

Jean Rotrou and the Trappings of Identity

by
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Jean Rotrou's position within the canon of French seventeenth-century theater is defined by glimmers of brilliance observed in his best-known plays: *Hercule Mourant*, *Le Véritable Saint Genest* and *Venceslas*. The general importance, however, of his collected plays deserves renewed consideration, particularly regarding the breath of work he produced dealing with the subject of cross-dressing. Using it as a complex thematic device, Rotrou explored the mechanism of transvetism in order to creatively grapple with matters of human nature, emotion, sexuality, social position and authority at a time when the ensuing controversy could elicit both critical, theatrical success and profound moral reprobation.

In 1609, the very year of Rotrou's birth, Claude Noiroi, a jurist erstwhile moralist, published a treatise entitled *L'Origine des masques* in which he elaborated on the mortal peril of assuming the garb of the opposite sex. Although his primary frame of reference for such behavior centered on an endless debate as to the perceived debauchery of ancient rituals, he stigmatized the practice in general with an authoritative rule, "[...] donc, est-il prohibé à l'homme de s'abaisser sous l'habit féminin, se souiller d'un vêtement externe, se manifester androgin, cinade, infâme; ou à la femme masquerader sous le parement viril, brelander sous l'accoutrement de l'homme, pour être telle folie contre le droit naturel" (Noiroi 103).

His words, nevertheless, betray a subtle distinction between the relative 'sin' of a man dressing as a woman versus that of a woman dressing as a man. The utterly vile nature of a man who would lower and sully himself to the point of denying his masculinity, particularly by dressing as a mere woman, is incontrovertible. It seems, however, as Sylvie Steinberg so aptly pointed out in her books, *La Confession des sexes; le travestissement de la Renaissance à la Révolution*, that Noiroi and many of his contemporary moralists and theologians were considerably less

vociferous in denying a woman the change, albeit illusory, of masquerading as a man (Steinberg 16). Such an undertaking would involve toying with reality and tinkering with a woman's identity in order to pass as a man, thus temporarily elevating herself to an overtly powerful and, by definition, liberated state.

This article focuses on this asymmetric distinction in the prevailing attitude toward cross-dressing, not purely in the intellectual realm, but on its most public literary proving ground – the stage. During Jean Rotrou's most prolific years, a growing theatrical trend toward representations of transvestite disguise was already quite evident in the works of Hardy, Du Ryer, Beys and Benserade, to name just a few, but it is without question Rotrou himself who must be credited with the most comprehensive exploration of the issue, well beyond hitherto simplistic character and plot requirements.

Over the course of his dramaturgical career, from approximately 1628 until his death in 1650, Rotrou wrote, as far as we know, at least thirty-five plays. Among them, no less than twelve deal in some fashion with the dynamics of transvetism, not merely as a substructure of plot-oriented convenience, but as a means to develop complex sexual identities that call into question norms of gender, class, moral propriety, behavior, and perhaps most importantly, appropriate means of expression specific to the sexes. To my knowledge, Rotrou's substantive preoccupation with this dynamic is unparalleled in seventeenth-century French theater. Even more noteworthy is his persistent recourse to this theme during the so-called 'early years' while he was *poète à gages* for the Hôtel de Bourgogne between 1629 and 1636. During that grueling era, he rapidly produced 20 plays, of which eight contained a primary plot dependent on a protracted act of cross-dressing effected by at least one character.

Georges Forestier defined this sartorial and performative transformation in his *Esthétique de l'identité dans le théâtre français* as a uniquely conscious act of disguise employed by the playwright to simultaneously advance the action and significantly amplify the character's presence and persona (Forestier 102-103).

Rotrou's deft use of sexual disguise frequently transforms the marriage of text and stage into a forum in which the external trappings of identity are temporarily manipulated in such a way as to reveal a daring, even subversive, glimpse of gender relations that would otherwise be intolerable were it not obliquely blurred by the act of cross-dressing itself. *La Célimène* and *Agésilan de Clochos* demonstrate this very dynamic and at the same time exemplify the glaring incongruity between the depiction of a woman dressed as a man as opposed to a man dressed as a woman.

