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Repository Citation
Ekstein, N. (2011). Performing violence in Rotrou's theater. *Neophilologus, 95*4, 543-556. doi:10.1007/s11061-011-9243-7

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Performing Violence in Rotrou’s Theater

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Performing Violence in Rotrou's Theater

Violence has a significant place in most theater. Discord and strife are natural to the stage and violence is one of the ways such conflict may be expressed.[1] The inherently spectacular nature of violence makes it particularly theatrical. At the same time, violence pleasingly tantalizes audiences. Indeed, in the period during which Rotrou composed his plays (1628-1649), violence on stage, particularly in the form of duels, ambushes, and attacks, was commonplace (Scherer 1956, p. 411; Guichemerre 1993, p. 285). In part this dramatic predilection was due to the renewed popularity of Seneca, whose theater was known for its extreme violence (Berregard 2006, p. 196). Alternatively, as Baby notes, violence is one of the essential defining characteristics of tragicomedy (2001, p. 78), a genre much favored by Rotrou (seventeen of his thirty-five plays are designated as such) and much in vogue in this period. Despite its popular place on the stage, violence runs the risk of *invraisemblance*: there is invariably a sizable gap between what is supposedly shown on stage and what in fact occurs (e.g., in a stabbing, no one is actually stabbed).[2] If that gap becomes perceptible to the audience, violence jeopardizes its intended onstage function and becomes a signifier of artifice. This risk discouraged few playwrights from using violence in theater, but it probably limited the types of onstage violence presented. And as we all know, the *bienséances*, largely focused on tragedy, were in the process of articulation and development during the period when Rotrou wrote. However, the tension between the forces favoring and opposing onstage violence are inherent to theatrical representation and long predate the institution of rules, rules which in any case did not seem to have had a decisive influence on Rotrou.

What I propose to examine here is first how Rotrou employs violence on the stage, second how he avoids the dangerous gap between fiction and reality described above by focusing attention on potential violence, and finally how he distinguishes himself from his contemporaries by embedding the artifice of performed violence within his plays.

“Real” Violence

It is clear that onstage violence, while perhaps limited in the scope of forms it may take, is typical of pre-classical (or “baroque”) French theater. In this respect Rotrou is exemplary. Every one of his thirty-five plays contains violence of some sort, whether it transpires on stage, off stage, or is merely threatened. I count a total of sixty-seven instances of *onstage* violence in the author’s œuvre, ranging from zero to six per play. Eight of his plays contain no onstage violence and only four (three of which are comedies) contain neither on- or offstage violence. With the exception of *Iphigénie*, the author’s tragedies are particularly bloody, but violence is omnipresent in Rotrou’s theater, regardless of generic designation. Duels are fairly common throughout, threatened, desired, or enacted in eleven of his plays. Rare is the play that does not make use of a sword; daggers, guns, and poison appear as well. The literal spectacle of violence and its accoutrements are almost everywhere. A scaffold threatens Cléandre on stage in *L’Heureux Naufrage* and Cassie’s severed head in the final scene of *Crisante* bespeaks violence quite eloquently.

Onstage violence sometimes takes unexpected forms in this corpus of plays. Rotrou opens several tragicomedies with a violent scene: Nise (disguised as a man) duels her beloved Pamphile whom she believes to be unfaithful; he doesn’t recognize her and wounds her with his sword (*Céliane* I,2). *Agésilan de Colchos* opens with Brunéo and Florisel dueling (I,1), the prescribed path to winning the hand of Forisel’s daughter in marriage. Three compatriots read a letter from the king and immediately turn and attack the hero in the second scene of *Les Occasions perdues*. In all three cases, the audience’s attention is engaged by the early onslaught.

Rotrou uses violence at times to balance a play’s structure: onstage violence occurs only in the first and fifth acts in *Les Sosies* and *Les Occasions perdues*. He also plays with the notion of mathematical imbalance when violent attacks involve more attackers than the number of their prey in *Cléagénor et Doristée* (I,2 offstage), *La Belle Alphrède* (III,6), *Bélisaire* (II,16), *L’Heureux Naufrage* (IV,8), and *Les Occasions perdues* (I,2). At times the imbalance is altered (in *Cléagénor*, the disguised Doristée changes sides; II,2) or rectified (in *Les Occasions* the

queen's men join the fight on the side of the solitary victim, I,2). Violence may be inflicted on objects, as well as people. In *Céliane*, Julie commits violence against a flower (IV,4), while in *Filandre*, Nérée in her jealousy attacks a lock of Célidor's hair that her rival Célise had in her possession (III,6); Cassie's head, mentioned above, is treated like an object by Crisante who throws it at her husband's feet (*Crisante* V,5).

