ILLUSION, VIOLENCE, AND CERTAINTY IN JEAN ROTROU’S “LE VERITABLE SAINT GENEST” AND CYRANO DE BERGERAC’S “LA MORT D’AGrippine”

Emily Miller Putman

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Approved by:

Dr. Ellen Welch
Dr. Philippe Barr
Dr. Hassan Melehy
Abstract

EMILY MILLER PUTMAN: Illusion, Violence, and Certainty in Jean Rotrou’s “Le Véritable Saint Genest” and Cyrano de Bergerac’s “La Mort d’Agrippine”
(Under the direction of Dr. Ellen R. Welch)

Historically, studies on French 17th century theater have predominantly focused on the works of so-called Classical authors, to the exclusion of the “récits sanglantes” and “histoires tragiques.” This thesis looks at two violent plays written the 1640s, Le Véritable Saint Genest by Jean Rotrou and La Mort d’Agrippine by Cyrano de Bergerac. These two dissimilar texts will be used to show that the threat of violence gives an impression of truth and validity to the declarations of the martyrs and the executed, and thus acts as a means of providing a feeling of certainty to the audience and to the other characters in the plays. The insights of this thesis into the function of violence in Rotrou and Cyrano’s plays may be extrapolated to other works of this time period and provide a useful starting point for considering the large body of “récits sanglantes” and “histoires tragiques.”
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May you be inspired to stand tall in the sunlight, to seek out the bright face of beauty, to see the world through the eyes of tenderness, to love with openheartedness, to speak the quiet word of comfort, to look up to the mountain and not be afraid to climb. May you always be aware of the needs of others, believe in the wonder of life, the miracle of creation, the joy of love, the beauty of the universe, the dignity of the human being.
– Hadin Marshall

Thanks be to God!
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Historically, studies on French 17th century theater have predominantly focused on the works of so-called Classical authors such as Molière, Racine, and Corneille, to the exclusion of the “Baroque,” “récits sanglantes” and “histoires tragiques.” These overshadowed plays were popular forms of entertainment on the French 17th century stage and, in recent years, a renewed interest among some scholars has developed. The literary critic Christian Biet, for example, has led the way in looking past the traditional cannon of 17th century classical and baroque plays to explore other types of theater written in the century that followed the Wars of Religion by promoting plays which deal primarily with violence.1

As Biet explains in Théâtre de la cruauté et récits sanglants en France, the interest in violent plays occurs because the spectator must render a judgment in the face of violent deaths, whether in favor of the sovereign, or of the martyr. The hyperbolic imagery of violence acts as a fable giving the audience an entertaining opportunity to consider power, law and morals in a method which will seize, shock, and emotionally move the audience (xl). It is my aim to show that violence also acts as a means of providing certainty to the audience and the characters in the plays and gives an impression of truth and validity to the

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1 In 2006 he directed a work entitled Théâtre de la cruauté et récits sanglants en France (XIVe-XVIIe siècle) and in 2009, along with Marie-Madeleine Fragonard, he put together a large work titled Tragédies et récits de martyres en France fin XVie-début XVIIe siècle. The goal of both of these works was to make available texts which have been denied a prominent place in French literary history.
declarations of the martyrs and the executed. In this paper, I examine two lesser studied plays from the 1640s, Jean Rotrou’s *Le Véritable Saint Genest* and Cyrano de Bergerac’s *La Mort d’Agrippine*, both of which revolve around violence. These stories are set in a world where illusions appear more powerful than truth, which allows the authors the opportunity to tackle the difficulties of proving one’s true beliefs. In both plays, the authors make use of the semblance of certitude which arises from acts of violence, such as that of martyrdom and other executions. Throughout the Rotrou play, the characters and the audience are perplexed by the actor Genest who converts on stage to Christianity. It is not until he is martyred for his faith that the other characters and the audience feel relatively certain that he was indeed a convert and not just playing the role of one. Likewise, in Cyrano de Bergerac’s only tragedy, the mostly forgotten *La Mort d’Agrippine*, while the characters are continuously plotting against each other and making false alliances, it is not until a violent act is committed that the other characters and the audience can be certain of where each character’s allegiance truly lies.

I show how themes of violence serve a similar function within these texts. Both authors utilize violence to provide “reality” to the illusions that their plays attempt to create, and the ideas that they are attempting to communicate. These two authors are not unusual in using violence as a means of proving certainty of their characters’ faith. Indeed, quite a few plays in the 1640s were written on the topic of martyrdom, notably *Saint Eustache* by Baro (1639), *Polyeucte* by Corneille (1640), *Thomas Morus* by La Serre (1641), *Saint Eustache* by Desfontaines, *Hermenigilde* by La Calprenede (1643), *Sainte Catherine* by La Serre (1643), *Saint Alexis*, author unknown (1643), *Sainte Catherine* by saint Germain (1644), *Saint Genest* by Desfontaines (1645), *Théodore* by Corneille (1645), and *Josaphat* by
Magnon (1646). Thus, the insights of this thesis into Rotrou and Cyrano’s plays may be extrapolated to other works of this time period and provide a useful starting point for considering the large body of “récits sanglantes” and “histoires tragiques.”
CHAPTER 2

ROTROU’S “LE VERITABLE SAINT GENEST”

In recent years, many scholars have expressed increased interest in the often forgotten play of Jean Rotrou, *Le Véritable Saint Genest*. Many of these writers focus on the aspects of art, politics and religion within the play, while others look primarily at the role of illusion and of metatheater.² I would argue that all of these issues are certainly essential to the play; however, the role of violence as a potential provider of certitude within a world dominated by appearances remains a neglected idea. I propose to look at how illusion becomes certainty through violence in the play, and how this in turn continually links the seemingly opposing realms of theater and religion. First, this paper will discuss the story of conversion and martyrdom from the perspective of the intradiegetic Roman court audience, and then from the perspective of the actor Genest.

**Illusion, Violence and Certainty – viewpoint of Genest**

Throughout the play, Genest frequently expresses that he longs to move beyond imitation. He is known as an actor who can so perfectly embody the part he is playing that the spectators believe a dead man to be revived (I.v.239-41). He promises the Emperor Diocletian that he will so well perform the story of Adrian, a Christian martyr recently killed by Diocletian, that:

> Et la mort d’Adrian, l’un de ces obstinés  
> Par vos derniers arrêts naguère condamnés,

Vous sera figurée avec un art extrême,
Et si peu différents de la vérité même
Que vous nous avouerez de cette liberté
Où César à César sera représenté
Et que vous douterez si dans Nicomedie
Vous verrez l’effet même ou bien la comédie (I.v.299-306).

For Genest, theater is about making imitation so close to reality that it is impossible to tell the difference between the two. As he explains to Diocletian, it is in fact his goal to almost confuse the audience’s sense of reality so that they are nearly to the point where they do not know if they are watching a fictitious performance or in fact watching reality.

In this case, Genest agrees to perform a modern story to please Valérie who is dissatisfied with the stories of the great ancient writers. She says:

Mais leurs sujets enfin sont des sujets connus;
Et quoi qu’ils aient de beau, la plus rare merveille,
Quand l’esprit la connait, ne surprend plus l’oreille (I.v.287-90).