First performed in 1633, *La Célimène*, like so many of Rotrou's early comedies, follows a pastoral tradition in that the action is solely concerned with a handful of would-be couples and their unflagging preoccupation with matters of love and happiness. Predictably, the characters are forced to overcome a series of rather impossible obstacles in order to come to a blissful and resplendent resolution at the conclusion of the play. *La Célimène* is, consequently, no exception to this rule in its general progression and outcome. However, the tone and wit of the play deviate from the standard not so much in the introduction of a young woman who is compelled, as I shall explain shortly, to dress as a man, but in that Rotrou's depiction of the cross-dressed character is one of a clever and modestly eloquent woman whose spirit and intellect are only able to achieve their full potential once she is permitted to exploit the range of behaviors afforded men of the day; and this, in the context of a simple sartorial disguise.

The scene, of course is set in the French countryside where a young man named Filandre has grown tired of his love for Florante. In her place, he seeks to win the affections of the aloof and domineering Célimène, who is renowned for spurning her suitors, particularly a long-suffering 'amant' named Alidor. Witnessing Filandre's advances being summarily dismissed by a particularly disdainful Célimène, Florante bitterly mocks his ineptitude. Wounded, Filandre declares that Florante herself could do no better:

Crois que tu pourrais peu sur cette âme inhumaine,
Qu'en mon lieu tu serois en une même peine.

Elle n'estime rien que ses propres appas ;
 Vénus sous mes habits ne la toucheroit pas. (I, v)

With these words, the challenge that will set the primary action of the play in motion is both declared and accepted. Florante is determined to prove she could easily win Célimène's favor were she granted the social latitude of a man and Filandre is equally determined to see her fail. Asking only that Filandre lend her an appropriate suit of clothes, Florante immediately prepares the terrain for her initiation into a temporarily male existence of her own construction. Her aunt agrees to corroborate her new identity by introducing Florante as a visiting nephew going by the name of Floridan.

The initial transformation that takes place before the audience depends on a very simple exchange of clothes. It is intended to be visually credible, but would have remained essentially vacuous without a totally convincing revolution in Florante's mannerisms and, most importantly, in the register and vocabulary of her discourse. Whatever term we choose to use, be it cross-dressing or transvestism, within the context of the theater the degree of success enjoyed in this thematic pursuit is measured only as a function of the playwright's ability to balance the visual quality of the disguise with the verbal and behavioral distinction it demands.

The moment that Célimène meets the freshly transformed Floridan in Act II, Scene iv, she is utterly captivated as is her rather frivolous sister, Félicie, much to the chagrin of the latter's blindly faithful admirer, Lysis. To both the audience and Célimène, Floridan represents everything a woman could possibly desire. She, as I shall refer to Floridan despite the gendered change in appearance, is physically refined and handsome, her voice has a gentle and endearing tone and her poetic words of affection seem motivated by a genuine and immediate 'inclination' towards Célimène. Initially, this proves only that Florante is both perspicacious and manipulative – she can understand from experience what a woman would want to hear from a suitor, and under the guise of the Floridan persona can deliver precisely the right combination of wit, charm and passion needed to seduce. It is

at this point much more interesting to turn our attention to the behavior that Floridan excites in those around her. The register of Célimène's discourse is dramatically and immediately altered to a remarkable, even scandalous, degree. In response to Floridan's initial compliments, Célimène abandons her guarded, clipped manner of speaking and reveals that she is now enraptured:

Je trouve en vos discours de si chamans appas,
Que vous me haïriez de ne me parler pas.
Le silence sied mal aux bouches si discrètes,
Et l'on voudroit, monsieur, les voir ouvertes. (II, iv)

By the time we reach Act III, Floridan has been so successful in her endeavor to simultaneously seduce Célimène and humiliate Filandre that she finds her will-being threatened not by her nemesis, but by the other two jilted lovers, Alidor and Lysis. These two now find themselves entirely eclipsed by Floridan's presence among them.