While onstage violence is typically associated with tragicomedy, as many critics have observed,[3] generic distinctions are problematic in Rotrou's theater (see, for example, Louvat 2007, Berregard 2007 and Morel 1968, pp. 136–37). Even if one takes the published generic designations at face value, the plays Rotrou calls "tragicomedies" contain only modestly more onstage violence than his tragedies, and onstage violence is well represented in comedy as well.[4] On several occasions, violence has an unambiguously moral dimension: victims of violence die on stage declaming their own guilt and remorse. It would seem that such expressions of contrition in the face of death are typical of tragicomedy—Hémon notes the *complaisance* with which the criminals of the genre allow themselves to be killed (1906, p. 43)—but here again generic categories reveal little about Rotrou's dramatic practice because criminals express remorse as they die on stage in all genres.[5]

Onstage violence in Rotrou's theater is far more a function of plot or of particular characters than it is of theatrical genres. A fair number of his personages may be characterized as violent. Hercule proposes violence to deal with issues of jealousy, changing his position only when he becomes a victim of violence himself (*Hercule mourant*). Ladislas has a reputation as a violent man when *Venceslas* opens, and he goes on to threaten violence and commit murder offstage. In fact, we may read *Venceslas* as the tale of one violent character surrounded by a non-violent court. Cassie, in *Crisante*, is defined by an impulsion toward sexual violence that he cannot control. The king in *Laure persécutée* has inexplicably violent designs on the young woman his son adores, repeatedly seeking to have her killed. In *L'Innocente Infidélité* almost everyone except the innocent bride Parthénie is violent, especially the scorned Hermante and Clariane, her confidant with magical powers. Even Évandre, Parthénie's virtuous protector, is

surprisingly savage: he shoots and kills Clarimond as punishment for the latter's sexual designs on the queen (IV,7), imprisons Clariane (IV,8), and assaults Hermante with a knife in order to force her to remove the magic ring (V,3). Créon foments violence all around him *Antigone*, in which six characters die. In *Cosroès*, the queen Syra plays a similar role, but she herself dies along with her husband and son. Violence associated with women is far from uncommon in Rotrou's theater. The beleaguered Crisante is violent even in her innocence, killing her confidante Orante on stage when the latter suggests she simply yield to Cassie; later, the queen demands Cassie's head before taking her own life on stage. *Bélisaire*'s Théodore delegates three assassins in her eagerness to have the eponymous character killed, and eventually attempts the deed herself, only to be interrupted by her husband (III,5).

Violence, of course, need not occur on stage. It can transpire before the action of the play or offstage during the course of the play. There is little predramatic violence in Rotrou's theater; most such examples refer either to earlier military feats (those of Bélisaire, Don Lope in *Don Bernard de Cabrère*, Léandre in *La Pèlerine amoureuse*), or else the predramatic actions provide a reflection on character (Ladislas is said to kill often [*Venceslas* ll.84-86], Agamemnon is reported to have killed Clytemnestre's first husband Tantale, carried her off, and killed her newborn son [*Iphigénie* ll.1115-24]); finally we find predramatic violence that influences the play's action (the kidnapping of Doristée [*Cléagénor et Doristée*], the duel in which Don Pèdre killed Don Louis [*Don Lope de Cardone*], Cosroès's murder of his father Hormisdas). The relative paucity of such examples no doubt reflects a more general sparsity of references to pre-dramatic action throughout Rotrou's theater. Temporal depth and complexity are not hallmarks of this playwright.

Offstage violence is somewhat more common and seems characteristic of certain plays that either contain exceptional levels of reported violence (*Cléagénor et Doristée*, *Antigone*) or are tragic, or at least straddle tragedy and tragicomedy (*Le Véritable Saint Genest*, *Cosroès, Venceslas*, *Bélisaire*). Noteworthy is the fact that Rotrou favors onstage violence over offstage: we may therefore conclude that violence is not merely a function of the particular plot, but is an

essentially dramatic feature of his theater, a significant component of what he chooses to enact on stage.

If violence is an undisputed audience-pleaser, so too is sex, and the combination of the two is potent indeed.[6] René Girard discusses at length the close relationship between sex and violence in *La Violence et le sacré*, noting that sexuality is considered impure in large measure because of violence and that "[l]e glissement de la violence à la sexualité, et de la sexualité à la violence s'effectue très aisément, dans un sens comme dans l'autre" (1972, pp. 57-58). Rape, of course, is the classic form that the fusion of sex and violence takes, and *Crisante* is the most powerful such example in Rotrou's theater. Cassie's desire, because illegitimate, necessarily takes a violent form. The rape of the eponymous character dominates the entire play from the first suggestions in the opening scene to the final suicides at the end. The crucial offstage rape scene between acts II and III is echoed by the attempted rape of Marcie, handed over to two soldiers by Cassie in order to keep them from protecting Crisante (recounted in III,2). In *L'Hypocondriaque*, Lysidor and Éristhène attack and attempt to rape Cléonice on stage, but are interrupted (II,2). Similarly, in *Cléagénor et Doristée*, Cléagénor interrupts Ozanor's onstage attempt to rape Doristée (I,3). In all cases the successful or unsuccessful rapists in Rotrou's theater die for their crime. In both *Bélisaire* and *L'Innocente Infidélité*, a woman's sexual desire and jealousy—Théodore's for Bélisaire and Hermante's for Félismond respectively—leads to extremely violent impulses. Théodore tries repeatedly to have Bélisaire killed and finally succeeds, while Hermante uses magic to induce the king to have his new bride killed (III,1). A less conventional conjoining of sex and violence occurs in *Agésilan de Colchos* where, as Charron notes, "[l]es combats successifs de Florisel ont tout l'air d'être sa façon détournée de "faire" l'amour à la reine Sidonie" (1982, p. 31). Violence here is thus a form of displaced sexual desire. Thus, referentially "real" violence, whether enacted on stage or reported, plays a significant if unsurprising role in Rotrou's theater, engaging the audience, structuring the action, delineating characters, and enriching the context of the play.

