

Cervantes and the Domestication of Romance in Seventeenth-Century French Theater: Jean Rotrou's Les deux pucelles, tragi-comédie

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THE 1630S WERE A CRITICAL DECADE FOR FRENCH DRAMA: The state began to subsidize the two main theaters in Paris. New laws restricted the conduct of theatergoers to impose order and relative calm upon the boisterous *parterre*. First Minister Armand-Jean du Plessis, Cardinal Richelieu, founded the Académie française, which soon positioned itself as the official arbiter of dramatic aesthetics. Playwrights and critics participated in outlining a distinctively French style of theater characterized above all by *vraisemblance*, the quality of “true-seeming” plausibility thought to facilitate spectators’ absorption in the dramatic illusion.¹ Over time, the concern for verisimilitude worked to codify certain dramatic elements (such as unities of place, time, and action) and models of appropriate human behavior that critics deemed believable. Eventually, the classical aesthetic achieved in the period’s drama became an emblem of French cultural glory, whose symbolic value only intensified over the succeeding centuries.²

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¹ Timothy Reiss, *Toward Dramatic Illusion: Theatrical Technique and Meaning from Hardy to Horace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 138.

² On the theater as a space for “reinforc[ing] collective identity” in the seventeenth century, see Michèle Longino, *Orientalism in French Classical Drama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2. On the importance of the era’s drama to later, nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses on Frenchness, see Ralph Albanese, *Corneille à l’école républicaine: Du mythe héroïque à l’imaginaire politique en France, 1800–1950* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008).

Part of the theater's work in fabricating a national aesthetic in this decade entailed dealing with an intensifying cultural rivalry with Spain. A long-standing contest between the two countries for European supremacy crescendoed into full-scale armed conflict by 1635. The Franco-Spanish War, which lasted until 1659, began as an offshoot of the Thirty Years' War when France joined efforts to contain the expansionist ambitions of its Hapsburg neighbors to the east and southwest.³ The declaration of war with Spain represented the culmination of smaller assaults on Philip IV's European dominance throughout the 1620s and early 1630s, as France championed the naturalized French subject Charles de Nevers over the Hapsburg candidates in the crisis of Mantuan Succession⁴ and supported revolts in the Spanish Netherlands. By 1636 Spanish forces had invaded Picardy, with some advance parties reaching as far inland as Pontoise, about fifteen miles outside Paris, posing a real and imminent threat to metropolitan life.⁵ Yet, while citizens of the French capital worried about a Spanish invasion of their city, Spanish themes and sources succeeded in overrunning Paris's playhouses. Throughout the 1630s, Parisian stages hosted an adaptation of the *romancero del Cid* and two invented sequels to it, plus several plays based on works by Lope de Vega and on Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares* and *Don Quixote*.⁶ This chronological coincidence of France's theatrical Hispanophilia and outright war with Spain indicates the complexity of the cultural relationship between the two countries in these years.

Scholarship has only begun to scratch the surface of this vexed relationship. The scant modern critical literature on the seventeenth-century French theater's obsession with Spain emerged from early twentieth-century philology and limited itself to cataloging instances of Hispanic influence rather than exploring the significance of literary and cultural borrowing.⁷ The most suggestive of these studies, Alexandre Cioranescu's *Le masque et le visage*, concludes with the tantalizing proposition that seventeenth-century French classicism was in fact produced through the adaptation of Spanish Baroque literature to French aesthetic taste.⁸ Throughout his book, however, Cioranescu describes this process as one of straightforward literary appropriation relatively untroubled by broader cultural tensions. The present essay aims to complicate such easeful portraits of seventeenth-century literary relations between France and Spain by investigating how Spanish models were implicated in fierce conflicts over French theatrical style in the 1630s. While the country's most eminent critics cited Aristotle and Horace as the ultimate authorities from whom French dramatic aesthetics should be derived, playwrights turned toward rival Spain for alternative exemplars.

³ For an overview of the diverse theories historians have put forward to explain the outbreak of the war, see David Parrott, "The Causes of the Franco-Spanish War of 1635–59," in *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jeremy Black (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987), 72–111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵ Geoffrey Parker, *Europe in Crisis, 1598–1648*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 183–84.

⁶ A near-exhaustive bibliography of French works based on Spanish sources can be found in Alexandre Cioranescu, *Bibliografía francoespañola (1600–1715)* (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1977).

⁷ See, e.g., Esther Crooks, *The Influence of Cervantes in France in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1931), 80–197; George Hainsworth, *Les "Novelas ejemplares" de Cervantes en France au XVIIe siècle: Contribution à l'étude de la nouvelle en France* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1933), 76–98; Maurice Bardon, *"Don Quichotte" en France au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle, 1605–1815*, 2 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1931).

⁸ "In the classical era . . . what had been Spanish is assimilated as French and what had been Baroque is interpreted as classical." Alexandre Cioranescu, *Le masque et le visage: Du baroque espagnol au classicisme français* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1983), 562.

Two Spanish authors in particular played a defining role in French theatrical style in this period. On the one hand, several French dramatists considered themselves disciples of Lope de Vega, citing the Spanish poet and playwright as master of the art of pleasing theater audiences with delightfully twisty plots.⁹ In addition to adapting Lope's works for the French stage, they followed the spirit of the *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias* (c. 1609) in privileging the audience's pleasure above slavish adherence to poetic rules.¹⁰ Embracing Lope, these writers implicitly resisted the neoclassicism that official literary culture advocated with increasing force in the 1630s. In fact, members of the Académie française explicitly denounced Lope's model as "dangerous," "condemnable," and exemplary of the bad taste of "those of his nation."¹¹ On the other hand, the prose works of Cervantes inspired dozens of plays, some of which (though certainly not all) challenged both the exuberant theatricality of Lopean adaptations and the decorous verisimilitude of neoclassical drama with techniques of disillusionment and down-to-earth themes. A closer look at how French dramatists invoked and engaged with these Spanish authors, I suggest, would lend another dimension of complexity to our understanding of theatrical culture in this key period. The development of a specifically French neoclassical aesthetic for the theater entailed negotiating not only between the ancient and the modern but also between the domestic and the foreign, and perhaps especially between French and Spanish styles.

