic conflicts and resolutions of Rotrou’s theater of immanence, we remember. (Certain conservative strains of modern psychiatric theory come close to the concepts of freedom and rationality in the sacramental ethos: criminal behavior is perforce insane, "adjustment" is the evidence of rationality, and so on).

The character of Syra, in particular, is best understood in light of these theological concepts. In spite of her fierce pride and generally open behavior, I think it a mistake to see her as a precursor of the modern, existentialist hero, on the one hand,\(^{31}\) or of a généreuse from Corneille, on the other. Orlando finds that she may be excused for charging Syroës with an attempt on her life because he touched his hand to his sword at the end of their first confrontation. The critic is aware that the reader, at least, knows this charge is not true. Stage directions make it clear that Syroës merely touches his sword as a gesture of the power on which he can rely. The queen has even started off, is not near her stepson, and stops only when her own son appears. When the latter sees his brother's hand on his sword hilt, he asks the meaning of this "threat." The older brother then denies Syra's "calomnie" that he intended to attack her. However, Mardesane seems satisfied with Syroës' explanation: "Je lui montrais ce fer comme mon défenseur."
son even criticizes her ambition, once she has gone. Now, Orlando sees the queen’s later report of these events not as a calumny but “probabilmente sincera nella sua passionalità.” The accused Syroès calls it by another name: “imposture” (II.3). The context justifies Syroès more than Syra. In private with the old king, she had just charmed—indeed, given her manner, we might say seduced—him into breaking the laws of heaven and earth by giving the throne to Mardesane. Syra’s public accusation of her stepson is only the final step in her scheme to have Cosroès abandon both the right use of his office and his reason.

In the relation between this husband and wife, we are far from the sisterly and brotherly affection of previous couples in Rotrou—Adrien and Natalie, for example. Instead, like Hermante in L’Innocente Infidélité, Syra uses the code of chaste desire in an impious ambition for worldly power as an end in itself. She urges the cause of Mardesane by reminding her husband of this son “dont vos chastes ardeurs ont honoré ce flanc” (II.1). (Theologically, this use of the sacred for the sake of the worldly is called a simony. In the religious climate of Rotrou’s time, this view of her motivation would increase the audience’s antipathy to her.) She has also spoken of Syroès’ ambition, warning her husband that his first son could not tolerate his father’s presence once he had assumed the throne. Knowing their characters at this point, the spectator is prepared to believe this insinuation more of Mardesane than Syroès! Preoccupied with the “tribunal céleste” to which he will soon go (II.2), Cosroès is only too ready to heed his wife’s arguments, indebted as he is to her: “C’est un prix que je dois à l’amour de Syra” (II.2). Later, he will blame chiefly his ambition as the motive leading him to his marriage to Syra; but in this line as elsewhere in the play, we sense that he soiled his throne in soiling his couch. Whatever the first sin, carnal desire and ambition are obviously as intertwined in the disordered reason of Cosroès as they were in the disordered reason of Ladislas before his repentance.

When Syra is before us on stage, she maintains her sacri-
igious outlook with a lucidity and rationality greater than anyone else’s in the play. This intense spiritual self-possession is Lucifer-like. It has been the basis of the comparison of Syra with Corneille’s Cléopâtre by traditional critics and for praise of her freedom by recent existentialist critics. Yet, it is hardly an image of fierce self-possession that Narsée evokes in speaking of the final moments of the woman whom she now knows is not her mother:

J’ai jugé toutefois ne pouvoir sans faiblesses
Ne point prendre de part au malheur qui la presse;
L’éclat qui me jaillit de sa condition
Me procure l’honneur de votre affection;
Je suis sinon sa fille, au moins sa créature,
Et du moins à ses soins je dois ma nourriture;
Mais la voyant en pleurs sur le corps de son fils,
Appeler les destins et les Dieux ennemis,
A ce triste spectacle, interdite, éplorée,
Sans pouvoir dire un mot je me suis retirée.