Potential Violence

Theatrical violence need not be limited to the referentially "real." Indeed, Rotrou is far more apt to have characters make reference to violence that has not (yet) occurred, than to depict or describe referentially real violence. The zone of potential violence — threats of violence, plots to commit violence, offers or demands to be killed — is particularly well suited to theater as it in no way runs the risks that the rules of *vraisemblance* and *bienséances* were developed to avoid, while increasing onstage tension and conflict. Indeed, Rotrou has a decided penchant for threatened violence; it is present in literally all of his plays. Threats become more visually dramatic when they are accompanied by gestures (e.g., Syroès's hand on his sword, *Cosroès*, I,1) and/or props (e.g., Achilles in *Iphigénie* displays his sword on three occasions, while most of the characters in *Filandre* threaten others or suicide with onstage swords). Entire plays revolve around the threat of violence: The eponymous heroine of *Laure perscutée* is indeed persecuted throughout the play by a king who wants to kill her; in *Agésilan de Colchos*, the queen Sidonie's promise of her daughter's hand in marriage to whoever brings her the unfaithful Florisel's head is in force until the dénouement. The threat of violence hangs powerfully over the final scenes of *L'Heureux naufrage*, *Don Lope de Cardone*, *Iphigénie*, and *Venceslas*. In each case, the hero is condemned to die (Cléandre is even on a scaffold), but spared at the very end once the dramatic potential of impending violence has been fully exploited. In *Bélisaire* and *Saint Genest* we find the same threat, but in these cases the eponymous character is in fact killed. Rotrou's plots are rife with threatened violence: violence may be a condition of marriage (*Célimène*, *Agésilan de Colchos*); characters may plot violence against their enemies (*Bélisaire*, *La Bague de l'oubli*, *L'Innocente Infidélité*, *Les Occasions perdues*; *Cosroès*); violence may even appear in dreams (*Cléagénor et Doristée*, *Venceslas*) and one hallucination (*Crisante*).

In some plays, threatened violence is strongly gendered: Queen Théodore in *Bélisaire*, as mentioned above, for example. Elsewhere, the violence women threaten may be directed against themselves: in *Antigone* the female characters (albeit not exclusively) call violence down upon themselves, generally in the place of another (Jocaste, II,4; Ismène, IV,4; Antigone, III,4). *Les*

Deux Pucelles provides an example of women who turn violence both inward and outward because of sexual sins that have led them to despair. Léocadie, who was on the verge of giving herself to Antoine, threatens suicide twice. She even deliberately gets herself chased and captured as a "voleur assassin" (l.1655), hoping to be severely punished. Her threats extend outward against her rival Théodose whom she twice threatens to kill. Théodose, whom Antoine has left pregnant, herself twice threatens suicide (both in II,5) and also directs threats against her rival, who finally is simply a double of herself.

When acts of violence are incomplete or interrupted, they enjoy an intermediate status between "real," whether on stage or off, and threatened.[7] The playwright can use the threatened or incipient violence to raise onstage tension and suspense, while avoiding the brutal acts themselves. For example, Hémon is restrained from killing himself by Ismène (*Antigone* V,8) and Bélisaire interrupts Narsès and Léonse as they attack Philippe (II,18). Onstage violence may also be circumvented by recognition of the disguised opponent (*Amélie* IV,5, *Céliane* V,8). The most egregious examples of interruption of potential violence are found in several of the plays that Morel calls Rotrou's "pastorale[s] pure[s]" (1968, p. 137): six suicide threats are stopped in *Céliane*, three threats or acts of violence are aborted in *Florimonde*, and four in *Filandre*. When violence is interrupted repeatedly, its dramatic function is decidedly compromised.[8] The spectator comes to expect the interruption and no longer takes the threat of violence seriously. A variant of these interruptions are violent acts that are reported as having occurred but turn out not to be real.[9] The violence is thereby both suggested (and enjoyed), but simultaneously, reassuringly overturned. Thimante is reported to have drowned himself in *Filandre* (V,2) and Évandre claims to have killed Parthénie as the king ordered (*L'Innocente Infidélité* V,2). Célie is thought to be dead after her father stabs her (*Célie* IV,5), as is Don Sanche after his duel with Don Lope (*Don Lope de Cardone* IV,7). All are in fact more or less safe. In *Hercule* and *Iphigénie*, Rotrou deals with the supernatural violence associated with Nesse's shirt and Calchas's oracle respectively by having his eponymous characters transcend their violent ends (the first enacted on stage and the other averted at the last minute) through immortality. In the

world of Rotrou's theater, such felicitous outcomes, in which violence is warded off or avoided, are widespread, and not merely the province of mythological personages.