My discussion here will focus on one play that actively negotiates between rival classical and Spanish influences: Jean Rotrou's *Les deux pucelles, tragi-comédie* (The Two Damsels, Tragicomedy), an adaptation of Cervantes's 1613 novella of the same name (*Las dos doncellas*), first staged at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1636 and published in 1639. Although considered a minor playwright by modern critics, Rotrou was among the most successful and prolific of French dramatists working in the first half of the seventeenth century. During his thirty-year career, he authored thirty-five plays, about half of them tragicomedies. Scholars often classify Rotrou as a "Baroque" playwright.¹² His taste for episodic plots, metatheatrical structures, and multiple sets

⁹ On playwrights and critics who embraced Lope's pleasure-centric approach, see Georges Forestier, "Du côté du plaisir: La naissance de la critique dramatique moderne au XVIIe siècle," in *Historiographie de la critique au XVIIe siècle en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1986), 133–45. See also Cioranescu, *Le masque et le visage*, 257–61.

¹⁰ Although the *Arte nuevo* does not seem to have been translated into French in the seventeenth century, it circulated in the original Castilian among French playwrights.

¹¹ At the end of his *Le preuve des passages alleguez dans les observations sur le Cid* (Paris: Antoine de Sommerville, 1637), Georges de Scudéry quoted a passage from what he called the "*Arte nuevo de hazer [sic] Comedias*": "dans lequel ce grand homme fait bien voir luy mesme, en parlant contre luy-mesme, combien il est dangereux, de suivre ceux de sa nation" (12; in which this great man himself reveals, speaking against himself, how dangerous it is to follow the example of those of his nation). In the preface to his translation and adaptation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, La Mesnardière praised Lope's "esprit fort intelligent" (intelligent mind) but found him "seulement condamnable pour n'avoir pas employé les meilleures façons d'écrire dans ses Ouvrages de Théâtre, encore qu'il les ait touchés dans l'Art qu'il a composé pour les Poëtes de sa nation; ne rend point d'autre raison de sa vicieuse pratique, & de ses fautes volontaires, sinon qu'il a voulu plaire à la multitude ignorante, presque en toutes ses Comédies; qu'elle n'auroit point estimées, si elles avoient été parfaites, & formées selon les Régles" (only condemnable for not having used the best ways of writing in his theatrical works, even though he touched upon them in the Art he composed for the poets of his nation; giving no other reason for his vicious practices and purposeful faults than that he wanted to please the ignorant multitude in nearly all his plays; and that they would not have been esteemed had they been perfect and formed according to the rules). Hippolyte Jules Pinet de La Mesnardière, *La poétique* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 2011), T–V.

¹² Jean-Yves Vialleton and Stéphane Macé, *Rotrou, dramaturge de l'ingéniosité* (Vanves, France: CNED, 2007), 15–17; Jean-Claude Vuillemin, *Baroquisme et théâtralité: Le théâtre de Jean Rotrou* (Paris: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1994).

went against the grain of official theatrical style in the period. Like Lope, seven of whose works he adapted for the French stage, Rotrou privileged surprise, novelty, and suspense above the observance of neo-Aristotelian rules.

Les deux pucelles exhibits all the anticlassical qualities of Rotrou's dramaturgy. Like many of his other plays, it features an episodic plot (with seven different reversals of fortune), cross-dressing, and a spectacular duel. In other words, it ignores Academic critics' recommendations to observe the unities of place and action and to respect standards of decorum (*bienséances*). Although the play fails to conform to the precepts of neoclassical drama as understood in 1636, it does address the poetic debates that surrounded their adoption by official theatrical culture. In particular, it explores issues of plausibility and realism or verisimilitude, presenting them in a different light from that seen in contemporary discourses about *vraisemblance*. As a comparison of *Les deux pucelles* with its source text reveals, Rotrou draws from the resources of Cervantine themes and structures to show how even the most extravagantly theatrical of plays might stake a claim to a profound and engaged form of verisimilitude.

This becomes particularly clear in Rotrou's adaptation of the novella's engagements with the structures and conventions of romance. Like other stories from the *Exemplary Novellas* adapted for the French stage in the seventeenth century (including *La gitanilla* and *El amante liberal*), *Las dos doncellas* received little critical attention until very recently, reflecting a critical view that any meaningful content in these stories was, in Peter Dunn's words, "muted or absorbed by conventions of genre."¹³ With their wellborn protagonists, geographical wanderings, encounters with bandits and pirates, and neatly happy endings, these novellas model themselves to a large extent on the patterns of romance. For readers in the second half of the twentieth century, the predictable romance conventions of these novellas didn't sit well with Cervantes's own claims to "novelar en lengua castellana" (innovate in Castilian) nor with the author's modernity and commitment to "realism" that critics found in *Don Quixote*.¹⁴ As more recent scholarship has shown, however, Cervantes rehearsed romance conventions in these novellas in order to ironize them.¹⁵ *Las dos doncellas* exemplifies the author's uses of romance for critical ends, as hyperbolic rhetoric,

¹³ Peter Dunn, "The Play of Desire: *El amante liberal* and *El casamiento engañoso* y *El colloquio de los perros*," in *A Companion to Cervantes's "Novelas Ejemplares,"* ed. Stephen F. Boyd (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Tamesis Books, 2005), 86.

¹⁴ El Saffar summarizes: "Most efforts to prove that the *Persiles* and many of the *Novelas ejemplares* were written in Cervantes's youth are based on our reluctance, as twentieth-century readers, to envision any development that would not culminate in a work of art that would reflect in technique and content the modern man's alienation." Ruth El Saffar, *Novel to Romance: A Study of Cervantes's "Novelas Ejemplares"* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), ix.

