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Rotrou's *Bélisaire*: Hierarchy and Meaning

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Rotrou's *Bélisaire*: Hierarchy and Meaning

Bélisaire (1643) differs significantly from the bulk of Rotrou's theater, perhaps above all in its array of profoundly disparate features. The notion of hierarchy offers a means of organizing the dissimilar elements and understanding the play as a whole. Like so many of Rotrou's plays, the subject is not original. Its source is Mira de Amescua's *El ejemplo mayor de la Desdicha*. The plot is relatively simple: Bélisaire, a historical figure from the sixth-century East Roman Empire, returns victorious to Constantinople, having expanded the lands controlled by the emperor Justinian.¹ César's wife, Théodore, however, nurses resentment against the conquering general for having not responded to her amorous advances before her marriage to the emperor. She dispatches three men to murder Bélisaire at different moments during the course of the play. Each in turn fails, converted by the sublime generosity of the intended victim. César lavishes honors on the victorious Bélisaire while Théodore persists in her hatred of this man who is so vital to the well-being of the empire, and she orchestrates a break between Bélisaire and his beloved Antonie. César eventually learns that it is his wife who seeks to have his general killed, and orders Théodore's exile. Bélisaire, however, intercedes on Théodore's behalf. For this, the empress rewards him only with increased hatred. She attempts to seduce Bélisaire for the purpose of revenge, and when she doesn't succeed, she intercepts a letter from Bélisaire destined for Antonie and claims that Bélisaire wrote it to her instead. She thus accuses the hero of betraying César by attempting to seduce his wife. César believes her without question and, refusing to listen to his defense, sends Bélisaire off to have his eyes plucked out. Bélisaire dies from the ordeal, Théodore then admits her own responsibility, and César is overcome by regret and remorse.

As in the case of *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, there exists as well a Nicolas-Marc Desfontaines's slightly earlier play on the same subject with which Rotrou's version was in competition.² *Saint Genest* and *Bélisaire* share another feature as well: they both lend themselves

to an unusually broad range of interpretations, some quite incompatible. In the case of *Bélisaire*, the spectator must wonder whether the central focus is a love/hate story or a cautionary tale about political power. Is Bélisaire a victim, or does he bring his own destruction upon himself? Is he a Christian martyr? Is this a tragedy or a tragicomedy? I propose to examine these questions, as well as certain particularly striking features of this play—the use of the discourse of identity, the frequent presence of asides, and the recurrence of the number three—through the organizing principle of hierarchy.

The play opens with Bélisaire's return from war. His triumphant efforts have changed the dimensions of the Roman empire; so too have they changed his status, elevating him considerably. The opening act makes it clear that both emperor and empress need to make important adjustments in order to deal with Bélisaire's elevation, despite the latter's reiterated modesty and humility. The question of hierarchy is thus at the core of the accommodations that the couple must make, for Bélisaire is no longer far below them. Indeed, in more general terms, the preoccupation with hierarchy is a constant in the play, ranging from the simply physical, with multiple scenes of kneeling, bowing, or prostration, to the otherworldly, with abundant references to a host of supernatural forces. Furthermore, the question of Bélisaire's place in a universe that is organized hierarchically is a central problem of the play, one that confounds all three main characters, Bélisaire, César, and Théodore. May the general's elevation be accommodated, or is the threat that elevation poses too great?³

Let us start with César. The emperor welcomes the conquering hero back with joy and gratitude. Unlike Corneille's Orode in *Suréna*, he never seems threatened by his own indebtedness to his general. Onstage with Bélisaire for the first time (I.vi), César almost immediately tackles the question of hierarchy. He moves quickly to place Bélisaire above himself, an independent force necessary to the emperor, but who has no real need of anyone: "Sans besoin de mes biens tu tiens tout de toi-même" (1.275); "Et pour régner enfin, j'ai besoin de ton bras" (1.278). It would appear that César has reversed the political hierarchy between himself and his general. He changes direction abruptly, however, and adopts a stance of perfect

parity through both words and physical symbols. Presenting two rings carrying the seal of the imperial eagle, César gives one to Bélisaire and keeps the other for himself; later, he will continue on in the same vein, dividing in two both the imperial laurel wreath and the imperial scepter, and assigning half to each (III.vii). His actions and words thus bespeak equality between himself and Bélisaire (the two rings “[m]arqueront entre nous une puissance égale,” 1.336). César goes even further, however, and insists upon complete identity between them, calling Bélisaire “un second moi-même” (1.339). And until Théodore accuses Bélisaire of making sexual advances towards her, César aggressively maintains that position. Variants of this form of reference to Bélisaire appear seven more times,⁴ and are supported by César’s reference to his general as “mon image” (1.1052) and by other rhetorically complex constructions of identity: “Et nouons entre nous de si parfaits accords / Que nous n’ayons qu’un coeur et qu’une âme en deux corps” (II.341-42); “Et son corps et le mien n’étant que même chose” (1.1059). César seems to have erased the line between the two men: referring to the sleeping Bélisaire, the emperor cautions: “Et puisque deux amis sont une même chose / ... / Par ce même sommeil je repose avec lui” (II.972-74).