Valérie wants Genest to portray a story which will surprise the audience more than the stories that they have seen previously represented on stage. She goes on to request that he perform as a Christian, which she has heard he can well portray (I.293-6). Genest selects the story of Adrian – which is an interesting selection since the Roman court knows first-hand the story of his confession and death (that is, they have already seen it “performed,” in that they actually had killed him). Genest is convinced that he can represent members of the audience to the point that they are confused as to whether they are truly on stage (I.v.298). Despite knowing that the main character will die at the end, the Roman court is excited to see themselves on stage, rather than characters of the ancients who have been so over-performed. Ironically, the Roman audience will get the surprise ending Valérie had requested, as Genest moves beyond acting, and literally incarnates the role of a Christian martyr from baptism to death, much to their surprise and confusion.
Soon after the decision is made that Genest will play the part of a Christian martyr, Rotrou’s play again questions the powers of imitation as Genest talks with the set-designer. Genest is displeased with the décor, for while it is “beau,” he feels that the designer can “ajouter à sa magnificence” (I.ii.313-4). This comment clearly reflects Genest’s philosophy regarding all aspects of the theater – it is not sufficient to do things well, rather they must be done to a level of imitation which nearly corresponds with reality. He tells the set-designer to, “Faire un jour naturel, au jugement des yeux” (I.ii.324). It is important to Genest that as far as the eye can tell, the illusion of the theater is made true and natural. Likewise, Rotrou has tricks for making the spectacle seem like reality – the French audience sees Genest on stage as director and practicing actor, thus they see the “real” Genest. He also shows the Roman characters expressing their “real” opinions about the inner play. In doing so, Rotrou gives a more realistic feel to the outer play by showing the “real” thoughts of the characters outside of their “performance.” In her article, Witt discusses the link Rotrou’s play shows between reality and illusion, saying:

In the perspective on theatrical illusion given in these scenes by actors playing characters who represent actors, stage management personnel, and critics, it is the very characters in the process of preparing to create or witness theatrical illusion who represent “reality” for the actual audience of the (outer) play. (25)

This point is well taken; however, for the inner audience, the Roman court, the performance does not become reality until Genest, in reality, dies for his conversion.

Indeed, even as Genest is creating illusion for the Roman audience, he creates his own reality – a reality which leads to his ultimate downfall (or salvation, depending on point of view). As he begins rehearsing his lines, he repeats them several times, then puts down his paper, and begins to pray, for he feels the truth of the Christian sentiments and is no
longer pretending to be Adrian, but becoming him (II.iv.403-9). He also admits in his prayer that the part is too difficult to perform as usual, saying:

\[
\text{Je sais, pour l’éprouver, que par un long étude} \\
\text{L’art de nous transformer nous passe en habitude,} \\
\text{Mais il semble qu’ici des vérités sans fard} \\
\text{Passent et l’habitude et la force de l’art (II.iv.405-8).}
\]

Genest feels he needs strength from the heavens to portray the truths of his role, because his art of imitation is not sufficient. And yet, he is utterly confused when, as the stage directions tell us, the heavens open with flames and he hears a voice speaking to him. Are these flames and this voice a part of the dress-rehearsal, with Genest feigning the part of a confused Adrian, or is this indeed the voice of God?

Genest seems to believe that the Christian God is speaking to him (we have no evidence that he is improvising the part of a Christian). He then immediately requests salvation from the voice and requests that God’s work in him be completed (II.iv.430). And thus, from all appearances, Genest is not actually faking his conversion (despite the fact that he will return to reciting his memorized lines shortly thereafter) all the way through to completion of *Le Véritable Saint Genest*. However, to complicate this certainty, Genest says

\[
\text{Que du Ciel cette voix me doive être adressée!} \\
\text{Quelqu’un s’apercevant du caprice ou j’étais,} \\
\text{S’est voulu divertir par cette feinte voix,} \\
\text{Qui d’un si prompt effet m’excite tant de flamme,} \\
\text{Et qui m’a pénétré jusqu’au profond de l’âme (II.iv.434-8).}
\]

It is as if a voice spoke to bring Genest back from his own illusion to which he was falling prey – that of being a Christian. Genest fears that this “feinte voix” is merely another actor entertaining himself by speaking as God. And yet, this voice excites and penetrates him to the depths of his soul.
Immediately after being excited by the voice, Genest says “Prenez, dieux, contre Christ, prenez votre parti, / Dont ce rebelle cœur s’est presque départi” (II.iv.439-40), which implies that perhaps Christ is the one entertaining himself by addressing Genest. Indeed, when the set-designer interrupts his prayer, Genest proclaims that he has been interrupted from performing his glorious role for the heavenly court (II.v.447-450). As we can only take Genest at his word, we must assume that it is only the inner play’s audience who does not know that Genest is already performing for God rather than the emperor – even before Genest’s official “performance” has begun. Until his death, the Romans believe that Genest is performing for them.

Two acts later, Genest proclaims on stage that he, himself, is speaking rather than Adrian (IV.vii.1325). Is this to be considered his true moment of conversion, or is he so caught up in the glory of his performance that he wants to take credit for his illusion? For indeed, in proclaiming himself Christian as Adrian had previously done, Genest takes the play to another level of realism. And yet, he twice announces that “Adrian a parlé, Genest parle à son tour! / Ce n’est plus Adrian, c’est Genest qui respire” (IV.v.1246-7), and then two scenes later “Ce n’est plus Adrian, c’est Genest qui s’exprime” (IV.vii.1324), which seems to guarantee that Genest is trying to convince the audience that they are no longer watching him perform. After his first proclamation, the stage-directions instruct that more flames are thrown from the heavens, and yet the Roman audience still thinks Genest is improvising forgotten lines, and after the second proclamation, Genest directly tells Diocletian

Ce jeu n’est plus un jeu, mais une vérité
Où par mon action je suis représenté,
Où moi-même l’objet et l’acteur de moi-même. (IV.vii.1325-7)

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3 See Vuillemin, 293
Genest acknowledges that his role has been part of a “game,” but is now a “truth.” This proclamation is thoroughly confusing since he declares he is still acting, but performing the truth and outwardly acting the role of himself. But at what level is he considering himself to be an actor? How can we be sure that he is speaking truth and no longer playing a part? Proclaiming something to be true does not necessarily make it true. Diocletian is certainly confused, thinking it is all still a show, as he says “Ta feinte passe enfin pour impunité” (IV.vii.1373). To which Genest replies “Elle vous doit passer pour une vérité” (IV.vii.1374). Such a reply is still remarkably unclear since Genest does not correct Diocletian’s remark that his actions are a “feinte” and, in fact Genest rather confirms that he is faking, and that his ruse should be taken as truth even if it is not. Certainly a difficult exchange to understand, the Romans remain uncertain about whether or not Genest’s performance has ended (IV.vii.1375-6). Even Genest’s fellow actors are doubtful of Genest’s conversion, as Marcelle accuses just before his death that “A ce culte nouveau tu te feins attaché” because, as she supposes, Genest prefers suicide over the possibility that the emperor will never adequately appreciate his acting talents (V.ii.1518-1630).

In order to prove that his role-playing was indeed truth, as he had told Diocletian, Genest has to keep his part, and “perform” his conversion, even after being removed from the theater. Indeed, as he talks to himself while alone in chains, his speech clearly resembles the lines he had early practiced for his part, as Adrian in Act II - “Non, non, mon sang, Flavie, est tout prêt à sortir… / L’attente m’en est douce et la menace vaine” (II.viii.614 & 616), and as Genest in Act V “Mourons donc, la cause y convie; / Il doit être doux de mourir” (V.ii.1461-2). Both Genest as Adrian and Genest as Genest feel themselves to be ready for the “sweetness” of death.

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4 See Simerka, 66, 69
Similarly, when Marcelle comes to talk with him, Genest tries to hold a conversation with her that resembles the dialogue between Adrian and Natalie as Natalie was visiting him in prison before his death. Adrian’s proclamation “Tu saurais que la mort par qui l’âme est ravie / Est la fin de la mort plutôt que de la vie! ” (III.v.847-8), compared with Genest’s “Que la mort qu’en effet je vous souhaitez à tous. / Vous mourriez pour un Dieu dont la bonté suprême, / Vous faisant en mourant détruire la mort même” (V.ii.1490-2), show the emphasis that both “characters” put on death as a means of ending death rather than ending life.

