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## Two French Tragedies of Saint Genest

*The Famous Actor or The Martyrdom  
of Saint Genest: Tragedy*  
by Nicolas Mary, sieur Desfontaines

*The Veritable Saint Genest: Tragedy*  
by Jean de Rotrou

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Translated, with Introduction and Notes,  
by Richard Hillman

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# TRADUCTIONS INTROUVABLES

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# Introduction

## Two French Tragedies of Saint Genest

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Besides facilitating the access of English-language readers to two complementary yet contrasting French hagiographic tragedies which deserve attention in themselves—both created around 1644 and on the same subject, the conversion and martyrdom of Saint Genest<sup>1</sup>—the present volume is intended to complement a previous one on the somewhat earlier *théâtre dévot* of the Norman dramatist Pierre Troterel.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, it purports to shed light in compact form on a traditionally flourishing, albeit increasingly precarious, sector of French theatrical activity as it evolved further in the mid-seventeenth century, especially in Paris.

That phenomenon has not attracted a great deal of interest on the part of English literary historians. Yet on the premise, which I would like to think is increasingly accepted, that the early modern theatrical cultures of England and France never existed in total isolation from each other, it might be postulated that the French theatre's predilection for saints' lives and miracles could not have been a matter of total indifference on the other side of the Channel. With respect

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- <sup>1</sup> Details of the editions which serve as the basis of the present translations are as follows: Nicolas Mary, sieur Desfontaines, *L'Illustre Comédien ou le Martyre de Saint Genest, Tragedies hagiographiques: Le Martyre de saint Eustache, L'illustre Olympie, L'illustre Comédien*, ed. Claude Bourqui and Simone de Reyff (Paris: Société des Textes Français Modernes, 2004), pp. 383-543 (Introduction, pp. 385-444); Jean de Rotrou, *Le Véritable Saint Genest, tragédie* (1647), ed. Pierre Pasquier, *Théâtre complet*, gen. ed. Georges Forestier, 13 vols, IV (Paris: Société des Textes Français Modernes, 2001), pp. 157-369 (Introduction, pp. 159-250). I have greatly profited from the editors' work in both cases.
  - <sup>2</sup> Pierre Troterel, *Pièces de dévotion (Hagiographic Plays): La Tragédie de sainte Agnès (1615), La Vie et sainte conversion de Guillaume Duc d'Aquitaine (1632)*, Édition des textes français avec introductions et notes par Pierre Pasquier, English Translations with Introduction and Notes by Richard Hillman (Tours: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, 2023).

to the official closure of public theatres in England under Puritan auspices from 1642 to 1660, might the functioning of devotional theatre in France as an instrument of Counter-Reformation theology—and, more broadly, ideology—have added to the multiple dangers that the English Parliamentary faction perceived theatre generally as posing?

There would have been a conjuncture, in any case, with the English theatre's occasional veering, real or perceived, towards sympathetic treatments of Roman Catholic subjects: witness *The Virgin Martyr* of Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger (1620), as well as the latter's *The Renegado, or The Gentleman of Venice* (1630), which features a positive Jesuit figure. At once more subtly and more deeply significant, perhaps, was *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (Shakespeare, probably with George Wilkins, 1607-8). F. D. Hoeniger, who first brought out that work's saint-play affinities, could affirm, "There are few plays by Shakespeare for which as much evidence is available to testify to their popularity on the stage during the early decades of the seventeenth century."<sup>3</sup> More recently, attention has been paid to the play's perceived suitability for an official occasion (in 1619) in honour of the French ambassador, to its adaptability to Roman Catholic sensibilities, even to its possible use as an instrument of proselytising.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the pre-Revolutionary climate, too, was the active (French) Catholicism, coupled with extensive dramatic engagement, of Queen Henrietta Maria (i.e., Henriette Marie), who was forced to flee England—in, as it happened, the "Saint Genest year" of 1644.<sup>5</sup> Worth singling out in this regard is the Catholicism (by conversion) of James Shirley, who was for a considerable period the Queen's favoured dramatist. And if Shirley's tragedy *The Cardinal* (1641) hardly paints a positive portrait of its ecclesiastical protagonist, the unmistakable allusion to Richelieu in its Prologue not only bespeaks the unremitting hostility of the Queen (and her mother, Marie de' Medici) to that particular churchman, but tellingly assumes the audience's familiarity with French

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3 William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, ed. F. D. Hoeniger, The Arden Shakespeare, 2nd ser. (London: Methuen, 1963), Introduction, pp. lxvi-lxvii; on the affinities with the "miracle play", see pp. lxxxviii-xci.

4 See William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, ed. Suzanne Gossett, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd ser. (London: Thomson Learning, 2004), Introduction, pp. 86-88, and Richard Hillman, "Laughing (Last) in the Brothel: Comedy and Sanctity across the Channel in the Wake of *Pericles*", *Notes and Queries*, ns 68.266 (2021): 121-27, 123.