(V.7; italics added)

Like Hermante, Syra acknowledges the gods in damning them: profanation is a religious act. One is hard put to find that the sacrilegiously defiant Syra has broken with “la morale traditionnelle” in any fundamental way. Like love of God, hatred of him is an ontological proof of his existence. One is hard put to find any of the dignity existentialist critics seek in the pathetic figure of the prostrate mother. In the end Syra is closer to the beaten Théodore of Bélissaire than she is to the chthonian Hermante of L’Innocente Infidélité. Syroès asserted his authority as king in an automatic generalization of the way things are: “Quittant le nom de Roy, c’est à moi qu’il le doit,” he said of his father in arguing with the ambitious queen. She could invoke only opinion against this reality: “Il croit servir l’État par cette préférence” (III.3), she feebly retorted. In a world where the higher reason expresses itself in all things and especially institutions, opinion is not to be confused with
insight. Guided by opinion to her doom, Syra occupies a fitting place among the heap of sacrilegious bodies at the foot of the scaffold to which Syroès and Narsèe run at the end of the play.

Among those bodies is that of Mardesane. Its presence there actualizes the threat, the potential of which his brother warned in the initial A portion of the play. Mardesane had even "warned" himself that he would end in such desecration, should he succumb to cursed ambition:

Qui veut faire usurper un droit illégitime,
Souvent, au lieu d'un Roi, couronne une victime;
Et l'Etat est le Temple, et le Trône l'autel,
Où cette malheureuse attend le coup mortel.

(II.2)

This politico-religious insight concludes a long speech in which this strange character, ultimately sacrilegious by his own lights, gives a different perspective on the conception of freedom from the one found in what Vahanian describes as our modern, post-Christian era.²³

Un trône attire trop, on y monte sans peine,
L'importance est de voir quel chemin nous y mène,
De ne s'y presser pas, pour bientôt en sortir,
Et pour n'y rencontrer qu'un fameux repentir.

For modern man, freedom may be a choice of ends. For a Rotrou hero once again, it is a choice of means rather than ends. Here, the choice is fundamentally between two negatives: either resistance to "unreason" or surrender to "unreason." Freedom consists in the commission of crime or, religiously speaking, sacrilege. In the final A portion of the play, each of the "sacrilesèges" comes to his deserved death. Only Mardesane dies with some dignity: in a suicide answering to "un généreux conseil," as Narsée puts it. This dignity is perhaps a sign of Heaven's kindly regard for his relatively lesser sin: he had been the purest of the lot of sinners, no doubt. His death is no less just,
for in his “trial” before the new king, he had proven the prideful ravages of the ambition that, he had been warned, would result from his usurpation of the throne.

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely those who do not have just title to it: this is the lesson of the deaths of Mardesane, his mother, and Cosroès. The usurpation of power has proved to be the chief false datum of this play. In an eschatological justification with a familiar tripartite pattern, the consequences of this false datum are, happily, not realized.\textsuperscript{34} Syra rather than Syroès has been the “indigne” and the “insolent.” Lust and ambition, traditional imperfections of being in Rotrou’s theater, have been only the illusions of a transitory middle part of the play. Syroès gives emphatic witness to the eternal “verities”:

\begin{quote}
Par quel aveuglement n’avez-vous pas jugé,  
Qu’ayant des Dieux au Ciel, j’en serais protégé?  
Doutez-vous que l’objet de leurs soins plus augustes,  
Est l’intérêt des Rois dont les causes sont justes?
\end{quote}

(V.2)

Once again in Rotrou, the dramatic A-B-A supports an ethical Q.E.D.