At the end of the play it also becomes clear that dying is a means of ending illusion. Despite Witt’s argument that, “Can flames thrown from the painted sky and the angel addressed as celestial actor indicate a breaking through from theatricality to reality? Rather, it seems that Genest, however sincere in his conversion, never leaves, indeed cannot leave, the world of the theater” (28), Genest’s death necessarily does remove him from the world of the theater. Though he is playing the role of himself up until his final moment, he has moved beyond role-playing, into truth – which he proves by his death. Lyons, notes that Genest’s words do not change very much; what changes is his intention and, finally, the spectator’s perception. Genest continues to talk like a Christian and this is delightful to Diocletian and the other non-actors until they realize that he believes he is a Christian. […] Although the words have not changed, they have a new function, for they no longer contain the semantic duality implicit in imitative language” (608). What Lyons is referring to here is the way in which Genest has changed context without the audience realizing. Since the Roman audience believes Genest’s words to be within the context of a theatrical performance, they are much slower to distinguish his performance from his conversion than they would have been had he not been an actor.

Up until his death, Genest had the opportunity to repent and save himself. By never repenting, Genest proved that he was indeed willing to die for his belief in the Christian
God’s power of salvation. This final act of violence ends all chance that Genest was still trying to fool the Roman audience. Ekstein, taking great effort to show the ways in which Genest could be seen merely as a victim of his own performance rather than a convert, comes to her final conclusion that “Thus Saint Genest is either a play about theater, or it is a play about theater and religion. Religion cannot break free of theater” (11). Regardless of the speculation that could go on endlessly about Genest’s true understanding of Christianity, his death did sufficiently prove to his audience that he became his role of Christian and martyr, by fulfilling the final act of dying for his Christian faith, despite whatever role the theatrical décor may have played in his conversion.

**Illusion, Violence and Certainty – viewpoint of the Roman Court**

While Genest is a master of creating illusory performances, the Roman audience has mastered the art of believing in fantasy. The credence that the play’s Roman characters give to illusions is made evident early on in the play when the emperor’s daughter, Valérie, tells her servant Camille about a distressing dream she has had about her father marrying her to a shepherd. Which leads to a discussion between the characters on what is reality and what is illusion. Valérie proves herself to be an easy believer in dreams (and thus perhaps also, in spectacles). She cites the example of Julius Cesar dying because he did not sufficiently fear his wife’s premonitory dream warning of his death. Indeed, Valérie becomes so convinced that the events of her dream will become real that she ponders suicide. In the following scene, Valérie’s fears do come true, though not in the worst-case scenario she had originally imagined. Her father is indeed marrying her to the son of a shepherd, but that son is Maximin, a heroic Roman army leader. As her dream comes true, the play gives credibility to the notion that seeming illusions can represent truth.
It is important to recognize the value that the Roman court assigns to the theater, for when Rotrou was writing, in the middle of the 1600s, it was debated in France whether theater was beneficial or dangerous to the populace. Despite the Church’s outcry against theatrical performances, Cardinal Richelieu encouraged various authors of the time to write apologies of the theater (Fumaroli 1008-9). Thus, when the Roman court calls upon the great actor, Genest, to perform a celebratory spectacle, a “noble plaisir” (I.v.230), in honor of Valérie’s wedding, this word choice takes the side of disputing the anti-theatrical critiques lobbed by the 17th century clergy. The Emperor further explains that he enjoys performances for exactly the reasons it was feared by the church - because Genest can fool him and make him feel the passions that Genest arouses first in himself (I.v.233-238). The illusions that Genest creates for his audience are so close to representing reality that the audience members are able to emotionally connect with the realities of the portrayal.

Diocletian highlights the possibility of audience pleasure stemming from representations in the heroic mode. He clearly explains that he likes seeing Genest play the role of military heroes and kings – roles which make Diocletian king over kings (I.v.239-244). It is strange then that Genest would choose to portray a Christian martyr. For Diocletian, the pleasure comes from having an illusion of increased power over men. Though the Roman rulers did have the power to kill the Christians who were denying the Roman gods, this power is not the glorious power that comes from being the greatest of all kings and military leaders, hence the limited enjoyment which would seem to come from the play. However it is not Diocletian who makes the selection of the story to be depicted by Genest; the subject matter is chosen by Valérie, a choice upon which Diocletian never comments. It is not surprising, with Valérie’s predisposition towards death (considering her
recent thoughts of suicide) that she would be interested in seeing the death of a recent martyr. Rather than preferring the heroic aspect of theater, she prefers pathos. In Act II, scene iv, just before the play of St. Adrian begins, Valérie and Maximin continue to discuss the value of tragedies, with Valérie acknowledging “Mon goût, quoi qu’il en soit, est pour la tragédie” (II.vii.453), a genre which she considers to be more noble, and in her mind, has more authority than other dramatic forms. Actually, considering her definition of the representation of death as offering aid to “grands cœurs” (I.i.82), the play seems to already suggest that she is sympathetic towards Christian martyrs.

Maximin articulates a third way to enjoy theater, focusing on the depiction of violence. While he, like Diocletian, enjoys plays for their heroic example – in this case, not the heroic example of Adrian, rather the example of himself, it is the possibility of seeing “himself” re-kill Adrian that gives him pleasure as he awaits the performance. He says,

\[
\text{Je verrai d’un esprit tranquille et satisfait} \\
\text{De son zèle obstiné le déplorable effet,} \\
\text{Et remourir ce traître après sa sépulture,} \\
\text{Sinon en sa personne, au moins en sa figure (II.vi. 471-4).}
\]

Not only do we see the concept that the viewing of a reoccurring act of violence, a re-killing, can provide a feeling of tranquility and satisfaction, but also the idea that he finds repetition of violence to be pleasing, even if he acknowledges the limitations of theatrical performances. However, it is also important to note that while he would prefer that the traitor “remourir” in person, he looks forward to seeing the death in the actor’s “figure” – as if Genest truly represent another man. Maximin is willing to believe in the illusions of theater so as to re-enjoy an act of violence.

For the Roman men, the theater is a tool to affirm their authority and leadership. They do not necessary believe that the illusion of theater is actually showing the true events
represented on stage. They do believe, however, that the theater can so well represent reality that it seems that the great men who have died are again living and the horrible men who have been killed are again killed. Maximin believes that theater is able to provide the same emotions that reality did, and for that reason, theater is entertaining – it can help the audience relive illustrious experiences. The same is also the case for Genest who uses the theater to relive illustrious experiences, but to affirm his own authority and power as an actor. In playing the roles of glorious characters he brings their glories upon himself. This is not the case for Valérie, for whom the theater is a means of recreating the great men who were willing to die for what they believed in, and thus a means of creating within her the noble emotions that are awakened in response to the performance of great courage.

Each of the Roman characters enjoys the feelings that Genest’s performance arouses. When he first announces his conversion on stage, the Romans are incredibly impressed. Diocletian proclaims,

Voyez avec quel art Genest sait aujourd’hui
Passer de la figure aux sentiments d’autrui (IV.v.1261-2).

Just as Maximin had wished earlier that Genest could “remourir” in person rather than just through outward representations, Diocletian feels as though Genest has indeed moved beyond depicting someone else on the surface, and now has used his talent to visibly pass to having the feelings of someone else. It is important to consider the distinction that the characters are making between outward appearances and inward realities, for they think they can distinguish between the two. Though the Roman audience knows Genest is really converting, they continue to interpret the spectacle as pure theater, which the outer audience then experiences as dramatic irony. At first the Roman audience, as does the servant Camille, finds it amusing that Genest has gone so far into playing his part that the other actors of the
troupe are confused. It seems to them that Genest has proven again that he is an extremely
gifted actor, for indeed it must take great skill to accurately recreate the feelings of someone
else. Not only can he fully incarnate his role, but his improvisational skills are so
extraordinary that his fellow actors cannot continue to play along in their own roles.
Whereas they need a script to follow to play their part, Genest can speak from himself as
someone else.