The pivotal moment of the play, however, is reserved for the most controversial scene during which Célimène and Floridan are engaged in what can only be described as a tryst of words that thinly disguises passions ill-suited to the comic stage, particularly when such evident emotion is inspired by little more than a passing acquaintance. The effect is even more dramatic when one remembers that both Floridan and Célimène are young, chaste women. At the height of their most heated moments together, Floridan declares:

Si vous n'avez cause la misère où je suis,
Si votre occassion ne fait tous mes ennuis,
Si je connois que vous pour sujet de ma peine,
Puissé-je être des dieux et l'horreur et la haine,
Et qu'après mille morts une éternelle mort
Fasse endurer mon âme et déplorer mon sort !
[III, iv]

The earnest tone implicit in the delivery of this speech and the almost violent vocabulary of which Floridan is in command proves

quite shocking and at the same time marks the pinnacle of Florante's complete subsumption by the Floridan persona she has created. The atmosphere during the scene is further complicated by the total lack of comedic relief – there is no intervention whatsoever to alleviate the tensions in the scene. The fact that Floridan takes her role as seducer to such an accomplished level is obviously immensely liberating. For the duration of the scene, even the complicit audience must question whether it be Florante herself and not Floridan who has developed a real passionate attachment to Célimène. But as soon as their encounter comes to an end, any sense of impropriety that may have been experienced by a seventeenth-century audience would be quickly assuaged when Filandre reveals that he was secretly privy to the entire conversation. In so doing he introduces the possibility that Floridan's words were directed, if only subconsciously, toward Filandre, the correct and acceptable object of her affection according to convention (Lyons 35).

As a modern reader, however, I am compelled to reflect on the situation as more than a little unusual as it reveals the extent to which Rotrou was able to use the trappings of identity to develop the potential inherent in his female character, particularly if we consider how Filandre reacts to the encounter he has just witnessed. Of course, he is acutely aware of Floridan's identity and although he should be angered by her bold success, he is instead overwhelmed by the masculine, forceful and passionate sentiments of which she is clearly capable – sentiments she could scarcely have expressed in any context had she not been permitted to temporarily escape the confines of her female identity. Filandre is moved to exclaim to himself:

Dieux! Avec quelle grace elle fait le transi!
 Célimène est touchée, et je le suis aussi.
 Il n'est rien de pareil à son rare mérite ;
 Contre moi-même enfin moi-même je m'irrite.
 Elle présideroit à ma flamme amoureuse,
 Et ma condition seroit encore heureuse. (III, v)

Ultimately, Floridan must actively resolve each conflict now standing in the way of a happy resolution for three couples. First she convinces Alidor and Lysis to trust that Floridan has no interest in their misery and that she will conspire to bring them back together with their respective loves Célimène and Félicie. She accomplishes this by accepting decidedly improper invitations proffered to Floridan by both women while at the same time insuring that Alidor and Lysis believe the invitations are intended for each of them respectively. The play concludes as all six characters convene and Floridan, with a dramatic flourish, bares her breast so that her identity is no longer suspect.

This conclusive gesture literally embodies Florante's conscious renunciation of her role as seducer, seductress and, in the context of this circumscribed scenario, as the omniscient manipulator of all that has transpired. In the end, Célimène finds her true emotions heightened by her intense, though ambiguous experience with Floridan and is content to soften her demeanor and entertain Alidor's courtship, while a befuddled Félicie settles quite happily for a union with Lysis. Only Filandre truly appreciates the journey Florante has undertaken and is both humbled and amazed to be reunited with her, particularly under such circumstances.

