

Ransom and Piracy in Classical French Comedy

by
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Although Turkish pirates were a genuine menace for Europeans in real life, and as dramatic characters they appeared frequently in tragicomedies, they are rarely to be found in comedies, probably because their activities were more frightening than funny. Indeed, the one comic playwright who had actually experienced kidnapping and a period of enslavement in the Middle East, Regnard, chose to recount his adventures in the form of a novel. In his plays he limited his allusions to such matters to a brief passage in *Les Folies amoureuses* (1704) where the wily valet Crispin, needing to improvise a fictional biography, invents a stint as a *flibustier* (1.5). Moreover, in tragicomedies the presence of pirates was an automatic sign of *invraisemblance*, and it was not uncommon to discover in the person of their leader a disaffected nobleman who would eventually reclaim his true identity and rank. In comedies, on the other hand, the playwrights preferred to keep these characters off the stage and tried to make their role in the plot relatively believable. The most common scenarios were bogus ransom demands, with the trickster claiming that someone has been kidnapped by Turks and is being held for ransom (Cyrano de Bergerac's *Le Pédant joué* [1654] and Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* [1671]), or mistaken identity of returnees, where a ransomed spouse returning home after many years is at first unrecognized and even taken for an impostor, due to false reports of the person's death (Rotrou's *La Soeur* [1647] and Tristan L'Hermite's *Le Parasite* [1654]).¹

For Cyrano and Molière the humor lies in the fact that a stingy but gullible old father is tricked out of a large sum of money; the ransom is paid, but there has been no kidnapping. The fact that the fathers swallow the deception so quickly suggests that pirates and their activities were a well-known fact of life.² However, since the Barbary corsairs centered their activities on the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas, Naples, the setting of Molière's comedy, makes a more logical target for a Turkish galley than Paris, where Cyrano's

comedy is set. Cyrano, however, goes out of his way to call attention to the unlikely appearance of a galley on the Seine, calling the matter "merveilleuse" and comparing it both to the visit of American Indians to France in 1550 and to the wedding of a French princess to the king of Poland in 1645!

Several features common to both plays shed light on how pirates were viewed by seventeenth-century audiences. For example, both authors emphasize the treacherous behavior of the fictional corsairs. In *Cyrano* the Turks surprise Charlot and Corbineli, who were minding their own business in their own small boat, by flying a Christian flag and greeting them as friends, before suddenly pulling alongside and boarding them (II.4). Such tactics were in fact frequently employed by corsairs in real life. In *Molière* the galley is anchored in the port; a young and good-looking Turk hails Léandre and Scapin and invites them inside for a snack of fruit and wine, but while they are eating and talking the ship sets sail and Scapin is dispatched to shore with the ransom demand (II.7). Another revealing touch is that the father in each play, before agreeing to pay the ransom, angrily threatens to appeal to the authorities - an approach that wins them only derision from the wily servants. These references would have reminded audiences that the European powers preferred negotiating with the corsairs, and frequently paying them off, rather than trying to defeat them militarily, since they found it expedient to have the commerce of their neighbors disrupted as much as possible.

One aspect of these scenes that is often overlooked is that the episode of the bogus pirates, far from being a gratuitous piece of fun, is thematically linked to other episodes in the play. Thus, the pedant Granger, who in Act II had been deceived into thinking that his son was kidnapped, falls into an analogous trap in Act IV. Not realizing that the invitation issued by his beloved Genevoté to climb into her bedroom window at night is a trick, he is caught unawares when the girl's brother La Tremblaye intercepts him and threatens either to kill him on the spot or to turn him over to the authorities as a burglar. Granger secures his own life and freedom by agreeing to the match of his daughter Manon to La Tremblaye,

though he is shrewd enough to realize that the lovers probably concocted the plot precisely in order to achieve this result (IV.3). He also recognizes, however dimly, that his attempts to win the love of a much younger woman are contrary to the natural order, for he refers to himself as a "pirate d'amour" who, sailing "sur cette mer orageuse, et fameuse en naufrages," needs to steer clear of a reef (namely, his son's love for the same woman). He attempts to overcome this obstacle by arranging for his son to get so drunk that he will be unable to interfere (IV.4).