¹⁵ Examples of this large and growing body of scholarship include William Clamurro, *Beneath the Fiction: The Contrary Worlds of Cervantes's "Novelas ejemplares"* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997); Jonathan Burgoyne, "La gitanilla: A Model of Cervantes's Subversion of Romance," *Revista canadiense de estudios hispánicos* 25, no. 3 (2001): 373–95; Barbara Fuchs, *Passing for Spain: Cervantes and the Fictions of Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), esp. 47 and 64; Javier Irigoyen-García, "El libro de cuentos de *El amante liberal*," in *"Novelas ejemplares": Las grietas de la ejemplaridad*, ed. Julio Baena (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2008), 167–86. For an overview of current scholarship on the *Novelas ejemplares* and a discussion of the mounting appreciation for Cervantes's ironic manipulation of generic categories, see Jorge García López, "Actualidad crítica de las *Novelas ejemplares*," *Ínsula* 799–800 (2013): 2–4.

excessive repetition of tropes, and degraded incarnations of typical figures (e.g., “damsels” who aren’t really) activate a suspicious mode of reading, undermining the genre’s idealism.¹⁶

For many mid-seventeenth-century dramatists, this combination of narrative conventionality and irony made Cervantes’s miniature romances perfect fodder for dramatic tragicomedies. As Hélène Baby points out in her seminal work on this theatrical genre, early seventeenth-century tragicomedy often took the form of a staged romance: “Singularly linked to the plot of stymied love, the tragi-comical fiction portrays the adventures of a couple who struggle to establish or preserve their romantic relationship.”¹⁷ Romance and tragicomedy shared key topoi—disguise, recognition scenes, happy endings featuring a marriage—as well as an extravagant aesthetic that pleased audiences.¹⁸ It is no surprise, therefore, that many of the tragicomedies to take to the French stage in this period drew their plots from narrative romances, including *Orlando Furioso*, *Amadis de Gaule*, and the pastoral *L’Astrée*. Authors of tragicomedy, more often than not, undertook a form of translation or transposition, transferring a romance story from page to stage.

At first glance, Jean Rotrou’s *Les deux pucelles* appears to be the result of this kind of translation or transfer.¹⁹ As its title implies, the play adapted the “plot of stymied love” narrated in Cervantes’s *Las dos doncellas*. Well known to French audiences through Vital d’Audiguier’s extremely faithful translation, published in its fourth edition in 1633, the novella recounts the adventures of Teodosia and Leocadia, who, having each been seduced by the faithless Marco Antonio, separately and unbeknownst to one another don male clothes and run away from home. Teodosia takes refuge at an inn, where she is discovered by her brother Don Rafael. They set off together to find Marco Antonio and make him acknowledge his secret wedding vows to Teodosia. En route, they discover Leocadia, dressed as a page and tied to a tree after an encounter with bandits. Once she reveals her true identity to them, all three go to Barcelona in pursuit of Marco Antonio, whom they eventually find. Marco Antonio acknowledges his promise to Teodosia, and Don Rafael, having “fortunately” fallen in love with Leocadia, redeems her honor by marrying her.

Although this basic plot retains the structural hallmarks of traditional romance or romance-like tragicomedy, Rotrou’s play picks up on Cervantes’s ironizing gestures in the novella, translating them into dramatic forms. For his stage version, Rotrou preserves the essential facts of the story—the coupling, uncoupling, and recoupling that form the basis of the classic romance or tragicomedy pattern. But while his changes may not be radical, they are striking. Rotrou reorganizes the presentation of the plot so that it is more chronological and less retrospective. He limits

¹⁶ For a formalist analysis of the metafictional elements that ironize romance in *Las dos doncellas*, see Eric J. Kartchner, *Unhappily Ever After: Deceptive Idealism in Cervantes’s Marriage Tales* (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2005), 63–76. On the political critique implied by Cervantes’s critical deployment of romance patterns, see Barbara Fuchs, “Empire Unmanned: Gender Trouble and Genoese Gold in Cervantes’s ‘The Two Damsels,’” *PMLA* 116, no. 2 (March 1, 2001): 285–99.

¹⁷ Hélène Baby, *La tragi-comédie de Corneille à Quinault* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2001), 103.

¹⁸ I rely here on Fuchs’s productively expansive definition of romance: “Romance cannot be quarantined into a generic category; instead it infects other genres . . . as an often unwelcome, or at least vexed, strategy of errancy and multiplicity. Romance counters teleology—and the accompanying ideology of national and religious destiny—with a special kind of narrative entropy, often coded as the presence of the feminine or the religious/racial Other.” Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 72.

¹⁹ Indeed, according to Morel, all Rotrou’s tragicomedies belong to the “genre romanesque,” by which he means that they combine highborn protagonists with adventure-filled plots. Jacques Morel, *Jean Rotrou, dramaturge de l’ambiguïté* (Paris: A. Colin, 1968), 156.

the geography to an area around Seville. He adds a dramatic fight scene featuring Théodose's brother. The male characters' names are changed: from Marco Antonio to Antoine, from Rafael to Alexandre. Finally, the innkeepers who host Théodose and her brother for the night of their reunion remain important characters throughout the play as omnipresent witnesses to the protagonists' adventures and as providers of comic relief. These alterations partially—but recognizably—“de-romancify” the story of the “two damsels” by reducing its narrative and geographical wanderings, heightening its epic references, and giving its idealized tone a comic counterpoint.²⁰

By streamlining and undercutting the romance-like qualities of the story while preserving its essential happily-ever-after nature, Rotrou's play reflects the ambivalence toward romance that permeated his literary culture. Writers and critics agreed that romance and tragicomedy were both pleasurable forms, giving audiences the novelty, variety, and sense of surprise they were thought to enjoy. Just because a form was pleasurable, however, did not mean it was appropriate, salutary, or useful. For many neo-Aristotelian critics, romance and romance-like tragicomedy failed to meet their standard for verisimilitude. Indeed, sometime in the 1630s, the French term *romanesque*—or “romance-like”—became a synonym for “unbelievable.” In part, this had to do with the kind and quantity of reversals of fortune that afflicted romance protagonists—a fundamentally implausible series of storms, shipwrecks, and miraculous reunions.²¹ In other contexts, “romanesque” could designate unbelievable behaviors on the part of characters—often Spanish ones—who acted as though they lived in storybooks rather than in the real world. In the theatrical context, this meant that the most influential critics, particularly those whose judgments were supported by the institutional authority of the Académie française, targeted intensifying critical opprobrium at dramatic techniques deemed to be *romanesque*.

