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Knowing Irony: The Problem of Corneille

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by

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Irony and knowledge exist in a problematic relationship to each other, one that is strikingly similar to that between knowledge and secrets. If irony becomes unambiguously obvious, that is, known to all, it is no longer perceived as irony. And a secret is not a secret if it is widely known. By the same token, someone must perceive irony in order for it to exist, just as a secret must be known by someone. Thus the question of whether a given author is ironic is unlikely to have a clear, unambiguous answer. The probable lack of final clarity does not make the question any less interesting, however. What I propose to discuss here is how one might decide, that is, *know*, whether Corneille was ironic in his theater, as well as the nature and degree of such irony.

Corneille is rarely associated with irony, for reasons that I believe are simple and stem from a reading of his theater that, first, is largely limited to the tetralogy and, second, tends to view Corneille as a national treasure who gives solemn voice to the mythic virtues of *gloire*, *honneur*, *générosité*, etc. Such totalizing and revered abstractions are implicitly called into question by the double voice of irony and its potential for deflation. Thus irony is a subject rarely discussed in conjunction with Corneille.[1] The tetralogy, however, is hardly representative of all of Corneille's theater, and the values I just mentioned are far less universal in the plays than sometimes assumed. The earnest, heroic image handed down through the generations and so deeply ingrained in French literary history does not do justice to the complexity of Corneille's *œuvre*.

In this brief paper I would like to examine the ironic potential of two specific examples taken from Corneille's theater, but before doing so, I need to clarify what variety of irony I will be considering. I could have focused on other sorts of irony (also found in Corneille); my choice is made

[1] D. C. Muecke, in *Irony and the Ironic* (London: Methuen, 1982), omits Corneille in a long list of Western writers in whose works irony plays a significant role, but he includes Racine, Molière, and Pascal (pp. 3-4).

in the interests of clarity. First, I will not be talking about verbal irony. Verbal irony involves the speech of characters: one says one thing but means something else. One finds numerous examples of verbal irony in such plays as *Nicomède* or *Pulchérie*. Several critics have done work in this area.[2] Nor will I be discussing dramatic irony, the situation where the audience and often an onstage character know more about a given situation than another onstage character. Finally, I will not address what is sometimes termed *tragic irony* or *irony of circumstance or fate*, the most classic example of which is the Greek legend of the statue of Mitys which fell on and killed the very man who had murdered Mitys.[3] Such irony is fundamental to the plotting of virtually all tragic theater and can be found even in *Le Cid*, perhaps the most non-ironic of Corneille's plays, in the cruel coincidence of Chimène being in love with the very man who is forced to duel her father (and vice-versa for Rodrigue).

The type of irony that I do propose to examine, and that I will call an *ironic gap*, involves contiguity coupled with incompatibility, if not downright contradiction. All irony is relational.[4] In verbal irony, the relation is between the said and the unsaid; in non-verbal irony (or as Kerbrat-Orecchioni calls it, "ironie référentielle"), it is typically between two contiguous situations. In the examples I will consider, the ironic gap involves the external borders of the plays, although such gaps may be found within plays as well.

The first example involves the relationship between the two comedies, *Le Menteur* and *La Suite du Menteur*, performed only a year apart (1643-44 and 1644-45). The contiguity of the two plays is not a simple chronological one (as in the case of *Le Cid* and *L'Illusion comique*, for instance), but a close relationship imposed on the spectator by the author through his title, specifically through the use of the term *suite*. As Carmichael says, "Every image and figure in the sequel stands in differential relation to an earlier representation, with which it is affiliated and from which its authority derives."[5] Corneille employs a number of means to ensure a close linkage

[2] R. C. Knight, "Andromaque et l'ironie de Corneille," *Actes du premier congrès international racinien* (Uzès: Peladan, 1963), pp. 21-27; Helen Bates McDennott, "The Uses of Irony in Othon," *French Review* 51 (1978), pp. 648-56; Anne-Marie Paillet-Guth, "L'Ironie dans Nicomède," *L'Information grammaticale* 76 (1998), pp. 20-24.