One scene later, the Romans (as Witt points out, like “comic dupes” (27)) continue to
think Genest is acting, even though they too begin to lose the ability to distinguish between
Genest and Adrian.

Maximin
Il feint comme animé des grâces du baptême

Valérie
Sa feinte passerait pour la vérité même.

Plancien
Certes, ou ce spectacle est une vérité,
Ou jamais rien de faux ne fut mieux imité. (IV.vii.1283-6)

Here, the joke of Genest over-playing his part is no longer comical or pleasant to the
Romans. For theater to be successful entertainment, it must come remarkably close to
portraying reality, but there is a point where fiction becomes truth and thus is no longer
acceptable to the men who were so delighted to relive the spectacle of the death of a man
they killed. As Christian Biet in discussing the pleasures of theater points out,

Mais très vite et presque simultanément, un second plaisir advient, qui est celui qui
permets au spectateur de constater qu’il est bien entré au théâtre, que ce qu’il voit est
feint, que ce sang n’est pas là pour de vrai, et qu’il est bien représenté. Horreur,
surprise, inquiétude, doute, puis (ou simultanément) assurance d’être au théâtre, mais
aussi conscience que le théâtre, par des artifices visibles, représente et dévoile le réel
dont il se nourrit” (xxxii).
For the spectator, a portion of the pleasure of the representation comes from knowing that what they are seeing is not true.

Indeed, once it appears that the actor playing “Diocletian” and the actor playing “Maximin” are not capable of intervening and putting an end to the idolatrous words of Genest, it becomes necessary for the real-life “actors” to resume their parts. That is to say, since the actors do not have the power to truly stop an enemy of the state, the men who do have power must take back their roles from the actors. As such, Diocletian becomes angry and has Genest arrested, exclaiming

O blasphème exécrable! O sacrilège impie,
Et dont nous répondrons, si son sang ne l’expie!
Préfet, prenez ce soin, et de cet insolent
Fermez les actions par un acte sanglant
Qui des dieux irrités satisfasse la haine (IV.vii.1383-7).

As Diocletian recognizes, by killing an insolent subject, the trouble caused is seemingly stopped. In order to determine whether or not Genest is feigning the role of a Christian, Diocletian employs the threat of violence. When this threat is not sufficient to get Genest to return to his pre-performance role, Diocletian must carry through with the execution (though allowing for the possibility of Genest’s repentance at any point until his death).

By repeatedly affirming that it is now Genest speaking what were the thoughts of Adrian, Genest makes it impossible for the Romans to know what is true and what is false. It is only in removing that which causes the confusion that things can be brought back to order. As Diocletian himself had said to Genest before the arrest “Votre désordre enfin force ma patience” (IV.vii.1319), Diocletian then takes it upon himself to end the dangerous illusion of Genest’s conversion by killing him with the actual bloody death that the Roman audience had expected to see faked on stage.
As the action progresses and Genest refuses to stop acting like a Christian, the men who had been so excited to see their own actions performed on stage become excited to act out the scenes again themselves. The passion of Genest’s performance has incited their true (violent) passions. In the final act, two scenes before the news that Genest has been killed, Diocletian and Maximin explain that they must act on behalf of their gods and avenge Genest’s impiety. Maximin goes so far as to say

> Donner ce soir au people un spectacle sanglant,
> Si déjà sur le bois, d’un théâtre funeste
> Il n’a représenté l’action qui lui reste (V.v.1666-8).

Though they do not seem to realize it, they themselves have become the reality of the illusion that was represented to them and their words continue to insist on the theatrical nature of it. They were enthusiastic from the start to see actors perform their own lives on stage, and now Genest has provided them the chance to do so as themselves, for Genest has indeed replicated his part so closely that the Romans get to actually experience the real sacrificial death of a Christian.

Valérie, however, has a different response to spectacle than her fiancé and father. She also enjoys tragedies, but, as mentioned earlier for “les pensers pompeux et pleins de majesté” (II.vi.455) that are portrayed by the performances. She is attached to the characters from an emotional standpoint, rather than the heroic, corporal level and as such pleads for her father to spare the life of Genest for the sake of his troupe. Due to her notion that spectatorship is pleasing if the performance leads to feelings of sorrow, Valérie behaves exactly as she would if this scenario were fictional. By feeling compassion and crying for the martyr, she is able to best enjoy Genest’s performance.
As Genest refuses to drop the performance of being a converted Christian, the Romans begin to reevaluate their assumptions about the distinction between theater and real life. They grow suspicious of that reassuring line between representation and reality that, according to Biet, validates the audience’s pleasure in violent spectacle. As everyone is leaving the stage following Diocletian’s death order for Genest, Plancien discusses with the other members of the troupe the dangers of being actors. He asks,

Et vous, qui sous même art courez même fortune,
Sa foi, comme son art, vous est-elle commune?
Et comme un mal, souvent, devient contagieux… (IV.ix.1407-1409).

Plancien’s question is important because prior to Genest’s performance the Romans had not considered the possibility that the troupe was able to perform as Christians since they might actually be Christians. Marcelle and the other actors are quick to assure Plancien that they certainly are only performers of many changing roles. He decides to believe the innocence of the other actors, but states

Et si Genest persiste en son aveuglement,
C’est lui qui veut sa mort, et rend son jugement (IV.ix.1425-6).

In the eyes of Plancien, it is Genest who is willfully choosing to die, and thus, like Diocletian, he does not believe Genest should be pitied. Also similar to Diocletian, he does not necessarily believe that Genest has converted, rather both men are convinced that Genest has insulted the State and the gods by pridefully refusing to bring the inner play (the one performed for Valérie’s wedding) to an end. Indeed they express regret at killing him, but his disobedience cannot be endlessly tolerated saying,

Je connais son mérite et plains votre infortune;
Mais outre que l’injure, avec les dieux commune,
Intéresse l’Etat à punir son erreur,
J’ai pour toute sa secte une si forte horreur
Que je tiens tous les maux qu’ont soufferts ses complices,
Ou qu’ils doivent souffrir, pour de trop doux supplices.
En faveur toutefois de l’hymen fortune
Par qui tant de Bonheur à Rome est destiné,
Si par son repentir, favorable à soi-même,
De sa voix sacrilège il purge le blasphème,
Et reconnaît les dieux auteurs de l’univers,
Les bras de ma pitié vous sont encore ouverts;
Mais voici le préfet; je crains que son supplice
N’ait prévenu l’effet de votre bon office (V.vi.1703-16).

On one hand, Diocletian is purging the state of a “real” dissident, but he is also ridding the theater of the actor who disturbs the barrier between representation and reality. Ironically he accomplishes that by enacting in real life the story of the play (and thus breaching the divide himself).

Curiously, despite the certainty that the spectators might have gained from watching the torture and death of Genest, and despite the fact that the requested play was to show the sacrificial killing of a Christian, the eager actors Maximin and Diocletian are not actually spectators at his death. Rather, Plancien comes on stage to announce that the off-stage death of Genest has been completed:

Par votre ordre, Seigneur, ce glorieux acteur,
Des plus fameux héroïs fameux imitateur,
Du théâtre romain la splendeur et la gloire,
Mais si mauvais acteur dedans sa propre histoire,
Plus entier que jamais en son impiété
Et par tous mes efforts en vain sollicité,
A du courroux des dieux contre sa perfidie
Par un acte sanglant ferme la tragédie (V.vii.1717-1724).