Threatened violence has a problematic relationship to reality that opens a crucial space for theatricality. Almost invariably, the spectator wonders whether the threat uttered will lead to actual violence or whether it is merely a stance, a performance. When a threat is made to a character on stage (e.g., Eraste to Eurilas in *La Belle Alphrède*, III,6) or when someone threatens suicide when alone (Thimante in *Filandre*, IV,1), the likelihood of escalation to actual violence is substantial. However, the presence of an onstage audience for any threat of violence, provided that audience does not include the threatened party, vastly increases the possibility of theatrical posturing. As an illustration let us consider the numerous threats of suicide.[10] In only one of the twenty-one plays containing such references does a threat lead to actual suicide (*Crisante*: the eponymous character). In all of the other cases, the gap between threat and action leaves room for the intervention of others, a change of heart, or an interpretation of that threat as empty and therefore theatrical. Indeed, we find great variety in the presentation of threatened suicide in Rotrou's theater. As we noted above, threats may become absurd through repetition, as in the case of *Céliane*. Theatrical melodrama seems to be the desired tone in the fifth act of *L'Heureux naufrage*, as one character after another, in a cascade moving from scene to scene, seeks death in the name of love or fidelity. In *Don Lope de Cardone*, four different characters threaten suicide as a curious form of *générosité*, while in *Florimonde* Cléante's threat to kill himself is met with derision. In all of these examples, the threat is, at least to some degree, a pose adopted by the speaker to act upon or even manipulate his audience.

A curious variant of the threat of suicide is the demand (or offer) to die: *tuez-moi*. Here, the threat is inverted, projected onto the interlocutor in essence against his or her will, as it is not the interlocutor who proposes to enact violence. Because agency does not rest with the speaker, the opportunity for theatrical posturing increases substantially.[11] Such demands are often associated with lovelorn characters who use them to dramatize their feelings. In *Les Deux Pucelles*, Théodose, abandoned and pregnant, makes a habit of such requests. She urges her

brother to kill her with her own sword (II,7), tells her disguised rival that her life is in her hands (IV,9), and asks her father to kill her rather than duel her beloved's father (V,6). Not surprisingly, the interlocutors typically do not respond to such demands, although in the case of *Genest*, the Romans do eventually torture and kill both Adrien and Genest, but hardly as a result of their suggestion.

Theatrical Violence

Violence is rendered particularly theatrical through the agency of individual characters. Just as the playwright incorporates violence within his plays, knowing full well that he presents at most a simulacrum of violence, one that is without lasting consequences, so too do his characters engage at times in an illusion, performing violence for their peers, and fully conscious of the distance separating them from true danger. In *L'Heureux Naufrage* we find a perfect example of the transition from a plausibly authentic threat of violence to its performance: Cléandre, believing his beloved Floronde to be dead threatens suicide several times (I,2; I,3; II,3). Presumably he is serious. When he discovers that Floronde is alive but disguised as the young man Lysanor (II,5), he continues to threaten suicide, but these latter threats are purely theatrical and performed for the queen Salmacis, probably to keep her at bay and perhaps to amuse Floronde as well (II,5; III,2). The potential for violence inherent in the threat of suicide here is transformed into a controlled performance.

Many have noted the central role of performance in Rotrou's theater, ranging from cross-dressing to gratuitous plays-within-a-play, or as they are often called, *passetemps*.[12] The subset of performances that relate to violence have largely escaped attention, however. Rotrou conceived of violence as performance in his very first play, *L'Hypocondriaque*. Under Aliaste's direction, one of the two men pretending to be dead and lying in their coffins shoots Cloridan, but with a blank, which helps to convince the latter that he is not dead. Performed violence does not preclude actual violence: on stage in the same play, Cloridan kills Lysidor and Éristhène, whom he caught attempting to rape Cléonice. We may speculate that the performed violence gains in verisimilitude for occurring in a world in which true violence exists as well.