There is an occasional move back to hierarchy (that is, non-identity), particularly when Bélisaire is threatened with assassination. Perhaps out of a desire to protect his general, César makes reference to his own power to establish all hierarchical relationships:

Les Rois comme rayons de la divine essence,
 En leur gouvernement imitent sa puissance,
 Font d’un mont élevé des abîmes profonds,
 Élèvent un vallon à la hauteur des monts,
 Et tenant pour chacun la balance commune,
 Au prix de la vertu mesurent la fortune;
 Je te mettrai si haut que la faux du trépas,
 Sans te pouvoir toucher passera sous tes pas” (II.1139-46).⁵

César’s control over hierarchy goes awry, however, when in the penultimate scene he seeks to stop Bélisaire’s punishment. The language the emperor employs to describe the wrongly accused Bélisaire seems to place the latter above César: the emperor calls Bélisaire “la plus vive lumière”

(l.1933) of his empire, “ce clair flambeau” (l.1934); the “Soleil de l’Empire” (l.1936).⁶ This change in positioning may be read either as a sign of Bélisaire’s heavenly ascension or of César’s unstable relationship vis-à-vis his general.

César thus seems to struggle throughout the play with how to deal with a returning hero and the change of status his accomplishments represent. His struggle is never satisfactorily resolved; it is only ended by Bélisaire’s death.⁷ For most of the play, however, César emphasizes his complete identity with his general. Indeed, César’s discourse of identity goes so far that it occasionally takes on sexual overtones. The emperor describes Bélisaire in terms that would befit a beloved: “ce port céleste, et ce divin aspect, / Imprintent à la fois l’amour et le respect” (ll.989-90). Interestingly, such language increases when César withdraws his favor and plans Bélisaire’s punishment: he calls him “l’objet de mes vœux” (l.1575) and accuses him of having “mal usé de mon affection” (l.1612).⁸ In his final lines of the play, César sounds like Iseult pining after the dead Tristan as he seeks to be reunited with Bélisaire in death: “Chère âme, obtiens-moi l’heur d’expié ton trépas, / Par celui de te joindre, et de suivre tes pas” (ll.1983-84). César’s identification with Bélisaire may be complete here, but it is with a dead man.

As I noted earlier, the issue of Bélisaire’s elevation concerns not only César, but Théodore as well. The contrast between the reactions of the two is extreme. Whereas César struggles and seeks to establish a place of equality and identity with his victorious general, Théodore, from beginning to end, seeks only to destroy Bélisaire, first through assassination and then through calumny. In essence, she refuses to make a meaningful adjustment to Bélisaire’s change in status, or rather, her idea of reorientation is to deprive him of his very existence. In several important respects her reaction resists clear interpretation. First, her motivations are too numerous: not only does she desire revenge because he rebuffed her amorous advances, but she complains that his victory makes her subservient to him in terms of political power; furthermore, she seeks to further the career and marriage of her nephew Philippe, both of which are impeded by Bélisaire’s success. Second, there is no clear chronological indication of when Bélisaire rejected the empress’s advances. We know only that it was before her wedding to César. Why

does her hatred and thirst for revenge show itself now? Is it because Bélisaire has been elevated by his heroic deeds? There does not seem to be any other viable explanation for why Théodore should choose this particular moment to launch her campaign against Bélisaire. The latter's elevation would seem to be responsible for a strange romantic triangle, with both César and Théodore desirous of a quasi-sexual alliance with this newly elevated general. Such a reading would explain the surprisingly small role accorded Antonie (not quite 4% of the play's lines): Théodore's rival is not so much the young woman as her own husband. Third, there is Théodore's *haine*. She spouts the word (or some variant) with great frequency—36 times—, but what exactly she means by *haine* is never made clear. In the place of César's elaborate poetic rhetoric of identity, Théodore's eloquence does not rise above repetition. One has only to consider Cléopâtre in Corneille's *Rodogune* of the following year (1644-1645) to be struck by the contrast. *Haine* is Cléopâtre's favorite word as well, but her hatred comes alive, almost literally, as the queen personifies it as her double.⁹ *Haine* is Cléopâtre's essence, what she attempts to inculcate in her sons, what she will not abandon, even at the price of her own life. Théodore, on the other hand, just tosses the term out, brutal and without nuance. Cléopâtre and Théodore share a similar hierarchical problem: in both cases the return of a male (males) threatens a significant loss of status for the female, although it is unclear in Théodore's case exactly how or why this is so. While certain readings of *Bélisaire* give a crucial role to Théodore (Mazouer 520, Béthery 22-23, 43), I find that she never comes into focus as a character, and thus is nothing more than a blunt force of evil, who just reflexively opposes Bélisaire at every turn.