Even after killing him, Plancien continues to refer to Genest as a “glorieux” actor and the most famous imitator of Roman theater. It is difficult to know whether he is being facetious or referring to Genest’s profession, for he also declares that while Genest was a great imitator of great heroes, he was a terrible actor in his own life - a tragedy which came to an end with a
bloody act. The concept of Genest being an actor both on stage and in real life highlights the idea of *theatrum mundi*, that man is an actor in the world. Certainly *Le Véritable Saint Genest* clearly demonstrates the concept that man is constantly being watched by God (or the gods), along with many levels of human spectators. As Genest performs, he is being seen by the rest of his troupe, by the Roman audience, by God, and by the true audience of Rotrou’s play, the French court. As Lyons points out, Genest himself talks about his “role” in this world several times in the play (609). Even when Genest tells the audience that he is no longer pretending, they (and to some extent, we) continue to consider him an actor, doubting the sincerity of his conversion. It is fascinating that the characters cannot seem to think of Genest in terms other than those of an actor.

By using the vocabulary of theater and spectacle to report on Genest's death, the characters acknowledge the spectacularity of violence. At the same time, they remind the audience that it is being denied the actual spectacle of Genest's death due to the constraints of *bienséance* in the French theater at that time. The verbal evocation of the missing scene of violence may provoke the audience's reflection on their own pleasure in witnessing violence. Additionally, by using these meta-theatrical terms to describe reality, Plancien upholds the idea of the link not only between theater and reality, but also between martyrdom and theater. Indeed, both martyrdom and theater are rooted in imitation and spectacle. For the theater, it is simple to see that actors must imitate others, take on their mannerisms, and do so in front of an audience. For Christian martyrs, they are imitating the death of Jesus-Christ and taking on an attitude of willingness to suffer so as to follow his example. For the spectator, seeing the characters raise the possibility of the theatrics of religion is a startling experience. As Ekstein describes it: “The conversion experience, once it is embedded in the illusion of
theatrical performance in this play, retains a powerful association with theater” (9). It is indeed this concept that the Church is really all founded on performance that caused the Church to attempt to suppress theater. For despite the fact that “Nous n’avons pas à revenir sur le fait que le plus ancien théâtre était, en France, un théâtre religieux et que celui-ci est le fondement même de l’art dramatique français” (Pascoe 25), both the Catholics and the Protestants of the late 1500s had called for the suppression of religious stories on stage for

Après s’être transporté de l’église à la place publique, l’art dramatique se développe rapidement, la mise en scène se perfectionna, l’imagination de l’auteur se déploya de plus en plus jusqu’à ce que la partie profane l’emportât sur la partie sacrée et que le ridicule attaquât les personnages le plus vénérable et surtout le diable. (Pascoe 8)

The transfer of religious stories from the realm of the church to the public theater was felt by both religious groups to be a danger to the respect for religious heroes and a danger to the morals of the populace.

It is problematic to confuse religious performances with theatrical performances because while the “performances” of the Church, much like the deaths of martyrs, give the illusion of being truthful, once the possibility arises that religion is just performance, spectators are left pondering whether all religious acts are merely a really good show. The possibility of it being an act could help explain the last line of the play, where following Plancien’s announcement of Genest’s death, the characters leave the stage crying. Maximin has the last word, which he says to Valérie (who is distraught that she was not able to save the life of Genest),

Ne plaignez point, Madame, un Malheur volontaire,
Puisqu’il l’a pu franchir et s’être salutaire,
Et qu’il a bien voulu, par son impiété,
D’une feinte, en mourant, faire une vérité. (V.vii.1747-50)
Maximin clearly believes that Genest’s conversion was all a spectacle until here where it is “verité”. It is intriguing that he believes that Genest’s voluntary choice to be martyred is not to be regretted by the audience. This point would imply that only involuntary deaths are regrettable, which shows that Maximin’s belief regarding tragedies has not changed - the grandeur of heroic example should be reenacted and violence against traitors should be pleasing. As he mentions, Genest did indeed have a chance to repent of his conversion on stage, but by refusing to return to the Roman gods, Genest, in the eyes of Maximin, died for his “feinte” and thus made it real.

Here is the answer as to what can bring certainty to an illusion. It is not sufficiently believable to hear someone’s belief – for people often do not say what they feel in their heart and their mind (particularly actors), and yet, deeds can also be done under illusory intentions. And so, we are left with the possibility that it is only through using a spectacular amount of courage, and perhaps dying for what they say, that one can prove their honesty and truthfulness. Genest therefore, proved to the characters that he was no longer acting by dying for his new Christian beliefs. The finality of death was all that could break the possibility of his conversion being an illusion for the Roman audience. Even if Genest did not truly convert (as was at least supposed by the Roman court), he did, in fact, die for the Christian God.
CHAPTER 3

CYRANO’S “LA MORT D’AGRIPPINE”

Cyrano de Bergerac’s only tragedy, *La Mort d’Agrippine*, probably written in 1647, questions the relation between illusion, certainty and violence in regards to vengeance (and blatant lies). Sinister and bloody, this mostly forgotten play has only been performed three times: once in 1653, and then later in 1872 and 1960. Famous for its “belles impiétés,” the play created quite a stir. Indeed the play is quite dark, as Dominique Moncon’huy puts it:

La pièce rejoint le pessimisme de *La Mort de Sénèque*; mais elle le dépasse: chez Tristan l’Hermite, si le pouvoir avait les mains tachées de sang et si l’avenir était noir, il restait des voix pour défendre des principes au annoncer un autre monde. Ici, il n’y a plus d’avenir. On se contente d’attendre la prochaine victime (13).

This play was immediately dismissed at its inception, and has had the beginnings of a rebirth since the 1920-1930s, when thanks to a renewal in interest for so-called libertine authors, several scholars, notably Antoine Adam, began to explore the merit of this undeniably sinister play (Ramos 11). While many of the authors who write on the play tend make a case for its inclusion among the great plays of the 17th century, this paper will set aside a consideration of its literary-historical value in order to focus on how the play is structured around lies and violence.

Throughout Rotrou’s play, Agrippine, the widow of Germanicus, thinks only of her desire to avenge her husband’s death. Even though she constantly imagines the glorious moment of killing her enemies, she is unable to do so for she feels that as a woman she must
rely on men to kill those whom she considers her adversaries. Through a series of lies filled with violent imagery, Agrippine manages to convince others to do her bidding. She first convinces Séjanus, the *favori* of the emperor Tibère, that if he will kill Tibère, she will marry him. Séjanus agrees, not knowing that he is also on Agrippine’s hit-list. Meanwhile, Livilla, the half-sister of Agrippine convinces Séjanus, her lover, to kill Agrippine. Both women ultimately betray Séjanus before the emperor. Livilla, who has already killed her husband, son of Tibère, and her children to clear the way for Séjanus to reign, goes before the emperor and admits both her guilt and that of Séjanus. They are sentenced to death. Livilla thus sacrifices herself for revenge, and Séjanus, whose sole hope had been to one day rule the Roman Empire, is left with no choice but to die as nobly as possible when Tibère has him tortured and killed. Though Agrippine’s treachery is also discovered, she remains alive at the end of the play.

**Plays within the play**

In Cyrano’s play the characters are constantly undermining each other and plotting the death of others to assure their place at the top rung of power in the Roman Empire. Speaking of the cut-throat nature of the play, Ramos clarifies “La seule loi respectée est celle de la jungle: je suis le plus fort, *donc* je peux faire ce que je veux, *donc* je le ferai” (18). Rather than a belief system focused on pleasing the gods, the characters serve only the laws of self-promotion. To do so, the characters spend their time plotting and putting on “plays” (filled with lies and death threats) for each other to mask their true intentions. This use of *mise en abîme* is interesting in that there is not an official play-within-a-play, but social and interpersonal performances within the play as a whole. As the characters seek to undermine each other, each character behaves and speaks differently depending on who else is on stage
with them. The audience, along with the characters, becomes lost in these un-official interior plays. As a result, each viewer and each character must constantly question who is speaking truthfully. As Gossip correctly summarizes

Ce qui caractérise surtout *La Mort d’Agrippine*, c’est l’importance accordée à la feinte: à de nombreuses reprises un personnage prononce devant un autre protagoniste certains vers qui contredisent la situation qu’il expose devant son confidant ou sa confidente et parfois le spectateur même prend les apparences pour la réalité, le mensonge pour la vérité. [...] Ces feintes multiples sont d’autant plus surprenantes – ou, si l’on veut, d’autant plus nécessaires et réussies – que les personnages sont rattachés inextricablement les uns aux autres par des liens de parenté exceptionnellement étroits (Gossip xii).