The “orthodoxy” of Cosroès within the canon is still more clearly demonstrated if we give the role of Narsée its proper weight. Like Stiefel, Lancaster considers the role an afterthought, viewing the mention of her in the Elzevir edition as an addition to the original version.\textsuperscript{35} Taking into account Schérer’s inclusion of the role in his edition, Knight has been more perceptive about the role, seeing it as a “possible source of interesting dramatic tension.” However, he finds that the role is “late and clumsily introduced,” and he regrets that it is “withdrawn, after a long story of substituted babies which proves her to be someone else’s daughter.”\textsuperscript{36} But in Schérer’s edition, the first mention of Narsée occurs in I.3, starting at verse 289:
Que peut contre Syra le courroux qui me presse,
Si j'adore en sa fille une auguste Princesse,
De qui l'autorité peut rompre mes desseins,
Et faire à ma fureur choir les armes des mains.

(I.3)

Coming fairly early in the first act, this news does not seem inordinately late either within the play as such or within the context of Rotrou’s earlier dramatic practice. What is more important, the relative delay in introducing this news seems anything but clumsy: it gives signs of a superb psychological and dramatic understanding of the mechanism of repression. Finally forced to the surface at the end of the scene, this private motive casts a dubious light over the litany of public motives that Syroès has offered in his arguments with Syra and Mardesane. Even more seriously, within the “natural law of love,” this motive casts a shadow over the “pious” love for his father that Syroès has just evoked (verses 273-86) to resist Palmyras’ advice to seize power! The dramatic tension could not be greater.

In a footnote to this scene, Schérer perceptively describes the scene he has restored as “une indispensable préparation au rôle important que jouera Narsée à partir du IIIe acte”. Narsée is as important to the denouement of Cosroès as the traditionally minimized role of Aricie is to the denouement of Phèdre. In Racine’s greatest play, Aricie is forbidden to Hippolyte on public grounds: she is the heir to a kingdom his father has dubiously acquired in one of his conquests. Yet, in fact, Hippolyte uses these public motives for private purposes. He says he comes to Aricie in order to restore what is rightly hers, but he knows that he has really come to see her as his beloved. He openly avows as much in one of the great lines of French drama: “Je vois que la raison cède à la violence” (II.2). Hippolyte, the chaste refuser of love, has been brought into love’s tragic nexus. The nexus is tragic not because the mistress is “publicly” forbidden to her lover but because she is an object of love and he “privately” forbids himself love. To reverse a usual practice,
we might apply the concepts of Rotrou’s canon here to demonstrate the truly tragic character of Racine’s vision. Like many Rotrou lovers, Hippolyte relies on générosité in order to realize a desire he knows to be forbidden by chaste desire. Nor is there a final peripety reconciling these two codes, an eschatological resolution showing that he had the right to love Aricie. On the other hand, in Rotrou’s Cosroès the tension between the codes is relieved by the disclosure that its source is unreal, a mere illusion. The tragic potential is left unrealized because Narsée is not Syra’s daughter.

The disclosure gives rise to what might be an inadvertently comic scene. As Palmyras teases his daughter with the knowledge that is his and ours, there is something grotesque in the playfulness of their exchange:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Narsée} & \\
& \text{J'ai malgré mon courroux du respect pour le Roi.} \\
\text{Palmyras} & \\
& \text{Quand vous me connaîtrez, vous en aurez pour moi.} \\
\text{Narsée} & \\
& \text{Quel objet de respect, l'ennemi de ma mère!} \\
\text{Palmyras} & \\
& \text{Votre mère plutôt m'a toujours été chère!}
\end{align*}
\]

(IV.4)

Again, this familiar situation of substituted babies leads to a paradoxical expression of another favorite motif of Rotrou. When he learns Narsée’s real identity, Syroès exclaims in joy:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Le reproche était juste, aux bouches de la Cour,} \\
\text{Que le sang de Syra, m'eût donné de l'amour;}
\end{align*}
\]
Et son aversion, pour moi si naturelle,
Ne me pouvait souffrir d’aimer rien qui vint d’elle.

(IV.2)

The “cri contre le sang” is as expressive as the “cri du sang.”

