CHAPTER TEN

CONTEXTUALIZING NICOLAS CAUSSIN’S TRAGOEDIAE SACRAE (1620): MORAL ISSUES IN THE PORTRAYAL OF PASSIONS

Jean-Frédéric Chevalier

In *La Cour sainte*, Nicolas Caussin embodied on stage the ravages caused by passions. With a series of narrations and portrayals, he gave courtiers models to follow or examples to avoid. Many studies have shown how Caussin dramatized his treatise; but the same inspiration first appeared in his tragedies and many characters in the *Tragoediae sacrae* will be mentioned again in *La Cour Sainte*; so we would like to dwell on the depiction of passions in the five Latin plays he published in 1620. Caussin was not original in his portrayal of the passions: his tragedies, as many tragedies in French or in Latin at that time, mirrored the moral issues. But the unity of the works written by Caussin is all the stronger as it derives from the influence of contemporary moral treatises and highlights a specific vision of the world. For instance, even if the poet never expresses himself directly in his plays, the recurrence of a few spectacular scenes and the insistence upon a specific vocabulary show that he wanted to protect his pupils from

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1 Nicole Boireau, Professor of English Literature at the University of Metz, kindly accepted the task of reading this paper and advising me on my English translation of this text, which I originally wrote in French. I thank her warmly for her kind help.

2 *La Cour Sainte* was first published in 1624; it was reprinted several times with substantial additions. For Nicolas Caussin’s life and works, see Rivière and Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*, 2; Conte, *Nicolas Caussin*, p. 26; Lécrivain, ‘L’éloquence sacrée à l’épreuve de la politique’, p. 59–76.


4 The poet expresses himself directly in the summaries preceding each play.
such a passion as Envy, a passion clearly exposed in *La Cour sainte* and the raw material of the plot of at least two of the *Tragoediae sacrae: Felicitas* and *Theodoricus*. The bad courtiers stir up hatred and trouble; they are green with envy at the virtuous man, who becomes an innocent victim. If such themes appeared only in one play, it would not be significant; but every play dramatizes, in the middle of its plot, a court action during which a king or a sovereign is deceived by calumny. Therefore, from 1620 onwards, Caussin chose to elaborate, in his tragedies initially, on the ideal edification of his pupils, and then, in *La Cour sainte*, on the edification of the courtiers. After briefly situating Caussin in his political context, this paper will focus on the relationship between the moral debates of that time and the role of Envy in the *Tragoediae sacrae*.

*Are Nicolas Caussin’s Plays Really Cut Off from the Reality of the Time or Can We Consider Them Topical?*

Nicolas Caussin, born in 1583, studied in Troyes and Paris, then became a Jesuit in 1607. Professor in Humanities and Rhetoric first at Rouen, then at La Flèche, he set out for the College of Clermont in Paris when this college was allowed to open again in 1618. In 1620, the Jesuits’ Company asked him to become a preacher in the Maison Professe. At that time he wrote his major book, *La Cour sainte*, first published in 1624. A few years earlier he had composed five tragedies, the *Eloquentiae sacrae et humanae parallela* and a few other books, all in Latin. He was so well-known that he was chosen by Richelieu as one of the King’s confessors in March 1637, a turning point in his career. But in December a clash between Richelieu and himself occurred. The clash was so dangerous for the Jesuits’ Company that Nicolas Caussin, condemned by the Company, had to go in exile in French Britannia, at Rennes, then at Quimper until Louis XIII’s death (1643). He died in 1651.

Caussin’s five Latin tragedies are scholarly works written when he talked and lectured at La Flèche. We do not have any information about performances. We do not know if they were all performed, before publication, at the college where he taught.5 I have found only one comment in the dedication to the Cardinal Henri de Gondi, Bishop of Paris:

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5 Hocking states that, according to Fouqueray and to Rochemonteix, the play *Hermenigildus* was ‘repeatedly produced at la Flèche and at Louis-le-Grand’. See Hocking, *A Study of the Tragoediae sacrae of Father Caussin*, p. 54; Fouqueray, *Histoire de la Compagnie de Jésus en France*, 5, p. 185 and De Rochemonteix, *Histoire du collège de la Flèche*, vol. 3.