

THE POET'S WAR ON MOTHERS: ICONOCLASM
IN AGRIPPA D'AUBIGNÉ'S *LES TRAGIQUES*

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Va Livre, tu n'es que trop beau
Pour être né dans le tombeau
Duquel mon exil te délivre:
Seul pour nous deux je veux périr:
Commence, mon enfant, à vivre
Quand ton père s'en va mourir.
Encore vivrai-je par toi,
Mon fils, comme tu vis par moi;
Puis il faut, comme la nourrice
Et fille du Romain grison,
Que tu allaite & tu chérisse
Ton père, en exil, en prison. (Préface, 1-12)

Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné begins *Les Tragiques*, his epic about the French wars of religion, with these lines, addressed by the poet to his book "son." At the time of the work's first edition, which was published anonymously in 1616, the author was indeed an elderly man, an intransigent Protestant "exiled" in the Catholic France of the young Louis XIII and the regent, his mother Marie de Médicis. However, the bulk of *Les Tragiques* had been written almost forty years earlier, in the midst of the period of religious wars, in which d'Aubigné had taken a very active part. Indeed, the poet began dictating the work in 1577, while he was recovering from serious battle wounds. The seven cantos of the completed work present a Huguenot's view of a France devastated by the religious wars, by tyrannical kings, and by Catholic persecution of Reformed believers, and they evoke in the end

the glorious triumph of the elect in the Last Judgment. But because of the long delay in publishing *Les Tragiques*, with the first edition appearing nearly two decades after the ostensible end of the religious wars, by the time the work came out, it already seemed outdated, not only in its content but also in its flamboyant style which did not suit the tastes of the time. Such considerations were not likely to stop d'Aubigné, however, who signed the first edition of the book with the cryptic inscription "au Désert, par L.B.D.D." The *désert* was a reference commonly used by the Protestants to affirm their link with the chosen people of the Old Testament; the initials stood for "Le Bouc du désert," a nickname that d'Aubigné had acquired thanks to his stubborn refusal to compromise in negotiations with religious and political adversaries. The poet's absolute certainty of his own access to the truth and his disregard for any possible negative reception of his views are precisely the subjects of the preface to *Les Tragiques*.

In the preface, the poet urges his book-son to go forth into the world and tell the harsh truth, no matter how ill-received it might be. The poet presents himself as an old man in exile, who has given life to this "son," his book, and who now appeals to the son to sustain him, the father. The image he uses for that sustenance is surprising: the book-son is to "nurse" his father, like the "nurse and daughter of the gray-haired Roman" did for her own father, from her breast. The obvious incongruity of d'Aubigné's analogy, with a male child being called upon to breast-feed a parent, obscures another, less evident manipulation by the poet. He refers here to an exemplum of Valerius Maximus (Cornelius Nepus 686-690), in which it is a daughter who nurses her Roman *mother* in prison, not only sustaining the mother physically but, through this extraordinary act of filial devotion, winning for her the pardon of her judges. In his use of the exemplum, d'Aubigné replaces the daughter with a son (his book) and the mother with a father (himself). In fact, he utterly obliterates the figure of the mother, since he does not even acknowledge her presence in the original story, but refers instead to an old Roman man.

Thus, d'Aubigné manages to represent the symbolic act of nursing entirely abstracted from any connection with female figures. The quality

of life-giving and selfless devotion, normally attached to the figure of the nursing mother, is associated instead with a savior son. From the first lines of *Les Tragiques*, the poet begins an effort at literary iconoclasm, which shifts his imagery away from the Madonna and towards the figure of Christ.

An important component of that effort is the recurrent degradation of various images of maternity in *Les Tragiques*. Particularly in the first canto, *Misères*, there is a proliferation of maternal figures, and their representation centers persistently on the nursing breast, from the image of mother France with rival sons warring over her breasts and wasting her milk (97-130), to the representation of French cities in happier times as nurses whose breasts overflowed with milk (569-80), to the various emaciated mothers in a ravaged France whose breasts are empty flaps of skin unable to give a drop of milk (352, 422-24, 511-12). These figures are suffused with pathos, but could not be construed as positive models of maternity. Furthermore, in certain key figures, pathos turns strikingly to noxious power. Mother France is unable to stop her "Jacob and Esau" from fighting and finally, torn and bloodied by them, she condemns them both.