Bélisaire's own attitude towards his elevation in status is invariably one of demurral. All that César bestows upon him, Bélisaire accepts only with the greatest reluctance, and only after attempting to dissuade the emperor.¹⁰ The most controversial moment of the play involves Bélisaire's attitude towards his own elevation. In act IV, scenes vi-vii, with almost everyone onstage, César first announces that his wife is to leave the court, then he divides and bestows half of the crown and the scepter on Bélisaire (over the latter's objections), and finally he insists that Bélisaire employ his new, elevated authority: "Ordonne sur-le-champ quoi que ton coeur respire,

/ Et fût-ce au détriment de mon propre intérêt, / Moi-même je m'en fais un immuable arrêt” (ll.1172-74). Returning yet again to his consistent strategy of extreme generosity, Bélisaire responds by aiding his enemy Théodore: after much hesitation (“L’effroi me saisit l’âme, et m’interdit la voix,” l.1178), he asks that “Ma Reine et ma Maîtresse, / [...] / Par son éloignement ne prive point la Cour” (ll.1179-81). He then goes on to place the halves of the crown and scepter at the feet of César.¹¹ This second gesture is unequivocally one of self-abasement: Bélisaire refuses the elevation that César bestowed on him. But it is Bélisaire’s act on Théodore’s behalf that has occasioned controversy. Van Baelen reads it as a move to place himself above César, to command the emperor (131; see also Béthery 52). I see it rather as an attempt on Bélisaire’s part to use a technique—generosity—that has worked so well earlier with his would-be assassins in order to convince Théodore to put aside her enmity. To the extent that Bélisaire’s act is in any sense directed toward César, I would argue that it indicates a generous attempt to satisfy the emperor’s unspoken wishes. Surely, Bélisaire cannot be unaware that César, after promising death to whoever has sought to attack his general, be it his own wife (II.xiii, ll.724-34), has only handed down a sentence of exile without disgrace. César’s strong feelings for his wife are thus evident. Consequently, Bélisaire, far from exploiting the quasi-sexual triangle that his elevation has engendered, seeks actively to destroy it by removing himself through his own demotion (returning the crown and scepter). It may well be that neither Théodore nor César will allow Bélisaire to lower himself (Théodore certainly does not allow herself to be touched by his generosity); or perhaps Bélisaire’s own image of the *roue de la fortune* (ll.1202-04, 1629-30) is most apt: neither César nor Théodore will forgive him for having been elevated, and thus Bélisaire is doomed. A change in status—up or down— invariably wreaks havoc.

*

The issue of hierarchy manifests itself strikingly throughout *Bélisaire* on the level of discourse as well. Most telling in this respect is the abundant presence of asides, statements made out loud that are conventionally taken to be inaudible to the other characters onstage.¹² Most often, asides provide a means for a character to express his thoughts and concerns openly and

honestly, as he or she would in a monologue. There are significant differences between a monologue and an aside, however. For our purposes, the most salient distinction is that the presence of asides, unlike that of monologues, makes the stage into a double-layered universe, with a level of public discourse and a second, private level involving words that are audible only to the audience. Writing in 1640, La Mesnardière was highly critical of asides because of their artificiality and *invraisemblance*.¹³ The *aparté* remained highly popular nonetheless, and Rotrou was a particularly egregious practitioner.¹⁴ With 58 asides, *Bélisaire* accords this feature a particularly large and thus significant place. One must wonder why there are so many asides in this play, and what their abundance says about the role of hierarchy.

The need for the second level of discourse that asides provide is a function of problems of communication. Indeed, in this dramatic universe it is difficult for anyone to speak openly and honestly. By far the greatest number of asides belong to Théodore and Bélisaire.¹⁵ In the case of Théodore, asides are necessary to underline the disjunction between her public persona and her true position: her attraction to Bélisaire and her desire to assassinate him in revenge for having refused her advances. It is only with her confidant, Camille, that she can speak openly (I.iii). Bélisaire, on the other hand, needs asides because of the instability of his position in the political hierarchy. The possibility for open and frank discourse is severely limited for him by the presence of three assassins on one side and an almost overly grateful emperor on the other. The general is never truly alone onstage with the one person—Antonie—with whom open discussion might take place. As the wheel of fortune takes its downward turn, asides function to underscore Bélisaire's solitude and looming ruin.