5 Much salutary attention has latterly been paid to this important subject. See, notably, Karen Britland, *Drama at the Courts of Queen Henrietta Maria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and "Queen Henrietta Maria's Theatrical Patronage", *Henrietta Maria: Piety, Politics and Patronage*, ed. Erin Griffey, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 57-72, as well as, in the same volume, Malcolm Smuts, "Religion, European Politics and Henrietta Maria's Circle, 1625-41", pp. 13-37; also Erica Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion: Queen Henrietta Maria and Court Entertainments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

affairs: “The Cardinal! ’Cause we express no scene, / We do believe most of you, gentlemen, / Are at this hour in France.”<sup>6</sup>

## I

This is hardly the place to engage the elusive and complex issue of English Protestant feelings about French theatre, nor others that hover in the background to the plays at hand. Hovering most closely among these, paradoxically, is the roughly parallel hostility within certain French Counter-Reformation circles, ecclesiastic and moralist, to theatre in general and religious theatre in particular.<sup>7</sup> This attitude, traceable both directly and indirectly (mainly through defences of theatre) had been formalised by the Council of Trent (1545-63), which forbade clergy from attending theatrical performances, a position upheld by synods throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> It would find its fullest expression, by another paradox, during the 1660s, when the theatre had been restored in England under Charles II.<sup>9</sup> And it would pointedly extend to French theatre professionals, who, at least at various times and in certain places, found themselves excluded from the Christian sacraments.<sup>10</sup>

Intertwined with this issue were evolving aesthetic criteria. Already by mid-century, the medieval tradition of saint and martyr plays, which had persisted side-by-side with other dramatic forms, especially in the provinces, and had allowed considerable formal freedom to Troterel, for example, began to reflect the disciplinary influence, according to Parisian tastes, of neo-classical theatrical precepts: the neo-Aristotelian “unities” of time, place and action, the “*bienséances*” governing what was acceptable to display on stage, the challenge of portraying changes in dramatic character—such as, precisely, conversion.<sup>11</sup>

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6 James Shirley, *The Cardinal*, ed. Elizabeth M. Yearling, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), Prol. 1-3.

7 See Rotrou, ed. Pasquier, Introduction, pp. 181-83, but also p. 241 on the positive value accorded the theatre by influential members of the “*milieu dévot*”. For a balanced overview with a long perspective, see Jean Dubu, *Les Églises chrétiennes et le théâtre: 1550-1850*, pref. Bruno Neveu (Grenoble: Presses Universitaire de Grenoble, 1997). See also Simone de Reyff, *L’Église et le théâtre: l’exemple de la France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, *Histoire du Christianisme* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998), and, for a thematically organised survey of the *querelle du théâtre*, Henry Phillips, *The Theatre and Its Critics in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

8 Dubu, p. 84.

9 This particular anti-theatrical current was chiefly associated with the abbey of Port-Royal, a stronghold of Jansenism; see Laurent Thirouin, *L’Aveuglement salutaire. Le réquisitoire contre ce théâtre dans la France classique*, *Champion Classiques, série “Essais”* (Paris: H. Champion, 1997).

10 See Bruno Nevo, Preface to Dubu, pp. 5-6.

11 See Pierre Pasquier, “L’option martyrologique des dramaturges parisiens de dévotion (1636-1646), heurs et malheurs d’un choix”, *Littératures Classiques*, 73 (2010): 169-81, and, on the challenge of

Under the further pressure of religious conservatives, however sporadic, the writing was on the wall (as it were) for hagiographic drama generally, at least on the Parisian stage, and its demise received impetus from the hostile reaction to Pierre Corneille's *Théodore vierge et martyr* in 1645-46.<sup>12</sup>

This context undoubtedly adds a dimension to the sudden French manifestation of interest in Saint Genest as the patron saint of actors, hence implicitly as the defender of *théâtre dévot*, and indeed theatre in general, on the grounds of its power to effect, not merely moral reformation, but spiritual conversion.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, it emerges as significant that Rotrou's play—to a degree far beyond that of Desfontaines—imparts value to the impact of theatre on its audience, as measured notably by the Emperor Diocletian himself, and to the practical artistry involved in dramatic production, including the process of rehearsal and the role of the Decorator, and indeed the prompter (at IV.vi.1298). Even the portrait of the *prima donna* Marcèle, with her vanity flattered by adoring fans, while it serves as a significant counter-point to Genest's piety, supports the play's project of evoking the theatrical world with convincing multi-dimensionality—indeed, with a “realism” that accentuates its distancing from a higher, “true” reality.