When read alongside the novella that inspired it, Rotrou's play can be seen to respond to both facets of criticism against “romance-like” plays. Rotrou takes inspiration from the ways in which Cervantes's version of *Las dos doncellas* already problematizes the conventions of romance and explores the critical uses to which they might be put. Through metatheatrical elements and other ironizing moves, the playwright asks his audience to reflect on the vexed question of verisimilitude in the theater and to consider what precisely makes a fiction believable in different literary and cultural settings.

RESTAGING PLAUSIBILITY

One of the qualities that mark *Las dos doncellas* as a romance-like novella is the sheer number of reversals of fortune that its protagonists endure. Misadventures, chance meetings, and coincidences drive the plot: Rafael happens upon Teodosia in the inn, Leocadia falls prey to bandits,

²⁰ As Cioranescu observes, “the Spanish action [of the novella] is excessive. . . . Rotrou made an effort to channel the overflow, but he did not always succeed.” Cioranescu, *Le masque et le visage*, 313.

²¹ In his letter on the “Rule of 24 Hours,” for example, Chapelain criticized “l'abondance des matières” (the abundance of subjects) tackled by episodic plays with many twists and turns. Jean Chapelain, *Opuscules critiques*, ed. Alfred C. Hunter and Anne Duprat (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2007), 222–34. Even writers of actual romances professed a desire to create more streamlined plots. As Madeleine de Scudéry put it in her preface to her 1641 romance *Ibrahim*, although she does have recourse to the romance trope of the shipwreck, she does so less often than other authors to “conserver le vraisemblable” (preserve verisimilitude): “Le mesme dessain a fait aussi, que mon Heros n'est point accablé, de cette prodigieuse quantité d'accidens, qui arrivent à quelques autres” (The same intention requires that my Hero be less afflicted by the prodigious quantity of accidents that happen to some others). Madeleine de Scudéry, *Ibrahim ou l'illustre Bassa* ([Paris:] A. de Sommaville, 1641), sig. f1'.

Teodosia and Rafael happen to stumble across her tied to a tree. Cervantes calls attention to the role of fortune and chance in structuring the novella by having his characters comment on it. His female protagonists repeatedly deplore their bad fortune, exclaim over their good fortune, or ascribe the events in their lives to the machinations of “la ventura” (luck), “la fortuna” (fortune), or “la ocasión” (chance). In the characters’ discourse, the force of destiny or the gods of chance possess grammatical agency, while the girls are their passive playthings. Cervantine scholars have long debated the author’s point of view on Providence or some other “transcendent reality” to which mortals must resign themselves.²² In *Las dos doncellas* the discourse on fortune is clearly overlaid with irony. The characters’ over-the-top rhetoric in reacting to their “fate” is one of the ways in which the novella’s romance façade wears thin to expose the political commentary lurking underneath.

In his staging of the novella’s story, Rotrou develops the possibility of an ironic reading of the role of chance encounters and misfortunes. Like Cervantes, Rotrou has his characters paint themselves as helpless victims of the gods. When Dom Sanche first appears onstage in the play’s first act, for example, he reacts to the discovery of his daughter’s dalliance with Antoine by swearing to those divine authors of his fate: “Ô justes Dieux! Ô fortune ennemie!” (O just gods! O enemy fortune!).²³ Similarly, Léocadie often rhetorically surrenders herself to the will of otherworldly forces. In act 3, scene 3, for example, Léocadie reacts to her ravishment at the hands of bandits by appealing to the gods:

Qu’un instable pouvoir gouverne nos destins!

 Te plais-je en cet état Deesse du desordre?
 Ta rage dessus moy n’a telle [*sic*] plus a mordre?
 Suffit il de laisser en proye à ta rigueur,
 Jusques à mon espoir, & jusques à mon cœur?
 (53)

How an unstable power governs our destinies!

 Goddess of Disorder, do I please you in this state?
 Your rage over me has nothing else to chew up?
 Is it enough to surrender as prey to your harshness
 Everything, including my hope and my heart?

The hyperbolic rhetoric of these speeches calls attention to the characters’ belief in fortune or destiny, a belief that the audience did not necessarily share. In 1636 the role of fortune in dramatic plots remained a controversial topic. Although many tragicomedies delighted audiences with what Baby has called a “dramaturgy of gratuitousness,”²⁴ neo-Aristotelian poetics favored plays in which events occur through obvious chains of causality rather than divine intervention

²² El Saffar contends that in Cervantes’s “late works the central protagonists are exemplary in their acceptance of a given role in life and their devotion to a transcendent reality. In the early works, on the other hand, the main characters try to remake their lives.” El Saffar, *Novel to Romance*, 13.

²³ Jean Rotrou, *Les deux pucelles, tragi-comédie* (Paris: Antoine de Sommerville et Toussaint Quinet, 1639), 16. Translations from the play are mine.

²⁴ Baby, *La tragi-comédie de Corneille à Quinault*, 153.

or arbitrary occurrences. As John Lyons has shown in his masterful work on this topic, *The Phantom of Chance*, playwright Pierre Corneille exemplified this shift: while his 1621 tragicomedy *Clitandre* hinges on over a dozen “accidents” (including a lightning strike that kills the prince’s horse), in his later plays events unfold more logically and feature characters who work to limit their exposure to risks and contingencies.²⁵ Fortune’s role in the construction of plots remained a vexed issue in dramatic criticism through the 1660s.