It may at times be difficult to ascertain whether threatened or incipient violence is a conscious performance or not. Any association with the comic, however, by virtue of overwhelming disjunction between violence and the comic, guarantees that we are witnessing a performance. Repetition readily becomes comic, as in the case of the six threats of suicide in *Céliane*, mentioned above. The timely, coincidental arrival of another character in order to prevent violence has a similar effect, such as when Théaste appears for no apparent reason and stops Tircis and Cléante from fighting in *Florimonde*; in the following scene Évandre appears out of nowhere to separate Théaste and Cléante, who now in turn have begun to fight. The extravagant onstage display of weapons may also be comic: in *Filandre*, Thimante, Filandre, Théane, Célidor, Nérée, and Céphise, that is to say, all the main characters of the play, male and female alike, brandish swords at some point as they threaten to kill one another or themselves. Swords repeatedly change hands in *Filandre* as well, with one character taking the sword of another. The latter play also offers a scene in which the performance of threatened violence, through repetition and clumsy enactment, leads to laughter on stage. Céphise, frustrated by Célidor's lack of interest in her, grabs his sword, "feignant de vouloir se tuer," according to the stage direction (II,7).[13] Célidor is not moved by her performance, however, and Céphise throws the sword to the ground in disgust. Oddly, given his own lack of reaction to Céphise's performance of violence, Célidor then picks his sword up from the ground and offers an identical show, protesting "Tu sais mourir par feinte, et moi par vérité" (l.716) and insisting that he will kill himself for having caused her suffering. Thereupon, Céphise begins to laugh, as no doubt does the spectator.[14] The laughter, on stage and off, may indicate a release of nervous energy caused by the threat of violence. In all events the comic arises from the disjunction between the significant violence threatened and the outcome in which no one is ever hurt.

Fifteen women disguise themselves as men in Rotrou's theater. On two occasions they take advantage of their disguise to assume the role of thief, an occupation that promises violence. Indeed Léocadie in *Les Deux Pucelles* claims to have committed multiple murders (V,2) and Doristée is forced in her disguise to fight alongside a band of thieves (*Cléagénor et Doristée*

II,1). Only one man disguises himself as a woman: Agéislan in *Agésilan de Colchos*. In that disguise he is called upon to duel twice. The performance in his case is not the duel itself but the fact that he fights *as* a woman, albeit a woman who fights like a man. Thus the highly theatrical act of cross-dressing engages gender stereotypes concerning violence.

Insanity on Rotrou's stage is essentially a performance rather than a reality and both Célie in *La Pèlerine amoureuse* and Ménechme Sosicle in *Les Ménechmes* feign a deluded mental state.[15] They use their performance to excuse or at least rationalize interpersonal violence. Célie strikes out on three occasions, hitting another (I,3 and II,7) or grabbing a sword from an *archer* (V,3). Ménechme Sosicle attacks both Orazie (the wife of Ménechme ravi) and her father while supposedly insane (IV,2). A curious variant of feigned insanity coupled with violence involves not the characters aware and in control of their performance of derangement, but rather one who assumes the role of director. In *Clarice*, Alexis takes advantage of the foibles, if not precisely the insanity, of Rhinocéronte, Hippocrasse (called "fou" l.620), and their respective valets to prepare a scene in which Rhinocéronte hits Hippocrasse and the former's valet Léonin hits the latter's valet (IV,7). This violent performance has specifically targeted spectators whose presence on stage has been as carefully orchestrated as the dual altercations. All of this group of performances of derangement have very specific goals that involve putting someone off (marriage plans in *La Pèlerine* and *Clarice*, the insistent albeit unknown father-in-law in *Les Ménechmes*) through the use or threat of violence.

Rhinocérante is also one of four *fanfarons* in Rotrou's theater, although none of the four demonstrate the *extravagance* of Corneille's Matamore (*L'Illusion comique*) or Demarets de Saint-Sorlin's Artabaze (*Les Visionnaires*). With the exception of the incident described above, these *fanfarons* can be counted on to threaten and describe violence rather than engage in it. At the same time, they are highly theatrical in nature, as their entire existence involves playing a role, one with close ties to violence. Baby notes: "les fanfarons font figures de vedettes de micro-spectacles intérieurs" (2007, p. 83). In *Amélie* the *fanfaron* Emille threatens his rival Dionys with death three times, including a classic move of indirection wherein he promises to have his valet

kill Dionys on his behalf (III,8). Ferrande, the *fanfaron* in *La Belle Alphrède* delivers a lengthy *récit* wherein he invents Alphrède's supposed death at the hands of a pirate. He incorporates violent details for the purpose of titillation ("J'ai vu son sein ouvert, son visage est pâli, / Et jusque sur mon front son beau sang a jailli," ll.795-96) and uses direct discourse to support verisimilitude. In all of these cases, the violence is a performance, an entertaining mystification without a referent, but not necessarily without a purpose. Ferrande's narrative performance has a significant function in the plot: to explain the sudden absence of two characters who have run off to England. Violence is similarly "performed" at a safe distance when one character invents an episode of offstage violence. In *Cléagénor et Doristée*, Théandre—not a *fanfaron*—concocts two fictional *récits* in order to convince first Doristée and then Cléagénor that the other is dead. While Théandre's *récits* seem particularly gratuitous ("J'ai voulu par la peine augmenter votre joie," he informs the finally reunited couple, l.1782), the *fanfarons* use the verbal performance of violence primarily to construct and protect their identity.