The project of defending the theatre by way of its patron saint may also have been energised, as Pasquier further proposes, by the publication, also in 1644, of a hagiographic document by the enormously prolific polyglot translator and early member of the Académie Française, Jean Baudoin (1584?-1650).<sup>14</sup> *Les Saintes Metamorphoses* gives notable prominence to the instance of Saint Genest.<sup>15</sup> Baudoin's work may have particu-

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portraying character changes, his Introduction to *La Vie et sainte conversion de Guillaume duc d'Aquitaine*, Pierre Troterel, *Pièces de dévotion / Hagiographic Plays*, pp. 165-66. On the other hand, in a comprehensive recent study Pasquier has thoroughly documented the persistence of medieval hagiographic traditions in the provinces and nuanced the picture of reception of *théâtre dévot* in both the provinces and Paris, and in both performance and print; see Pierre Pasquier, “La Réception du théâtre de dévotion au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France”, *Divertir, instruire, célébrer. Études sur le théâtre et la théâtralité dans l'Europe prémoderne à la mémoire d'André Lascombes / To Entertain, Instruct and Celebrate: Studies in Early Modern Theatre and Theatricality in Memory of André Lascombes*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bordier, Juan Carlos Garrot Zambrana, Richard Hillman and Pierre Pasquier, Regards Croisés sur la Scène Européenne (Tours: Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance, 2023), publication online, <<https://sceneeuropenne.univ-tours.fr/sites/default/files/regards/pdf/RCSSE10-14-PASQUIER.pdf>>; pp. 245-89.

**12** For a thorough discussion of this phenomenon, its contexts and the issues involved, see Christian Biet, “La Sainte, la prostituée, l'actrice: l'impossible modèle religieux dans *Théodore vierge et martyr* de Corneille”, *Littératures Classiques*, 39 (2000): pp. 81-103.

**13** See Rotrou, ed. Pasquier, Introduction, pp. 208-13, 241-43.

**14** See Rotrou, ed. Pasquier, Introduction, pp. 211-13.

**15** Jean Baudoin, *Les Saintes Metamorphoses, ou les Changemens miraculeux de quelques grands saints, tirez de leurs Vies* (Paris: Pierre Moreau, 1644), pp. 129-51 (Discours 6, “Saint Genest, de Comedien

larly contributed, I will be suggesting, to the distinctive treatment of identity in relation to the profession of acting which constitutes one of the key features of Rotrou's play, indeed perhaps part of its claim to be "*véritable*". Yet the precarious status of *théâtre dévot* as a genre was not necessarily reinforced, to judge from the limited existing evidence, by the implicit case made for it by the dramatic treatments of Saint Genest. The respective modern editors of the plays—Pasquier (for Rotrou), Claude Bourqui and Simone de Reyff (for Desfontaines)—have been struck by the absence of indications that either was favourably received by its Parisian audiences, and neither enjoyed an especially distinguished critical reputation in its own time, although both received multiple re-editions.<sup>16</sup>

## II

Inevitably engaged by the present volume, although indirectly, and without a proposed resolution, is a critical debate as to the priority and direction of influence between the two Saint Genest plays. Some such influence is highly probable, although they share a principal source, whether independently or perhaps (in Desfontaines's case) at second hand. That source is Lope de Vega's dramatic treatment in three parts (i.e., over three days) of the story of the actor-saint Ginès (Lat. Genesis), *Lo fingido verdadera* (The Feigned Proved True), which was published in 1620. The modern editors of the two French plays offer opposing arguments for the priority of their respective authors. Pasquier, on the side of majority opinion, essentially endorses the argument of Georges Forestier,<sup>17</sup> who proposes that Rotrou was commissioned by the Troupe Royale, which performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, to produce a version of the story of Genest to compete with that of Desfontaines (*L'Illustre Comédien*), mounted by rival players at L'Illustre Théâtre.

This hypothesis makes obvious sense of Rotrou's claim that his play presents the "*véritable*" Saint Genest, although the term also echoes the title of Lope's work and highlights the interplay exploited by both Lope and Rotrou—less actively by Desfontaines—between notions of truth and feigning. In this view, moreover, Rotrou was effectively responding not merely to a single work of Desfontaines but to the latter's series of three hagiographic tragedies (the first two being *Eustache* [*privilège* 1643] and *L'Illustre Olympie ou le Saint Alexis* [*privilège* 1644]). In any case, Rotrou's venture into the genre entails

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fait Martyr").

<sup>16</sup> On the question of reception, see Rotrou, ed. Pasquier, Introduction, pp. 163-65; Desfontaines, ed. Bourqui and de Reyff, Introduction, pp. 401-2; and Pasquier, "La réception du théâtre de dévotion", p. 281.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Forestier, "*Le Véritable Saint Genest* de Rotrou: enquête sur l'élaboration d'une tragédie chrétienne", *XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, 45 (1993): 305-22; Rotrou, ed. Pasquier, Introduction, pp. 159-61, 242-43.

a striking departure within his extensive and diverse oeuvre, which was dominated by comedies and tragicomedies (including seven additional adaptations of plays by Lope<sup>18</sup>).

On the other hand, Desfontaines's editors make a contrary case for *L'Illustre Comédien* as a reaction to Rotrou.<sup>19</sup> That case substantially rests on the argument that nothing suggests a direct acquaintance with Lope's work on the part of Desfontaines, and that the only textual source the French author might have drawn on apart from Rotrou's play is the sixteenth-century account of Genest by the German hagiographer Surius.<sup>20</sup> Surius' narrative is, in fact, quite rudimentary, as is that in the major hagiographic source for French contemporaries, the *Flos Sanctorum* of the Spanish Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeneira (1526-1611) in its vernacular translation.<sup>21</sup> Certainly, neither leaves room for anything approaching a sub-plot.