In *Les deux pucelles*, Rotrou responds to this controversy over the role of chance by having his characters give voice to doubts about fate’s or fortune’s absolute power over their lives.²⁶ Théodose’s first scene foreshadows the more profound shift that occurs in later acts. As in the novella, Théodose speaks for the first time from her bed at the inn as she laments her ill fortune: “Triste jouet du sort, chetive abandonnee, / A quoi te resous-tu? Quelle est ta destinee?” (26; Sad plaything of fate, abandoned waif, / To what do you resolve yourself? What is your destiny?). Just a few lines later, though, Théodose corrects herself by taking responsibility for the situation in which she finds herself. It was not fate or destiny that led her to the inn but rather her own irrational, implausible actions: “Quelles inventions egalent mes effets? / Et quels Romants si faux ont dit ce que je faits?” (26; What inventions might equal my acts? / And what romances, however false, have told of what I am doing?). Théodose depicts herself as author of her own fate. Unfortunately, she is a bad author who has managed to design an incredible plot line for herself. Her literary metaphor both hints at the metafictional aims of the play and signals the character’s own resistance to the conventions of fabulous romance that would hold her in a state of passive victimhood.

Théodose’s acknowledgment of her own role in her misfortune is just one element in the play’s reconfiguring of its haphazard romance plot as a more Aristotelian narrative. Rotrou’s choice to reorder the presentation of the story furthers this act of redemption. Rather than begin in medias res at the inn where a cross-dressed Teodosia takes refuge for the night, the play opens with a darkened stage as Antoine makes his way to Léocadie’s bedchamber. His initial monologue paints him as a villain and a seducer:

Dieux! Que le Ciel ce soir, couvre d’un voile obscur
Le Lambris étoillé de sa voûte d’azur!
O nuit! Pour m’exaucer, tu passes ma priere,
Tu sembles moins cacher, qu’esteindre la lumiere,
J’ay de l’art, la clarté que tu me viens d’oster,
Et ta faveur m’a mis au besoing d’emprunter.
.....
Mais qu’importe pourquoy sa clarté s’est couverte,
Puisque l’art aisément en repare la perte,
Et que ce peu de feu suffit pour me guider.

(1–2)

²⁵ John Lyons, *The Phantom of Chance: From Fortune to Randomness in Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 30–66.

²⁶ “In Rotrou’s plays, a whole stylistic arsenal (diction, short exclamations, etc.) is mobilized to have the characters themselves underline the ‘marvels’ of the play.” Vialleton and Macé, *Rotrou, dramaturge de l’ingéniosité*, 52. As they limit their analysis of this characteristic of his work to the Christian play *Le véritable Saint Genest*, they ascribe this thematization of fortuitousness to a belief in grace.

Gods! How the sky tonight covers with an obscuring veil
 The starry paneling of its azure vault!
 O night! In answering my prayers you surpass them,
 You seem less to hide than to extinguish the light,
 I have by means of art the clarity that you have removed
 And that your favor put me in need of borrowing.

 But who cares why the light is covered,
 For art easily repairs its loss
 And this bit of fire is enough to guide me.

He thanks the night for providing him with a cover of darkness for his shameful acts and boasts that his lantern—which he calls his “art”—offers sufficient light to achieve his ends. After this speech, the audience witnesses evidence of the shameful behavior Antoine sought to hide: he throws away a reproachful letter from his fiancée, Théodose, and flees before she or her father can track him down. Meanwhile, his new object of desire, Léocadie, suffers the consequences of their aborted night of love all by herself when her father overhears her soliloquizing about her passion by an open window, becomes enraged, and throws her out of the house.²⁷ Antoine’s cowardice, Léocadie’s lust, and Dom Sanche’s fury conspire to scatter the characters at the outset of the play. By displaying this chain of events that were only retrospectively narrated in Cervantes’s novella, Rotrou reveals how human deeds rather than divine intervention set the plot in motion.²⁸

The importance of human agency in Rotrou’s rewriting of Cervantes’s story is most evident in the play’s dénouement. In *Las dos doncellas*, the happy ending is achieved when Marco Antonio recognizes his obligation to Teodosia, Rafael declares his love for Leocadia, they marry, and their fathers fortuitously cross their path to bless the unions. The neat formation of the two couples is underpinned by Rafael’s discourse on Providence when he proposes to Leocadia:

Todo esto digo, apasionada señora, porque toméis el remedio y el medio que la suerte os ofrece en el extremo de vuestra desgracia. Ya veis que Marco Antonio no puede ser vuestro porque el cielo le hizo a mi hermana, y el mismo cielo, que hoy os ha quitado a Marco Antoino, os quiere hacer recompensa conmigo, que no deseo otro bien en esta vida que entregarme por esposo vuestro.

I say all this, beloved lady, so that you may accept the solution and the means which Fate offers you at the lowest point in your fortunes. You can see now that Marco Antonio cannot be yours because heaven has joined him to my sister, and the very same heaven, which today has taken Marco Antonio from you, wishes to make amends with me, for I have no other wish in this life than to offer myself to you as your husband.

²⁷ Perhaps in acknowledgment of French theatrical *bienséances*, Rotrou’s staging departs from the novella in implying that Léocadie never consummated her relationship with Antoine, although her soliloquy makes it clear that she was willing to do so.

²⁸ Rotrou makes more obvious and central Antoine’s culpability, but Cervantes’s novella also posited his actions as the first cause of the rest of the plot. As El Saffar remarks, “a fundamental deception—that by Marco Antonio of Teodosia—underlies the whole story, giving it its initial impulse. This deception unleashes a whole chain of deceptions through which the confusion caused by the initial one is resolved.” El Saffar, *Novel to Romance*, 117.

“El cielo” (the heavens) gave Marco Antonio to Teodosia and have arranged for Rafael to find Leocadia. These are far from the most seductive lines in Rafael’s speech, yet they are the ones that convince Leocadia to accept him, as she declares, “ea pues . . . pues así lo ha ordenado el cielo” (so be it, since heaven has ordained it thus).²⁹ She will marry Rafael because the heavens desire it. The characters’ decision to set off on a pilgrimage following their marriages reaffirms the centrality of faith in organizing their lives.