As I have already mentioned, variations on a pastoral theme involving cross-dressing were not unusual on the French stage between 1630 and 1660, however, successes like that enjoyed by *La Célimène* did not escape the attention of critics and moralists who were becoming more sensitive to glaring contraventions of fundamental '*vraisemblance*' as well as the rules of '*bienséance*'. At the same time, moralists and theologians continued their engagement in an age-old discussion as to the degrees of evil incurred by individuals who went so far as to live a transvestite existence, not to mention those who dared encourage the mere possibility by depicting it publicly on the stage. Key to the debate, as had presumably been the case with Noiroi, was the weighty proscription of cross-dressing ascribed to Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. "The women shall not wear that which pertaineth to a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God"(Deut. 22:5). From a

theological perspective the gravity of any such violation is unequivocal, but by the time we reach the 1630's, it takes a theorist to outwardly reconcile the impropriety of the practice in reality with the artistic potential it affords a playwright, such as Rotrou, on the stage. In his *Poétique* of 1639, La Mesnardière engages in a theological consideration of the question but in a philosophical one, the substance of which is played out in chapters VIII (*les mœurs*) and IX (*les sentiments*). As I understand it, if an increasingly important benchmark of theatrical quality is its ability to conform to both the potential of reality ('*vraisemblance*') and the appropriate behavior of the characters as they move through a given play ('*bienséance*'), then the audience must afford the cross-dressed character the same tolerance they offer actors in any role removed from their veritable existence. Explaining La Mesnardière, Georges Forestier writes that "[u]ne femme travestie, aussi longtemps qu'elle apparaît en homme, ne peut choquer ni les coutumes de son sexe d'origine, ni la pudeur des hommes. Ayant changée d'identité et de sexe, elle a changé de sentiments, sans tomber sous le coup d'une accusation de 'sentiment irréguliers'" (Forestier 78-9).

Accordingly Forestier points to the abbé d'Aubignac's celebrated work on the *Pratique du théâtre* to demonstrate that the latter not only concurred with La Mesnardière, but also took the additional step of extending the same latitude to the controversial treatment of monarchy and disguise on the stage. D'Aubignac explains, "Quand un roi parle sur la Scène, il faut qu'il parle en Roi, et c'est la circonstance de la dignité contre laquelle il ne peut rien faire qui soit vraisemblable, s'il n'y avait autre raison qui dispensât de cette première circonstance, comme s'il était déguisé" (II.ii).

Consequently, disguise may apparently overcome all behavioral constraints imposed on a character by his or her education, family, station, appearance, etc. It goes without saying, however, that during the seventeenth century, this is only true if the disguise is temporary and the conclusion of the play returns the world within a normal and acceptable state of affairs conforming in

every way to the expectations of the audience and the conventions of 'vraisemblance' and 'bienséance'.

I emphasize this particularly as it pertains to representations of monarchy because Rotrou attempted a most bizarre tragi-comedy, which, while pertinent to d'Aubignac's precept, could also be said to challenge the more damning of Noirot's asymmetric condemnations of cross-dressing. Presented to the public in 1636, *Agésilan de Colchos* not only brings to the stage a monarch in the person of Florisel, Emperor of Greece, but the title character himself, Agésilan, Roi de Colchos, spends much of the play disguised as a woman in a doubly compromised position at another ruler's court. This creates an uncomfortable situation which is further complicated as the audience is forced to grapple at every turn with their understanding of what subject matter is dignified enough to be coupled with a plot involving monarchy.

Rotrou was among the first to experiment with both the form and content of what would become, at the hands of Corneille, the quintessential tragi-comedy. Accordingly, the tenor of *Agésilan de Colchos* is certainly higher brow than that of Rotrou's comedies, as is the rhetoric at its service. In this particular instance the characters also belong to the very highest order of society. The subplots involve matters of jealousy and remorse that are almost Racinian in their deep seated potential for disaster, but at the forefront of this complex play is Agésilan – a King who happens, through a series of improbable circumstances, to fall in love with a portrait of the beautiful, young Diane. Diane is the illegitimate daughter of Sidonie, Queen of Guindaye, and Florisel, Emperor of Greece. During the years following Diane's birth, Sidonie has become increasingly defined by her hatred towards Florisel for seducing and abandoning her. Her obsession to see him dead prompts her to offer in marriage her only daughter (the symbol incarnate of both the Queen's most egregious error and greatest accomplishment) to any man who will behead the father.