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 70.

[4] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge; The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 59.

[5] Thomas Carmichael, "'After the Fact': Marx, the Sequel, Postmodernism, and John Barth's *LETTERS*," *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, ed. Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 174-75.

between the two plays. He has three characters from *Le Menteur* reappear in *La Suite*: the protagonist, Dorante; his valet, Cliton; and Dorante's friend, Philiste. Corneille links the plots of the two plays through an elaborate exposition in *La Suite* which explains how the about-to-be-married Dorante of the end of *Le Menteur* finds himself unattached and in a Lyon jail. Cliton makes frequent references to the characters and events of the first play, ensuring that the ties between the two cannot be overlooked as the action of the second play is engaged. Philiste, for his part, explains that he has frequently recounted the events of *Le Menteur* to friends and acquaintances, while changing the names of those involved. Furthermore these same events are reported to have been made into a play currently being performed in Paris. The most important tie between the two plays is, of course, the lie, Dorante's defining characteristic. Dorante frequently tells falsehoods in both plays.[6]

Sites of disjuncture between the two plays, however, are almost as frequent and substantial as these extensive similarities. The primary locus of difference is Dorante himself. The inconsistencies of character are so glaring that we are not certain it is the same individual. Adam voiced this frustration most trenchantly when he said: "Le héros de la seconde pièce n'eût pas été sans intérêt. Il ne fallait pas qu'il s'appelât Dorante."[7] Dorante tells lies in *La Suite*, but here his lies are *généreux*, not self-serving and boastful as they were in *Le Menteur*. The Dorante of *La Suite* is concerned above all with honorable conduct while his earlier incarnation has no compunctions about abusing others' expectations for his own advantage. Their situations are equally dissimilar. The first Dorante is exuberantly free, in Paris for the first time as an adult, while the second spends most of the play in a Lyon prison cell. In contrast to the gap between the two Dorantes, the Cliton of *La Suite* is patently identical to the first Cliton. As he makes repeated references to the first play, he is not merely reminding us that *La Suite* is a sequel, but he is also cuing us, through his skepticism and astonishment, that it is an ill-fitting sequel.

[6] In his edition of *Le Menteur et La Suite du Menteur* (Paris: Folio, 2000), Jean Serroy notes a different kind of link between the two plays: the source of *La Suite*, *Amar sin saber a quien*, appears immediately after the source for *Le Menteur*, *La Verdad sospechosa*, in volume XXII of the *Comedias* of Lope de Vega that Corneille read, an edition that erroneously attributed *La Verdad* to Lope rather than Alarcón. Thus there was apparently an originary relationship of sequence between the two plays in Corneille's mind (p. 305).

[7] Adam, Antoine, *Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^e siècle*, vol. 2 (Paris: Del Duca, 1962), p. 395.

It is clear that there are a number of significant gaps between these two plays, plays which in other respects aggressively advertize their continuity from one to the next. While my response is to label the situation irony, two other basic critical alternatives exist. One is to read the gap between the plays as accidental clumsiness on Corneille's part. The problem with that reading is that it calls into question Corneille's skill as a playwright, a prospect that is, if anything, even more uncomfortable for most readers than accepting the gaps between the two plays. The other alternative is to somehow reconcile the differences. Indeed, a few efforts have been made to paper over the gap between the two plays, between the two Dorantes, but none is very satisfying. Serroy argues, "Mais dans les deux cas, Dorante est fidèle à lui-même: simplement, dans *Le Menteur*, il est fidèle au personnage qu'il se compose, alors que dans *La Suite* il laisse parler sa nature profonde;"[8] elsewhere he suggests that the unifying element is Dorante's relationship to heroism, in both plays represented by his sword.[9]

Whether one seeks to paper over the gap or to draw attention to it (and call it ironic), one is obligated to make an implicit appeal to intentionality. In order for the gap not to be seen as a sign of the author's incompetence, he must have chosen to create it. Needless to say, intentionality is very murky critical terrain but virtually unavoidable when discussing irony in a literary work.[10] Reconstructing Corneille's intentions necessarily involves conjecture.