Furthermore, Palmyras’ impulsion to reveal the truth is, in a non-
satirical sense, a part of the comic spirit at work in this play as
in all of Rotrou. The inevitability at work in Rotrou’s universe
is benign rather than tragic. Through the false datum of Narsée’s
identity as through the false datum of sacrilegious ambition
(Syra, Mardesane, Cosroès), Rotrou remains faithful to his
dramatic practice and moral vision. Usurpation and sacrilege
are redeemed by divine foreordination.

And yet, there is the denouement:

Syroès (furieux)

Et bien, cruels, êtes-vous satisfaits?
Mon règne produit-il d’assez tristes effets?
La couronne, inhumains, à ce prix m’est trop chère,
Allons, Madame, allons suivre ou sauver mon Père.

Palmyras (le suivant)

Ne l’abandonnons point.

Sardarigue

Ses soins sont superflus,
Le poison est trop prompt, le Tyran ne vit plus.

FIN

Many critics have found a way of reconciling this tragic ending
to “regular” dramatic practice in the period and, more im-
portantly in this context, to Rotrou’s usually hopeful outlook.
Syroès’ threat to commit suicide may be no more real than
that of many another Rotrou hero and heroine. Calling attention to this previous practice, Schérer adds that Narsée and Palmyras will probably dissuade the prince from his intention. In this light the “happy ending” of the final A portion of the drama lies beyond the running time of the play. By the same token, its initial A portion lay before the running time, in the play of Heaven with its inevitable condemnation of Syra and the substitution of Narsée for the dead daughter of Syra. Ironically, however, the role of Heaven suggests that the tragic premises of the play remain, whether the prince carries out his threat to self-slaughter or not.

The price of kingship, Syroès learns, is “tristes effets.” He had had a glimmering of this truth in Mardesane’s death: “Cruels,” he had exclaimed at that news, “voilà l’effet de vos nobles maximes” (V.7). True, he himself had ordered that execution, and it would be surprising if he were not pleased that Mardesane had at least died with some nobility. Nevertheless, the news teaches Syroès that there is an irreconcilable conflict between human feeling and “nobles maximes.” The news of his father’s impending death brings the lesson home with even greater force. Like Mardesane’s, Cosroès’ death is self-inflicted. More importantly, neither the orders of Syroès nor of his minister lead directly to the old king’s death. The son had resisted executing his father out of a mercy whose Christian overtones I have already stressed: “Condamné par mes pleurs, quel Dieu m’absoudra?” (IV.2). And in this final moment, in the “limit situation” of his father’s “trial” he can no more get away from the view of patricide as an impiété than he could before seizing power. When Palmyras warns him that he must retract his order to spare all three defendants, he replies:

Je n’ai pu mieux défendre un cœur irrésolu,
Où le sang a repris un Empire absolu;
Vous deviez imposer silence à la nature
Qui contre vos avis secrètement murmure,
Et me fait préférer le péril d’une mort

[174]
NOSTALGIA FOR IMMANENCE

A l’inhumanité d’un si barbare effort.
Il faut pour tant de force une vertu trop dure.

(V.6; italics added)

In an ideal, aristocratic world of royal généreux, the rhyming of rang and sang is moral as well as poetic. But now the two are no longer apposite; sang is a secret murmur opposed to rang: “Je ne sens plus mon rang/ Et [qu’en] mon ennemi j’aime encore mon sang” (V.4). The concept and its formulation (“secrètement murmure”) are familiar from Rotrou’s earlier plays as the sufficient grace guiding offending heroes to repeat their crimes and infidelities. Like so many of them, Syroès also repents an “infidelity” in the name of a natural law not of duty but of love.

