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Dramatic structure and philosophy in Brutus, Alzire and Mahomet

by Thomas M. Carr, jr.

An impressive amount of recent critical work has dealt with the philosophic element in Voltaire's tragedies. His plays have been labelled a theatre of involvement and a theatre of ideas; they have been examined from the standpoint of propaganda and as tragedy¹. However, the focus of such studies has been primarily on Voltaire's message or on the meaning of the plays, rather than on the dramatic structure he created to convey his philosophic concerns.

Today, of course, Voltaire does not rank high either as an original thinker or as a dramatist. Nonetheless, his attempt to introduce his philosophic concerns into his tragedies continues to deserve serious attention. For even though his plays seem at times to be only weak imitations of Corneille and Racine, and his chief contribution to philosophy that of a popularizer, the effort he made to bring the two together was a real innovation in the French theatre. His involvement in both areas was intense and lifelong. Voltaire loved every aspect of the theatre—acting, designing scenery and writing. His intellectual activity was equally passionate and wide-ranging for he concerned himself with troublesome metaphysical questions as well as with the more practical problems of social and political reform. Given his love for both the theatre and philosophy, it was inevitable that Voltaire should seek to

¹ Marcus Allen, 'Voltaire and the theater of involvement', *CLA journal* (1967), x, 319-332; Robert Niklaus, 'La Propagande philosophique au théâtre au siècle des lumières', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* (1963), xxvi, 1235-40; Ronald Ridg-

way, *La Propagande philosophique dans les tragédies de Voltaire* (Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century, xv: 1961); Jack Vrooman, *Voltaire's theatre* (Studies on Voltaire, lxxv: 1970).

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combine the two. Moreover, one of the most fascinating features of this marriage is the point at which philosophy and the theatre converge—the dramatic structure of these plays. As Robert Niklaus has noted, Voltaire's treatment of philosophical themes in the tragedies is less complex than in his other writings, and it remained fairly constant throughout his long career as a dramatist. How Voltaire turned the theatre into a vehicle for his thought is perhaps as interesting as the message itself.

Voltaire's conception of philosophy made it especially appropriate for him to treat such questions on stage. During most of his life he struggled with metaphysical questions like the existence and nature of god, free will and the soul, and he made serious efforts to familiarize himself with the philosophical systems he inherited from the seventeenth century. But he found the speculative ventures of the continental philosophers frustrating and in the long run futile. Much more to his liking was 'la sage et modeste philosophie de Locke'², which emphasized the limitations of human nature, and came closer to Voltaire's ideal of reducing metaphysics to 'la morale'. Ira Wade³ has shown how this meant for Voltaire a preoccupation with questions which dealt with *rappports*: the relation of god to men and of men to men. This is the practical side of philosophy, dealing for the most part with values and moral issues—just the sort of intellectual problems the theatre can treat with the most success. Thus, his philosophical plays were not the place for his attacks against the systematizers of the seventeenth century. More dangerous to the true spirit of philosophy as he saw it were greed, superstition and prejudice. The task of the *philosophe* the 'amateur de la sagesse'⁴, was to spearhead the effort to free men from these enslavements which blind men to the call of natural morality and in whose name so many atrocities have been committed. Because the subject of classical tragedy had traditionally been the affairs of princes and the gods, the tragic stage was an

² *Lettres philosophiques*, xiii.

⁴ 'Philosophe', 1, *Dictionnaire philo-*

³ *The Intellectual development of Voltaire* (Princeton 1969), pp.771-774.

sophique.

appropriate arena for his assault on religious fanaticism and tyranny.

But how is any philosophy, whether speculative or of a more practical kind, expressed on stage? Henri Gouhier⁵, in a short but suggestive article on the theatre and philosophy points out what the two have in common. 'Le philosophe essaie de penser le monde', and 'le dramaturge essaie de créer un monde'; but the work of both is the reflection of 'une certaine pensée personnelle du monde'. This world view of the playwright need not always be especially profound; and, indeed, it is often left implicit in the action for the spectator to discover for himself. In most serious drama, however, it becomes more or less explicit, as in the tragedies of Corneille where the heroes' ethos is powerfully displayed in discussions and monologues. In certain circumstances, playwrights are not satisfied to merely display their vision of things. As in Racine's *Esther*, the dramatist may seek to win over the spectators to the values his world view represents or to strengthen their adherence to them.

In addition, while the philosopher appeals to reason in presenting his personal vision, a play is directed at other faculties as well. Its impact will involve emotional and ethical dimensions along with an intellectual one. The playwright thus commands a potentially more complex response, which he can, if he wishes, press into the service of his world view by carefully structuring his play. Aristotle's discussion of the six qualitative parts of tragedy in the *Poetics* provides one of the best tools for the analysis of dramatic structure. It is through the first three—plot, characterization and thought⁶—that the playwright-philosopher can make explicit his world view, and it is their interplay which shapes the audience's response. Diction, spectacle and melody usually play a subordinate role. The importance of thought in raising and defining issues is

⁵ 'Philosophie et théâtre', *Encyclopédie française* (Paris 1957), xix.6.

⁶ Aristotle discusses the relation between these parts in chapter six of the *Poetics*. It should be noted that thought does not refer to the meaning of the

play, but to 'the thought of the personages', that is, to their 'effort to prove or disprove, to arouse emotion . . . or maximize or minimize things'; *Poetics*, tr. Ingram Bywater (New York 1954), p.248.

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obvious; more likely to be overlooked is the way in which the kinds of arguments chosen by the characters reveal their personalities. Characterization contributes when the characters are representatives of various points of view. Moreover, the degree of sympathy the spectator is allowed to feel can determine whether the character's ideological stance is attractive or repellent. The plot can be designed to allow debate of the problem at hand, or even better, the *nœud* can turn on the issue in question. Finally, the play's impact can be made more intense if the emotion generated by the plot is used to reinforce the playwright's message.

Voltaire established himself firmly as the successor of Corneille and Racine in the decade following his return from England in 1728. Although many of the ten or so tragedies he conceived or wrote during this period have philosophical overtones, three of them represent distinct approaches to the problem of creating a viable philosophic theatre. *Brutus* is the first of a series of republican tragedies. *Alzire* combines recent history with a lesson in tolerance while *Mahomet* prefigures the militant dramas of the Ferney period. Later plays, although much more complex than some critics would believe, tend to rework the formulae first used in these plays. A study of how his ideological concerns shape the dramatic structure of these three plays can reveal a great deal about the potential and limitations of Voltaire's philosophic drama.

A brief look at the weaknesses of Voltaire's first tragedy *Œdipe* will serve as a useful preliminary. Critics have long noted that *Œdipe* owed much of its success with the regency audiences of 1718-1719 to its anticlerical passages as well as to certain lines critical of royalty. But although Voltaire showed interest from the very beginning of his dramatic career in expressing his ideas on stage, critics have been very much divided on the success of this venture. The ease with which these anti-authoritarian verses can be detached for quotation leads some critics to wonder if they are not a *hors d'œuvre* 'à l'adresse des seuls spectateurs contemporains';

⁷ Henri Lion, *Les Tragédies et théories dramatiques de Voltaire* (Paris, 1895), p.19.

others have questioned whether the *Œdipus* legend, ending as it does with the vindication of the oracles, provided a suitable vehicle for their expression.

Since *Œdipe's* defects have often been analyzed, it might be well to point out first of all its very real strong points. The vigour with which the play's notorious passages are formulated is well known. Perhaps more important, but not generally very well recognized, is the fact that these passages present a well-developed, coherent ethos linking both the political and religious beliefs of the leading characters. To use Aristotle's terms, the novice playwright displayed a certain mastery of both diction and thought.