In Molière's comedy the deception practiced upon Géronte is directly juxtaposed with a similar scheme against the other father, Argante. Here Scapin extorts the necessary funds from the stingy old man by proposing to buy off the family of the young woman whom Octave has secretly married, but adding a factor of menace: her brother is a violent-tempered military officer who would like nothing better than to run Argante through with his sword. In fact, there is no brother, and the role is played by the valet Silvestre in disguise, but his performance is convincing enough that poor Argante fails to recognize his own servant (II.6). Thus, the father is made to believe that the life he is ransoming with the money is his own. The presentation of these two deceptions one right after the other not only displays Scapin's dazzling virtuosity, but also suggests the lawlessness of the times, in which deserters and unemployed ex-soldiers often turned to crime, and civilians had good reason to fear for their personal safety and that of their families.

In the remaining comedies the pirates are real, although the kidnappings occurred in the distant past. Tristan's *Le Parasite* centers around the homecoming of Alcidor, who some eighteen years earlier underwent a hair-raising adventure. With his two-year-old son Sillare and a group of friends he embarked for a brief pleasure trip. However, the boat wandered far off course during a sudden storm and the following day was boarded by Turks. The Frenchmen were brought to Algiers and sold into slavery. Alcidor was apparently unable to send word to his family, who received their first news of his whereabouts only when one of his fellow prisoners was ransomed. Four years later Manille learned that her hus-

band and son had changed cities and masters, though with no details (I.4); we are not told whether in the intervening time she made any attempt to raise the funds for their ransom. A few weeks prior to the start of the play Manille received word from some Provençal merchants, just back from a commercial trip to Egypt, that her husband was alive and would shortly return, but that her son was dead (III.3, 6). Strangely, Tristan never tells us how Alcidor finally gained his freedom, though perhaps we are supposed to believe the statement, comprising part of the parasite's invented narrative, that the merchants, upon finding a fellow countryman, generously paid for his release (III.2).

Much of the humor during the second half of the play stems from the difficulty that the returning Alcidor experiences in getting recognized by his family and from Lisandre's temporarily successful impersonation of the long-lost son Sillare. In fact, the latter scheme is both immoral and ill-advised, since Lucinde, the daughter of the house who is desperately trying to forestall an unwanted match that her mother has arranged for her, would have a perfect excuse for delay in the news that her father was soon to return home. Her plan, which involves reversing the message from the merchants, claiming that it is in fact the son who is alive and the father who is dead, is extremely cruel to her mother and also very risky, since it can only be a matter of time before her father does in fact return.

Once again, the play includes a real ransom plot, but it has nothing to do with pirates. Lucinde's beloved, Lisandre, gains admission to the house pretending to be her brother. However, when her real father turns up only a few hours later, he has Lisandre arrested as an impostor and seducer, and urges the authorities to hang him. Fortunately, Lisandre's father, a royal judge from Orléans, happens to be in Paris for a lawsuit, discovers his son's predicament, and persuades Alcidor to resolve the situation by letting the two lovers get married. But as a backup plan, the judge summons a troupe of police officers to Alcidor's house, with instructions to storm it and liberate his son, in the event that he cannot arrange a peaceful settlement (V.5).

In Rotrou's play failure to pay the ransom very nearly leads to tragic consequences. Upon learning the whereabouts of his kidnapped wife and daughter, many years after their disappearance, the merchant Anselme sent his son Lélie to Constantinople with ransom money. However, the youth failed to accomplish the mission, buying instead the freedom of the girl with whom he fell in love during a stop in Venice. Lélie could have written home to ask for more money and gone on to try to find his mother, but, instead, he returned home directly with his bride whom he passed off as his sister. Never does he show the slightest concern for the welfare of his mother and his real sister. Fortunately, Constance manages ultimately to return home, but only because her master, following a promotion to high office, freed all his Christian slaves. She generously forgives Lélie for his lack of filial devotion and agrees to cooperate with his deception. But when she recognizes in the supposed sister, Aurélie, her real daughter, the young people discover to their horror that their marriage is incestuous. Thanks to the revelation of a substitution of infants years before, the taint of incest is removed and the play can end happily. In a final irony, Anselme's money turns out to have served to ransom one of the persons it was actually intended for.