Le Véritable Saint Genest

The performance of violence receives its most intriguing treatment in *Le Véritable Saint Genest*. I began this article by discussing how Rotrou employs violence in his theater, on stage and off, "real" and threatened. I then considered how characters themselves at times choose to create the illusion of violence, paralleling what Rotrou does in the creation of his plays. *Genest* reproduces these two levels of agency, but distinguishes itself by adding a third: the violence represented, recounted, or threatened in the play-within-a-play enacted by Genest's troupe.

The onstage violence in *Saint Genest* is highly limited and entails only arrest. Specifically, the two martyr figures—Adrian and Genest, one on each level—are arrested as onstage (and offstage) spectators look on. Their arrests suggest inevitable violence to follow. Offstage, reported violence centers around the subject of torture, a form of violence that is mentioned, and then but briefly, in only two other of Rotrou's plays (*L'Innocente Infidélité* and *Cosroès*). In *Saint Genest* both interior levels contain descriptions of particularly egregious physical cruelty. In the play-within-a-play Adrian describes the torture of Christians thus: "J'ai

vu couler leur sang sous des ongles de fer; / J'ai vu bouillir leurs corps dans la poix et les flammes, / J'ai vu leur chair tomber sous de flambantes lames" (ll.741-43). At the end of Rotrou's play, Plancien describes Genest's torture (and death) using very similar terms: "les chevalets, [...] les lames flambantes, / [...] les ongles de fer, [...] les torches ardents" (ll.1731-32). In no other of Rotrou's plays is violence presented in such detail. So powerful are the descriptions that Cavaillé is not wrong to call the torture in this play "le *spectacle* paroxystique du pouvoir absolu" (1988, p. 710, italics mine). Onstage violence in numerous other plays may be more immediate, but it is nonetheless far less gruesome. Characters may often talk at some length before expiring on stage, but they do not seem to suffer much. Here violence is verbally exuberant and painfully graphic.

In *Saint Genest* characters interweave violence and performance in multiple fashions. To begin with, Dioclétien chooses a singularly violent and inappropriate subject—the martyrdom of Adrian—for a play to be performed in honor of the upcoming marriage between his daughter Valérie and the emperor Maximin. The choice of subject matter is doubly odd because the depiction of Adrian's conversion and martyrdom is entirely too sympathetic to Christians to appeal to Dioclétien and Maximin, powerful men actively engaged in their persecution.[16] At the other end of the play, violence and performance meet in the description of Genest's martyrdom under torture. The emperors reaffirm their fondness for theater by twice attempting to stage Genest's death. First, in act IV, scene 7, Dioclétien seeks to incorporate the spectacle of Genest's death into the play that they have been watching about the Christian martyr Adrian: "Qui vécut au théâtre expire dans la scène" (l.1388). Dioclétien thereby collapses, much as Genest has already done, the line between performance and reality. Later, Maximin says that the prefect intends to make a spectacle of Genest's death, but moves outside of the realm of the court performance we have witnessed so far, into the public domain, saying that he will "de cet insolent / Donner ce soir au peuple un spectacle sanglant" (ll.1665-66). The emperors thereby underline both the spectacular nature of violent death and above all the need for spectators. In that need, Dioclétien makes common cause with Christian martyrs, both eager to move their

audience through performance.[17] Both target the same audience, but with opposing aims. In the case of Genest, however, for reasons of *bienséances* pertaining to the offstage rather than the onstage audience, the only spectators of his martyrdom are his torturers. And indeed, they are moved—"Nous souffrions plus que lui par l'horreur de sa peine" (l.1736)—but not, as Dioclétien would have wished, to anger and hatred, and not, as Genest would have hoped, to conversion. Instead Plancien and his men are moved to pity, and therefore dispatch him quickly. The effect on us, the real audience, is hard to gauge: we are not allowed to witness the performance of torture/martyrdom, but we are afforded in its place, a highly concrete and violent *récit*.[18] Modeling ourselves on the interior spectators, the offstage spectators are likely moved to pity, rather than anger or conversion, as well.

Language then is a significant means of presentation of violence in *Le Véritable Saint Genest*. Performance itself is obviously represented far more concretely here through onstage rehearsal and acting. Performance, however, has important ties to language as well. Genest's torturers are in no way infected by the martyr's religious fervor, as we noted above, but Plancien does give indications of the contagion of Genest's theatrical language: "J'ai mis la tragédie à la dernière scène" (l.1740). The jailer too speaks in theatrical terms, warning Genest: "Si bientôt à nos Dieux vous ne rendez hommage, / Vous vous acquittez mal de votre personnage, / Et je crains en cet acte un tragique succès" (ll.1619-21). Genest himself, as he undergoes his conversion, saturates his language with theatrical images. He calls the angel who has descended from the heavens to offer him baptism a "celeste acteur" (l.1255) and he asks God to "représente avec moi" (l.1277), as though God too were an actor. Finally, the actress Marcelle suggests performance as a means of avoiding violence. She asks Genest to play a part for Dioclétien, wherein he would deny or recant his conversion so as to save himself and the entire troupe. Genest refuses the role. He refuses to act, but significantly he never abandons the language of the theater.