Voltaire's use of thought deserves attention. The play's attacks against the priests are found in two speeches: one by *Araspe* in II.v and another by *Jocaste* in IV.i. Close examination shows them to be based on two arguments. The first tends to undermine the oracles by pointing out the discrepancy between the supernatural powers claimed by the priests and the grounds on which the predictions are based. What connection can there be between the flights of birds, the entrails of dead animals, or human-made temple paraphernalia and a knowledge of the future? No, the priests are mortal like other men, without any special powers:

Ces autres, ces trépieds qui rendent leurs oracles,
Ces organes d'airain que nos mains ont formés,
Toujours d'un souffle pur ne sont pas animés.
(II.v)

Cet organe des dieux est-il donc infailible?
Un ministère saint les attache aux autels;
Ils approchent des dieux, mais ils sont des mortels.
Pensez-vous qu'en effet, au gré de leur demande,
Du vol de leurs oiseaux la vérité dépende?
Que sous un fer sacré des taureaux gémissants
Dévoilent l'avenir à leurs regards perçants,
Et que de leurs festons ces victimes ornées

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Des humains dans leurs flancs portent les destinées?
Non, non: chercher ainsi l'obscur vérité,
C'est usurper les droits de la Divinité.

(iv.i)

Araspe sees the practical implication of this logic: man should rely on human methods of investigation in pursuit of the truth (II.v):

Ne nous fions qu'à nous; voyons tout par nos yeux:
Ce sont là nos trépieds, nos oracles, nos dieux.

The second argument explains the success of clerical imposture by linking the priests' willingness to deceive to the people's credulity:

Nos prêtres ne sont pas ce qu'un vain peuple pense;
Notre crédulité fait toute leur science.

(iv.i)

Ne nous endormons point sur la foi de leurs prêtres;
Au pied du sanctuaire il est souvent des traîtres,
Qui, nous asservissant sous un pouvoir sacré,
Font parler les destins, les font taire à leur gré.

(II.v)

These two speeches by Jocaste and Araspe were reinforced in the 1738 edition by a third one which emphasizes the true functions of a priest (III.iv):

Un prêtre, quel qu'il soit, quelque dieu qui l'inspire,
Doit prier pour ses rois, et non pas les maudire.

Thus Voltaire refuses to attribute any superhuman power to the priests; they share the limitations of the rest of men. In fact, he attributes the ease with which they deceive the masses to the people's weakness.

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This same attitude characterizes the political ideal of Œdipe. His highest goal is to be 'utile aux mortels'. His model is his predecessor Laïus who refused to isolate himself from his people by the kind of ceremony Louis XIV had created for himself at Versailles (IV.i):

Ce roi, plus grand que sa fortune,
Dédaignait comme vous une pompe importune;
On ne voyait jamais marcher devant son char
D'un bataillon nombreux le fastueux rempart;
Au milieu des sujets soumis à sa puissance,
Comme il était sans crainte, il marchait sans défense;

Moreover, Œdipe will claim no divinely given privileges. He sees the plague as a reminder that a king is as mortal as any one of his subjects (I.iii):

Mais un roi n'est qu'un homme en ce commun danger,
Et tout ce qu'il peut faire est de le partager.

He admits that the throne gives him no special gift to make wise decisions (II.v):

Dans le cœur des humains les rois ne peuvent lire;
Souvent sur l'innocence ils font tomber leurs coups.

Yet, just as the people's credulity makes them easy prey for the priests, the people have an apparent need to idolize their rulers, treating them with undue respect (I.iii):

Tant qu'ils [les rois] sont sur la terre on respecte leurs lois,
On porte jusqu'aux cieus leur justice suprême;
Adorés de leur peuple, ils sont des dieux eux-même.

Voltaire's heroes reject any attempt by either princes or priests to go beyond the limits of human nature; at the same time, they

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realize that the people often expect, even encourage such action. Œdipe and Jocaste see their ultimate duty in terms of rendering service to their subjects and in giving due respect to the gods. It is an aristocratic ethic, but far more modest than the Corneillian one based on *gloire*. It demands that they stay strictly within the limits of human possibility.

Critics have had difficulty situating these passages, especially the anticlerical ones, in the context of the play's plot and characterization. In spite of the attacks against the pontiff, the oracles all come true; nor does the high priest personally deserve the vituperation heaped on him. Furthermore, there is a certain contradiction in Araspe's attitude, since in the first scene of act II, he seems to accept the people's interpretation of the oracle, while he later mocks it in the verses previously quoted⁸.

The fact that the anticlerical passages are part of a coherent ethic is one justification of their presence. They also seem more appropriate when considered along with the characterization of the gods as cruel that René Pomeau⁹ has noted in the play. This portrait begins in the play's first scene with Dimas's insinuations that the gods are to blame for Thebes's woes and culminates in Jocaste's rejection in the play's last verses of the pardon offered by the high priest in the name of the gods (v.vi):

Honorez mon bûcher; et songez à jamais
Qu'au milieu des horreurs du destin qui m'opprime,
J'ai fait rougir les dieux qui m'ont forcée au crime.

Her belief that the gods are indifferent to virtue remains constant throughout the play; it takes Œdipe five acts to be won over to it as he gradually realizes the fate the gods have prepared for him (v.iv):

⁸ cf. 'Remarques critiques sur la nouvelle tragédie d'*Œdipe*' (anon. rev.) *Mercur de France* (March 1719), 117.

⁹ *La Religion de Voltaire* (Paris 1969), pp.90-91.

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Misérable vertu, nom stérile et funeste,
Toi par qui j'ai réglé des jours que je déteste
A mon noir ascendant tu n'a pu résister . . .
Impitoyables dieux, mes crimes sont les vôtres.

In this light, it can be argued that the fact that the oracles are true increases the horror: as ministers of inhumane gods, the priests deserve attack. Unfortunately, however, they are criticized not as the servants of tyrannical masters, but as purveyors of false oracles.

This ambiguity is not the play's greatest shortcoming. For while Voltaire almost succeeds in adapting the traditional Ædipus story to fit his interpretation, the love plot involving Philoctète in the first three acts, Voltaire's own invention, is only tenuously linked to this theme. In order to transform classical tragedy into a vehicle for philosophy Voltaire would have to learn to coordinate his message with the other dramatic elements and link it to the romantic interest French audiences expected.

Brutus (1730), Voltaire's first play after his return from exile in England, marks his first attempt to present a sustained argument dramatically. Voltaire seems to have been particularly struck during his English stay by the stage's potential for presenting philosophical subjects. He does not directly deal with this problem in the *Lettre sur la tragédie* which serves as the play's preface, but it is interesting to note that the three scenes he does cite approvingly as examples of English 'action'—Antony's funeral oration in *Julius Caesar*, Renault's appeal to the conspirators in *Venice preserved*, and Cato's tears over his dead son in Addison's *Cato*—all come from tragedies with strong political overtones. All three involve what he referred to as 'action', visually oriented *tableaux* of a touching or stirring nature. Such scenes, Voltaire complains, are impossible in Paris where blind devotion to the *bienséances* and the presence of spectators on the stage prevent dramatists from using the theatrical resources available in England which allow such subjects to grip an audience with emotion. Instead, the French

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must content themselves with love plots that as often as not degenerate into *galanterie* or worse. Thus it seems that Voltaire's plea for the introduction of more English-style spectacle at the Comédie française was not just for the sake of visual delight, but because he saw it as the complement of vigorous philosophical themes. 'Action' would make ideas as interesting on the stage as the Racinian treatment of the passions.