Adonc se perd le lait, le suc de sa poitrine;
 Puis, aux derniers abois de sa proche ruine,
 Elle dit: "Vous avez, félons, ensanglanté
 Le sein qui vous nourrit et qui vous a porté;
 Or vivez de venin, sanglante géniture,
 Je n'ai plus que du sang pour votre nourriture."
 (I.125-30)

Just as d'Aubigné's characterization of her goes from benevolent to impuissant to vindictive, other emaciated mothers in *Misères* also grow progressively more horrifying and malevolent. The poet first evokes them collectively, as pitiful victims of torture by marauding troops (343-52); later, he stuns the reader with the "horrible anatomy" (414) of the mother in Montmoreau, whose dried-up breasts can give no milk and whose wounds drop blood instead on her dying child

(421-24); finally, he reaches a pinnacle of horror with the cannibal mother who turns from motherly to murderous and who, instead of offering milk, requires the blood of her child, saying:

“Rends misérable, rends le corps que je t’ai fait;
 Ton sang retournera où tu as pris le lait,
 Au sein qui t’allaitait rentre contre nature:
 Ce sein qui t’a nourri sera ta sépulture.” (523-26)

Certainly, there are positive maternal figures in *Les Tragiques*, most of whom are allegorical. The figure of Truth in the preface (29-30, 120-92, 409-14) is the worthy mother of this book-son, and the object of the poet’s “holy love” (132). The Earth is a benevolent, protecting mother to the oppressed French peasants in *Misères* (275-310). And in the second canto, *Princes*, a naive newcomer to court encounters in a dream two mothers who both claim him, one false—Fortune—but also one true—Virtue (1175-1486).¹ Besides these positive and strong maternal figures, there are some who, though weak, are also fundamentally positive from a moral point of view. However, these latter victims participate in an overall degradation of the image of maternity, much as the malefic mothers do, if to a lesser degree. Both the victimized and the victimizing mothers contribute to a general representation of maternity in a reduced and humiliated state.

As the references above to the figure of ravaged mother France, to the dying mother of Montmoreau, and to the cannibal mother suggest, milk turns again and again into blood in *Les Tragiques*. This transformation suggests a shift from the realm of the Madonna to that of the Christ—from the mother’s offering of milk to the martyr’s offering of blood. D’Aubigné’s literary attack on mariolatry is three-pronged. In the first place, he degrades the figure of the mother by repeatedly pairing her with images of horror. Secondly, he detaches the positive maternal act of nursing, and the image of milk itself, from female figures and attaches them to males. And finally, he emphasizes blood imagery, often in direct contrast with that of milk, and thus turns towards the martyr’s sacrifice, which is an imitation of Christ’s.

I have already mentioned the first two strategies as they are applied in the preface and first canto of *Les Tragiques*. I should note that not only the book-son but also the poet himself assume Christ-like poses. The poet represents himself as a martyr, dying so that another might live. The image of the savior son is also Christic, and his association with the act of nursing is not entirely unprecedented, as Caroline Walker Bynum's work on the medieval tradition of Jesus as mother points out. Elsewhere in *Les Tragiques*, d'Aubigné again manages to forge a link between himself and the figure of Christ using references to milk, the ultimate symbol of maternity. In the preface, the poet receives the offering of milk, which has a sustaining and even redeeming function; later, at the start of the sixth canto, *Vengeances*, it is the poet who makes an offering of milk to God.

Si je n'ai or ne myrrhe à faire mon offrande
 Je t'apporte du lait: ta douceur est si grande
 Que de même oeil & coeur tu vois & tu reçois
 Des bergers le doux lait & la myrrhe des Rois. (5-8)

Here, the milk represents the poet's humility before God, but it also serves to meld two dominant subjects in Renaissance iconography and to allow one of them to eclipse the other. The reference to the gifts of shepherds and of kings makes clear the allusion to the familiar scene of the adoration of the Christ child, an extremely popular iconographic subject. However, the gift of milk is not commonly included in the representation of this scene. That gift is normally offered by the child's mother: images of the Madonna and child—by far the most popular subject for Christian iconography up to the Renaissance—very often show the Virgin Mary nursing. Thus in the above passage, the poet imports the maternal act of devotion into the representation of the relationship between (male) believer and Christ, and then banishes the mother. D'Aubigné's literary iconography effects a transformation analogous to the reform advocated by Protestant theologians: both poet and theologian seek to discredit the "idolatrous" attention to intercessors and to foster the direct relationship between believer and God.