Once again the ransom theme finds a parallel in other threads of the plot. To forestall Anselme's decree that his son must wed Eroxène that very night, even though he is already secretly married to his supposed sister Aurélie and though Lélie's best friend Eraste and Eroxène are in love, the clever servant Ergaste proposes a highly immoral scheme. The young men will agree to the double wedding of Lélie to Eroxène and of Eraste to Aurélie, but will substitute a sham priest during the ceremony; thereafter the supposedly married couples will live together in the daytime while swapping partners at night! As a sop to their consciences, they promise to marry their real beloveds publicly once the fathers have died. Of course, even under the much looser code of *bienséances* operative in the 1630s, Rotrou could never have contemplated letting his characters put such an illegal and un-Christian scheme into effect. Symbolically, however, this plan serves to put parental tyranny on the same plane with piracy, in that people are deprived of their

freedom by unreasonable authority figures, forced into unacceptable arrangements for arbitrary reasons, and left to formulate desperate plans for their escape.

The only comedy of the century to make piracy and ransom a central theme is Montfleury's *Le Mari sans femme* (performed c. 1663, published 1698). It is also, so far as I can determine, the sole French comedy of the century to be set in Algiers. To be sure, we do not see any corsairs. Instead, the governor of Algiers, Fatiman, though an ex-pirate and though he oversees the corsairs' activity, speaks and acts like a monarch.

Montfleury, a master of comic imbroglio, subjects the ransom theme to more complications than any of his fellow playwrights. Although Dom Brusquin travels to Algiers for the express purpose of ransoming his wife, Julie, and quickly pays the sum demanded, the transaction does not proceed smoothly. First of all, Dom Brusquin has mixed feelings about getting back his wife, since he has a veritable obsession with cuckoldry and is constantly jumping to the conclusion, despite all assurances to the contrary, that the Turks are sex fiends who have taken advantage of the beautiful Julie. Aware that Julie has never loved him and was coerced into the marriage by her mother, he further suspects that she was only too eager to surrender her honor and keeps wondering whether he is doing the right thing by ransoming her. A second wrinkle derives from the fact that the heroine, who had eloped with her lover Carlos immediately following the wedding ceremony, has no wish to be reunited with her boorish husband, whom she loathes. Upon learning of this, the humane Turkish governor uses his power to dissolve her marriage and let her wed the man she truly loves. In an intriguing twist, he decides to free her gratis and to use the ransom money for the cost of the new wedding. Dom Brusquin, a grotesque coward who is incapable of both genuine love and generosity, is forced to yield to this humiliating arrangement by thrashings and the threat of being sent to the galleys.

Yet another complication derives from the infatuation of Fatiman's fiancée, Céline, for Julie's beloved and fellow-captive Car-

los. This leads her to execute a daring scheme to deceive Fatiman and escape with Carlos, whose love she hopes to win through what is basically blackmail. A fourth, and quite unnecessary, complication is the attempt by Carlos to get his own family to ransom him. Since his rich old uncle is a skinflint, Carlos fears that nothing may ever come of his letter. However, when the uncle suddenly dies, the young man's brother hurries to Algiers with ransom money. As it turns out, Fatiman has already resolved to liberate Carlos gratis, to reward him for confiding both his love for Julie and the treachery of Céline.

Two aspects of the ransom business in this play are likely to take the reader by surprise. First of all, Fatiman is extremely chivalrous in his treatment of women. He tells Dom Brusquin that he charges far more for women than for men because he views beauty as a priceless treasure (vv. 569-71), and taking unfair advantage of them would be unthinkable for him. Secondly, Fatiman is a patron of the arts and, once he discovers that Julie and Carlos have excellent singing voices, he exempts them from manual labor and assigns them the task of giving concerts to his fiancée. In these respects, combined with his concern for justice and humaneness, he appears as a worthy counterpart of European monarchs, rather than the overseer of a kidnapping trade.

Although it would seem that the paying of ransom to kidnapers is a perfectly straightforward method of exchange by means of money, in all these plays the principle of exchange backfires in that the money is not used for its intended purpose, that the captives are never freed in the manner or by the person intended, and that exchanges often take the form of substitutions (characters pretending to be someone they are not, or money intended to free one person used to free another). In short, ransom becomes a device to produce humorous surprises and to let the audience laugh at the normally somber baroque themes of human powerlessness and the instability of all things earthly.

NOTES

¹ Although there are a number of other comedies where pirates are mentioned, I am limiting myself here to works where ransoming plays a significant part in the plot.

² On the activity of the Barbary corsairs, see: Peter Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970); Stephen Clissold, *The Barbary Slaves* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977). On their use in French literature of this period, see Alia Bornaz Baccar, *La Mer, source de création littéraire en France au XVIIe siècle (1640-1671)* (Paris, Seattle, Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1991), Chapter 1.