The first two scenes of act I provide the ideological focus for the rest of the play. In them the chief issues are raised and resolved in highly formal debates before the assembled senate. The arguments used in these scenes deserve close attention since they provide the basis for the ensuing action. Scene two, with its contrast between the royalist ambassador Arons and the republican Brutus, is especially significant. Arons has been permitted to address the senators over the objections of Brutus's fellow consul Valérius-Publicola (1.i). The ambassador's arguments appeal to fidelity to the past and fear of novelty. He reminds the senate of the oath which binds Rome to Tarquin, and while admitting Tarquin's failings, compares him to a father, responsible not to his children but to god: 'Un fils ne s'arme point contre un coupable père; Il détourne les yeux, le plaint, et le révère' (1.ii). In both these cases he appeals to their blind loyalty rather than to their reason. A second tactic is to try to divide the senate from the people by playing on the senators' aristocratic prejudices and by insinuating that the overthrow of the king will unleash forces far more destructive. Only at the end of his speech does he use a more positive approach, asserting that a monarch can 'faire encor fleurir la liberté publique'.

Brutus's reply is calculated to meet the main thrust of Arons's attack head on and to go beyond it. The consul scorns any attempt to separate the senate from 'ce peuple vertueux' which it represents. In response to Arons's appeals for a return to past allegiance, he shows that it is not the Romans, but Tarquin who has broken the oath binding them together. Moreover, the establishment of republican government is not an innovation, but a return to the

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true tradition of Rome; Tarquin, he implies, represents a temporary aberration in Roman history:

Rome eut ses souverains, mais jamais absolus;
Son premier citoyen fut le grand Romulus;
Nous partagions le poids de sa grandeur suprême.
Numa, qui fit nos lois, y fut soumis lui-même.
Rome enfin, je l'avoue, a fait un mauvais choix:
Chez les Toscans, chez vous, elle a choisi ses rois. . . .,
Sous un sceptre de fer tout ce peuple abattu
A force de malheurs a repris sa vertu.

Arons's defense of the monarch was centred around the metaphor of the king as father. Brutus, on the other hand, gives his reply a more solid philosophical basis by appealing to equality before the law. This equality applies to all citizens without exception, even the king, as Brutus's example of Rome's lawgiver Numa demonstrates. Tarquin's mistake was to not realize that he was bound by his oath, just as were his subjects:

Devant ces mêmes dieux, il jura d'être juste.
De son peuple et de lui tel était le lien;
Il nous rend nos serments lorsqu'il trahit le sien;
Et dès qu'aux lois de Rome il ose être infidèle,
Rome n'est plus sujette, et lui seul est rebelle.

This principle is the basis of a fundamental contrast that is perhaps not immediately evident. As Ronald Ridgway¹⁰ points out, in eighteenth-century usage republic was often used, not in contrast to monarchy, but to despotism. And although the two kings who play a role in the action are accused of tyranny, Brutus makes it clear that he is not an enemy of kings as such; it is only necessary that the monarch obey the laws (III.vi).

¹⁰ *Voltaire and sensibility* (Montreal 1973), p.99.

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Brutus introduces a second argument which provides a firm basis in political theory for Tarquin's ouster. Each state's constitution ultimately depends on the temperament or will of its people:

chaque État a ses lois,
Qu'il tient de sa nature, ou qu'il change à son choix.
Esclaves de leurs rois, et même de leurs prêtres,
Les Toscans semblent nés pour servir sous des maîtres,
Et, de leur chaîne antique adoreteurs heureux.
Voudraient que l'univers fût esclave comme eux.

The Roman character demands a republic, while Toscan frivolity and superstition explain their submission to a tyrant. Brutus's arguments, based on equality and national character, can be justified in terms of reason and experience; Arons's, on the other hand, as exemplified by his comparison of a king to a father, tend to appeal to a vision of reality that must be accepted without question: any attempts at change will only bring disaster, for it is easy to 'renverser l'État au lieu de le changer' (I.ii). This is certainly not an undefensible position and is treated with respect in the play. There is even an area of shared values between Arons and the consul to the extent that the ambassador professes a respect for liberty. Brutus certainly does not contest Arons's contention that liberty is possible in a monarchy, that public liberty can flourish 'sous l'ombrage sacré du pouvoir monarchique' (I.ii). All in all, Arons's defense of the monarchical principle is rather moderate. Nevertheless, he does not answer Brutus's charges that Tarquin exceeded his rights as king. It will only be in the action of the play, through a study of characterization and plot, that we shall see if the ambassador is in fact using legitimate arguments in the service of a tyrant.

Besides providing an ideological introduction these two scenes play a limited role in the action. They mark the first step in Arons's attempt to win back Tarquin's throne; but when debate proves

futile, he then turns to conspiracy, seeking to involve Brutus's son Titus in a royalist counter-revolution. The ambassador's efforts are paralleled by the consul's attempts, culminating in the execution of his son, to preserve the nascent republic. Both these plot strands allow the testing of the political theories presented in the opening scenes.

Arons's projected *coup d'état* provides most of the dramatic interest and at the same time has richer ideological possibilities. He enlists the aid of Titus's confidant, Messala, a Roman disenchanted with the revolution. Messala prefers the firm rule of a monarch to a hundred petty dictators disguised as senators, who in turn 'affectent des rois les démarches altières' (I.iv). His position is thus an echo of Arons's previous warning of the danger of revolution, but seen from inside the Roman camp. Unlike Messala, who exists only in terms of his political stance, Titus has more psychological depth. The young general has just returned from leading the Roman troops to victory over the royalist forces, yet he is dissatisfied by what he considers the ingratitude of the senate which refuses to reward him with the consulate. Moreover, he is depressed because he is in love with Tullie, Tarquin's daughter, who must leave Rome for exile. Titus is interesting on both the psychological and ideological levels since, although he has served the republic, he is willing to consider royalist claims.

The discussions between Titus, Arons and Messala allow us to see the royalist arguments in a less theoretical setting. Arons attempts to turn the senate's refusal into a test case of sorts. According to the ambassador, the senators, jealous of Titus's success, will not give him his due, while a king would have amply rewarded him. Picking up the theme previously used by Messala, he asks: 'Est-il donc, entre nous, rien de plus despotique / Que l'esprit d'un Etat qui passe en république' (II.ii)? He makes more explicit his previous assertion (I.ii) that liberty can flourish under a monarch: 'Souvent la liberté, dont on se vante ailleurs, / Etale auprès d'un roi ses dons les plus flatteurs'. Unfortunately for his case, he defines more closely this liberty to be enjoyed under Porsenna:

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Aimé du souverain, de ses rayons couvert,
Vous ne servez qu'un maître, et le reste vous sert.
Ebloui d'un éclat qu'il respecte et qu'il aime,
Le vulgaire applaudit jusqu'à nos fautes même:
Nous ne redoutons rien d'un sénat trop jaloux;
Et les sévères lois se taisent devant nous.

Titus sees through the ambassador's claims, for the liberty he describes has nothing to do with the independent virtue of Brutus. It is little more than vulgar favoritism bestowed by royal whim, and Titus, faithful to his father's principles, refuses as Tarquin's 'premier esclave, être tyran sous lui'.

Often the arguments used by Messala or Arons are ones that Voltaire himself employed on other occasions. For example, Ridgway (*Propagande*, p.78) has pointed out that Messala's claim that 'sous le joug des grands, / Pour un Roi qu'elle [Rome] avait, a trouvé cent tyrans' (I.iv), echoes a statement in the *Lettres philosophiques*. Similarly, Arons's assertion that liberty is possible under a monarchy represents Voltaire's views. Yet, ultimately, the spectator's sympathy must be with the republican side. It is made quite clear that Messala's motives are selfish, just as we have seen that in spite of Arons's praise of liberty, it is a brand completely foreign to Brutus. In addition, no sign is given in the play that there are any grounds for Arons's charges that the people are unstable, as was the case in *Œdipe*; nor does the senate seem composed of power-hungry politicians as Messala alleges. Nevertheless, we must resist the temptation to completely discredit all the arguments the royalists use, just because they are employed in support of self-interest or a tyrannical master. By lending his own voice to the royalists, Voltaire assures a more evenly-matched dialogue, even if in the last analysis the royalists are defending a tyrant.