Agésilan, apparently oblivious to this grave situation, independently concocts a plan to travel to Guindaye in the guise of a woman, present himself at court and thus insinuate himself into

Diane's immediate entourage. Unfortunately, this is the sum total of his plan and the events that subsequently overtake him are entirely dependent on improbabilities. This flaw in Rotrou's conception of the play ultimately calls into question the legitimacy of using transvestism at all to advance the action of the play. Known only to the members of Sidonie's court as Daraïde, Agésilan finds himself suddenly dueling with a stranger who has come from afar solely to declare that his mistress is more beautiful than the world-renowned Diane. Once Daraïde wins the preposterous battle, Sidonie entreats this seemingly powerful woman to finally rid her of Florisel. Although Daraïde agrees to accomplish the treacherous task, Agésilan privately resolves not to kill the father of the woman he loves. Instead, he reasons with Florisel, brings him back to Guindaye, and, still dressed as Daraïde, convinces Sidonie that he has returned with the corpse of the Emperor. Predictably the Queen feels great remorse and is moved to forgive Florisel as a final gesture before taking her own life to silence her guilt. But, as this is a tragi-comedy and not a tragedy, Florisel chooses this very moment before Sidonie's suicide to reveal himself alive and ready to marry. At the same time, Agésilan reveals his true identity and claims Diane's hand in marriage to her great, though inexplicable, delight.

I suggest that with this play, Rotrou may well have intended to use cross-dressing as a means of liberating Agésilan from his weighty responsibilities as King, and in so doing, effectively explore how such a powerful figure might behave according to whim rather than obligation. Unfortunately, Rotrou fails from the very beginning to legitimate his use of this powerful device either to pursue depth of character, or even to simply exploit the technique in a manner acceptable to the standards of disguise touched by *La Mésnardière* and *d'Aubignac*. Rather, Rotrou contents himself with a monarch who groundlessly assumes a disguise that is somehow made all the more senseless by its transvestite dimension. Had Agésilan had some knowledge of Sidonie's near mad fixation, perhaps his desire for Diane could have justified his action, but the notion that a monarch would frivolously engage in such a pointless amorous adventure is

entirely incongruous with the underlying and potentially enriching possibilities of the play.

In *La Célimène*, Rotrou deftly manipulates the theme of cross-dressing to illuminate an aspect of the condition of women and to unlock the wealth of his female character's spirit. Florante's final victory lies in having proved that, though she may be no Vénus, she possesses within her the wit and understanding of both genders. Ultimately the conclusion is bitter-sweet as her multidimensional character comprising both Floridan and Florante must collapse back into her original, static, female role, complete with all the restrictions and conventions that dictate her existence. In *Agésilan de Colchos*, Rotrou struggles to render a plausible tragic-comedy in which it is not a mere man who is compelled to dress as a woman, but a King. The license Rotrou enjoyed to perform such a transgression was ill-served and the underlying motivation for the plot seems poorly justified. The resulting character of the King as he is transformed into Daraïde is both shallow and constantly on the margins of the comic. Meagerly equipped, he is in this one play suddenly thrust into the midst of an opposing, unfolding tragedy. Ultimately, Rotrou's manipulation of identity in a man's act of transvestism – in this example, Agésilan – is far less revealing than that which he undertook for a woman, in the case of Florante. Such a comparison suggests that, in the same way as Noïrot's asymmetric treatment of the trappings of identity adds nuance to his moral and juridical views, the disequilibrium in Rotrou's use of transvestite identity encompasses both the strengths and weaknesses of this playwright's reflections on the surrounding human condition.

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