The specific textual parallels adduced by Bourqui and de Reyff are convincing. Nevertheless, a broader perspective on the relation among the works of Lope, Desfontaines and Rotrou may be in order, taking account of the very different approaches of the two French playwrights to some less-often remarked aspects of their common material. While the issue of priority no doubt remains insoluble, such a perspective arguably points up a closer essential affinity between Desfontaines's tragedy and the Spanish precursor text.

### III

The more significant points of contact, and contrast, with regard to the three plays' treatments of their central preoccupation, the protagonist's acquisition of sainthood, have been abundantly documented, even if interpretative consensus remains elusive.<sup>22</sup> Yet less central elements may also prove revealing. Perhaps surprisingly, the clearest glimpse of Desfontaines's affinity with Lope, and of Rotrou's divergence, is perhaps afforded by the plays' respective treatments of worldly love-relations—a conventionally appealing dramatic element, and one which found its way into a surprising number of hagiographic

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**18** See Rotrou, ed. Pasquier, Introduction, p. 167, n22.

**19** Desfontaines, ed. Bourqui and de Reyff, Introduction, pp. 400-6. (De Reyff has therefore changed her position since 1997, when she spoke of Rotrou as offering a response to Desfontaines [*L'Église et le théâtre*, pp. 56-57].)

**20** I.e., Laurentius Surius [Lorenz Sauer], "De S. Genesio romano martyre, etc.," *De Probatis sanctorum historiis, etc.*, 7 vols, vol. IV (Köln: apud G. Calenium et haeredes Quentelios, 1579), pp. 916-17.

**21** For convenience of reference, I cite Pedro Ribadeneira [*sic*], *Les nouvelles fleurs des vies des Saints, et fêtes de l'année, etc.*, trans. René Gaultier, André Du Val *et al.* (Lyons: Claude Carteron, 1707), available on Gallica; see "La Vie de Saint Genest, Comédien, & Martir. 25. Aoû.", pp. 780-81.

**22** For Desfontaines, see Forestier, pp. 314-14, and Bourqui and de Reyff, eds, Introduction, pp. 403-6; for Rotrou, Pasquier, ed., Introduction, pp. 167-70, and Léonce Person, "*Le Véritable Saint-Genest de Rotrou et Le Fingido Verdadero de Lope de Vega: Conférence*" (Paris: Noizette, 1886).



dramas,<sup>23</sup> but which certainly has no place in the underlying accounts of the “historical” Genest’s conversion and martyrdom.

A major component of the much-amplified three-part version produced by Lope involves the intermingling of the future saint’s theatrical activities with a romantic subplot of a kind which would seem more at home in comedy, tragicomedy or indeed tragedy of a secular kind. Genès suffers from love for the actress Marcela, who rejects him for their fellow player Octavio. The ensuing complications enter into, and indeed disrupt, the first play that the company mount for the emperor Diocleciano in celebration of his wedding—to the point where an initial confusion between fiction and reality baffles the emperor, when Ginès, in despair, demands justice against Octavio for eloping with Marcela. All of this is prelude to the second inset piece, in which Ginès has been asked to play the role of a Christian martyr and in which his on-stage conversion—the centre-piece of the legend—will take place. Prior to that performance, it is revealed that Octavio has actually married Marcela, and Ginès must accept the *fait accompli*.

What distinctively links this aspect of Lope’s tragedy with that of Desfontaines is the latter’s similar supplying of Genest with a love-interest within his troupe in the person of Pamphilie, to whom he effusively expresses his devotion. Not only is this passion returned, however, but in the crucial and remarkably powerful scene of their reunion after his conversion (IV.iii), when Pamphilie has undertaken to persuade him to recant, it is his love, which now takes the form of a desire for her salvation, that transfigures hers and makes her resolve to share his martyrdom. This is to take Lope’s treatment of terrestrial love, which Ginès, in accepting the painful loss of Marcela, effectively renounces as a prelude to his discovery of the divine, a significant step further—or perhaps, from a strict theological angle, backward. For Desfontaines gives the impression, at least, of recuperating the traditional spiritual apparatus of neo-Platonism, by which earthly love, inspired by terrestrial beauty, may serve as a vehicle of transcendence. The point is backhandedly confirmed by the contrasting failure of the amorous relation between Aristide and Luciane—introduced without forewarning in V.i.1315 ff.—to rise above commonplace jealousy and its destructive consequences.