When Titus cannot be won over by flattery or arguments, Arons moves into the second phase of his attack, mobilizing Tarquin's daughter. But even this love interest is tied thematically to the play's political orientation. As befits a princess, Tullie loves

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imperiously, and as would a heroine of Corneille, she frets about her obligation to her *gloire*. When Arons delivers a letter from her father promising to make Titus his heir if he will betray the republic, she renews her efforts. She describes for Titus the brilliant future that awaits him at her father's court where he will make rather than obey the laws. Titus in turn asks her to renounce her claims to the throne and consider herself a simple Roman citizen whose dowery will be love of Rome's laws. When she refuses Titus realizes the impossibility of their situation (III.v):

Non, toute trahison est indigne et barbare.
Je sais ce qu'est un père, et ses droits absolus;
Je sais . . . que je vous aime . . . et ne me connais plus.

His reference to a father's authority shows that they are separated by birth rather than by anything that can be settled rationally. Tullie can no more escape the fact that she was born a princess than Titus that he is the son of Brutus. Their situation parallels the argument Voltaire had used in the first act to avoid making any absolute choice between the republican and monarchical forms of government while rejecting tyranny. Just as Brutus had appealed to national character to explain why the Romans, unlike the Tuscans, prefer a republic, so family background and upbringing make discussion of the issue fruitless.

Eventually, however, Titus does give in to pressure from Tullie. This creates a dramatic problem which corresponds to the difficulty of keeping a proper balance between the two forms of government—as H. C. Lancaster¹¹ has posed it, how 'to present the two leading characters, a traitor and one who condemns his son to death, without losing the sympathy of the audience'. The differences between Livy's account and Voltaire's version illustrate how sympathy was preserved for Titus. Just as Voltaire had

¹¹ *French tragedy in the time of Louis XV and Voltaire* (Baltimore 1950), i.126.

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mitigated the crime of Tarquin to retain as much sympathy as possible for the royalist cause (all mention of the rape of Lucretia is reduced to some unspecified 'crimes'), he also changes the motivation of Titus to make the young man's conduct less offensive. Instead of Livy's almost effeminate youth, who conspired simply out of nostalgia for the delights of Tarquin's court, Voltaire makes his hero a victorious general, fully aware of his obligations to the republic. Thus Titus's betrayal is not the result of thwarted ambition or of a conversion to royalism, but because of 'une passion véritablement tragique, regardée comme une faiblesse, et combattue par des remords', to quote the definition of tragic love Voltaire gives in his preface. For love is the only weakness worthy of such a hero, the only failing that can motivate his treason without losing the spectator's sympathy.

Once Voltaire has established Titus's guilt, his repentance and desire for punishment for his crime, there is little difficulty retaining sympathy for Brutus, even as the father condemns his son to death. Perhaps more of a dramatic problem for Voltaire was maintaining the spectator's interest, for it is clear from the first scenes of the play that Brutus's public responsibilities outweigh any personal ties. Because there is never any doubt what his decision will be once he learns of Titus's complicity, Voltaire delays Brutus's discovery of this fact as long as possible. Not until he has recommended that no mercy be shown any traitor no matter what his rank or family (v.ii), does he learn that first his younger son (v.iii), then Titus are implicated (v.v). This process of revealing to Brutus the full extent of the conspiracy detail by detail allows tragic irony to replace suspense.

Brutus's decision in the last act is the culmination of his role as an exemplar of the republic throughout the play. As father of his country, he sees in every event a potential lesson in republican virtue. He never misses an opportunity to teach by word or example. This attitude is an essential part of his stance in the debate scenes of the first act, and in the middle three acts, acts devoted to Titus's hesitations about joining the conspiracy, Voltaire manages

to arrange an appearance by the consul near the end of each act. These interventions can contribute little to the action since Brutus does not know that his son is being tempted, but they amplify the philosophical richness of the play. In the second act he explains to Messala his reasons for opposing his son's election to the consulship; not only is Titus too young, but the danger that 'le prix de la vertu serait héréditaire' (II.iv) must be avoided. The third act finds him giving Tullie a dissertation on the obligation of sovereigns to stay within the law. Near the end of act IV, just after Titus has finally agreed to betray Rome, his father arrives to lecture his son on his duty to the republic. The consul's presence at the end of each act balances Arons's and Messala's intrigues and insures that the spectator never forgets the norms by which Titus is to be judged.

Brutus's tendency to give a republican oration whenever possible is particularly evident in the last act. In the first scene he frees the slave who revealed the plot and makes reflections on equality: as a Roman citizen, the slave becomes the equal of the consul's own sons. In the next scene he scolds Arons for having disgraced the office of ambassador and ignored the laws of nations. He decrees that Arons's punishment shall be to watch the executions of the traitors. At this point Brutus does not yet realize just how great a lesson in Roman virtue Arons will witness, but even after he passes sentence on Titus, his son concurs that the punishment must be exemplary: 'Rome veut un grand exemple' (v.vii).

Voltaire illuminates both the political lesson and the personal tragedy by his use of fatherhood as the play's central metaphor. Even the rival political systems are presented in terms of it. The senators are, of course, called the fathers of Rome, and Brutus is hailed as the father of Roman liberty (I.i). Likewise, Arons's defence of royal prerogative is based on the monarch's position as father of his people (I.ii). To this the ambassador adds an explanation of why his own sovereign has come to the aid of the expelled Tarquin: Porsenna is the 'père des rois' (I.ii). However, Brutus makes it clear that there is an essential difference between the

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paternal role of the senators and that of a king. The highest office in Rome must not be allowed to become hereditary: 'Qui naquit dans le pourpre, en est rarement digne' (II.iv). Virtue, not birth should be the chief prerequisite for the consulate. In this way Voltaire links the political discussion to the personal dilemmas of the chief characters. Titus and Tullie must choose between their love and their fathers; Brutus, too, sees his conflict in terms of his public and family roles: 'De l'Etat et de toi [Titus], je sens que je suis père' (IV.iv). The contrast is between two fathers of their peoples: Tarquin, whose crimes against his subjects lead to his exile, and Brutus, who sacrifices his only son to the republic.

In conclusion, we have seen that Voltaire succeeded in presenting philosophical themes in a gripping way, even if his use of English spectacle is somewhat timid. It is not the crowd scenes in the first and last acts when the senators in their red togas file on stage that make the political discussion dramatic, but his ability to provide a stimulating exchange of ideas and to embody this exchange in the characterization and plot. Voltaire has developed a dramatic formula which allowed him to focus first on the issues he hoped to raise, and then on the situation of his protagonists. The debate between Arons and Brutus establishes a theoretical framework for the ensuing action. Arons's attempt to win over Titus, who is torn between ambition, love for Tullie and patriotism, to the royalist cause brings the action down to a psychological level. The focus becomes more personal as interest shifts to the dilemma of this pair of youthful lovers, caught between the rival camps of their elders, which provides the *nœud* of the plot.