Indeed, as the play progresses, the viewer increasingly discovers the familial bonds between characters. Despite these bonds, the actors in Cyrano’s work do not know whom to trust. However, as the audience sees the on-stage discussions between characters and their confidants, we buy into the illusion of being privy to truth, and we often feel confident that we know what is “really” going on. Even with this sense of assurance, we cannot know whether or not the characters are telling their confidantes the truth. And so, as the story progresses, the audience has only a vague feeling of certainty, knowing that we cannot fully distinguish between fiction and reality.

The importance of illusion in the play is clear from the opening act. From the second line of *La Mort d’Agrippine*, Agrippine and her confidant are both intentionally pretending to believe in self-created illusions. Agrippine has asked her friend to feign being unfamiliar with the story of the death of Germanicus so that Agrippine can again tell of his glory and of his unfair death. Cornélie, of course, willingly agrees. Playing the part, she foreshadows the way in which all the characters will put value in the feigning of others and of themselves. Agrippine is also pretending since she knows that Cornélie already knows the story. As the
women allow themselves the illusion of reliving the death of their hero, they further open up their dangerous and real desire for revenge.

Throughout the play, the characters will show the dangerous powers of deception. The *mise en abîme* structure is quite successful at allowing the characters to further their goals, since none of the characters (or the audience) know with certainty the true feelings of the others and thus are held captive in the power struggle. Once Séjanus arrives on stage, the play’s trend of lies become more perilous than when the two women were feigning ignorance to allow for the retelling of an old story. Within this story, and moments before Séjanus enters, Agrippine has announced that he is among those she wants dead (“Pison est déjà mort et bientôt l’Empereur, Livilla, Séjanus, sentiront ma fureur” (I.i.135-6)). Séjanus, however, appears to not know of her violent feelings and strangely, Agrippine talks of marrying him. Once he has left the stage, Cornélie, who believed that Agrippine was serious about marrying Séjanus is astounded saying

\[
\text{Enfin Madame,} \\
\text{Du traître Séjanus, deviendrez-vous la femme?} \\
\text{Faut-il que l’assassin de votre cher époux} \\
\text{Se trace par son crime un chemin jusqu’à vous?” (I.iii.178-80).}
\]

Cornélie, like the audience, is equally perplexed as to which time Agrippine was telling the truth: when she wanted to kill Séjanus, or when she wanted to marry him? The confidante and the audience thus are both at a loss as to which instance was truthful and which was illusory.

Unlike in *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, acting is presented immediately as an art that is used for ill, and more specifically, for hiding the truth – especially since there is no official “theater” space within the world of the play. Indeed, nearly every character in this play acts falsely to ultimately lead to the ruin of someone else. Each character plays a different part
depending who is on stage with them, and once a character leaves and returns, the motivations and desires of the character often appear (intentionally) contradictory compared with their previous behavior. There are numerous examples of the multiple personalities of the characters. For example, the previously mentioned scene change where Agrippine is plotting Séjanus’ death, then telling him that she will marry him (I.i. & I.ii), or where Séjanus, who has just agreed to marry Agrippine, promises Livilla he will kill Agrippine (I.ii & I.iv), or in the following scene when Séjanus who has just promised to obey Livilla, tells his confidante that he hates her and does not plan to kill Agrippine (I.iv and I.v), and so on throughout the play. These schizophrenic behaviors, characteristic of Baroque literature and art (Buffum 40), are very different from the behaviors of the majority of Rotrou’s characters, which are quite stable aside from Genest. The abilities of the characters to convincingly lie and their treacherous natures greatly complicate and inhibit the possibility of recognizing the truth.

Violence as Persuasive Power and Determining Force

Although deception abounds, the true desires of each character (whether exacting revenge, ascending to power, or retaining power) center around acts of violence. It is through the description of these acts of violence that the audience and other characters can see glimpses of reality through the complicated tangle of lies. (It is only in the cases where the violence threats are carried to completion that certainty about reality is provided). Thus, it is violence that provides the characters and play with any semblance of reality and functions to move the play beyond a series of lies that spiral into meaninglessness (for the characters and the play as a whole). Indeed, the actors all plan their future lives around particular acts of violence. Agrippine is only promising to marry Séjanus so that he will kill Tibère for her.
Séjanus is only promising Livilla that he will kill Agrippine because he is afraid of Livilla’s murderous nature. Tibère wants to safely keep his title as emperor so he agrees to give up the throne to Agrippine’s son. Livilla wants Séjanus to stay with her so she tells Tibère that Séjanus is plotting against him and deserving of death. Indeed, Séjanus is plotting to kill his friend Tibère and forsaking his lover Livilla because wants to be on the throne. As for Agrippine, she acknowledges that her sole goal is to avenge her husband’s death, and that she is willing to do whatever it takes to be successful saying “Etant ce que je suis, je m’abaisse à tromper” (I.iii.208). Meaning that while Agrippine thinks of herself in terms of being the “veuve d’un héros,” (I.iii.202) descending from royal “sang glorieux,” (IV.ii.1119) she laments that she cannot have the glory of avenging her husband’s death herself (III.i.762). Despite her royal heritage, she feels she has no choice but to avenge a hero’s death by lowering herself and collaborating with one of his killers. While she could gain glory from having killed Tibère herself (III.i.762), at this point in the story she does not see how it is possible that she, a woman, could kill him. She is therefore forced to rely on her collaboration with Séjanus to trick him into killing Tibère, after which Agrippine will also have Séjanus killed. For Agrippine, the use of deception provides her with power.

However, as in Act II, scene ii, where two powerful characters are on stage together, we are provided with the limits of believable illusion. Tibère and Agrippine, stubbornly pretend that they do not want the power of the throne to such a ridiculous extreme that their deceit turns into a moment of comedy for the audience – though it is only because they have told their confidantes their true feelings that the audience can be fairly sure that the characters are dissembling. Tibère had previously discussed with Nerva, that he needed to find out if Agrippine is really against him, so “Pour l’empêcher d’agir, il faut la rassurer; / Si
son crime paraît, feindre de l’ignorer” (II.i.423-4) and once she enters “Pour me tromper encore elle vient en ces lieux; / Mais écoute-nous feindre à qui feindra le mieux” (II.i.431-2).

In this scene, Tibère devises a scheme in an attempt to gain information about possible traitors. Thus, he offers Agrippine the crown of the empire so that her son may rule in his place. Agrippine, of course, cannot accept. Though she may see through his ploy, she has greater concern that Tibère’s offer would extinguish her chances of revenge. While she would like for her son to rule, and have her family line regain control of the empire, if Tibère gives the power up for her son, it would be as if he had repented of his error in unrightfully taking power (II.iii.539-548). This is problematic because she cannot get vengeance if he repents of his error, remarking to Séjanus, “Sache que je préfère à l’or d’une couronne / Le plaisir furieux que la vengeance donne” (II.iii.537-8). Agrippine, in refusing the crown, has safely avoided verifying Tibère’s fear that she wants the throne. As she tells Séjanus, she recognized that the dangerous Tibère she was accustomed to was hiding behind the Tibère who had offered her the empire. (II.iii.519-528).