At any rate, the force of the double martyrdom of Genest and Pamphilie is shown to resonate throughout the rest of the play-world—from the whirlwind of futile passions that provokes the deaths of their fellow-actors to the repentant distress of Diocletian himself, who dimly intuits, across an access of conscience and political insecurity, that the deities to whom he has sacrificed the innocent martyrs are false inventions. The con-

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23 In drawing attention to this phenomenon, Pasquier, “La réception du théâtre de dévotion”, cites the example of Desfontaines’s *L’Illustre Olympie ou le Saint Alexis* (p. 282).

trast with the curt dismissal of Rotrou's unshaken Emperor following Genest's death is particularly striking: "*Ainsi reçoive un prompt et sévère supplice / Quiconque ose des Dieux irriter la Justice* [Let such swift and bitter punishment be the end / Of any who dares the gods' justice to offend]" (Rotrou, V.vii.1743-44).

Bourqui and de Reyff, in their illuminating Introduction to *L'Illustre Comédien*, convincingly demonstrate (following the lead of Henry Carrington Lancaster) the significant indebtedness of Desfontaines to a recent contribution of Pierre Corneille to the corpus of hagiographic drama, *Polyeucte martyr* (1641).<sup>24</sup> Their central point of comparison is none other than the relation between the eponymous protagonist, destined for martyrdom, and his love-interest, in that case his non-Christian wife, Paulina. As in the treatment of Genest and Pamphilie, there is a major confrontation scene, but one in which Paulina vainly opposes the claims of her terrestrial love to those of the divine love to which Polyeucte has been converted.

The differences between the two confrontations and their outcomes, however, again throw into relief Desfontaines's attempt, at least anticipated if not inspired by Lope, to integrate romantic love conventions into hagiography. First, and most obviously, Paulina fails to deter Polyeucte from his martyr's trajectory; in fact, she is herself finally converted, though only after his death, by the blood he has shed in the divine cause. But another point which Bourqui and de Reyff may undervalue, even as they develop it, relates to the theatricality of Desfontaines's "*grande scène*", which originally, as they convincingly maintain, was designed to exploit the widely admired virtuoso talents of the company's leading actress, Madeleine Béjart, in the role of Pamphilie.<sup>25</sup> Arguably, this is where the metadramatic element built into Genest's original story, and reproduced by Lope, seems to have been, in effect, redirected by Desfontaines—in a way Rotrou might plausibly have considered to be less than "*véritable*".

Somewhat strangely, Bourqui and de Reyff reduce the character of Pamphile in Act III, Scene iii, to that of a "*nouvelle Médée* [new Medea]" who "*nourrit un sentiment de vengeance* [nurtures a thirst for vengeance]".<sup>26</sup> This is to take at face value the profession of absolute outrage by which, deflecting Diocletian's anger from her fellow actors, she induces him to grant her a private interview with Genest:

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**24** Desfontaines, ed. Bourqui and de Reyff, Introduction, pp. 419-23. Cf. Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century. Part II, The Period of Corneille, 1635-1651*, 2 vols (1932; rpt. New York: Gordian, 1966), II: 536, who also affirms that Desfontaines owed nothing to Lope.

**25** Desfontaines, ed. Bourqui and de Reyff, Introduction, p. 435.

**26** *Ibid.*, p. 420.

... *je me veux venger aussi bien que nos Dieux.*  
*César, si cet ingrat ne change de courage,*  
*Épargne tes bourreaux, il suffit de ma rage.*

[Vengeance I seek—for me and our divinities.  
 Caesar, if that ingrate reveals no change of heart,  
 Spare your tormentors—my rage will tear him apart!] (III.iii.923-25)

Especially as it might have been inflated by a great actress, this fury is surely suggestive in context of overacting—an attempt, at least, to deny contrary feelings.

Next, prior to the confrontation itself, which pivots on Pamphilie’s conversion through acceptance that Genest’s love for her soul is truer than his love for her person, she is accorded an extraordinary soliloquy, which occupies the whole of Act IV, Scene ii, and strikingly departs in form from the Alexandrines comprising the previous text: unexpectedly—with considerable dramatic effect—Pamphilie unfolds her inner struggle, her futile attempt to force herself to hate the man she loves, over some thirty lines in intricately rhymed stanzas dominated by octosyllabics and culminating, as he enters, with “*Mais voici cet ingrat, cachons notre faiblesse, / Ah! cet abord me tue.* [But the ingrate’s here—let me my weakness control. / Oh, this encounter kills me!]” (IV.ii.1002-3). Against this background, which would in itself be a gift to a gifted actress, the climactic confrontation, and especially Pamphilie’s vindictive hostility, would surely play out on two levels, to the point where her sudden surrender to her feelings of love, and through them to her lover’s Christian faith, releases powerful tensions but does not surprise. Unquestionably, this sequence represents the high point of Desfontaines’s dramatic writing in *L’Illustre Comédien*, and this in itself is telling, since the martyrological *raison d’être* tends to fade into the background.