The characterization is likewise better calculated to serve the presentation of ideas than in *Œdipe*. Brutus unites political acumen with Roman austerity and respect for law. An accomplished courtier like Arons, who combines aristocratic grace with a mastery of the art of intrigue, is perhaps more representative of the spirit of monarchy than even his royal master would be. Two secondary figures are also conceived in terms of their political position. Publicola's extreme hatred of kings is meant to contrast

with Brutus's more moderate position, while Messala represents those self-serving Romans who are jealous of the new rulers. Of the two lovers, only Titus is treated with any depth. Tullie's concern for her *gloire* is appropriate for a princess, but seems rather mechanical. Unlike Titus, she never wavers in her support for her father's cause. This strength of character makes her tend to overshadow Titus, whose hesitations are more interesting psychologically. Voltaire realized this problem, and in his 1738 version of the play he completely eliminated her from the second act and reduced her role in the fourth so that the focus remains clearly on Titus in the middle three acts. The problem is not simply one of characterization, however; it also leads one to question the suitability of a love plot to mediate a political conflict. Discussion of philosophic issues does not mix well with love making, and key decisions with public consequences are motivated by essentially private concerns. In this particular case, where Voltaire wished to attack tyranny, not the monarchical principle, Titus's tragic passion is perhaps an appropriate solution.

If Tullie had been the weak point of *Brutus's* construction, *Alzire* is centred around its heroine. This radical shift was made possible by the birth in *Zaïre* (1732) of the heroine of sensibility, whose dilemma draws tears of sympathy from the spectators. *Zaïre*, of course, is not without its own message of religious tolerance, but as T. E. D. Braun¹² has shown in a careful comparison of the play to *Alzire*, this lesson is extraneous to the central conflict. 'Zaïre is not torn between love and religion so much as between love for Orosmane and duty towards Lusignan and Nérestan', who incidentally represent Christianity. In *Alzire*, acted in 1736, Voltaire tried to obtain the same box-office appeal *Zaïre* had received by placing the love plot at the centre of the play, but at the same time he hoped to make his philosophic concerns a

¹² T. E. D. Braun, 'Subject, substance and structure in *Zaïre* and *Alzire*', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* (1972) lxxxvii.183.

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more integral part of the structure. As we shall see, his success depended on his ability to amplify the religious and political implications of the love interest.

To a great extent the intrigue is propelled by love. In fact, the action of *Alzire* seems to revolve around a single romantic conflict—the dilemma of its heroine who is caught between her loyalty to the lover she thought dead, and her fidelity to her marriage vow to a man she cannot love. The confrontation of these three characters in act III.v is the *scène à faire* of the play. In an earlier tragedy, *Adélaïde de Guesclin* (1734), Voltaire had threatened his heroine with marriage to a man she could not love, but had saved her at the last moment. In *Alzire*, he not only marries her to such a man, but has her true lover, to whom she had been engaged, appear immediately after the ceremony to accuse her husband of having tortured him. Voltaire does not even stop there. For if Zamore incarnates fidelity to the past and Guzman Spanish arrogance, Alzire's absolute sincerity compels her to declare her continued love for her husband's rival. Hers is indeed an untenable position. Too sincere to love Guzman, yet too faithful to her wedding vow to flee with Zamore, death is the only solution to her dilemma. She successively asks Zamore (III.iv), Guzman (III.v) and Alvarez (III.vii) to slay her. But of course even though a death is necessary to break out of the impasse, it is not necessarily hers that is required. It is when this is realized by the other characters that the play's action can begin; for as Henri Lion (p.109) noted the real action of *Alzire* does not begin until the end of act III. Guzman has every intention of removing this offence to his honour by executing the Indian prince, but is forestalled by Zamore who manages to strike down his captor. Guzman's death would provide a resolution to the basic situation. Thus, conventional romantic motivation can account for the principal direction of the action; yet the weakness of such an analysis is that it reduces the first two acts to extended exposition. In the first we merely learn of the transfer of power from Alvarez to his son and Alzire's consent to marry Guzman, while the second act consists of two

recognition scenes. Nor does this analysis based on love explain Guzman's conversion *in extremis*. Finally it leaves Alvarez little more than the glorified confidant of his son.

If the love interest can account for only half of the play, it is because Alzire's dilemma serves as an example of a larger conflict of political and religious values. The romantic concerns of the characters in the love triangle are given wider implications by issues raised in the early acts of the play. Voltaire arranges his exposition so that the spectator is not even aware of Guzman's amatory interests for well over one hundred lines into the first scene, which begins as a discussion of the method of governing a conquered nation. Guzman and Alvarez make it clear that the play's theme is 'the relations between an occupying power and a subject people'¹³. More precisely, the problem the play examines is how to win over the defeated race and accomplish a merger of the two parties. Guzman sees the Peruvians as a proud rebellious people, who can be controlled only by the constant threat of repression. Honour suffices to make a Castilian do his duty, but only fear can keep the barbarian population in their place (I.i):

Je sais qu'aux Castellans il suffit de l'honneur,
 Qu'à servir sans murmure ils mettent leur grandeur:
 Mais le reste du monde, esclave de la crainte,
 A besoin qu'on l'opprime, et sert avec contrainte.

He cites as proof, with the self-satisfaction of one who considers himself a member of a higher religion, the fact that the Indian gods could only be appeased by human sacrifice. For just as he sees the need to use military force to maintain political order, Guzman asserts that the Indians should be compelled to adopt the Spaniards' religion:

Commandons aux cœurs même, et forçons les esprits. . . .
 Je veux que ces mortels, esclaves de ma loi,
 Tremblent sous un seul Dieu comme sous un seul roi.

¹³ Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (London &c. 1969), p.188.

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Alvarez refuses to accept both his son's evaluation of the Peruvian character and his methods. It is the Spaniards rather than the natives who are the barbarians, for out of greed and cruelty the Europeans have been false to their obligations as Christians and damaged their reputation. Alvarez sees the Indians as a simple, though fierce people, who are as capable of *grandeur d'âme* as the Spaniards. In fact, the Spanish, who have been chosen by God to convert the Indians, have only succeeded in increasing their ferocity. The battle now is for the hearts of the vanquished, and it is a battle which can only be won, Alvarez insists, by imitating the god of pardon the Christians preach:

Mais les cœurs opprimés ne sont jamais soumis.
J'en ai gagné plus d'un, je n'ai forcé personne;
Et le vrai Dieu, mon fils, est un Dieu qui pardonne.

It is only after the spectator has recognized the characters as representatives of opposing policies that personal concerns are introduced. If the heart is to be the battleground, Alzire's comes to stand for her people's. Guzman is irritated by her obstinancy, akin to the rebellious spirit of the Peruvians, and just as in politics and religion, he would use force to obtain the marriage. For Alvarez, 'De tout ce nouveau monde Alzire est le modèle' (I.i). He sees the union not in terms of the satisfaction of personal conquest as he does his son, but as the beginning of a new era of harmony between the two races. Yet notwithstanding his previous objections to forced conversions, Alvarez is willing to have Montèze use his paternal authority on his daughter to obtain Alzire's consent.

In this first discussion even the advocate of the Peruvians accepts the Spaniards' right to impose their values on the defeated. In the second extended discussion scene, Voltaire has two Indians confront the problem (II.iv). It is a much tenser scene because Zamore, who must discover Alzire's whereabouts if he is to prevent the impending wedding, allows himself to be diverted into a dis-

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cussion of the merits of European and American cultures. His seeming ineptitude allows the plot to move forward while providing the necessary complement to the scene between Guzman and his father. Zamore echoes Alvarez's portrayal of the Spaniards as barbarous, citing his own torture at the hands of Guzman. He sees the victors' success as due more to the novelty of their weapons than to their superior courage. Indian virtue combined with a knowledge of the new methods of warfare will make the revolt he hopes to lead successful. Montèze's response is firmly practical, but at the same time grounded in principle. First of all he sees the futility of further struggle: 'L'univers a cédé; cédon, mon cher Zamore'. His is not just passive acceptance, but an enthusiastic embrace of a new way of life which has divine sanction:

Il en est que le ciel guida dans cet empire,
Moins pour nous conquérir qu'afin de nous instruire;
Qui nous ont apporté de nouvelles vertus,
Des secrets immortels, et des arts inconnus,
La science de l'homme, un grand exemple à suivre,
Enfin l'art d'être heureux, de penser, et de vivre.

