ROTROU’S prolific theater closes with *Dom Lope de Cardone*, Tragi-comédie (1649). Here, a stern king and father forgives his son, Dom Pèdre, for his misdeeds as both lover and généreux. It is as if the playwright wished to correct the ambivalences of recent plays like *Dom Bernard de Cabrère* and *Venceslas*. Here, a deserving vassal, Lope, having himself incurred the king’s displeasure, is rehabilitated by the king’s son, the Bernard-like Pèdre. Again, both in his *sales désirs* and in his triumph over them, Pèdre reminds us of Ladislas. The grace he demands of his father on behalf of Lope manifests the power he has found in himself to overcome the flesh.

The grace would hardly seem sufficient, say, to many of the Jansenists whom Pascal defended in *Les Lettres provinciales*. For them the words Pèdre addresses to his mistress after his father’s pardon of Lope will be more significant:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Eh bien, inexorable, êtes-vous satisfaite} \\
\text{De l’importunité dont je vous ai défaite?} \\
\text{Et le barbare effort que j’ai fait sur mon cœur} \\
\text{A-t-il quelque rapport avec votre rigeur?}
\end{align*}
\]

(V.5)

Jansenists would probably find no greater sacrilege in all of Rotrou’s theater: Pèdre has used the quality of mercy itself as a means of winning the woman after all. His eye has been cocked
toward her, they could say, from the moment he demanded Lope’s “grace” in a grotesque play on words. “Je demande sa tête et non pas son trépas,” he tells his father, who has misunderstood his demand for Lope’s head. This world is too full of such casuistical “misunderstandings,” strictly Jansenistic critics might feel. They will understand that the world of this play is a market place of virtue. The prince uses his sister as a lever of love; the princess admits that her royal appearance conceals a demeaning love; a brother uses his sister as a lever of love in his relations with the murderer of the lover for whom she grieves; loyal vassals count on their past services to move the king to “discount” their violation of his law against dueling; and so on. Having condemned Lope as a matter of principle, the king himself at first refuses pleas of mercy from the women out of sheer expediency: “Qui, sujet seulement, m’a pu désobéir,/ Gendre un jour, se pourrait résoudre à me trahir” (V.2). Little wonder, the truly pious might say, that Heaven is mentioned only as an afterthought by this casuistical king of a world of spiritual money-changers.

And yet, this time that familiar formula of qualification must reject, rather than lead into, Jansenistic reservations. The quality of mercy is not strained in Dom Lope’s resurrection through pardon. Nor is the quality of justice strained by the rejection of this world by Rotrou’s transcendental heroes. For Lope and Pèdre, as for Adrien and Genest, the things of this world, including self-interest and reason, are the instruments through which divine mercy manifests itself. Even more than those Christian martyrs, Rotrou’s men and women show in the last act of his theater that the order of charity is of this world. Caesar’s realm has become permeated with the shaping truth of God’s realm. The tendencies of Rotrou’s theater of immanence rather than those of his theater of transcendence inform the epiphany of grace with which this play ends. In Rotrou we might well apply to this, and to every tragicomedy, Northrup Frye’s insight into Shakespeare’s comedy and romance: “His festive conclusions with their multiple marriages are not concessions: they are conventions built into the structure of the
play from the beginning.” These conclusions are part of the “natural perspective” Frye finds in the great English dramatist to whom Rotrou has often been compared. It may seem that in his last play he has once again unduly emphasized the naturalness of his own perspective. Once again, it is a question of emphasis. True to his lifelong swing between the poles of sacramental figuralism, in a subsequent play the dramatist would perhaps have emphasized the spiritual rather than the material pole in this “natural perspective.”

But, then, who is to say that the quality of mercy is not spiritual? Who is to say that it is not a forethought of the Heaven on which the king-father of this play calls in what prove to be the last words of Rotrou’s theater?

O Ciel! dont les décrets règlent nos destinées,
Donne d’heureux succès à ces deux hyménéées.

(V.5)

Some may find that Rotrou satisfies his nostalgia for immanence no more successfully in *Dom Lope de Cardone* than in *Venceslas* and *Cosroès*. These plays give ethical as well as psychological premonitions of the dramatist of whom Lanson and others consider Rotrou a precursor in his last plays: Racine. In their dialectic of pride and sensualism, Rotrou’s final plays anticipate those motifs of “rationalisme, naturalisme, monismo” that Butler finds more illuminating than Jansenism for explaining Racine’s vision. That critic does not deny the validity of religious categories for understanding the dramatist whom Goldmann considers, with Pascal, the most extreme Jansenist of the seventeenth century. But where Jansenism is the very soul of Racine’s theater for Goldmann, for Butler it is only a point of departure. He especially warns against seeing in the Racinian “concupiscence de la chair” Jansenistic theses about the “fall” of the natural order. For Jansenist theologians, acknowledgement of this “fall” may be the indispensable preparation for the return of grace (at the Almighty’s exclusive will, of course). However, for Racine, says Butler,
Unlike Goldmann, Butler finds grounds for optimism in such Racinian heroes and heroines as Hippolyte and Bérénice. The “désintéressement” of the one and the “délicatesse exquise”\(^5\) of the other are clues for Butler that a natural générosité does exist in Racine. Butler links this complexly optimistic naturalism to Naudé, Gassendi, and other thinkers from the first part of the century, usually considered libertins. Contrasting this naturalism with the dominant baroque irrationalism of the first third of the century, the critic suggests that this early minority vision has become the majority vision of the classical writers of the last third of the century.