With only a moderate amount of such conjecture, however, the gap between the two plays can be explained, and not only the gap, but also the simultaneous presence of similarities and incompatibilities between *Le Menteur* and *La Suite*. Indications suggest that Corneille is not trying to smooth over the rough edges separating the one play from its suite, but rather he chooses to underscore their differences. We have already seen

[8] Jean Serroy, "La Sincérité du Menteur," *Travaux de littérature* 7 (1994), p. 134.

[9] "La différence si souvent relevée entre les deux pièces a trop facilement conduit à conclure qu'elles n'offraient aucun lien, et que *La Suite* portait bien mal son nom. C'est sans doute faire trop peu de cas de ce rapport à l'héroïsme que le personnage entretient dans les deux pièces et que traduit d'emblée, dans l'une et l'autre scène d'exposition, l'usage de cet instrument qui en est la projection à la fois métonymique et métaphorique: l'épée." Serroy, "Préface" to *Le Menteur et La Suite Du Menteur*, p. 12.

[10] Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni notes that "l'étude de l'ironie littéraire est absolument indissociable d'une interrogation sur le sujet d'énonciation, cette instance qui, dissimulée derrière le texte, juge, évalue, ironise. Si l'on refuse ce type de problématique, le concept d'ironie se trouve du même coup frappé d'inanité." "Problèmes de l'ironie," *Linguistique et Sémiologie* 2 (1976), p. 41.

how the dissimilarities between the two Dorantes coupled with the similarities between the two Clitons function in this fashion. The clearest example of Corneille's seemingly deliberate construction of the gap, however, is the exposition of *La Suite* which, while painstakingly linking the action of the two plays, simultaneously subverts the idea of continuity by deliberately making Dorante appear to be a more pernicious character than either of the plays themselves would suggest. Corneille could have had both Dorante's father and Lucrèce die in some tragic fashion to which Dorante would have been a powerless bystander; instead he has Dorante desert his bride, steal her dowry, and thereby at least indirectly cause his father's death. In so doing, Corneille takes his own site of continuity—the exposition of the second play—and creates dissonance. The author seems to be using Dorante's gratuitously despicable behavior in order to poke fun at the idea of a sequel, the idea of seamless continuity. Within *La Suite* itself, Corneille has Cliton attempt to make sense of the rupture between the two Dorantes in terms of conversion: "Il s'est bien converti [...]/ C'est tout un autre esprit sous le même visage" (ll.599-600; also l.673). It is difficult, however, to take this position too seriously, given the comic nature of the speaker and the fact that the play is hardly a religious one. Corneille may be suggesting playfully through Cliton that divine intervention would be necessary to eliminate the enormous discrepancies between the two Dorantes. Corneille also mocks the happy ending of comedy by having the dénouement of *La Suite* closely resemble the ending of *Le Menteur*: an impending marriage. The outcome for the betrothed couple Dorante and Lucrèce, described in the exposition of *La Suite*, does not augure well for the impending union between Dorante and Mélisse. Finally, one may posit that the ironic gap between the two plays is not merely a strategy of showmanship or fun for Corneille, but, more significantly, a means of reproducing the complex relationship between lies and truth at the heart of both of Corneille's final comedies.