This scene is exemplary of the dangerous, bloodthirsty nature of their world, where the importance of distinguishing between fiction and reality is heightened for the characters (and the audience) because more lives are in danger. Nearly every character is at risk of death if they cannot determine the truth about those living around them (who are potentially plotting their death). Since each character builds their desired future around particular acts of violence, violence then plays a role in the projected culminating “scene” of all the concurrent “plays” constructed and enacted by the characters. This is significant because not only does it allow for the fulfillment or denial of these goals, but it also acts as a means of providing certainty for the other characters. Until someone moves beyond words and begins to act, e.g.
kill someone, it cannot be known whether or not they sincerely plan to carry through or how they truly feel. For example, although Tibère hears Agrippine detailing how she wants to kill him:

   Je veux, le massacrant au milieu de ses gardes,
   Voir couler par ruisseaux de son Cœur expirant
   Tout le sang corrompu dont se forme un tyran! (III.i.766-8),

he is uncertain as to whether or not she was indeed just describing a dream, as she so quickly tells him (III.ii.773). He remains uncertain of her true feelings for him until she proclaims that it is true that she wants to kill him (V.i).

All of the principal characters of the play use this strategy of keeping the others uncertain of the truth. If Agrippine can keep Séjanus uncertain about her sincerity long enough, he will kill Tibère before discovering the truth. If Séjanus can keep Tibère uncertain about his loyalty, he can kill Tibère before Tibère kills him. If Livilla can keep Séjanus on her side for long enough, she can convince him to kill Agrippine, and so on. Agrippine, however, becomes increasingly reckless—as she becomes obsessed with vengeance, she continually places less value on her own life. Her illusory performances only matter to her in that she needs to be certain that someone will do her bidding so that her goal can be accomplished. Since all that matters to her is avenging her husband’s death, she is not caught up in worrying who is lying to her. Despite the fact that the lies of others are of no concern to Agrippine, she still has to keep up her fictitious performance in front of the other characters; they in turn do the same since they are unsure as to whether or not she is being truthful.

At the beginning of Scene 3, the link between illusion and violence is strengthened by the appearance of a “Sanglante Ombre” (III.i.687), essentially violence personified, which
comes to Agrippine asking for vengeance of Germanicus’ death. As Agrippine, who was already “haunted” by the idea of revenge, talks to her husband’s ghost, it appears that she has changed her mind about the previous plan to have Séjanus kill Tibère. It is impossible at this point to know if Agrippine is really seeing a ghost, or if she is again using an illusion to convince Cornélie that she should be the one to kill Tibère. However, she is directly addressing a ghost which cannot be seen by the audience or by Cornélie. Though Agrippine at this point is still focused on vengeance, she now wants to kill Tibère herself (III.i.764). By the end of her discussion with the ghost of Germanicus and with Cornélie, she says

Si la Fortune instruite à me désobliger
M’ôtait tous les moyens de me pouvoir venger,
Plutôt que me résoudre à vaincre ma colère,
Je m’irais poignarder dans les bras de Tibère,
Afin que, soupçonné de ce tragique effort,
Il attirât sur lui la peine de ma mort.
Au moins dans les Enfers j’emporterai la gloire
De laisser, quoique femme, un grand nom dans l’Histoire (III.i.755-762).

Agrippine has switched from seeking vengeance to desiring glory for herself. Whereas at the beginning of the play she was willing to go to great lengths (marry her enemy, reject the crown) to get revenge for her husband’s death, while contriving illusions to convince the other characters so as to kill off her enemies and protect herself, she becomes increasingly desperate to kill Tibère.

It is important to note the characters’ seeming understanding of the persuasive power and determining force of violence. Several of the characters are also skilled in using verbal evocations of violence to influence other characters. While Livilla and Tibère are certainly examples of characters who use threats of violence, Agrippine, who believes that she can exclusively wield power through her stories, has most perfected her skills of persuasive violent speech. In fact, she can quite easily spin multiple “plots” around the threat of
violence. For example, when Tibère enters the room while she is proclaiming vividly how she will kill him, she is only momentarily fazed and then begins a fabulous performance explaining that she had merely been discussing a bad dream with Cornélie. With this “sommeil prophétique” (III.ii.784), Agrippine then cautions the Caesar of his impending death—not a death that she will cause, for they both are of noble blood, but rather a death perpetrated by someone like Séjanus. At this moment, Séjanus arrives on stage and hears Agrippine say to Tibère “Séjanus te trahit” (III.iii.816). Séjanus immediately acknowledges the truth of Agrippine’s accusation. But Agrippine again changes the spin of the story, acting as if she had just been explaining to Tibère the false accusations about her and Séjanus (III.iii.824-6). At which point, Séjanus laments to himself: “Imprudent, qu’ai-je fait? Tout est désespéré!” (III.iii.827) Tibère, for his part, does come to believe Agrippine, at least to some extent, thanks to Séjanus’ admission of guilt which gives truth to Agrippine’s story. Both of the men are helplessly at the mercy of Agrippine, who commands their attention with the bloody aspects of her prophecies and proclamations.

Here, in the world where the gods never intervene, truths can only come from the actions and words of the characters. There is no hope for anything beyond keeping oneself alive and in power; as such the moral systems are founded on the individual goals of each character. Since Agrippine feels that her integrity and power will be upheld if she avenges her husband’s death by killing her half-sister, her fiancé, and the emperor (who is at once her uncle by marriage, her step-father, and her step-brother (Gossip xii)), she is justified in her actions and in fact, it is only if she succeeds in avenging Germanicus that she will be upholding truth. Since her moral system is based on her individual desires, she feels no shame in plotting against family. In a similar vein, Livilla feels justified in killing her
husband and children for the sake of her lover. In her mind, truth comes from her love for Séjanus, any actions based on that are rightfully done.

Due to the absence of the gods, there is no chance of a *deus ex machina* moment, where the problems of the play can be immediately solved thanks to the intercession of a god. Indeed, even the characters do not believe that this can happen, as evidenced by Séjanus’ famous (perceived as atheist) remark that “Ces Dieux que l’homme a faits, et qui n’ont point fait l’homme, / Des plus fermes Etats ce fantasque soutien, / Va, va, Téréntius, qui les craint, ne craint rien,” to which Téréntius unsuccessfully counters “Mais s’il n’en était point, cette Machine ronde…?” and Séjanus holds his ground asking “Oui, mais s’il en était, serais-je encore au monde?” (II.v.635-642). The characters themselves fear that they are indeed alone in their quest for answers, for power, and for protection against their enemies. Thus ensues for the audience a realization that the characters’ deception cannot last. As the lies of the characters are discovered, they can no longer rely on their false alliances. Without these alliances, the characters are led to their demise. In fact it becomes apparent for the audience that the false alliances were actually functioning to keep the characters from killing each other because they could not be certain who they could really trust.

As the characters discover the true feelings of those they had wrongly considered harmless (Agrippine and Livilla tell Tibère that Séjanus is against him, Agrippine tells Tibère that she does indeed want to kill him, and so on), the characters then become willing to die themselves, in order to demonstrate one of two things: either that they did everything they could to achieve their goals, or that they were willing to die to prove their innocence. Agrippine chooses to go the latter route, seeking to prove her (false) innocence to Tibère.
through her willingness to die. She tells Tibère “Faut-il tender le col? Qu’on frappe, je suis prête” (IV.ii.1054).

Again seeking to re-spin reality, and influence Tibère, Agrippine holds strong to her declaration that she is innocent and ready to be killed by him. By maintaining her innocence all the way to her death, Agrippine warns Tibère that he would be killing an innocent and royal relative. As Agrippine says to Tibère,

Tu vois mon innocence et la lis sur mon front.
Agrippine, César, attenter sur ta vie?
Non tu ne le crois pas! Mais ce Monstre d’Envie,
Dont le souffle ternit la candeur de ma foi,
A sans doute a posté des témoins contre moi;
Car tout Rome connait qu’il veut par ma ruine
Elever sa maison sur celle d’Agrippine (IV.ii.1044-1050).