The presence of performance in conjunction with violence persists, albeit less pervasively, in the third level: the play-within-a-play put on by Genest and his troupe, in which

Adrian undergoes a conversion experience. Violence surrounds Adrian, both as the man whose job it had been to torture Christians on behalf of the emperor and as the new Christian who will himself be martyred. While Adrian doesn't think of his own martyrdom as a performance per se, he does see it as a role, and he doesn't want to share star billing with his Christian wife Natalie: "Au défaut du premier, obtiens le second rang" (l.937), he tells her, forbidding her to follow him. Natalie sees martyrdom as a theatrical role as well, which is why she misconstrues Adrian's later appearance at her door (IV,4). He has come to say farewell but she imagines that he has recanted, because he isn't playing the role of martyr properly: he arrives alone at her door unfettered, whereas the martyr is supposed to be in shackles and accompanied by soldiers. Adrian's wife Natalie is an experienced actress, having played the role of the non-Christian, presumably for years. We get to see her acting skills in the scene following her revelation to her newly converted husband: she effortlessly convinces Flavie that despite her efforts she had been unable to convince her husband to recant. Obviously she made no such effort.[19] Her relationship to violence is indirect, but nonetheless disturbing. She has been married against her will to a man whose job it is to torture her coreligionists. She obviously suffered a kind of emotional violence because of the impossible position she occupied: "J'ai souhaité cent fois de mourir pour tes crimes" (l.904).

Violence and performance lay at the heart of *Saint Genest*. They are woven together through the opposing institutions of imperial power and religion. The former holds sway over both theatrical productions and torture, and the latter over martyrdom. Both institutions use performance to further their aims.[20]

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Violence, while highly popular and thus desirable, poses significant problems for a seventeenth-century playwright, even before the strict codification of the *bienséances*. Rotrou finds solutions to these problems, as do his own characters, through theatricalization. "L'art de Rotrou consiste ainsi, en grande partie, à exploiter de toutes les manières possibles l'illusion théâtrale," Hubert notes (1958, p. 344). Here the theatrical illusion affords a means of

simultaneously taking advantage of violence and keeping it at a safe distance. And I have to disagree with Guichemerre when he says that “la violence est surtout représentée en action” (1993, p. 285). In fact, instances of threatened, proposed, and reported violence occur seven times as frequently, in my accounting, as onstage violence. Furthermore, once the referent has been lost—that is, the violence did not in fact occur, whether on stage or off—the door opens wide to dramatic performance. The theatrical performance of violence allows the titillation of violence to operate in conjunction with illusion to afford pleasure without risk. The privileging of the theatrical makes violence less threatening, less disturbing, and more playful. In such situations playwright and characters become complicit in the use rather than the act of violence. It would be tempting to ascribe this mixture of “real” and performed violence to the genre of tragicomedy, but it is in fact to be found in all corners of Rotrou’s theater. Even in plays where violence indeed occurs, it may be mitigated by the presence of performed violence: a subtle contagion operates, reminding the offstage audience that everything they witness on stage is a performance.

Notes

[1] The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *violence* first as: “exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse.”

[2] There exist performance artists who do bodily violence to themselves in front of spectators, but of course such acts are not pertinent to the context of Rotrou’s theater. For more information about the performance of actual onstage violence, see Graver (1995).

[3] “Les scènes de violence, en effet, sont de loin les plus nombreuses dans la tragi-comédie. Le spectateur goûte la représentation des duels, des combats, des batailles; et les bienséances auront ici beaucoup plus de mal à s’imposer;” (Guichemerre 1981, p. 177); “Très rares sont les tragi-comédies d’où toute violence est exclue” (Baby 2001, p. 77).

[4] Based on my review of Rotrou’s plays, there are an average of 2.3 acts of onstage violence per tragicomedy, 2 per tragedy, and 1.33 per comedy.

[5] I find three such examples in the tragicomedies—Ozanor dies declaiming his guilt in I,3 of *Cléagénor et Doristée* (I,3), as does Thersandre in *L’Innocente Infidélité* (IV,8) and Argant and Damis in *L’Heureux Naufrage* (IV,8)—but also an identical situation in the tragedy *Crisante* (Cassie as he dies in IV,5) and the comedy *La Belle Alphrède* (Éraste in III,6).