While my arguments concerning an ironic gap between *Le Menteur* and *La Suite du Menteur* may be convincing, the larger problem of intentionality is hard to dismiss. Corneille's *Discours* and *Examens* do not address the subject of irony nor do they give any indication of any playful intent. Other extra-textual sources are of little help. One might argue, as Jaouën does, that Corneille's relations with political figures such as Richelieu, Mazarin, Fouquet, Colbert, and Louis XIV were full of contradictions.[11] On that basis, it seems reasonable to suggest that Corneille was secretive in revealing his true political leanings, but to go from there to irony

[11] Françoise Jaouën, "La Faute à Corneille," *Les Cahiers* 21 (1996), p. 62.

in and between his plays seems like an unjustified leap. Intentionality is an even more pressing problem in my second example because of the political implications of reading irony into the gap.

La Toison d'or is preceded by an allegorical prologue in which the peace with Spain and the mariage between Louis and Marie-Thérèse is celebrated. While such prologues were not uncommon in the seventeenth century in certain contexts, such as machine-plays and operas,[12] this is the only one of Corneille's plays to be published with one. The physical contiguity of prologue and play invites a reading which relates the two. The potential for close ties is reinforced by certain other similarities: both the prologue and the play involve kings, queens, war and peace, and ascent to the throne.[13] Through figures such as "La Victoire," "La France," "Mars," and "La Paix," the prologue enacts France's suffering in war and its joy at attaining peace through Louis's mariage with the Infanta. The king, while not on stage, is the major focus of the prologue along with his queen who appears in the form of a portrait on the shield of the figure "L'Hyménée." The play itself tells the story of how Jason came to Colchos to obtain the Golden Fleece, and with it, the princess Médée, in order to return home and claim the throne of Thessalie from Pelias. Doubling the situation of the royal wedding found in the prologue, there are two kings in the play: Aète, king of Colchos; and Jason, about to become the king of Thessalie. Similarly, we find two queens: Hypsipyle, queen of Lemnos, and Médée, about to become Jason's queen. The play ends with the promise of two mariages: between Jason and Médée; and between Hypsipyle and Médée's brother, Absyrte.

Just as in the example of the two Menteur plays, however, there are significant disjunctures between the prologue and the play proper. The major gap involves identification. Is Louis to find his double in Aète, the old king who is tricked out of the fleece and thereby loses his kingdom? Is he to see himself in Jason, who tricks Aète, who has callously abandoned Hypsipyle and who, as the audience knows, will do the same to Médée? Is Marie-Thérèse reflected in Hypsipyle, the abandoned and betrayed queen or in the dangerous Médée who betrays her father and her kingdom to run off impetuously with Jason? The disjuncture is compounded by questions of procreation. In the last scene of the play, Jupiter announces that Aète

[12] See Sylvain Cornic, "Ad limina templis Polymniae: Les fonctions du prologue d'opéra chez Quinault," *Recherches des jeunes dix-septiémistes*, ed. Charles Mazouer (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2000), pp. 47-62.

[13] Zanger notes other shared themes, including cross-cultural love, empire building, and stolen riches. Abby E. Zanger, *Scenes from the Marriage of Louis XIV* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 111.

will regain his kingdom and his line will carry on, not through any issue of his son and Hypsipyle, but through a child named Médus who will be born to Médée. Médée is a problematic maternal figure, as everyone knows that she will kill the children she has by Jason. This is not the picture of dynastic succession that a newlywed Louis XIV would be pleased to take as a model. There is a problem of tonality as well. The end of the prologue is joyous, celebrating peace and marriage. The play ends with flight, betrayal, and loss, with only the distant promise of dynastic redemption through Médus.[14]

In this second case of disjuncture there have been more numerous efforts made to reconcile the gaps. Corneille himself addresses the issue in what he terms the "décoration du prologue": "L'heureux mariage de Sa Majesté, et la Paix qu'il lui a plu donner à ses Peuples, ayant été les motifs de la réjouissance publique, pour laquelle cette tragédie a été préparée, non seulement il était juste qu'ils servissent de sujet au Prologue qui la précède, mais il était même absolument impossible d'en choisir une plus illustre matière," but he goes no farther than to link the king's marriage, the peace treaty, and the story of Jason and Medea through their high level of prestige.[15] Couton simply denies that there is a gap.[16] "Le personnage de Jason convenait à un roi jeune et conquérant," he says, and he equates Jason with Apollo, Hercules, and Alexander, other fictional reincarnations of Louis XIV.[17] Another critical move has been to deny, not the gap, but the contiguity between prologue and play. Niderst argues that Corneille began his play as early as 1656, long before either the peace treaty or the marriage.[18] Such a position concedes that Jason and Médée are problematic stand-ins