In Cosroès, as in Venceslas, Rotrou seeks to reconcile justice and mercy and only leaves us with deep doubt about the possibility of such a reconciliation. At the outset, for the young Syroès as for the old Venceslas, there is a conflict between two values rather than between a value and a non-value. Understanding this, we not only appreciate the strength and poignancy of these characters but also see the unique moral status of Cosroès when we compare it with Rotrou’s earlier “resolutions” of the same conflict. In Hercule mourant, for example, the pitié that God brings from on high corrects a potentially unjust act rather than a just one. Similarly, even in Le Véritable Saint Genest, Rotrou posits the possibility of reconciling the Roman and Christian concepts of piety. In that most obviously Christian of his plays, the conflict is not really between two different laws, justice and mercy, but between two different conceptions of justice. Here, paradoxically enough, in divesting Cellot’s Chosroès of its overt Christian references, Rotrou has come closer than in any other play thus far to dramatizing the Christian tension between God’s justice and God’s mercy. In responding to the “natural law” of mercy, the son has not forgotten his father’s usurpation of the throne. But love is a redeeming virtue here. “Mon cœur contre mon sang s’ose en vain révolter. . . . J’ai fait de ma tendresse une fausse vertu;/ A l’objet
d’un Etat mon lâche sang s’est tu” (V.4; italics added). Sang and tendresse are opposed to cœur.

Once again, we must be wary of Pascalian overtones in studying both cœur and its etymologically-linked word courage in Rotrou. Cœur and courage evoke the public self in the dramatist’s work. This is obviously the sense of cœur in Cosroès, where it seems to include not only the order of esprit as understood by Pascal but also his order of chair. Opposed to this order of cœur in Rotrou is an order of sang with its particular virtue of tendresse. Once we make these semantic adjustments, we see that the dramatist, like the philosopher, distinguishes between an order of love (Rotrou’s sang or tendresse, Pascal’s cœur or charité) and an order of justice (Rotrou’s cœur, Pascal’s esprit-chair). The orders are not necessarily at odds with one another in principle. Even in practice, some sense of Rotrou’s touching desire to reconcile all antinomies can be found in Syroès’ reproach to his blood as “lâche.” The order of sang must not keep its reasons and values to itself; it must make them public. Nevertheless, Syroès shows us clearly that the order of charity conflicts with such public values as the defense of a throne. Here he accuses even himself of ambition. According to primogeniture and patrilineal inheritance, we know him to be wrong. However, according to the higher law of sang or love, he is right: concern with station is a false value. Redeemed by mercy in his own sacrilegious ambition, he has returned to a real value whose grace he wishes to extend to his sacrilegious family. Returned is a key concept here, for he now sees that rank and ambition are the false data that have led him to contemplate an even worse sacrilege: the execution of the members of his family. Returned is the real datum of love is not vindicated; there are no miraculous repentances and resurrections in this denouement. Instead, the eschatological judgment vindicates the quality that Syroès has come to see as the very opposite of love. The loving son fails in his effort to incarnate divine mercy. Justice prevails instead.

Divine justice? That the justice could be viewed as divine is
apparent from the many motifs I have reviewed. Heaven's surveillance of the world on behalf of just kings is proven in the final words of Cosroès himself. He died, says Sardarigue, with the awareness that

Il faut du sort de Perse assouvir la furie,
Accorder à mon Père un tribut qu'il attend,
Laisser à Syroès le trône qu'il prétend,
Et de tant de tyrans terminer la dispute.

(V.8)

As in Venceslas, Rotrou returns to the notion of the immanent deity whose presence gives both shape and meaning to the world. However, in Cosroès, the divinity gives undeniable evidence that He is a God not of love but of justice. He surveys the world on behalf of just kings, but not of loving sons. On the last occasion in which we see him in that world, Syroès has invited Narsée to join him in a choice between the suicide of the virtuous or the salvation of the sinful. The invitation is as disturbing as the haunting question of Cassandre: “Ha! quel temps le peut faire?” On the basis of Syroès’ persistent “hesitancy,” we might hope that he will not choose suicide. However, he had found the strength to withdraw the sentence of death he had imposed on his family. Should he find the strength to carry through his threat to suicide, should Narsée join him, they would deprive this world of its last signs of sanctifying grace.