In a situation in which open speech is dangerous, it is natural that asides flourish. Furthermore, it is reasonable to suppose that the more public and ceremonial the scene, the greater the need for asides. It is thus not surprising to find them in abundance in the bookend scenes I.vi and III.vii, in which César takes steps to elevate Bélisaire in the presence of virtually all of the other characters. Similarly, the higher one's position in the political hierarchy, the less one has need of asides. César in his absolute power speaks none at all until the end of the

fourth act, when his feelings of anger and pity towards Bélisaire impinge on his public discourse. At the other end of the power spectrum are Antonie and the three would-be assassins Léonce, Narsès, and Philippe, each with multiple asides, all coerced into submission by the commanding Théodore.¹⁶ And while she is indeed powerful, the criminal nature of her thoughts and feelings means that she cannot speak openly in public any more than can those far below her.

The stage thus becomes a two-tiered space, peopled by characters who move fluidly from one level to the other. For the most part, asides constitute a subcurrent of private reflexion. It is worth noting, however, that there is occasional dialogue on the level of asides. In the great scene of welcome for the conquering hero (I.vi), Théodore and Léonce carry on in asides an exchange concerning the latter's failure to assassinate Bélisaire. Similarly, in II.xvi, Narsès and Léonce use asides to organize a plan to attack Philippe in order to save Bélisaire. There is even the possibility of an intermediate position between the two levels. When Philippe comes to kill Bélisaire (III.ii), the latter overhears him speaking (an aside in which Philippe notices with great surprise his own ring on Bélisaire's finger), but cannot make out his words ("Que marque à mes pieds ce muet entretien?" 1.897). In virtually all cases asides are a kind of speech distinctly *below* the primary level of discourse.

Asides operate in conjunction with other means of doubling levels in the major scene of confrontation between Théodore and Bélisaire (IV.2). As the two characters face off, they cannot, given Théodore's royal status and attempts to murder Bélisaire, be direct with one another. For the first half of the scene (ll.1291-1356), Théodore displaces their present conflict onto the realm of the past, focusing on what Bélisaire did and did not do, and what he should have done. Thus the scene sets out both the present and the past. Near the end of the scene, the empress takes two objects—her scarf and her glove—and moves them from the domain of their everyday function to the realm of the symbolic by dropping them on the ground. Indirection is thereby compounded as new meanings are added to old. Finally, this scene contains the largest number of asides in the entire play (12), evenly divided between the two characters. This group of asides includes two curious features. First, while Théodore is responsible for the other

doubling of levels (present/past; denotation/connotation), her own asides at times indicate, not the manipulation of levels as one might expect, but rather confusion. She does not know how to interpret Bélisaire's lack of attention to the scarf and gloves she has dropped: "Ou ma faveur le trouble, ou l'amour qui l'engage [for Antonie] / Des yeux comme des mains lui dérobe l'usage" (ll.1391-92). Indeed, the asides of both characters here suggest uncertainty about the true feelings of the other. The second surprising feature is contained in Bélisaire's overlong aside:¹⁷

[...] cette force d'âme [his own],
 Se rend sans résistance à la voix d'une femme [Théodore];
 Sa fureur s'apaisant en obtient mieux ses fins,
 Et fait plus par trois mots que par trois assassins.
 Le trouble me saisit, la frayeur me possède (ll.1367-71).

Nothing has prepared us for Bélisaire's sexual attraction to Théodore. While he resists acting on his desire, beyond giving some unavoidable indication of being flustered, this attraction is nonetheless shocking for the audience. Most asides tell us something we already know or suspect, and work to underline the contrast between the two levels of discourse. Here, Bélisaire's admission is entirely unexpected and his feelings seem to be occurring as he speaks them. Our shock is also based on the criminal nature of his attraction: although his actions are beyond reproach, the simple fact of his attraction does not befit the perfect hero, one of whose attributes in seventeenth-century France is perfect fidelity to the beloved. While the contents of this noteworthy aside have no direct influence on the course of events for, as Bélisaire says, "ma foi tient toujours si ma constance cède" (l.1372), it may be part of a pattern to cast a certain measure of guilt on Bélisaire so that his cruel punishment will be more palatable.¹⁸