[14] Stegmann says of *La Toison d'or*: "La seule signification possible de la pièce serait la fin de l'optimisme cornélien." André Stegmann, ed., *Œuvres complètes*, by Pierre Corneille (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 591.

[15] Pierre Corneille, *La Conquête de la Toison d'or*, ed. Georges Couton, vol. 3 of *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 211.

[16] "Le Prologue apparaît comme un prélude, qui indique le sens de la pièce." Georges Couton, "Notice," *La Toison d'Or*, vol. 3 of *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 1416.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 1417-18. Wagner sees no problem in identifying Jason with Louis: "Sous le masque dramatique de Jason se dissimule une présence historique, le grand roi Louis XIV à l'aube de son règne en 1660." She identifies Hypsipyle with Marie Mancini, the woman whom Louis was forced to abandon in favor of his political mariage to Marie-Thérèse. Marie-France Wagner, "Evocation de Louis XIV sous le masque dramatique de Jason triomphant de l'oracle," *PFSCL* 15 (1988), p. 214.

[18] Alain Niderst, "Notice à *La Toison d'or*." *Théâtre Complet*, vol. 3, pt. I (Rouen: Publication de l'Université de Rouen, 1986), p. 93.

for Louis and Marie-Thérèse, but refuses to assign any meaning to the gap.[19] The most complex discussion of the relationship between the royal marriage and Corneille's play is that of Abby Zanger. She underscores the historical association of the king of Spain with the Golden Fleece as well as the utilization of the Medea myth in the fireworks commemorating the royal marriage in Lyon and Paris.[20] In the Medea myth Zanger sees the characteristic dialectic of nuptial fictions, in this case, danger and its containment.[21] While recognizing repeatedly the potential political danger of the close association of the marriage and the myth,[22] she brings all her considerable critical energy to bear on attenuating the gap between the prologue and the play proper. She presents the juxtaposition of the Medea myth with the royal marriage as a way of mastering what is most feared within the central role of the queen, that is, the power of dynastic succession: the power to make babies and to kill them.[23] She cautions against "insisting on any absolute parallel" between specific characters in the myth and the marriage (although she later refers to Medea as Marie-Thérèse's "homologue"), and hypothesizes that the relationship between the two is an example of the popular genre of the enigma, suggesting that the polyvalent interpretive possibilities that some ascribe to the form would allow Marie-Thérèse to be equated with the Fleece itself as well as with Medea.[24]

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[19] Lancaster is caught between the two positions, claiming on the one hand that Corneille would not have dared represent the royal couple as Jason and Medée, and on the other, that "he evidently meant to indicate the parallel between Jason's quest and Louis' war." Henry Carrington Lancaster, *French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Gordian Press, 1966), pp. 503-04. Displacement of the problem is another tactic: Wygant finds that it is Hypsipyle, the political bride and the one element of the play which is not justified by any source, who represents Marie-Thérèse and that the couple Jason-Médée is not central, allegorically speaking. She goes so far as to suggest a possible identification between Louis and Médée: "in becoming himself, Louis XIV will become not Corneille's Jason, but rather his Medea." Amy Wygant, "Pierre Corneille's Medea-Machine," *Romanic Review* 85 (1994), p. 540.

[20] Zanger, p. 99. She notes, however, the absence of the Medea myth in sonnets commemorating the union or in Collet's allegorical reports.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 99.