In this generational perspective, Rotrou seems neither a baroque irrationalist nor a classical naturalist, neither an adept of Corneille nor a precursor of Racine. The historical reference is helpful. In the still larger historical perspective—taking into account those from whom they take life, so to speak—all three dramatists stand as contemporary expressions of familiar stresses within the religious heritage to which they all explicitly turned at the height of their artistic powers. This heritage, which has informed my analysis of Rotrou’s entire canon, seems especially relevant in an ultimate assessment of Rotrou’s relation to his great classical contemporaries. Whether the naturalism of Racine be optimistic or pessimistic, libertine or Jansenist in its roots, those roots are themselves grounded in the long-standing tension within sacramental theology itself. As I have brought out in connection with Rotrou’s theater of immanence, materialism under the sign of “les cieux” is a logical outgrowth of sacramental theology. Similarly, the otherworldly spirituality of his theater of transcendence is a logical outgrowth of that same theology. Whether in theologians from Augustine to Teilhard de Chardin or dramatists from Rotrou to Claudel, the sacramental
vision has sought to reconcile matter and spirit, man’s will and divine purpose, this world’s justice and God’s grace.

As Butler sees it, Racine describes this tension only to resolve it in favor of the former term in each polarity. “In favor of” only logically speaking, of course, since it is hardly a “favorable” view of this world and its “justice” that emerges from his plays! The great classical tragedian thus breaks with both Corneille and Corneille’s “mentor,” Rotrou.

Yet, if we accept Butler’s view of at least some of Racine’s “profane” heroes and heroines, his is not a universe totally without grace. Like Goldmann, some may want to find that grace in Racine’s late theater: in the specifically religious plays, Esther and Athalie. Appropriately enough, given the subject of these plays, the grace they proclaim is, in Vahanian’s terms once again, “biblical” and “transcendent.” But grace it is: Racine can no more look on the world as completely self-sufficient and irredeemable than Rotrou can look on it as completely self-sufficient and in no need of Heaven’s tutelage. Rotrou stands between Corneille and Racine, then, not by moving from one to the other, but by including in his theater what Butler and others find univocal in each of the great classics. Corneille’s is a theater of immanence in which the world seems blessed in its every sign and accident; Racine’s, a theater of transcendence in which the world seems damned in its every sign and accident. Rotrou’s is a theater of immanence and transcendence in which sacrament triumphs over sacrilege.

Related to his contemporaries in this way, Rotrou is hardly a modern “tragicomedian.” He is nonetheless essentially an author of tragicomedy. I generalize the term quite consciously, in spite of the fact that Herrick and others have preferred to see Venceslas and Cosroès as “tragedy with a happy ending.” Undoubtedly, these and some other tragedies of Rotrou do not fit the definition of tragicomedy given by Herrick, Lancaster, and other literary historians: presence of both lowly and noble characters; the concomitant mixture (often, merely juxtaposition) of comic and serious scenes; a grave situation (usually
Rotrou's other plays may answer to this definition, especially the plays of his theater of immanence. But Venceslas, Cosroès, Crisante, Bélissaire, and perhaps others escape these characteristics of external form. More importantly, they show an inner form that links them to modern tragicomedy as we know it first in Ibsen and Strindberg, then in Chekhov and Pirandello, and presently in "absurdist" drama. In whatever genre we place their fascinating plays, these dramatists show the fusion of comic and tragic. They are concerned with such themes as: the bleak "everydayness" of the human condition at every social level; the lies by which we seek to make the pity of our existence more bearable to ourselves and, perhaps, to others; the prison of subjectivity that makes pity for any but ourselves a dubious hope; the assertion of every man's heroism by the assault on every man's cowardice; the elucidation of our misery by the baring of our spiritual ambiguities; and so on. Some may find these themes at least in the Rotrou of the late plays. As for the earlier plays, some will perhaps be prepared, with a modern student of tragicomedy, to dismiss them as a "hybrid" form, a jumble of "faraway outlandish settings . . . unlikely happenings and situations . . . farfetched juxtapositions of the ludicrous and the serious."