Asides organize the stage into a binary hierarchy that affords us a nuanced view of relationships and events and reminds the audience of the difficulties of communication between characters. In their creation of a second level of discourse, asides are inherently linked to perhaps the most characteristic feature of Rotrou's theater: theatricality. Through role playing, disguise, and onstage spectatorship, characters in *Bélisaire* create miniature plays within the play itself, a doubling that is once again hierarchical in nature. The roles are fairly numerous here: under

Théodore's direction, Antonie pretends to be indifferent to Bélisaire (II.iv); Bélisaire feigns sleep in order to be able to speak the truth concerning Théodore (III.iv); specifically, he pretends to speak to her directly, and later pretends to awaken (III.v).¹⁹ The theatrical extends to the past: in the confrontation between Théodore and Bélisaire (IV.ii), the empress reproaches him for not having played the galant role required when she initially signaled her attraction to him. In that same scene Théodore seems to be playing the role of seductress, feigning interest so as to trap Bélisaire. Later, Bélisaire's disgrace is a function of Théodore's role-playing (IV.vi): her tears and fainting-spell work to support the role she has assigned herself of the importuned wife. Disguise, characteristic of theater, has its place as well: Léonce disguises himself as a pilgrim when he goes to kill Bélisaire, and Bélisaire disguises his voice and hides his face from Philippe after having saved him from Léonce and Narsès (II.xviii). While anyone on stage when another character plays a role is inevitably a spectator, on two occasions the invisible onlooker's role is adopted explicitly: Théodore hides by a window while Antonie pretends under duress to be no longer interested in Bélisaire (II.iv) and César hides with Alvare and his guards behind a tapestry as Théodore prepares to assassinate Bélisaire. As in the case of asides, the largest participation in scenes of theatricality belongs to Théodore and Bélisaire; and again César has far less need of the second level it affords because of his own power. Asides and theatricality work hand in hand to make the stage a layered space where only the speaker of the aside, the actor, or the spectator can perceive the hierarchy at work.

*

One of the most curious and non-typical features of *Bélisaire* is the overabundance of various groupings of three. I know of no other seventeenth-century tragedy or tragicomedy that is so subtly patterned and structured. There are three attempts on Bélisaire's life distributed among the first three acts. Each potential assassin—Léonce, Narsès, and Philippe—is sent by Théodore and each abandons his project when faced with the generosity of the unsuspecting general. All three in turn then swear allegiance to Bélisaire and promise to protect him; all three refuse, however, to divulge the name of the woman who sent them to kill him. Coincidentally,

the same three men seek the position of governor and they present formal requests to that end, requests that César then turns over to Bélisaire for his decision. As Bélisaire's fortunes fall, the same three men are dispatched by César in the same order to demand that Bélisaire return a specific symbol of the power the emperor has invested in him: Léonce demands the ring bearing the seal of the Imperial Eagle (V.ii); Narsès, the official documents "Qui vous ont fait l'envie et la terreur des Rois" (V.iii, l.1684); Philippe, Bélisaire's sword and his freedom (V.iv).²⁰ Between these two major series of threes, Rotrou places a third: at the end of the critical scene in which Bélisaire requests forgiveness for Théodore (III.vii), the same three men underscore the importance of the scene, like a kind of Greek chorus, one after the other, each speaking a single line in the form of a rhetorical question.²¹

Below that level of heavy-handed patterning, there exist numerous other references to the number three. Théodore gives three motives for wanting to kill Bélisaire (see above). Bélisaire, weakening before Théodore's attempts at seducing him, notes that she "fait plus par trois mots, que par trois assassins" (l.1370). It is not uncommon for characters to create small groupings of threes in their discourse,²² but Théodore takes it to an extreme, as she prepares to play her role of accuser:

Fournissez-moi des cris, de sanglots et de pleurs;
Intéressez mon sein, et mes yeux, et ma bouche,
.....
A venger les soupirs, les regards et les voeux (ll.1446-49).

This repeated, conspicuous use of the number three gives the play an abstract and artificial cast. It creates an almost hieratic pace, as the same structure repeats itself with the force of inevitability. The excessive patterning in César's withdrawal of his favor makes Bélisaire's fall into a kind of rite. Like the abundant use of asides, the presence of the artificial trebling structure works against *vraisemblance*. The organizing structure of threes, while not in itself a vertical structure, nonetheless functions, one might say *horizontally* in tandem with the hierarchies we have examined in *Bélisaire*.