[22] She mentions the "problematic aspects of the story," says that it "skirts a bit too close to real territorial issues of the marriage (theft, for example)," mentions "explosive symbols, like Medea," calls the myth and its implications "difficult to neutralize," and says that Corneille's play "seems to hit too close to home for comfort." *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 112, and 127.

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 117 and 125.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 131, and 122-23.

Despite the broad range of arguments that Zanger offers to tie the prologue to the play, and perhaps in part because of their eclectic nature and their multiplicity, a significant gap remains, in my opinion. Irony offers a different avenue of interpretation.[25] But such a reading raises further problems. While the two potentially ironic situations I have presented are remarkably similar in their basic contours, their implications are radically different. Claiming to find an instance of playful irony in conjunction with two comedies is relatively unthreatening. After all, who is the object or victim of this irony? Corneille is perhaps (the problem of intention again) gently poking fun at the spectator who is easily led by his generic expectations; perhaps he is mocking himself as well. In the case of *La Toison d'or* the object of the irony could be none other than the king and his bride, a far more dangerous matter. The question of Corneille's intentions is therefore a substantially more urgent one in this context. One possible explanation is that Corneille's irony here is unconscious.[26] Such an assertion, however, has no moorings in knowledge. What little we do know may suggest a partial solution to the problem. We know that Louis XIV did not, to all accounts, interpret the juxtaposition of the laudatory prologue and the play as irony at his own expense. Corneille was not arrested or exiled. As Hutcheon has argued very cogently, "Irony isn't irony until it is interpreted as such. [...] Someone attributes irony; someone makes irony happen."[27] The interpreter of irony has considerable power over the situation: Corneille may or may not have had an ironic intent in the situations I have described, but his intent is not sufficient either to make those situations ironic or non-ironic. Even if he had no such intent, if Louis XIV found irony in that particular juxtaposition, then that irony would exist.[28] Hutcheon notes: "Irony

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[25] Wygant finds an implication of irony in Niderst's position that Corneille wrote the play long before the peace treaty, but she does not adopt it as her own. Amy Wygant, "Le Corps métaphorique de Médée," *Le Corps au XVII^e siècle*, ed. Ronald W. Tobin (Tübingen: *PFSCL*, 1995), p. 386.

[26] See Frank Stringfellow, Jr., *The Meaning of Irony; a Psychoanalytic Investigation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 27.

[27] Hutcheon, p. 6.

[28] Zanger implies that such a reading on the part of the king was a real possibility when she provides several reasons why it was acceptable for Corneille to present the Medea myth in honor of the king's marriage, the most interesting of which is that *La Toison d'or* was not staged until well after the wedding (1661) and was not staged at court until 1662, by which time the dauphin was already born (p. 129).

is always (whatever else it might be) a modality of perception--or, better, of attribution---of both meaning and evaluative attitude."[29]

I am fully aware of how convenient it is for me to base my assertion of the presence of irony on reader interpretation. The grounds of knowledge shift radically thereby. I claim to know that irony exists because I perceive it. There are, however, obvious drawbacks to this position, not the least of which is my imperious stance. Another is the potential for contagion. As Muecke says, "There is nothing that a 'polemically developed' ironist with a well-stored mind could not see as ironic if he wished; there is always somewhere a contrasting context."[30] Once I identify one situation as ironic, I may potentially go off to find another and another. I would likely be accused of excess and roundly dismissed if I were to propose an ironic reading of the gap between Polyeucte's love for Pauline and his love for God. It is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a clear line between what may be read as ironic and what cannot possibly be, for no final knowledge is achievable in the domain of irony. Its tantalizing ambiguity leaves us in the position of viewers of an Escher print. Are the stairs going up or down? Is this an example of irony or is it not? The tools one must rely on are good judgment and lucidity concerning the pitfalls. Reading Corneille ironically, while it is an enterprise rife with such pitfalls, offers the advantage of a different perspective and encourages a more complex and less stable understanding of the playwright's theater.

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[29] Hutcheon, p. 122.

[30] Muecke, p. 43.