For his stage version, Rotrou replaces the pilgrimage—and all its implications for the reintegration of the characters into a Catholic, domestic Spanish community—with a novel, theatrical twist worthy of Lope de Vega. Here, the happy ending is achieved not through acquiescence to the desires of “heaven” but rather through an act of ingenuity on Léocadie’s part, as well as a spectacular display of heroism by Alexandre. After being rejected by Antoine, Léocadie wanders off scene, pausing just long enough to deliver a dejected monologue that establishes the suicidal intensity of her despair. A few scenes later, she encounters three “archers,” or hired vigilantes, and sees an opportunity to put an end to her suffering. Léocadie, still in her male costume, declares that she is the bandit and murderer they are seeking. Brandishing her own stash of pearls and diamonds as proof of her crimes, she spins a story about how she and two companions killed a passerby:

Nous l’avons à la mort offert en sacrifice;
Encore deux marchands égorgés ce matin,
A quelques pas d’icy, m’ont laissé ce butin.
(101–2)

We offered him to death in sacrifice.
Two more merchants, whose throats were slit this morning
A few paces from here, left me this booty.

She identifies the dead man as Antoine Adorne of Seville, using the geographical marker to enhance the realism of her story. Through her performance, disguise, and expert use of the jewels as a prop to authenticate her lie, Léocadie succeeds in convincing the archers of her outlaw identity. They take her offstage to exact justice, just as she had hoped. This event signals not only a reversal of fortune for Léocadie but a reversal of character: her misfortunes began because she fell prey to Antoine’s seduction, but now she engineers her own fortune by marshaling the resources of persuasion and deception for herself.

In inventing this new episode to conclude the story of “the two damsels,” Rotrou draws from a deep reservoir of tragicomic topoi pertaining to metatheatricality—disguise plots, ruses, faked dreams, and other tricks. As Baby observes, the ubiquity of such elements in tragicomedie makes it a highly self-reflexive genre that proffers delightful illusions to spectators at the same time as it unveils their workings.³⁰ In this play and others, the characters’ deployment of theatrical techniques to dupe others reminds audiences of the gulf between truth and appearances, calling into question the value of true-seeming illusions on the stage. While some playwrights

²⁹ Cervantes Saavedra, *Novelas ejemplares*, 2:232; Cervantes Saavedra, *Exemplary Novels*, 3:183.

³⁰ The spectator of tragicomedie “can never fall into the complete hallucination of a perfect illusion.” Baby, *La tragi-comédie de Corneille à Quinault*, 256–57.

used metatheatrical elements to warn spectators against credulity, *Les deux pucelles* enlists audience sympathy and support for the deceiver.

To the extent that the play preserves a remnant of the novella's pretensions of exemplarity, perhaps it resides in Léocadie's active mobilization of illusion to write her own destiny. The final lines of dialogue refocus attention on the question of Léocadie's agency as stage director of her own fate. The play's last scene opens on a swordfight between the archers and Alexandre. Living up to the heroic image of his namesake, Alexandre defeats the archers, "frees" Léocadie, and then urges Dom Sanche to give him her hand in marriage as recompense for his bravery:

Ouvrés, ouvrés les bras, plutost que les oreilles,
Embrassez cet objet, digne de tant de vœux,
Et l'accordez pour prix à l'ardeur de mes feux
(115)

Open, open your arms rather than your ears,
Embrace this object worthy of so many oaths,
And grant it as a prize to the ardor of my flames.

Alexandre here claims credit for redeeming Léocadie, who runs into his arms to complete a happy, romantic tableau. Before Léocadie can verbally affirm her acceptance of Alexandre's love, the archers intervene. Addressing himself to Léocadie, the "first archer" begs forgiveness for having misjudged her identity and underestimated her value. Léocadie's reply—the final lines of the play—are appropriately ambiguous: "Et par vous, j'ay des prix, au lieu de chastimens" (118; And through you, I have rewards rather than punishments). In dramatic context, the deictic pronoun points ambivalently to both Alexandre and the archer. On one the hand, Léocadie seems to affirm her "hero's" instrumentality in ensuring her rescue. On the other hand, she acknowledges the villain's role as intermediary in the final *coup de théâtre*, reminding us that if she herself had not created the "scene" of her kidnapping, Alexandre could not have "saved" her. Responsibility for the happy ending of the play is fractured, assigned either to Alexandre's romanesque gallantry or to Léocadie's deviousness. What is clear is that fate or chance had no part in it. Human action rationalizes an otherwise-implausible plot.

In his major critical work on Rotrou, Jacques Morel declares that, in the author's tragicomedies, "the poet and his spectators must abandon themselves to the determining whims of fortune."³¹ This statement does not quite hold true in the case of *Les deux pucelles*. Misfortune and "accidents" occur not because of the machinations of fate or otherworldly forces but because of the characters' own human mistakes—mistakes of judgment and credulity. The redemption story at the center of the tragicomedy depicts Théodose and Léocadie redeeming themselves, manipulating events, and using others' credulity against them rather than falling victim to others' ruses. In a sense, Rotrou redeems romanesque conventions by showing how their very implausibility and artificiality can be used to enlighten and empower.

³¹ Morel, *Jean Rotrou, dramaturge de l'ambiguïté*, 161. Morel ascribes this aspect of the plays to a belief in fortune or destiny (114–32).

RETHINKING REALISM

If the logical unfolding of events in a drama constituted one aspect of its verisimilitude, the other side of the coin of plausibility required that characters' actions appear believable according to the social norms and expectations of the public. In the mid-1630s, this dimension of verisimilitude was central to critical debates, particularly those associated with the "quarrel" over Pierre Corneille's tragicomedy *Le Cid*. Critics condemned as indecorous, and therefore unbelievable, that the play's heroine Chimène should agree to marry her beloved Rodrigue shortly after he slayed her father.³² The play's other characters also came under critical fire. In his *Observations sur "Le Cid,"* for example, Georges de Scudéry complained that the noble Spanish characters' speeches and actions could not be believed because they were too "romanesque" and that "jamais un homme de cœur, ne voudra vivre par cette voye" (no man of courage would ever want to live in that way).³³ Would Léocadie's surrender to the archers be accepted as believable in this sense? Would Alexandre's performance of noble heroism appear realistic? Or were the actions of these Spanish characters also seen by French audiences as hopelessly romanesque?