The technical superiority he describes is what makes Guzman's show of force possible. The art of happiness corresponds, of course, to Alvarez's enlightened ideals. Montèze's reference to his new god only provokes Zamore's outrage, for Christianity to him means Guzman's use of religion to dominate. Finally, it becomes clear at the end of the scene that for Zamore, like Guzman, Alzire will be a test case.

The frequent recourse in these scenes to arguments based on example should be noted. Alvarez refers to the necessity of imitating the Christian god of pardon, while his son cites the blood-thirsty gods of the Incas in support of his contention that the Indians are cruel and barbaric. Likewise the example of man to man is stressed. Alvarez offers the example of the Indian who saved his life as proof of the Indians' native virtue. Montèze speaks

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of 'un grand exemple à suivre', probably Alvarez's virtue, and Zamore uses the torture inflicted by the Spanish as illustration of their wickedness. That this line of argumentation is not accidental will become clear shortly when the play's numerous conversions are treated.

Characterization, as well as the discussion scenes, is used to amplify the love interest. The personality traits of each character necessary for their role in the love plot are amplified so that each represents a distinct attitude toward the merger of the two cultures. The rivals for Alzire's hand both tend toward extremism for neither will admit that there is any virtue in the other side. Guzman's pride in dealing with Alzire corresponds to his cultural arrogance, his willingness to impose his values by force. Christianity for him is only one means of controlling the native population for his own benefit. Zamore's appeals to Alzire's fidelity are an indication of his policy of vengeance. He looks back to the past but without ever discussing the re-establishment of the old order, only the destruction of the new. The two fathers, a generation away from the love triangle, represent more conciliatory positions. Because Alvarez stands as a father in relation to the other characters (Guzman is his natural son, Alzire and Montèze his godchildren, and he promises to act as a father to Zamore), he functions as an arbitrator, seeking moderation from all parties. Montèze's role in the love plot is more crucial since Alzire will not marry Guzman unless her father orders it, and it is because of this that his ideological role seems distasteful to many. Is his acceptance of Christianity a base collaboration founded on hopes of personal gain? Braun (p.184) sees in his role Voltaire's impatience with those who accept uncritically their beliefs, the attitude of the majority of French Catholics at the time. Yet we have seen that even if Montèze can be accused of being self-serving, he defends his new faith well against Zamore.

Voltaire puts the outspoken sincerity Alzire shows in her dealings with Zamore and Guzman to work in the service of his enlightened ideals. This trait, so important in the love plot, also

justifies the repeated doubts expressed by this recent convert, who imperfectly understands her new religion, doubts which are used to criticize Christianity indirectly. She complains that her new god has not brought her the promised inner peace (I.iv); she wonders aloud if the Christian god is merely a local deity like her old Incan ones (IV.v); and she questions the Christian prohibition of suicide (V.iii). The outward sign of her virtue is her *gloire*, which she is careful to contrast with the Castilian honour Guzman had vaunted, but which is only a concern for reputation. Her own sense of integrity is emphasized at the expense of sectarian matters in her refusal to break her marriage vow. Montèze had previously used as an excuse for breaking his pledge to marry Alzire to Zamore the fact that he no longer believed in the pagan gods who had witnessed the oath. But Alzire insists that her word, not the gods, is the guarantor of her pledge (IV.iv). Thus, in spite of her profession of faith in Christianity, she stands somewhat detached from organized religion as it appears in the play.

It might seem strange that regardless of the care Voltaire took to endow his characters with distinct points of view, and to manœuvre them into exchanges of views, these discussions do little to influence the plot directly. No change of direction in the action results from these clashes. No character is persuaded to change his stance as a result of them. Alvarez does win the release of the captives in the first scene, but this has nothing to do with the arguments he uses; rather Guzman yields to his father's wishes, simply because Alvarez is his father: 'Quand vous priez un fils, seigneur, vous commandez' (I.i). Alzire is persuaded to marry Guzman by the same means. If this is a discussion play, it is odd that no one in it is convinced by rational discourse¹⁴.

Change does occur, but it is conversion through example. So important is this principle that a veritable chain of conversions can be traced through the play culminating in the denouement. In the first scene of the play Alvarez describes how an unknown Indian,

¹⁴ Merle Perkins stresses the innovative nature of the discussion scenes in

'Dryden's The Indian emperor and Voltaire's Alzire', *CL* (1957), ix.234-37.

who later proves to be Zamore, had rescued him from death two years before. It was this deed which made him recognize that the Peruvians shared the same humanity as the Spanish and were capable of the same virtues. This example of Indian charity awoke in him the spirit of brotherhood and led him to dedicate himself to their aid; his son, however, is not sufficiently touched by the story to be converted himself. Later Alvarez is responsible for the conversion of Montèze and his daughter to Christianity. Again it is the example of virtue that accounts for the change. Montèze refers to Alvarez's 'grand exemple à suivre' in his discussion with Zamore, but the Indian youth, like Guzman, remains unconverted. The example of a single worthy Christian is not edifying enough, since most of the Spanish resemble Guzman.

Only at the denouement are these two touched. But before Guzman's spectacular conversion in the last scene, Zamore is called upon to make a different one. Indeed, the two scenes are closely related. La Harpe¹⁵ writes that they were conceived as a unit by Voltaire: 'M. de *Voltaire* a souvent raconté qu'il avait été fort longtemps sans pouvoir trouver un dénouement pour *Alzire* dont il fût content. Tout le monde d'ailleurs trouvait son plan impraticable. Censuré de tous côtés, et ne trouvant point de cinquième acte, il était prêt à se rebuter, lorsqu'une nuit, l'idée du pardon de Guzman, et celle du changement de religion proposé à Zamore, lui vinrent à la fois. Il se leva sur-le-champ et ne quitta point l'ouvrage qu'il ne fût achevé'.

The council has condemned Alzire and Zamore to death. Alvarez, hoping to save the lovers, reminds Zamore of the Spanish law which promised pardon to any pagan who converts. He sees Zamore as worthy of 'le Dieu qui nous apprit lui-même à pardonner' (v.v). But Zamore sees only the god of Guzman in Christianity; moreover, he maintains that to accept the new religion only to save his life would be shameful. He is quickly seconded by Alzire in the name of integrity (v.v):

¹⁵ *Commentaire sur le théâtre de Voltaire* (Paris 1814), p.168.

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Mais renoncer aux dieux que l'on croit dans son cœur,
C'est le crime d'un lâche, et non pas une erreur:
C'est trahir à la fois, sous un masque hypocrite,
Et le Dieu qu'on préfère, et le Dieu que l'on quitte.

Thus Alzire's appeal to sincerity and the example of Zamore's courage place the pair in a heroic light, immediately before the final scene that is to be essentially Guzman's.

Instead of confirming the death sentence as expected, Guzman confesses that he himself has been guilty of enormous crimes which this death alone cannot expiate (v. vii):

J'ai fait, jusqu'au moment qui me plonge au cercueil,
Gémir l'humanité du poids de mon orgueil.
Le ciel venge la terre: il est juste; et ma vie
Ne peut payer le sang dont ma main s'est rougie.
Le bonheur m'aveugla, la mort m'a détrompé.
Je pardonne à la main par qui Dieu m'a frappé.