In the passage from *Vengeances* cited above, the poet obliquely identifies himself as a “shepherd” offering milk. While the overt reference is to an adoration scene (where shepherds worship the Christ child), it may occur to the reader that another well known New Testament shepherd is the “Good Shepherd” Christ himself. Again, there is the fleeting figure of Jesus as mother in this image of shepherd offering milk, and again through the image of milk, a (male) believer is associated with Christ, this time in a relationship of resemblance.

It is that resemblance between Christ and the believer—specifically, the martyred Protestant believer—that d’Aubigné wishes to emphasize in *Les Tragiques*. And as he insists more heavily on this resemblance, he moves from his second tactic (the attachment of milk images to masculine figures) towards the third (the turning from milk to blood). In a particularly striking confrontation of milk and blood, d’Aubigné employs all three of the tactics I have mentioned. In the fifth canto, *Fers*, he refers to rivers that ran red with the blood of Protestant victims of massacres, and he describes them flowing into the ocean, which he anthropomorphizes as an old man whose waters are “like milk” (1459). Through accusations spoken by the figure of the Ocean, the poet discredits the formerly benevolent mother Earth: “Terre qui les trahis, tu étais trop impure/Pour des saints et des purs être la sépulture” (1529-30). He identifies the paternal figure of the Ocean with the image of milk: La lame de la mer étant comme du lait./Les nids des aleyons y nageaient à souhait (1459-60). And finally, he represents milk turning to blood as the Ocean is reddened by the rivers in which the martyrs float: Il trouva cas nouveau, lorsque son poil tout blanc/Ensanglanta sa main; puis voyant à son flanc/Que l’onde refuyant laissait sa peau rougie (1487-89).

Furthermore, the Christic nature of the martyrs’ sacrifice is evident as the poet describes angels carrying chalices of martyrs’ blood back up to heaven, as if in a grand communion ceremony:

A la tête des siens, l’Océan au chef blanc
Vit les cieus s’entrouvrir, et les Anges à troupes
Fondre de l’air en bas, ayant en main des coupes

De précieux rubis, qui, plongés dedans l'eau,
 En chantant rapportaient quelque présent nouveau.
 Ces messagers ailés, ces Anges de lumière
 Triaient le sang meurtri d'avec l'onde meurtrière
 Dans leurs vases remplis, qui prenaient heureux lieu
 Aux plus beaux cabinets du palais du grand Dieu.
 (1500-08)

In the many references to blood in the canto *Fers*, the poet emphasizes a close relationship between the martyrs and Christ. For the blood which appears everywhere as a sign of horror (because it is caused by the Catholics' diabolical persecutions) is at the same time a sign of holiness (because it is the mark of the martyrs' resemblance to Christ). The martyrs' sacrifice is an *imitatio Christi* from which the figure of the Virgin Mary is entirely removed and to which her influence is irrelevant.

The poet says that at the massacre of Vassy, a river of blood flowed, the source of which was the "flank of the Christian": "Là même on voit flotter un fleuve dont le flanc/Du chrétien est la source le flot est le sang" (5.559-60). Christ and "the Christian"—that is, the Protestant martyr—are bound together by the similarity of their sacrifice, which is represented in each case by the bleeding wound in the side. But these lines reinforce the parallel between Christ and believer on a second level also, since the passage from the gospel of John to which they allude presents Christ and his followers as similar sources of the water of life.

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"² (John 7.37-38)

The discrediting of the mother in favor of the martyr in *Les Tragiques* is at its most striking in the opposing representations of the work's most reviled and its most revered figures, Catherine de Médicis and Elizabeth of England. A woman who takes on the manly role of exercising political authority is an anomaly, and this clash of male and

female within a single being leads d'Aubigné to represent both Catherine and Elizabeth as essentially hermaphroditic. However, for the reformed poet, Catherine is an unfit ruler, and accordingly the feminine predominates in his treatment of her, paired with carnality and faithlessness; Elizabeth, on the other hand, is "the Ideal of all good kings" (3.955), and the poet presents a masculinized and spiritualized portrait of her.