Rotrou invites the spectator to ponder these questions by juxtaposing the idealized love and passion-fueled heroics of his protagonists with the down-to-earth figures of the Sevillian innkeepers. In *Las dos doncellas*, the hosts at the Castilblanco inn where Teodosia first takes refuge are fleeting presences who disappear from the narrative after the first few pages (although by means of their brief presence they indicate the corruption and materialism of the world inhabited by the protagonists). In *Les deux pucelles*, the innkeepers remain important presences throughout the play, appearing in twelve out of thirty-five scenes. Alcionne (the wife in the innkeeper couple) even has three short soliloquies—more than any other character. Critics have dismissively characterized Rotrou's amplification of the innkeepers' role as a provision of "comic relief."³⁴ It is undeniable that Alcionne provides most of the tragicomedy's laughs. The nature of the humor generated by the innkeepers, however, is significant. Particularly for avid French readers of Cervantes, who might have associated these characters with the innkeepers who indulge Don Quixote's chivalric illusions, their role in the play signals Rotrou's larger engagement with the poetics of verisimilitude.

As the mismatch between their pedestrian livelihood and the lofty pretension of their pastoral names might indicate, the characters of Alcionne and her husband, Dorilas, poke fun at the conventions of high romance by embodying it in a humbler form. By the early 1640s a French critic might have labeled their comic effect as "burlesque"—the mode of humor or ridicule produced by an unlikely mismatch of form and content or, in this case, of the status of a speaker and the register of her speech.³⁵ Alcionne is laughable because she exercises a style of language to which she has no social claim.³⁶ In act 2, scene 5, for example, Alcionne enters the room where

³² The numerous critical texts are edited and examined in Jean-Marc Civardi, *La querelle du Cid (1637–1638): Édition critique intégrale* (Paris: Champion, 2004).

³³ Georges de Scudéry, *Observations sur "Le Cid"* (Paris: Au depens de l'Auteur, 1637), 32–33.

³⁴ "A touch of comedy," according to Cioranescu, *Le masque et le visage*, 313.

³⁵ The term "burlesque" emerged in literary discourses only in the 1640s but designated a form of humor that had existed for decades. For an exhaustive, nuanced survey of seventeenth-century burlesque literature, see Claudine Nédélec, *Les états et empires du burlesque* (Paris: H. Champion, 2004).

³⁶ This variety of burlesque was called the "burlesque retourné" by Perrault in his description of Boileau's *Le lutrin*, in which a clockmaker and his wife "speak as Aeneas and Dido." Critics have labeled the work a "héroï-comique," acknowledging its status as a parody of the heroic romance genre. See Nédélec, *Les états et empires du burlesque*, 207.

Théodose and Alexandre are sleeping to gaze upon the beautiful bodies of her noble guests. Described in the stage directions as “half nude and carrying a lantern,” the hostess compares herself to Psyche spying on the sleeping Cupid: “Telle psyché d’amour, pour l’amour mesme atteinte, / A ce Dieu sommeillant fait sa muette plainte” (41; What psyche of love, by love even ravaged, / Makes her mute complaint to this sleeping god). The scene produces the ridiculous spectacle of a humble innkeeper’s wife impersonating a princess from classical mythology. The burlesque informs Alcionne’s language throughout the play and makes her an object of ridicule not only for the audience but also for other characters in the play. In act 2, scene 6, her husband, Dorilas, explicitly criticizes “Ta langue affetee & pleine d’artifice” (59; Your affected speech, full of artifice).

Alcionne, in other words, behaves and speaks as if she were the heroine of a grand romance.³⁷ The ridiculousness of her imposture aligns her with characters in comic narrative such as the heroes of Charles Sorel’s 1627 *Le berger extravagant, anti-roman* (The Extravagant Shepherd, an Anti-romance) and indeed of its model, *Don Quixote*.³⁸ In these works, humor offers a means of critical engagement with the romance genre and the idealized vision of the world—and especially of love—that it represented.³⁹ Seen in this light, Alcionne represents more than an isolated object of ridicule in the economy of the play or a source of intermittent comic relief. By borrowing from the anti-romanesque tradition of comic realism in his characterization of Alcionne, Rotrou introduced a critical parody of high romance style into his staging of a romance plot.

To a certain degree, Alcionne resembles a figure like Don Quixote or Sorel’s extravagant shepherd in that she speaks and behaves as though she lives inside an elevated fictional world and for that reason becomes a figure of ridicule. Yet, unlike those characters, who believed themselves to be protagonists in those fictional worlds and whose delusions propelled them to pursue adventures, Alcionne is primarily an onstage spectator of the main characters’ action. The questions of narrative plausibility raised by the play’s restructuring of the novella resurface in Alcionne’s function as a credulous witness of the play’s romanesque action. As the characters around her easily recognize the cross-dressed Théodose and Léocadie, Alcionne persists in worshiping them as exemplary specimens of male beauty. The scenes in which Alcionne observes the cross-dressed heroines have a metatheatrical structure: we watch her watching them. The humor of these scenes derives from the dramatic irony whereby Alcionne remains ignorant of the disguise that the audience easily perceives. The more poorly maintained the girls’ imposture, the more ridiculous Alcionne appears. Her failure to recognize the girls as girls becomes funnier the longer it persists. Even after she encounters Léocadie crying and sighing, she continues to call her “Monsieur” (act 4, scene 3). Toward the end of the play, as she witnesses Théodose embracing Dom Antoine, she declares: “Je demeure confuse, & toutes ces merveilles, / Charment également mes yeux, & mes oreilles” (89; I remain confused, and all these marvels / Charm equally my eyes and ears). She finally acknowledges the truth in act 4, scene 8, when, faced with Léocadie half out of her disguise,

³⁷ Her “love” for Théodose, Alexandre, and Léocadie could be seen as the trigger for her folly. On the theme of love as folly in Rotrou, see Vuillemin, *Baroquisme et théâtralité*, 156–73.