His confession, and even more so, his pardon of Zamore, mark his conversion to the more authentic form of Christianity represented by his father. Like his father, Guzman sees in it the means of reconciling the Spanish and the Peruvians. It is important to note at the same time that he in no way gives up his claim to Spanish superiority:

Instruisez l'Amérique; apprenez à ses rois
Que les chrétiens sont nés pour leur donner des lois.

His previous military victories had been due to the technological advantages of Europe; now, on his deathbed, he realizes that if he is to win over Zamore and his people, it must be by putting into practice the higher moral law of the Europeans which teaches forgiveness of injuries. Until this point both he, as an unworthy Christian, and Zamore, as a pagan, had been caught up in a spirit

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of vendetta. Guzman's willingness to forgive breaks definitely that cycle of vengeance. For although Zamore hesitates to become a Christian in name, he too renounces revenge: 'Honteux d'être vengé, je t'aime et t'admire'. Vengeance henceforth will be left Alvarez states 'Aux volontés d'un Dieu qui frappe et qui pardonne'.

Any search to pinpoint a motive at the psychological level for Guzman's conversion can only end in failure. For all of the play's conversions are unmotivated. Example is what counts, and Guzman has been immersed in it. His decision to pardon Zamore shows that he has also finally realized the potency of example. He renounces his policy of using physical force to solve all problems. Note that the attempt to extort a conversion from Zamore in the previous scene was only the latest instance. Force he still uses—'je te veux forcer à me chérir' he says to Zamore, but it is the force of example. His father had begged him to adopt this method from the first: 'Et n'apprendrez-vous point à conquérir des cœurs' (IV.i). He now joins the other characters in the use of the rhetoric of the heart which does not depend so much on rational proofs, as in *Brutus*, as on the impact of one character's personality on another.

The conversions are possible, not because all the characters are reasonable, but because they are *sensible*, and thus basically good. Even Guzman, heartless as he might seem, is potentially *sensible*: witness his respect for his father. Tears of compassion are the sign of this goodness, as Alvarez explains to Zamore: 'Ne cache point tes pleurs, cesse de t'en défendre; / C'est de l'humanité la marque la plus tendre' (II.ii). Conversion occurs when this latent goodness is tapped by some example of virtue. Evil, necessary of course to generate dramatic conflict, is thus external to character; it is the result of prejudice, of error of judgment, or of lack of knowledge. Hence the importance of keeping the characters at least in partial ignorance of their true situation. Voltaire manipulates their ignorance, often at the expense of *vraisemblance*, to expand the meagre basic situation by the use of recognition scenes and suspense.

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The advance Voltaire made in *Alzire* is thus its union of romantic interest and Voltaire's philosophic goals. In *Œdipe* Voltaire had not been quite able to attach the Philoctète episode to the main plot, much less to the play's ideological context. Titus's love for Tullie in *Brutus* was handled with more skill, but it is nonetheless subordinate to the tragedy's principal action: Titus's hesitations are necessary only so that his father can display his exemplary virtue in condemning his son. Voltaire's innovation in *Alzire* was to centre the plot around a dilemma involving romantic interest, much as he had done in *Zaïre*, but all the while limiting this love-centred action as much as possible. As has been seen, this action does not really begin until the third act, and once under way moves swiftly to its logical conclusion, the death of one of the rivals. Yet at the same time this compressed action is amplified by giving it religious and political overtones. From this point of view the play's action is not just the personal matter of Alzire's marriage to Guzman, but the union of two peoples for which the wedding is only a symbol. Having reduced the romantic action, Voltaire expands his subject by the introduction of characters such as Alvarez, whose function is primarily to provoke discussion. Guzman's conversion provides an apparent resolution to the ideological conflicts while assuring a happy ending for the love plot.

This success is nevertheless blunted by a certain ambiguity in the play's thrust. One source is the equivocal use of Christianity. Voltaire wrote to Argental, 'C'est une pièce fort crétienne qui pourra me réconcilier avec quelques dévots' (Best.D804). Yet it could only be the undiscerning Christian who would identify the deistic faith of Alzire and Alvarez, devoid of dogma and ceremonies and based on the humanity Voltaire recommends in the preface, with orthodox catholicism. Moreover, the whole denouement, founded on the renunciation of violence in favour of pardon, seems uncharacteristically naive for Voltaire. M. L. Perkins¹⁶ has

¹⁶ 'The Documentation of Voltaire's *Alzire*', *MLQ* (1943), iv.433-436.

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pointed out the care Voltaire took in documenting this play to present a faithful portrait of Indian culture, but the reconciliation allowing the Incan prince to rule over his people is patently unhistorical. As Voltaire himself was to put it so well in the eleventh dialogue of *L'ABC* (1762), 'Je ne connais aucun conquérant qui soit venu l'épée dans une main et un code dans l'autre; ils n'ont fait les lois qu'après la victoire, c'est-à-dire après la rapine; et ces lois, ils les ont faites précisément pour soutenir leur tyrannie'.

Only a few years separate *Alzire* from *Mahomet*, which was conceived in 1739 although not performed until 1741, but the change of tone is tremendous. Voltaire's American tragedy was animated by the spirit of *bienfaisance*, 'ce sentiment généreux, cette humanité, cette grandeur d'âme qui fait le bien et qui pardonne le mal'. *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet* is the reverse of this portrait. It is dominated, not by reconciliation, but by intransigence, by the deceit and cruelty engendered by fanaticism; *Mahomet* is thus a *pièce de combat*, an attack against 'cette espèce d'imposture qui met en œuvre à la fois l'hipocrisie des uns, et la fureur des autres' (Best.D2386).

This more militant tone required a new principle of construction. Voltaire found it in the introduction of a thoroughly evil villain, a rarity in his theatre. At the same time, he did not abandon the formula which had served him so well in *Brutus* and *Alzire*. The pair of young lovers caught between the rival camps of their elders and the dilemma of a hero of sensibility still have key roles, but they are adapted to his innovation. In a plot based on a dilemma like that of *Alzire*, where all the characters are virtuous at heart, the stalemate can only be resolved by a sudden burst of passion, such as prompts Zamore to assassinate Guzman. But a moral monster like Mahomet can hatch intrigues and manipulate his fellow characters in a way less wicked ones cannot. Intrigue had of course played an important role as a sub-plot in *Brutus*; yet because Arons is ultimately responsible, his conspiracy is not nearly as machiavellian as Mahomet's scheme to gain control of Mecca. A

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second consequence of the presentation of a villain is the polarization of the other characters. In *Brutus*, both the ambassador and the consul hold defensible positions, and in *Alzire* the five principal characters represent a wide spectrum of opinion. In *Mahomet*, however, there is an atmosphere of conflicting absolutes with no room for honest differences of views or for compromise. One must be either for or against the prophet, and eventually even the spectator is called upon to take sides.

In fact, the play's action, which centres around Mahomet's seizure of power in Mecca by means of the murder of the city's sheriff Zopire and a false miracle, can be seen as a series of appeals by the prophet to side with him. The first two acts are devoted to an attempt to convince Zopire to align himself with Mahomet. When Zopire refuses, Mahomet decides that this obstacle must be removed by assassination. But even the sheriff's murder necessitates a persuasive effort since the two assassins Mahomet has chosen must be encouraged to perform the deed. Moreover, the murder itself is destined by the prophet as proof to Mecca's citizens that god favours him instead of Zopire. In the last act, this struggle for the people's allegiance continues. The assassins, who turn out to be Zopire's long-lost children, and who have by now learned their identity, reveal Mahomet's treachery to the assembled people. But before the citizens can be enlightened, Séide falls dead from a poison Mahomet had had secretly administered. The prophet's hold on the city is confirmed by this false miracle, proof in the peoples' eyes of divine protection for the new faith. Only Palmire's suicide mars his triumph. Yet, even though the inhabitants of Mecca have been won over, the spectators' reaction is quite the contrary. They reject the man and his methods. Just how Voltaire creates this revulsion against Mahomet becomes clear when one realizes the extent to which thought, characterization and plot have been shaped to this end.