#### IV

Rotrou, by contrast with both Lope and Desfontaines, and contrary to dramatic opportunism, if not audience expectation, gives Genest no terrestrial love-interest at all, whether to set off or to enhance his conversion. Instead, as if in pointed response to both the Marcela of Lope and the Pamphilie of Desfontaines, Rotrou represents Marcèle, the only female member of the troupe, as a shallow coquette, thriving on the adoration of her fans and notably impervious to the spiritual significance of the lines she speaks in the role of the Christian Natalie, the loving wife of the martyr Adrian. There is a pointed contrast between Genest’s palpable anticipation of his “*véritable*” identity even in his initial rehearsal of Adrian’s lines in Act Two, Scene Two—which is crassly interrupted by Marcèle’s falsely modest complaint about the “*importuns* [pestering throng]” (II.iii.350)—and her own rehearsal (373-84), which he finds deeply moving but which she

frankly dismisses, in effect, as well-executed imitation: “*Vous m’en croyez bien plus, que je ne m’en présume* [You have greater faith in me than I myself do]” (389).

Marcèle is concerned about Genest’s fate simply because it threatens her livelihood, and her allegiance to the pagan gods remains unshaken. The climactic scene of her confrontation with Genest in prison (Act Five, Scene Two) could not more strikingly depart from the dramatically affecting encounter of Pamphile with Genest in *L’Illustre Comédien*, and it issues ironically in a selfishly bitter “*Adieu cruel* [Adieu, cruel one]” on her part, echoed by his simple “*Adieu*” (V.iii.1)—simple, but informed by the profound meaning embedded in that formula.

I have elsewhere explored in some detail the way in which the female characters in *Le Véritable Saint Genest* function as foils in support of the treatment of conversion and martyrdom.<sup>27</sup> Marcèle, in this view, has a counterpart and foil of her own in the person of Valérie, Diocletian’s daughter and wife of the “Caesar” Maximin (Maximian in the translation). Initially married against her will, given her husband’s lowly origins, she is soon reconciled to him by his military and political power, so that she, too, becomes an index of spiritual obliviousness—all the more so because she because she evinces a passing openness to the world of the theatre and shows recognisably “womanly” sympathy with Marcèle over the latter’s loss of her vocation.<sup>28</sup> Allowed to resound at the play’s conclusion, together with Maximin’s glib consolation, this attitude only reinforces the total isolation of Genest’s discovery of spiritual verity from the continuing blindness of the pagan world, which the audience well knows, from its historical knowledge, is living on borrowed time.

## V

This is perhaps as good a route as any by which to confront what Forestier identifies as the play’s “*grande ironie céleste* [great celestial irony]”<sup>29</sup>—a dimension conspicuously absent from Desfontaines’s version—and the essential role played by meta-theatricality in constructing it. The venerable conceit of *theatrum mundi*, which figures the world as a stage on which human beings merely act their transitory parts, is persuasively applied by Forestier to Rotrou’s method and message: Genest’s translation to a higher—“*vérita-*

27 Richard Hillman, “‘Enter [...] a Boy Dressed for a Lady’: (Meta)Theatricality, Tyranny and *Theatrum Mundi* in Philip Massinger’s *The Roman Actor* (1629) and Jean de Rotrou’s *Le Véritable Saint Genest* (1644)”, *Modern Language Review*, 117.4 (2022): pp. 535-59, esp. 552-54.

28 “*Vous voyez de quel soin je vous prêtai les mains: / Mais sa grâce n’est plus au pouvoir des humains* [You see how earnestly I presented your case, / But his pardon now lies beyond the human race]” (V.vii.1745-46).

29 Forestier, p. 322.

*ble*—reality exposes the world of pagan belief and power as idle imitation and, given the impossibility of salvation within it, as true tragedy, contrasted with divine comedy.

The mechanism of the play-within-the-play in effecting Genest's conversion by supernatural intervention at the moment of a feigned baptism—hence, Lope's label of "The Feigned Proved True"—is an unavoidable component of the legend. It is also indispensable, one might suppose, to validating the claim of theatre to function as an instrument of salvation. *L'Illustre Comédien*, however, both complicates this moment, by enfolding it within the protagonist's familial and amatory affairs, and renders it elusive, if not ambiguous, by presenting it indirectly, through Genest's narration: he must insist, for both on- and off-stage audiences, that "*je vous dis des choses véritables* [the things I recount are veritable]" (III.ii.658).

From the first, Rotrou's approach focuses sharply on the issue of the actor as entering entirely into his role, with the intrigued Valérie testifying to his power of total conviction:

*Mais on vante surtout, l'inimitable adresse  
Dont tu feins d'un Chrétien le zèle et l'allégresse  
Quand, le voyant marcher du Baptême au trépas,  
Il semble que les feux soient des fleurs sous tes pas.*

[But most praised is the inimitable address  
With which you feign a Christian's zeal and joyfulness,  
When, as he strides from baptism his death to meet,  
It seems the fires are flowers beneath his feet.] (I.v.293-96)

To Maximin's more sceptical remark, "*L'épreuve en est aisée* [That is readily ascertained]" (297)—rich with irony at his own expense, as are a number of his pronouncements—Genest counters that a performance of the conversion and martyrdom of his former officer Adrian on Maximin's orders will furnish an ample demonstration, if only the Roman will allow himself to be represented on stage. The proposition piques the latter's curiosity but does not impinge on his detachment.