³⁸ Other examples include the protagonists of Gilbert Saulnier du Verdier’s 1632 *The Hypochondriac Knight* or Louis Moreau du Bail’s 1637 *The Extravagant Gascon*.

³⁹ As Serroy put it, the comic-narrative genre was not only “a phenomenon of reaction to heroic, gallant literature” but also a “remise en cause” of the poetics of narrative fiction. Jean Serroy, *Roman et réalité: Les histoires comiques au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Minard, 1981), 292. The diverse texts he treats are united, he asserts, by “a common concern, which is to introduce reality into novelistic works” (701).

she exclaims: “Monsieur, hé Dieux! que dis-je, encor ce vestement / Entretenoit mes yeux en leur aveuglement! Madame, . . .” (91; Sir, oh gods! What am I saying? Still these clothes / maintained my eyes in their blindness! Madame, . . .). The prolonged joke at Alcionne’s expense culminates in this moment of belated anagnorisis. Rotrou’s verses call our attention to Alcionne’s eyes and ears, her faulty tools of perception that have prevented her from understanding the truth.

When Alcionne is cured of her delusion, her observations of the action perform a different kind of dramatic work. Although she remains characterized by the burlesque style, her language inflated to the point of silliness, the humor generated by her dialogue is directed at the tone of the play as a whole just as much as at her character. Alcionne’s role as an ironic commentator on the main action of the play is most evident in her final soliloquy. Having just witnessed Théodose’s reunion with Antoine and Léocadie’s pathos-filled goodbye to him, Alcionne comments on the action like a Greek chorus: “Quelle plus belle histoire, & quelle autre aventure, / Sera plus memorable à la race future?” (103; What finer history and what other adventure / Will be memorable to future generations?). She compares Théodose and Antoine to Angelica and Medor of the *Orlando Furioso* and lauds Alexandre’s heroism as he departs in pursuit of Léocadie. She concludes:

Enfin tous sont partis, & m’ont laissé la gloire,
D’avoir sans dommage, eu part en leur histoire;
Puisent-ils moissonner un long siecle de fleurs,
Qu’ils aillent, & qu’aux ris, enfin cedent les pleurs.
(103)

At last all have gone and left me with the glory
Of having harmlessly taken part in their story.
May they reap a long age of flowers,
May they go and may their tears cede to laughter.

Alcionne’s solemn benediction bestowed on the main characters casts an ironic light on the twin marriage plots because it is filtered through the play’s most ridiculous persona, in the burlesque style.

By the play’s conclusion, then, Léocadie has been liberated from the idea that she is a passive object of the vicissitudes of (romance) destiny, Alcionne cured of her love-sick delusion, and the audience distanced from the “romance-like” qualities of the play itself. *Les deux pucelles* highlights and dramatizes Cervantes’s ironic rehearsal of romance themes and structures in *Las dos doncellas* through allusions to the more obviously anti-romanesque perspective of *Don Quixote*.⁴⁰ By creatively mixing Spanish models, Rotrou exploits the exuberance and twistiness of romance while deflating romance idealism with the lowly, urban mode of comic realism.

⁴⁰ Cascardi helpfully summarizes Cervantes’s engagement with concepts of verisimilitude: “the example of the Quixote itself goes to show that the Aristotelian notion of ‘verisimilitude’ as understood by so many thinkers of the Renaissance was neither a reliable governing principle for fiction nor a way to enable fiction to help us consider the ways things might be.” Anthony J. Cascardi, *Cervantes, Literature, and the Discourse of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 36.

CONCLUSION

The year after *Les deux pucelles* had its debut on the Parisian stage, Corneille's *Le Cid* sparked the decade's biggest controversy over dramatic aesthetics. The quarrel launched an important debate about dramaturgical matters and about theater's place in influencing public morality. What sometimes gets overlooked in the ample scholarship on the critical reaction to *Le Cid* is that it was also a dispute about translation, specifically about the relevance of Spanish models within French literary culture. Corneille defended his characters' actions on the grounds that they remained true to their Spanish sources. His detractors condemned them not merely as unseemly or implausible but as too Spanish, too histrionic, too romanesque. If the quarrel over *Le Cid* marks the symbolic beginning of French classicism—the literary style most emblematic of the glory of the French nation—it is noteworthy that this event required the expulsion of styles, values, and behaviors associated with Spain.

Despite its Spanish geography and romanesque elements, Rotrou's nearly contemporary play escaped any explicit or direct critical condemnation. Yet it posed no less of a challenge to emerging classical standards than did Corneille's more infamous work. Although infused with Spanish influences, Rotrou's play does not subvert French *bienséances*. For the most part, its characters could have hailed from Saint-Étienne just as easily as Seville. The preservation of the Spanish setting functions instead to remind audiences of the play's literary sources and poetic affiliations, which arguably posed a more profound challenge to French theatrical culture. Rotrou, the disciple of Lope, uses Cervantes's critical engagement with verisimilitude to justify overtly theatrical dramaturgy in a critical climate that favored absorbing illusion. Indeed, the play subtly criticizes official theatrical culture's obsession with neoclassical standards of verisimilitude through a plot that metatheatrically centers on questions of credulity, manipulation, and deceit. Illusionary dramatics—represented onstage by Léocadie's ruse—appear in the play as a form of trickery. Meanwhile, spectators' readiness to believe in deceptive appearances—embodied by Alcionne—is depicted as laughable weakness of mind. In this way, under the cover of the seemingly frivolous genre of romantic tragicomedy, Rotrou undermines the guiding poetic principles of neoclassical French drama. In their place, he offers a critical dramaturgy achieved by combining Lopean exuberance with Cervantine irony. His play grapples with the poetic and ideological problems of an emerging French classical aesthetics not by excluding Spain but by juxtaposing different kinds of Spanish inspiration to creative and critical effect. A