While hoping to convince him to trust appearances, (i.e. read the innocence on my face), Agrippine also undermines Tibère’s (correct) fears that she is out to kill him by suggesting that he is too smart to believe the other characters who are surely telling lies about her in hopes of taking away her rightful power. Thus, while Agrippine focuses her “performance” around the violence she hopes to commit against others, she must also use her performance to defend herself against violence. In the same way, all of the primary characters of the play focus their “performances” around threats of violence.

**Cyrano’s Version of the Martyr**

The play eventually moves away from the characters putting on plays for each other, and attempting to persuade each other through tales of violence, to the actual violent outcomes of the drama. In a string of murderer-martyrs, Livilla goes before Tibère, accusing Séjanus of plotting against him. After being assured that Tibère trusts her and is enraged to
the point of intending to kill Séjanus, Livilla proclaims her own guilt of having killed the emperor’s son and grandchildren, proclaiming

Si je t’ai découvert la révolte secrète
Dont ce couple maudit complotait ta défaite,
C’est que mon Cœur jaloux de leurs contentements
N’a pu que par le fer désunir ces amants.
Et dans mon désespoir si je m’accuse encore,
C’est pour suivre au tombeau Séjanus que j’adore;
Ose donc, ose donc quelque chose de grand,
Je brûle de mourir par les mains d’un tyran! (V.v.1429-1436).

Whereas martyrs often proclaim that they yearn to die for their cause, it is noteworthy that her cause is the death of her lover whom she has jealously convinced the emperor to kill. Here, Livilla’s goal is not to die for an eternal reward, but rather to die just so she can follow her lover to the tomb, although that wish also constructs a narrative, pitting persecutors against persecuted.

Séjanus, who had aspired to be a murderer, thinks at first that he is a martyr for the cause of Agrippine, even though he now knows that Agrippine is willing to sacrifice him, he still is compelled to do her bidding. Though he begins to doubt the alliances he has both made and broken, he declares

Frappons, voilà l’hostie, et l’occasion presse;
Aussi bien, quand le coup me pourrait accabler,
Séjanus peut mourir, mais il ne peut trembler (IV.iv.1306-8).

He recognizes that at this stage in the play, his only hope is to act courageously. He still is unsure of whether or not Agrippine is trustworthy, but she remains his only chance at ascending to the throne. Thus, death is worth risking in order to achieve his goals. However, Séjanus soon becomes aware that Agrippine was against him all along and she cruelly tells him of the pleasure she will have in watching him die (V.vi.1520-2). As we have seen that Agrippine repeatedly controls other characters through her use of verbal evocations of
violence, here she tries again to assert her power over him by describing in detail the torture and deaths that his children will undergo because of him. His replies, “Cela n’est que la mort et n’a rien qui m’émeuve” (V.vi.1558). As his death approaches, the power of Agrippine’s imagery lessens, and he resigns himself to a death that would prove him noble.

As for Agrippine, she desperately wants to be a murderer-martyr, but never succeeds. She becomes so entangled in her own hopes of revenge that she forgets to uphold her appearance of innocence and admits to Tibère that she does in fact want to kill him. Tibère is afraid and confused by these admissions, so he decides to go back to Capri, taking with him the son of Agrippine. (IV.ii.1130-4) Agrippine, upset that her enemy was escaping, rather than upset that her son is being taken away, declares “Périsse l’Univers pourvu que je me venge!” (IV.iii.1214), a startling line which shows the extent to which violence is the sole motivation for Agrippine. Nothing in the world matters at all to her except the blissful possibility of revenge. She is not concerned about her son, or her own life – rather preferring to be a martyr for her cause.

And thus we see that in order to write their “scripts” to their liking, the characters have to enact or accept violence in a particular way. Livilla both enacts and accepts violence. Séjanus accepts violence. Nerva reports to Caesar of their deaths saying

J’ai vu la catastrophe
D’une femme sans peur, d’un soldat philosophe;
Séjanus a d’un Cœur qui ne s’est point soumis
Maintenu hautement ce qu’il avait promis;
Et Livilla de même éclatante de gloire,
N’a pas d’un seul soupir offense sa mémoire (V.ix.1649-54).

In the manner of martyrs they went to their death, and with pride and glory, in order to demonstrate in spectacular fashion the veracity of their professed beliefs.
Agrippine wishes to both enact and accept violence. She is unable to do so because her desires are complicated by Tibère who is wise enough to deny Agrippine the one thing that would have given her success – the chance to die killing him. And at the same time, Tibère keeps himself free of the guilt that would have come from killing Agrippine, so that no one has a reason to kill him as repayment for her death. Agrippine, who was dangerous in her single-mindedness towards revenge, is no longer capable of having others kill Tibère, for Séjanus is dead; she can no longer kill Livilla and Séjanus out of revenge for her husband’s death, because Tibère killed them first; and in that Tibère refuses to kill her, she has been deprived of her chance at glory. While he wants to kill her, he will not give her that satisfaction of becoming a martyr.

However, by the end of the play all of the main characters are in someway playing the part of the martyr: Livilla because she dies to keep her lover; Séjanus because he dies a traitor to prove himself worthy of the throne; Tibère because he agrees to suffer the continued presence of “cette ingrate vipère” (V.vii.1637), Agrippine. Interestingly, though Agrippine is denied physical martyrdom, Tibère forces prolonged suffering on her by denying her the glory of death and/or revenge.

Throughout La Mort d’Agrippine, the questions of illusion and “reality” are raised, but it is only in the final scenes, when acts of violence are committed, that the characters are provided with any notion of certainty about the true desires of the others. In a story where all desires are built around acts of violence, the characters use their skills of theatricality to perform fictions before their enemies. For these performances to be successful at convincing the other characters, they must use the persuasive powers which stem from threats of
violence. Once violence is at hand, the characters must again decide on an individual basis how they want to use the violence to realize their ambitions.
Jean Rotrou’s play *Le Véritable Saint Genest* with its multi-level *mise en abîme*, and Cyrano de Bergerac’s *La Mort d’Agrippine* with its unofficial plays-within-the play, ask the audience to question the divide between representation and reality, theater and the world. Despite the surface differences between these plays, both are structured around the concept that violence provides a possible means of determining truth within illusions. Whereas the Roman court in Rotrou’s play uses the execution of Genest assure themselves that he had indeed converted, the Roman court in Cyrano’s play uses violence to persuade others, and also to prove their dedication to their ideals (attainment of the throne, revenge, love). Thus, by making a martyr out of Genest, the court could be certain of his faith. By martyring themselves, Cyrano’s characters could provide certainty of their true ambitions.

By showing the likeness between theatricality and religious systems, Rotrou further develops the possibility of which the Church was afraid – that unless someone willingly died for their faith, it was impossible to know what they truly believed. But at the same time, as Genest himself proclaimed the dangers of theater at the end of the play, Rotrou’s complicated defense of theater through a defense of religion leaves the audience certain, perhaps, about Genest’s conversion – but uncertain about the role of theatrical illusions within religious acts.

Cyrano, with his godless, hopeless characters, shows the dangers of living in an illusion-filled world where no god can come to the rescue. Without the possibility for an
after-life, ultimately, to be a murderer-martyr is the only hope for the characters. Thus religious fervor and the total absence of religion both lead to the same violent results. It is this possibility which underlines the similarities between Rotrou and Cyrano’s plays. Both texts utilize violence to provide “reality” to the illusions that their plays attempt to create, and the ideas that the authors are attempting to communicate. These acts of violence provide certainty to the audience and the characters in the plays and give an impression of truth and validity to the declarations of the martyrs and the executed. Thus Biet’s suggestion that violent plays fascinate the audience because they must pick either the side of the killer or the executed is not the only possibility. Perhaps violent executions are compelling to the spectators because they give an impression of a breaking through the uncertainties of performance and moving into reality and truth.
REFERENCES