This makes for a suggestive introduction to Rotrou's major metadramatic innovation and supplement to Lope: his choice as the medium of Genest's conversion of a faithful adaptation (at some points closely translated) of the neo-Latin drama (pub. 1630) by the Jesuit Louis Cellot depicting the martyrdom of Saint Adrian.<sup>30</sup> The power of theatrical

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**30** *Sanctus Adrianus Martyr, Ludovici Cellotii Parisiensis e societ. Iesu, Opera Poetica* (Paris: Sebastien Cramoisy, 1630), pp. 1-100. On the adaptation of this work, see Rotrou, ed. Pasquier, Introduction, pp. 170-73. Person strangely opines that Rotrou's incorporation of Cellot's tragedy "*n'a pas d'importance dans l'agencement du drame* [is of no importance in the organisation of the play]" (p. 4).

performance to destabilise identity is thereby put in play, in keeping with the Emperor's own tribute to Genest in initially commending his performances: "*Avec confusion j'ai vu cent fois tes feintes, / Me livrer malgré moi de sensibles atteintes* [Stupefied, I have often known your imitations / To affect me despite myself with real sensations]" (I.v.233-34). In this context, the fact that only Genest, by profession the instrument of provoking emotions in others, is affected by his enactment of Adrian—neither the onstage audience nor his fellow actors, and most conspicuously not Marcèle-as-Natalie—emphasises the arbitrary nature of the gift of divine grace, which, in theological terms, is merited, not by its inevitably sinful recipient, but by the expiatory sufferings of Christ.

The part played by Baudoin's 1644 narrative presentation of Genest in guiding Rotrou's composition fully warrants Pasquier's attention, I believe, not simply for its insistence, in the context of the *dévo*t milieu, on the mysterious and miraculous operation of divine grace, but for its explicit integration into Genest's legend of the notions of *theatrum mundi* and theatricality itself.<sup>31</sup> Here is Baudoin's general reflection:

*Ce n'est pas une mauuaise pensé que celle de quelques Stoïiens, qui disent que le Monde est un grand theatre, où toutes les actions de la vie humaine se voyent diuersement représentés. Les hommes en sont les Comediens, qui tirent les principaux sujets de leurs pieces des passions différentes. [...] Aussi est-ce d'elles-mesmes, et particulièrement de la Haine, de l'amour, de la Crainte, et de la Jalousie, que se forment des Avantures estranges, où la Tragedie a beaucoup plus de part que la Comedie.*

[The idea of certain Stoics was not a bad one, when they said that the world is a great theatre, where all the actions of human life are seen represented in their diversity. Men are its actors, who draw the different subjects of their plays from different passions. [...] So it is from these, and especially from hate, love, fear and jealousy, that strange adventures are formed, in which tragedy has a much larger part than comedy.]<sup>32</sup>

And with specific regard to Genest's "holy metamorphosis", Baudoin finds pertinent an actor's natural delight in assuming different identities and imitating divers passions, "*des mouuemens desquels, selon qu'ils sont violens, troublent souuent la Raison, & mettent l'Ame en desordre* [whose changes, inasmuch as they are violent, often trouble the reason

**31** On the apparent influence of Baudoin, see Hillman, "Enter [...] a Boy Dressed for a Lady]", esp. pp. 556-59, where it is suggested, with due caution, that this prolific polyglot translator, with a demonstrable knowledge of English texts, may have pointed Rotrou towards *The Roman Actor* of Philip Massinger (1626), a tragedy which deploys analogous issues of identity and *theatrum mundi* in the context of pagan Roman tyranny.

**32** Baudoin, pp. 129-30.

and cause disorder in the soul]”.<sup>33</sup> He might as well have been scripting Diocletian’s avowal of “*confusion*”.

Grace lifts Genest out of the stage of this world. The physical opening of the heavens with the angelic voice, which he at first suspects may be a practical joke, a “*feinte*”<sup>34</sup>—and which is ultimately, after all, by a further irony, a theatrical device—is the promise of this transcendence, by which he will leave behind those non-Christians who are acting illusory parts, unbeknownst to themselves. Their ignorance, which effectively puts that of Rotrou’s real audience to the test, is constantly made apparent through the unconscious doubleness of their language, for their down-to-earth speech resonates willy-nilly with spiritual meanings. This is a pervasive metadramatic effect wholly absent from Defontaines’s approach.