For d'Aubigné, Catherine de Médicis' authority is entirely illegitimate, since she is a woman, a foreigner, and an idolatress. She holds power in France only by virtue of her maternity: she is mother to kings and regent during their minority. The Valois kings her sons—and particularly Henri III—are called by d'Aubigné "hermaphrodites, effeminate monsters" "hermaphrodits, monstres efféminés" (2.667), and together Henri III and Catherine form a doubly hermaphroditic pair: "[. . .] malheureux celui qui vit esclave infâme/Sous une femme hommace et sous un homme-femme!" (2.759-60). The feminine side is dominant in each of the individuals as well as in the pair, since Catherine is represented as the evil power behind the throne. In Catherine, the female is associated with sexuality and specifically sexual perversion, both her own and that she promotes in her sons. In the long passage on Catherine in the first canto of *Les Tragiques* (699-992), the poet overlays the base physicality of her being with progressively intensifying layers of abjection. She goes from base to vile to monstrous, polluted, and polluting. D'Aubigné portrays her as the creature and instrument of Satan; her spirit is formed in hell of the "worst excrements" "les pires excremens" (701), and through a string of references to "poisons" and "venom," Catherine is associated with the serpent race of God's enemies.

Catherine's primary identity is that of mother, and as he does frequently in *Les Tragiques*, the poet "denatures" this representation of maternity by depicting Catherine as cruel and vicious, a mother who turns her children into brutes, who pushes them into sexual perversion by procuring for them—in short, a mother whose mother's milk is poison:

Plût à Dieu, Jésabel, que tu euss' à Florence
 Laisse tes trahisons, en laissant ton pays,
 [. . .]
 Ton fils eût échappé ta secrète poison
 Si ton sang t'eût été plus que ta trahison.
 (I.758-59, 767-68)

By calling Catherine "Jezebel," as he does repeatedly, d'Aubigné emphasizes both the illegitimacy of her authority and her association with idolatry. For him, the usurpation of power by the Catholic Catherine is akin to the hold that the Virgin Mary had over the idolatrous minds of the poet's religious adversaries, and the fact that Catherine's motherhood is the seat of her power reinforces her possible association with the Virgin Mary.

Not surprisingly then, in his encomium of Elizabeth I of England—the "Ideal of all good kings," as d'Aubigné calls her—the poet avoids any reference to Elizabeth as mother of her people, although this is a common image in other contemporary writings about her,³ and although d'Aubigné himself favors imagery of kings as parents to their people elsewhere in *Les Tragiques*. He presents her rather as a martyr for the Protestant faith (based on her imprisonment under Mary Tudor, as well as the willingness to die that he ascribes to her). D'Aubigné represents Elizabeth's reign as ordained by God, and in his view, this cancels the normal prohibition, to which he subscribes, against women's rule. He applies a legal maxim which, Ernst Kantorowicz explains (10-11), was applied in cases concerning the overriding nature of both the king's double body and the hermaphrodite's. The maxim, that "the worthier draws to itself the less worthy" (*magis dignum trahit ad se minus dignum*), means in the case of the king that the immortal body politic overrides and repairs any "imbecilities" of the body natural (such as female sex); and in the case of the hermaphrodite, it means that the nature of the hermaphrodite is determined according to the sex (male or female) that seems most prevalent.

Heureuse Elizabeth, la justice rendant,
 Et qui n'as point vendu tes droits en la vendant!