The heavy use of the number three comes out of several traditions, the most significant of which is the folk or fairy tale. For our purposes we may conflate the two, because the questions of origin and orality that preoccupy specialists in those fields are not pertinent here. A folk or fairy tale is a highly unusual source for seventeenth-century French theater, even if there is no specific tale referenced. The number three has long been associated with the folk tale (Lüthi 33; Propp 74): “It is above all the triad that is predominant: three tasks are accomplished in succession; three times a helper intervenes; three times an adversary appears” (Lüthi 33). While the number three forms the basis of the tie between this play and the fairy or folk tale, other elements support it as well. First, in the opening lines of the play we find a comparison between mountains covered with men come to watch the triumphant return of Bélisaire and giants: “Et ces hauts monts chargés de pieds jusques aux faîtes, / Paraissent des Géants, tout de bras et de têtes” (ll.11-12), an image that is entirely appropriate to the folk or fairy tale. Second is the character of Théodore: her obdurate stance coupled with the absence of unified and substantial motivation makes her resemble a wicked witch. The large number of objects in the play, many of them highly symbolic, also call to mind folk or fairy tales. We find two different rings, the laurel wreath, the scepter, the scarf, and the glove, all objects whose meaning and power in the play exceeds their normal roles. The presence of elements associated with the folk or fairy tale gives this play its unusual cast and they both jar with the play’s tragic ending as well as its grounding in history.

The number three is also strongly tied to religion, specifically to the Christian tradition of the Trinity. The presence of the divine or the supernatural is frequently mentioned in *Bélisaire* and works to reinforce the importance of hierarchy to the play: the characters are subservient to a higher realm. However, this point is also where the entire highly structured and hierarchized system we have described develops serious cracks. In a pared-down dramatic universe with one hero, one emperor, two desiring women, and three helpers (Léonce, Narsès, and Philippe), we suddenly encounter, through the language of the characters, a dozen superior powers, many of whom are seemingly incompatible. Leaving aside the issue of the singular versus the plural

(“Dieu” vs “Dieux”; “Ciel” vs “Cieux”), all four of which occur repeatedly, we also find “sort,” “Déesse,” “Fortune,” “hasard,” “Parques,” “Mars,” “Soleil,” and “astre.” While *Bélisaire* makes the largest number of such references by a significant margin, as well as using the greatest variety of terms, all the characters refer to these superior powers and show no consistency in the terms they employ. The nature of the superior force(s) at play is perfectly unclear. The importance of the religious domain has long been noted in discussions of *Bélisaire*: Nelson calls it “a profoundly religious and specifically Christian play” (119); Morel (178) and Watts (82) compare it to a medieval mystery play. The amassing of undifferentiated superior forces at work creates a sharp note of discord within the hierarchical structure of the play. Who or what exactly occupies that highest rung? And how may this array of superior powers be reconciled?

The note of discord is felt elsewhere as well. Perhaps most striking is the question of genre. In the original edition, the appellation “tragédie” appears on the title page and “tragicomédie” is printed between the list of characters and the first scene of the play (Berregard 99). Unlike *Le Cid*, for example, where the tragicomedy became a tragedy in a successive edition, here the generic uncertainty is anchored in the original text. Tragicomedy and tragedy are themselves associated with hierarchy insofar as tragedy was clearly a more elevated form when *Bélisaire* appeared. Indeed the play combines elements of both to a degree that makes assignment to one or the other category impossible.²³ There is an absence of movement in *Bélisaire* that is completely uncharacteristic of Rotrou’s tragicomedies, where people generally rush about a great deal. Here, having returned from battle, *Bélisaire* seems physically trapped and at the mercy of César, Théodore, and her three assassins. The impression of stasis supports the impression of tragedy. The discordance between tragedy and tragicomedy is compounded by the odd frankly comic elements, such as *Bélisaire* falling asleep in the same place and immediately after making the highly political act of choosing a governor (II.vii-viii) and Philippe’s clumsy efforts to awaken *Bélisaire* when Théodore enters (III.v). Morello goes so far as to attribute the play’s initial lack of success to the curious mixture of genres (113). Generic uncertainty thus works against the organizing principle of hierarchy.

The theme of envy provides another example of a hierarchy that is scrambled in *Bélisaire*. The notion of envy is obviously tied to hierarchy: implicit in the sentiment is a feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis the person envied. Envy is frequently brought up during the course of the play (11 times), and in varied contexts: Léonce blames his banishment from court on it (l.45); Bélisaire believes that he will be protected from envy by the “Ciel” and Léonce asserts that to envy Bélisaire would be to harm the state (ll.127, 129); Bélisaire calls the knife he has found upon awaking “Ce tragique instrument ou de haine ou d’envie” (l.639); César and Antonie assume that Théodore acts out of envy (ll.1108, 1419) and Bélisaire blames his disgrace on this motive (ll.1826, 1866). What is odd is that in fact envy plays a negligible role in the play. The envy that harmed Léonce is never explained; the envy that the three “helpers” no doubt feel, although never express directly, is dispensed with very quickly in each case by Bélisaire’s generosity. Théodore is not motivated by envy, but rather by hate and a thirst for revenge; thus Bélisaire’s downfall is unrelated to envy. Is this red herring an error on Rotrou’s part, or is it another knot in the clean lines of the hierarchical structure of *Bélisaire*?