The effect is actually signalled (in lines adapted from Lope but also echoing Baudoin<sup>35</sup>) following Genest’s declaration that his “*feint*” is a “*vérité*” (Rotrou, IV.vii.1373-74). When Camille rebukes him, “*Simple, ainsi de César tu méprises la grâce* [Simpleton, how little you care for Caesar’s grace!]”—meaning “favour”, “pardon”—he retorts, “*J’acquiers celle de Dieu!* [I acquire that of God]” (1395-96). And that double meaning of “*grâce*”, which in a sense encompasses all the double meanings throughout the text, carries through to Valérie’s sympathetic words for Marcèle at the conclusion, through which a glimpse of a higher truth momentarily flickers: “*Mais sa grâce n’est plus au pouvoir des humains* [But his pardon now lies beyond the human race]” (V.vii.1746). That glimpse, along with her sympathy, is immediately foreclosed by Maximin, but in terms whose own resonance—reaching as far as the passion of Christ—confirms his blindness:

*Ne pleignez point, Madame, un malheur volontaire,  
Puisqu’il l’a pu franchir, et s’être salulaire;  
Et qu’il a bien voulu, par son impiété,  
D’une feinte, en mourant, faire une vérité.*

[Don’t mourn, Madam, an ill that must wilful be deemed,  
Since he could have passed through it and himself  
redeemed,  
And he instead preferred, in his impiety,  
By his death to forge, by feigning, a verity.] (V.vii.1747-50)

33 Baudoin, pp. 131-32.

34 “*Quelqu’un s’apercevant du caprice où j’étais, / S’est voulu divertir par cette feinte voix* [Someone who perceived me wavering in my choice / Saw fit to amuse himself by feigning that voice]” (II.iv.435-36).

35 See the translation, IV.vii,1396 and n. 89.

The play's last line thus redeploys Lope's title in a richly ambiguous (and of course metadramatic) way, involving both deliberate irony on Maximin's part and irony at his expense, since, in his cynical dismissal, he speaks more truly than he supposes. Also to the point, as elsewhere, is Baudoin, whose language amounts to a direct refutation of Maximin:

*ce que l'on croit n'estre qu'une Fable en luy, devient maintenant vne vraye Histoire. . . . et de rendre visible aux Romains vne Verité qu'ils tiennent pour vn Mensonge.*

[What one believed to be nothing but a fable in him now became a true history. . . . a means of making visible to the Romans a Truth which they held to be a Lie.]<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, the insistent application of the theatrical metaphor to Genest's martyrdom by the Prefect Plancien (Plutianus in the translation), as he reports it, ironically recoils against himself and the onstage audience. The ultimate expression of his secular power—more largely of secular power itself—is his appropriation of the language of Genest's profession when he opposes the latter's imitation of famous heroes, his status as the glory of the Roman theatre, to his incapacity to *act* to avert tragedy in the “reality” of his own life:

*. . . ce glorieux Acteur,  
Des plus fameux Héros, fameux imitateur,  
Du Théâtre Romain, la splendeur et la gloire,*

. . . . .

*A du courroux des Dieux, contre sa perfidie,  
Par un Acte sanglant, fermé la Tragédie.*

[ . . . that glory-covered actor,  
Of the most famous heroes famous imitator,  
Of the Roman theatre the splendour and the glory,  
But such a wretched actor in his own history,

. . . . .

Has, of the gods' outrage against his perfidy,  
With a bloody act concluded the tragedy.] (V.vii.1717-24)

What is intended here by the Prefect as irony—linguistic feigning—could not more clearly evoke true speaking at his own expense. And his ultimate act of appropriating Genest's profession as part of putting him to silence in this world could not more clearly

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36 Baudoin, pp. 136-37.



assimilate that world to tragedy and confer upon his supposed victim the power of blessing God eternally:

*J'ai mis la Tragédie, à sa dernière Scène,  
Et fait, avec sa tête, ensemble séparer,  
Le cher Nom de son Dieu, qu'il voulait proférer.*

[I carried the tragedy to its final scene,  
And caused, at the same instant as his head, to sever  
His god's dear name, which he sought to repeat forever.]  
(V.vii.1740-42)

Thus the purported power of the pagan persecutors over language itself, as over life and death, functions precisely as an index of their unwitting powerlessness, speaking truth despite and across their presumptuous feigning. There could be no more basic evidence of the pervasiveness of meta-theatre as both tenor and vehicle in Rotrou's work.

### Note on the Translations

In keeping with my usual practice, I render the Alexandrines of the original into hexameter couplets, which (at their best) can come close to imitating the effect of the originals. In the present cases, Alexandrines are all but universal. There are no choruses to complicate matters (the fashion had passed), and only occasionally is the versification varied for special effects. These are, however, especially significant moments: in *L'Illustre Comédien*, the entire scene of Pamphile's literally pivotal soliloquy (IV.ii), then her defiant and inspired declaration of true faith, delivered before Diocletian in intricate stanzas (IV.v.1259-98); in Rotrou's tragedy, the quatrain (three octosyllabics plus one hexameter) with which the heavenly voice addresses Genest (II.iv.421-24) and the latter's prison soliloquy in octosyllabic stanzas (V.i.1431-70). I have attempted to preserve these forms.

The names of characters have been normalised to approximate Roman equivalents, where these are evident; otherwise, the French forms are retained in order to preserve the flavour of the originals.

The original punctuation has been freely modified in the interest of clarity, while phrasing has often been rearranged within, and sometimes between, verses. Additions to the text, including occasional proposed stage directions beyond those in the editions of reference, are placed in square brackets.