Et puisque ce nom saint, de tous bons Rois l'idée,
 Prend sa place en ce rang, qui lui était gardée
 Au rôle des martyrs, je dirai en ce lieu
 Ce que sur mon papier dicte l'Esprit de Dieu.
 La main qui te ravit de la geôle en ta salle,
 Qui changea la sellette en la chaire royale
 [. . .]
 L'œil qui vit les désirs aspirant à la flamme
 Quand tu gardas ton âme en voulant perdre l'âme,
 Cet oeil vit les dangers, sa main porta le faix,
 Te fit heureuse en guerre et ferme dans la paix,
 Le Paraclet t'apprit à répondre aux harangues
 De tous ambassadeurs, même en leurs propres langues.
 C'est lui qui détourna l'encombre et le méchef
 De vingt mortels desseins du règne et de ton chef.
 (3.953-60, 963-70)

In his portrait of Elizabeth (3.953-98), d'Aubigné seems to apply the maxim I have mentioned to king and hermaphrodite at once; the founding fact (in his estimation it is a fact) of her election by God means that the nobler—read “the masculine”—side of her being will prevail. Elizabeth is portrayed as a virile maiden; she renders justice (3.953); she is victorious in war and steadfast in peace (966, 979-90); she commands the absolute loyalty of her subjects (971-76, 985-86); and the excellence of her learning is divinely induced (967-68). She is a virgin, but unlike Mary she is emphatically *not* a mother—in fact, she is not even a woman, an individual representative of the female gender; rather, she is one of a kind, inimitable, and not subject to the normal processes of reproduction. These are some of the reasons for which one of the familiar symbols used in portraits of Elizabeth and on coins from her reign is the phoenix. D'Aubigné does not use the image in his portrait of her, but he hints that she is the ideal king of whom he speaks when in a passage on the depravity of the Valois kings, he contrasts them with the ideal, a “phoenix from heaven” ‘phénix du ciel’ (2.657). The various symbolic associations with the mythical bird include the idea of virginity, since it did not reproduce sexually (being the sole

creature of its species) but eternally regenerated itself; the image of the hermaphrodite, since the phoenix's engendering itself led to the idea that it was of both sexes; and the image of the martyr, since it died and was reborn in flames. Elizabeth the ideal king, as "phoenix," is identified with all of these symbolic meanings and through them, with Christ himself.

Perhaps the privileging of masculine over feminine figures which I have examined here should be seen as nothing more than common misogynistic imagery. Certainly, Calvin, Knox, and other Protestant reformers were suspicious of feminine influence within the political and religious spheres, and certainly, d'Aubigné joins them in their condemnation of female rule. In *Les Tragiques* he rails against Catherine's evil influence on France, and it may or may not be coincidence that decades later when he finally decides to publish the work, there is another Médicis woman—another foreign Catholic mother—in place as the dangerous power behind the French throne. However, I would contend that d'Aubigné's prime motivation in writing *Les Tragiques* is theological, and that through the many shifts in his imagery, from degenerate mothers to "nursing" males, from milk to blood, or from Catherine to Elizabeth, the poet effectively operates a literary iconoclasm against the cult of the Virgin Mary and develops instead a masculinized, Christ-centered iconography. D'Aubigné is, after all, a soldier poet who, in the exordium of *Les Tragiques*, indicates that his very writing of the work is in itself an act of holy war.⁴ If he construes it as such, it is reasonable to argue that what his iconoclastic Huguenot brothers did with hatchets and torches, he undertakes here with words: to bring down the idols (chiefly the devotional images of the Madonna) and turn believers instead towards the imitation of Christ.

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NOTES

¹ Note, however, that the false mother is characterized by

traditionally “feminine” attributes – an association with the moon, with lasciviousness, with vicious and unbridled passions – while the true mother is “masculine” – associated with the sun and with sobriety, probity, and continence. The contrast between the poet’s representations of these two mothers is similar to that between his portraits of Catherine de Médicis and of Elizabeth of England; see discussion of these below.

² Two passages from Jeremiah (2.13, 17.13) also refer to the Lord as “the fountain of living waters.” Both of these passages are warnings against those of his people who have gone astray.

³ A great many modern critical works on Elizabeth note not only the general maternal imagery connected with her but specifically her representation as a “second Virgin Mary.” See, for example, McClure and Headlam Wells; Yates 78-79; Hackett, “Shock” and *Virgin Mother*; King; Greenblatt 168; Montrose; Marcus 137; Berry 82, 178n66; and Levin 18, 26-30, 33, 65, 70, 104.

⁴ Various studies of the opening lines of *Les Tragiques* have emphasized this point. See, for instance, Langer and Lestringant

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