[6] Guichemerre focuses on the two tendencies, but not specifically on their combination. Rotrou “se plaît en particulier à multiplier les actions brutales et sanglantes, et aussi, à un degré moindre, les scènes d’amour lascives, double aspect révélateur du goût persistant du public pour la violence et la sensualité, que les efforts d’épuration du théâtre et la tyrannie des ‘bienséances’ auront bien du mal à faire disparaître avant 1640” (1993, p. 283).

[7] Butler distinguishes between tragicomedy and tragedy on the basis of the former, saying that incomplete violence is characteristic of tragicomedy (1959, p. 205). Similarly, Hémon asserts: "Veut-on savoir à quoi se reconnaît une tragi-comédie vraiment digne de ce nom? A ce signe qu'il se trouve toujours à point nommé quelqu'un pour empêcher un grand crime" (1906, p. 43). However, the distinction, like all efforts to separate Rotrou's genres, is not always valid. Much violence is threatened in *Iphigénie*, for example, and the closest anyone comes is Calchas's raised knife and Achille's exposed sword.

[8] Lancaster, referring to *Céliane*, notes: "[a]s [...] threats of suicide are used on five different occasions in the play, they lose their terror for the reader, if not for the characters" (1966, II, p. 503). I find six rather than five: Nise (I,2 and IV,5); Florimant (II,2 and III,2); Pamphile (III,3 and V,6).

[9] Orlando (1963) sees the false death as a *leitmotiv* of Rotrou's theater, and devotes the first chapter of his book to the subject. See also Gethner's "A Baroque Guilt Trip: False Death Announcements in Rotrou" (2003).

[10] Twenty-one of Rotrou's thirty-five plays contain explicit threats of suicide. There are forty-six threats in total, plus seven offers, suggestions, or expressions of desire for suicide. There are also ten characters who threaten to die without specifying that it would be by their own hand.

[11] These demands are even more common than the threat of suicide in Rotrou's theater: we find sixty-two occurrences in twenty-one plays, to say nothing of Genest's variant ("torturez-moi," IV,7) and his (and Adrian's) offers to be martyred.

[12] According to Berregard, "le déguisement, la feinte, l'illusion figurent ainsi parmi les motifs privilégiés par l'auteur dans l'ensemble de son œuvre et constitutifs de sa dramaturgie

(2007, p. 99). Pasquier goes even further: discussing Rotrou's "obsédante interrogation sur la feinte" he concludes that "le jeu dramatique ...[est]... la forme la plus haute et la plus accomplie du faire-semblant" (2001, p. 192).

[13] Phèdre's move to grab Hippolyte's sword and threaten suicide is jarringly reminiscent of this comic scene (Racine, *Phèdre* II,5).

[14] Vuillemin suggests that this scene should alert us not to take too seriously Thimante's equally unsuccessful but considerably more dramatic attempt at suicide in Act V that involves throwing himself in the river (1994, p. 215).

[15] Cloridan's altered mental state is *L'Hypocondrique* is the exception, and his delusion is cured by the end of the play.

[16] This jarring juxtaposition of subject and context is subtly tied to another. Violence in the form of suicide is temporarily associated with marriage early in *Saint Genest* when Valérie assures her confidante that she will kill herself rather than marry whomever her father chooses (I,1). That eventuality is quickly dismissed when it becomes clear that her father's choice coincides with her own. The odd juxtaposition lies between the very possibility of suicide, forbidden by the Church, and Christian martyrdom, doubly represented in the play, a pious choice with strong structural similarities to suicide.

[17] Seznec says that the Christian martyr "se donne en spectacle" (1972, p. 179).

[18] J'ai joint à la douceur, aux offres, aux prières,

À si peu que les Dieux m'ont donné de lumières,

(Voyant que je tentais d'inutiles efforts)

Tout l'art, dont la rigueur peut tourmenter les corps;

Mais ni les chevalets, ni les lames flambantes,

Ni les ongles de fer, ni les torches ardents,

N'ont, contre ce rocher, été qu'un doux zéphyr,

Et n'ont pu de son sein arracher un soupir;

Sa force, en ce tourment, a paru plus qu'humaine,

Nous souffrions plus que lui, par l'horreur de sa peine;

Et nos coeurs détestant ses sentiments Chrétiens,

Nos yeux ont malgré nous fait l'office des siens;

Voyant la force enfin, comme l'adresse vaine,

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. (ll.1727-42)

[19] Rotrou amuses himself by providing Natalie with an ironically double speech whose ambiguity allows for completely different messages for her two interlocutors:

Reçois de ton épouse un conseil salutaire,

Déteste ton erreur, rends-toi le Ciel prospère;

Songe et propose-toi que tes travaux présents,

Comparés aux futurs, sont doux ou peu cuisants!

Vois combien cette mort importe à ton estime! (ll.987-91).

[20] My article, "The Conversion of *Polyeucte*'s Félix: the Problem of Religion and Theater" (2009), deals with another deep-seated opposition of institutions in *Le Véritable Saint Genest* (and in Corneille's *Polyeucte*): religion and theater.

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