The biggest knot in that structure is the confusing multiplicity of supernatural forces. Such forces are never explicitly present onstage, but the high degree of coincidence involved in Narsès arriving to kill Bélisaire at precisely the moment when the latter has written Narsès’s name as his choice to be governor cannot possibly be explained without the existence of a superior realm. Bélisaire’s triple deliverance from assassination can plausibly be called miraculous. César’s obtuse credulity when confronted with Théodore’s suspect accusations is so unbelievable that it too may be credited to obscure forces. Bélisaire himself envisions higher powers when he makes repeated reference to the *roue de la fortune* (ll.1202-04, 1629-30). The irreconcilable set of such forces that we find here occupies the highest position in the play’s hierarchy, but the tensions that arise from the incompatibility and mutual exclusion of those forces make the apex of the hierarchy an incomprehensible space.²⁴ How are we then to come to any final conclusion about the play’s meaning? Are there divinities of some sort at work here, but who act in a fashion beyond human understanding? Or is this a moral drama in which

Bélisaire is guilty of a crime which makes him lose both royal and divine favor? Is Bélisaire destroyed simply because he is at the bottom of the hierarchy? Or is the divine a red herring similar to the theme of envy? Without the level of superior forces, the hierarchy is truncated and the play reduced to the simple victimization of a hero by the whims of the emperor and empress. Without any superior force at work, Rotrou's commonplace of the wheel of fortune becomes an empty conceit. Perhaps we would do well to retain the supernatural level, even with its attendant overcrowding and incompatibilities. The hierarchy, thereby more elaborate, thus forms the basis for a far greater range of potential meanings for the play, even though the lack of unity in that highest level ensures that no final meaning can be securely ascertained. In the complex manifestations and implications of the hierarchical system undergirding *Bélisaire*, we are left with Jacques Morel's fundamental insight about Rotrou: *ambiguïté*. Perhaps nowhere else is Rotrou as thoroughly the "dramaturge de l'ambiguïté" as he is in this play. In the final analysis, I read *Bélisaire* as a tragedy of unintended hubris, wherein Bélisaire's glorious victory upsets the tripartite hierarchy of subject, emperor, and divine forces, revealing serious instabilities within the hierarchical structure and destroying the hero in the process.

Notes

¹ The play refers to the emperor as “César;” I will do so as well.

² See Béthery and Lancaster for discussions of the relationship between the three versions of the Bélisaire story.

³ Corneille will recall this play, no doubt when he writes *Suréna* (1674) and perhaps even *Nicomède* (1651).

⁴ Ll. 369, 532, 684, 972, 1059, 1476, 1594.

⁵ Also: “Il suffit que ce bras [César’s] . . . / T’élèvera si haut . . . / Et que la passion des plus ambitieux, / Ne peut monter plus haut, sans s’attaquer aux Cieux” (ll.1193-98).

⁶ It is worth noting that these images are curiously reminiscent of Bélisaire’s earlier description of Théodore as a “céleste flambeau” (l.1317); he describes her eyes as “vivants soleils” that give light to the court (l.1182).

⁷ Anne Teulade makes a pertinent point: “Le couple masculin est de soi porteur de tragique: la coexistence dans l’identité, étant contradictoire dans les termes, exige la disparition, à la fois inévitable et injuste, de l’un des deux protagonistes” (111). Death may thus be the inevitable resolution.

⁸ Robert Nelson observes the homosexual cast of such comments: “The emperor calls the sleeping Bélissaire “la moitié de moi,” a term applied elsewhere in *Rotrou* by heterosexual lovers or married characters to their beloved and mate.” In reference to César’s comment about “affection,” Nelson notes that “*affection* is the

term used in the early plays to express the emotion felt between heterosexual lovers” (127).

⁹ Addressing her *haine*, Cléopâtre says: “Éclatez, il est temps, et voici notre jour. / Montrons-nous toutes deux, non plus comme Sujettes, / Mais telle que je suis, et telle que vous êtes” (*Rodogune* ll.406-08).

¹⁰ Béthery suggests that Bélisaire’s attitude is what permits the role of double that César gives to Bélisaire. “Le maître ne peut l’affirmer avec complaisance que parce que le sujet la récusé ; elle ne remet jamais en cause l’inégalité foncière entre eux” (52).