To dismiss Rotrou and his contemporaries on these grounds is to pay less attention to the philosophic and cultural setting of Rotrou's time than to the setting of modern tragicomedy. Inured to alienation, many moderns will find the B portions of Rotrou's tragicomedy more attractive than the A portions. For such moderns, the world gives less than it takes away. The neat pairings and constrained passions of the A portions must strike some moderns as the real illusions of Rotrou's vision. These critics will look on that total vision as, at worst, an abominable deception and, at best, a prologue to paranoia. To sanctify the world in its beauty and then to deny the enjoyment of that beauty on purportedly the same religious grounds—this is an invitation to madness and, in religious terms, to the sacrilegious rather than the sacramental celebration of the world.
Seen in this light, the Rotrou of the B portions of his plays looks forward more to Baudelaire than he does to Racine. To the "converted" Baudelaire of Mon Cœur mis à nu, the "incarnational" postulates of Rotrou's theater of immanence would seem a euhemerist surrender to the lesser of the "deux postulations simultanées, l'une vers Dieu, l'autre vers Satan." Baudelaire finally surrenders to "l'horreur de la vie," which he admits had always existed in his heart with a contradictory "extase de la vie." In these notions he shows himself a quintessential Christian in the terms of Harnack, which I cited in my Introduction and which bear repeating here within the context of a fuller statement:

At bottom, only a single point was dealt with, abstinence from sexual relationships; everything else was secondary: for he who had renounced these found nothing hard. Renunciation of the servile yoke of sin (servile peccati iugum discutere) was the watchword of Christians, and an extraordinary unanimity prevailed as to the meaning of this watchword, whether we turn to the coptic porter, or the learned Greek teacher, to the Bishop of Hippo, or Jerome the Roman presbyter, or the biographer of Saint Martin. Virginity was the specifically Christian virture, and the essence of all virtues; in this conviction the meaning of the evangelical law was summed up.

Citing this passage, Philip Rieff has said: "Historically, the rejection of sexual individualism (which divorces pleasure and procreation) was the consensual matrix of Christian culture." Yet, at key points in the history of that culture, the consensus was challenged from within the culture itself. Various Christian thinkers sought to wed pleasure and procreation. The effort is undoubtedly doomed to failure for those who stress that current in Christian culture which culminated in Protestantism. For them, the Christian consensus is based on what Rieff calls a "predicate of renunciatory control." However, from within the largest Christian group, the Church of Rome, have come the strongest efforts to modulate this predicate of renunciation through a predicate of indulgence. On the specific sexual renunciation emphasized by Harnack and Rieff, it is significant that
the Roman church considers marriage a sacrament, whereas Protestant sects can measure their distance from Rome on this very point. Nevertheless, the Protestant consensus can be measured within Rome itself by the hierarchy of the sacraments in Rome’s sacramental theology: Orders are higher than Marriage and, within Orders, celibacy and chastity are as much watchwords today as they were for the early Christians cited by Harnack. In heroines like Crisante, Antigone, and Iphigénie, in heroes like Adrien and Genest, Rotrou depicts the power of the predicate of renunciatory control. Yet, even in the worlds of these heroes and heroines, Rotrou is reluctant to relinquish the Catholic predicate of indulgence. Whether subordinated in those plays or stressed in the theater of immanence, this predicate is permissive as well as remissive. Having remitted the sacrilegious abuse of natural faculties, man is permitted the sacramental use of those faculties.

Reconciliation is the goal of action in Rotrou’s theater of ambivalent religious forces. As a poet, the seventeenth-century dramatist never succumbs to that “horreur de la vie” which leads Baudelaire to assert that “il se fait un divorce de plus en plus sensible entre l’esprit et la brute.” In his darkest moments, Rotrou never looks on the world as the comitragedy Baudelaire came to see in it.

Rotrou always writes tragicomedy. In arriving at a minimal definition of seventeenth-century French tragedy, Knight does not include those very plays in which he, like Lanson before him, finds that Rotrou “prefigures Racine.” One assumes that Knight excludes all of Rotrou from his definition on the grounds that all of the plays violate vraisemblance and les bienséances. The late plays do meet the other minimal conditions, it is true: “a dramatic action in which personnages above the common have to react to a situation above the common, in that it involves a danger usually of death.” Yet, beyond these minimal conditions, in both his theater of immanence and his theater of transcendence, Rotrou’s plays are tragicomedies. They express in their plots the movement of the parts in that compound word: they move through the tragic to the comic, from the conjectured
loss of value to the actual retrieval of value. However things work out in “modern tragicomedy” in the Age of Anxiety, they always work out as planned in the tragicomedy of an Age of Reason that is still an Age of Faith. Rotrou manipulates his plots toward their “happy ending,” just as God manipulates the world toward its “happy ending.” To apply certain concepts of modern linguistics, Rotrou’s plays are “transforms” of a “deep grammar” of eternal meaning. To apply the chief concept of the more optimistic school of thought in modern theology, his is a “theology of hope.”

Even in moments of greatest stress on either of its major tendencies, Rotrou’s tragicomedy remains within the bounds of a religious vision in which the transcendent God is said to have resanctified the fallen world through the sacramental gift of His Merciful Son Become Man. In its specific Christian as well as in its secular expression, Rotrou’s vision re-states an ancient, enduring faith in the holiness of the human condition.

In life and in death, Rotrou reflected on the meaning of this world’s signs. “Au moment que je vous écris,” he informed his brother in his last hours, “les cloches sonnent pour la vingtième personne qui est morte aujourd’hui. Elles sonneront pour moi quand il plaira à Dieu.” The sights and sounds of this world are at one with those of another world. In a long canon of dramatic witness, Jean Rotrou unfailingly testified that, in the last things as in the first things, Heaven’s decrees “règlent nos destinées.”