¹¹ The stage directions indicate that he places them “aux pieds de l’Impératrice.” Béthery states, in a note, “L’édition de 1780 corrige en « aux pieds de l’Empereur » (140, n.77). It would appear that the latter edition is correct, as Bélisaire shifts from “elle” to “vous” as he offers these objects, and indicates the masculine gender of that “vous” very clearly when he states: “Vous seul êtes pourvu de cet auguste rang” (l.1186).

¹² Fournier provides a succinct definition of the aside: “Procédé dramatique, discours secret (monologue ou dialogue) dérobé par convention aux autres personnages en scène” (16).

¹³ D’Aubignac conceded their utility but made numerous recommendations to authors including advising a length of one half to one line per aside and insisting that the aside not interrupt the onstage discourse of another character (376). Corneille expressed his aversion to the practice in three of his *examens* (those attached to *La Veuve*, *La Suivante*, and *Le menteur*) and made only modest use of

asides outside of his *Menteur* plays where they have a significant and comic role. See Cuénin-Lieber.

¹⁴ Fournier notes: “l’aparté est en progression très sensible dès le second quart du XVII^e siècle, d’abord chez Mairet et Scudéry, entre 1630 et 1640, puis, entre 1640 et 1650, chez Rotrou, qui, il est vrai, a pour le procédé un goût que n’a pas Corneille et l’emploie dans tous les genres, avec une moyenne de 10,8 apartés par tragédie, 44,5 par tragi-comédie et 33,5 par comédie” (4).

¹⁵ Théodore has 20 asides for a total of 44.25 lines and Bélisaire has 12 (42.75 lines).

¹⁶ In terms of the numbers, Léonce has 9 asides, Narsès 3, Philippe 5, Antonie 5, and César only 2.

¹⁷ At 15 lines, it strays far from d’Aubignac’s prescription to avoid exceeding a single line and is two and a half times as long as any other aside in *Bélisaire*.

¹⁸ Racine may have remembered this play when he makes the pure Hippolyte “guilty” of loving a woman his father has expressly forbidden him in *Phèdre*.

¹⁹ In the act of pretending to be asleep we may observe a further crack in the perfect virtue of Bélisaire: the implicit mendacity is hardly characteristic of the hero. Béthery notes that this ruse “donne un peu d’ambigüité à un héros jusqu’ici d’une vertu monolithique” (26).

²⁰ While all three have vowed loyalty to Bélisaire, in the final analysis their first allegiance is to César. As Van Baelen notes, the hierarchy is clear: “Quand il s’agira de choisir, la plupart des personnages se rangeront du côté de l’empereur;

même s'ils accordent une valeur au mérite, ils en accordent davantage au rang" (128).

²¹ Léonce: "Qui jamais entendit une telle aventure?" (l.1199); Philippe: "Qui jamais pour son Prince eut une foi si pure?" (l.1200); Narsès: "Quelle rage tiendrait contre tant de bonté?" (l.1201). It is worth noting that Viollet-le-Duc's 1820 edition identifies these lines as "à part" while Béthery's does not. I think either stance can be justified, all the more since these short rhetorical questions have no effect on the action.

²² For example, Antonie asks Philippe to leave her alone, "soit par pitié, par haine, ou par amour" (l.438); Bélisaire is aghast at César's rejection of him: "Quoi, . . . sans me parler, sans me voir, sans m'entendre?" (l.1610).

²³ Characteristically tragicomic elements in *Bélisaire* include the extensive use of objects, multiple misunderstandings, characters hidden onstage for the purpose of eavesdropping, onstage sleeping, and a general emphasis on the visual spectacle (Béthery 27, 33; Louvat 68-69; see also Baby 662). Tragic features of the play encompass the classic plot of the accusatory temptress who destroys the innocent hero (see Bénichou), the dénouement, and what Béthery describes as "un authentique *sens du tragique*," "un effort constant vers la concentration tragique" (33).

²⁴ Béthery notes the ambiguity that Rotrou creates by mixing "Fortune et Providence" (61). Morel attempts to recuperate this supernatural multiplicity: "La fortune prend alors une signification providentielle. Ses caprices ne sont tels que parce que les desseins ultimes de la divinité échappent à l'homme. Aussi voit-on les personnages de Rotrou utiliser indifféremment les mots de *fortune, sort, astre*, et

destin. Aussi les personnages malheureux se disent-ils indifféremment persécutés par la fortune, par le destin ou par les dieux” (117). I am not comfortable with such a reductive move, all the more so in a play in which hierarchical distinctions are central.

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