The core of the first two acts is Zopire's series of discussion scenes culminating in his confrontation with Mahomet. It is here that Voltaire provides arguments for and against the prophet.

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For like *Tartuffe*, Mahomet appears only after the audience has been given the chance to appraise his followers. The scenes are arranged for a crescendo effect. In the first (1.1) Phanor, Zopire's confidant, argues for a more flexible policy toward Mahomet; in the next scenes Zopire has interviews with Palmire, a zealous disciple, and with Omar. It is especially interesting to compare the presentation of the claims of the new religion by both Omar and Mahomet, and their refutation by the sheriff. Omar tries initially to show that his faith is based on humanitarian principles of pardon and peace: 'Je veux te pardonner. . . . Et j'apporte la paix qu'il [Mahomet] daigne proposer (1.iv)'. In the same vein, later in the scene, he insists that men are at birth all equal; only virtue or merit, not riches or ancestry, distinguishes them. This is a preamble to a panegyric of Mahomet as a *grand homme*, a sort of invincible superman, whose success is due entirely to his own prowess. Zopire's technique is to deflate this portrait by pointing to the sordid reality it conceals: 'Vois l'homme en Mahomet'. He begins with a contrast between Mahomet's present glory and his humble origins as a camel driver:

Ne rougissez-vous point de servir un tel maître?
Ne l'avez-vous pas vu, sans honneur et sans biens,
Ramper au dernier rang des derniers citoyens?
Qu'alors il était loin de tant de renommée.

It is this none too subtle appeal to Omar's own aristocratic background which elicits Omar's declaration of human equality. Next Zopire traces the history of Mahomet's rise to power to prove that tyranny and vengeance are the principles on which the prophet's empire is founded. Zopire is so skilful a debater that he manoeuvres Omar into revealing the expediency behind the high-sounding moral values he invokes. This brief exchange is typical:

OMAR

Pense et parle en ministre; agis, traite avec moi
Comme avec l'envoyé d'un grand homme et d'un roi.

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ZOPIRE

Qui l'a fait roi? qui l'a couronné?

OMAR

La victoire.

It becomes increasingly clear that Omar is an opportunist rather than a fanatic, interested only in sharing his master's success. This is confirmed by his final 'argument': he offers wealth and power if only the sheriff will cooperate.

Mahomet uses the same series of proofs: appealing to moral principles, citing historical precedent but ending with an appeal to self-interest. The difference is his use of what is known in formal rhetoric as the ethical proof—that is, a proof that relies on the speaker's character to establish credibility and confidence. Throughout his interview with Zopire, Omar maintained the stance of an idealistic follower of the prophet. Mahomet, on the other hand, realizes that at least the appearance of sincerity will be his best tactic: 'Mais je te parle en homme, et sans rien déguiser' (II.v). Instead of hiding behind claims of a divine mission, he will reveal the inner-workings of his movement: 'Je me sens assez grand pour ne pas t'abuser'. Thus he freely admits his ambition, but all the while making it clear that it is no ordinary ambition. The moment of glory of the Arab people is at hand. Their impending greatness depends only on the adoption of his cult. He confesses openly that they must be deceived, but his religion alone can unite them; it alone can provide the zeal to make them courageous. His faith 'élève l'âme et la rend intrépide. / Ma loi fait des héros'. 'Dis plutôt des brigands', retorts Zopire, cutting through this mixture of totalitarian double-talk and candor. Under the sheriff's persistent attacks, the last vestiges of Mahomet's mask fall, and it is clear that expediency and self-interest are his twin ideals. Thus his final attempt to win over Zopire is the revelation that he controls the destiny of the sheriff's lost children. But even to save his children,

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Zopire will have nothing to do with Mahomet. There is no common ground, even here, from which to bargain declares Zopire, 'L'intérêt est ton dieu, le mien est l'ésquité'.

His refusal shifts the battleground to Palmire and Séide. Although fervent sectaries of the prophet, their instinctive revulsion to murder must be overcome before they can be counted on to kill the sheriff. With them, Mahomet makes no pretense of appealing to reason; instead, his strategy is to emphasize the blind faith his followers owe him: 'Quiconque ose penser, n'est pas né pour me croire. / Obéir en silence est votre seule gloire' (III.vi). He invests the murder with religious significance by presenting it as an act of divine vengeance. Similarly, recalling that Mecca is Abraham's birthplace, he compares the assassination to the patriarch's sacrifice of Isaac:

Ibrahim, dont le bras docile à l'Eternel,
Traîna son fils unique aux marches de l'autel,
Etouffant pour son dieu les cris de la nature.
Et quand ce dieu par vous veut venger son injure,
Quand je demande un sang à lui seul adressé,
Quand Dieu vous a choisi, vous avez balancé!

Just as Abraham's act of obedience was necessary if he was to become the father of the Jewish people, so such an act of faith is required to establish the new cult. Yet Séide's doubts, before he finally gives in to Mahomet, show that he is at least able to formulate objections against the prophet's arguments: 'Un mortel venger Dieu!' sums up Voltaire's often expressed belief that god needs no human help to avenge affronts against his dignity. 'Ce dieu . . . va d'un combat illustre honorer mon courage' contrasts with the treacherous nature of Mahomet's scheme. But Séide expresses these ideas only as doubts, which Mahomet's appeals to authority easily extinguish, rather than with the cutting force his father would have given them, because his intellectual faculties are short-circuited by fanaticism.

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This blockage of the young enthusiast's head is paralleled by a blockage of his heart, as is shown in a subsequent scene (III.viii). He is alone for the first time with Zopire, who hopes to break Mahomet's grip. The sheriff comes closer to success here than he had with Palmire in I.ii, because he does not rely primarily on rational attacks against the youth's faith. He appeals to Séide's heart by emphasizing his own good will, sensibility and concern for Séide's welfare. Both feel a mysterious sympathy: the audience knows that the pair should be able to communicate with their hearts, but they are held back by Séide's fanaticism. In fact, the father and son are often not even able to address each other directly, but lapse into long asides:

Hélas! plus je lui parle, et plus il m'intéresse?
Son âge, sa candeur, ont surpris ma tendresse.
Se peut-il qu'un soldat de ce monstre imposteur
Ait trouvé malgré lui le chemin de mon cœur?

A recognition scene seems imminent as the two hearts grope toward each other until Omar interrupts suddenly to spirit Séide away.

The arguments found in these scenes illustrate well the use Voltaire makes of thought throughout the play. First, just as in *Brutus* and *Alzire* no character's position is changed in such scenes. Instead, they serve to define the ideological conflict for the spectator, and their analysis confirms what discussion of the play's action leads one to suspect: the problem of religious fanaticism is treated in a political context. At issue is political legitimacy versus usurpation and the various methods, including the exploitation of religious enthusiasm, an upstart can use to seize power. Finally, the frequency with which the speakers resort to arguments based on their own character or their opponents' underscores the fact that the conflict is much less theoretical than it was in *Brutus* or even *Alzire*. Instead it centres around the evaluation of the personality of Mahomet.

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Certainly Voltaire does nothing to complicate the task for the spectator. Mahomet's character is sharply drawn and fully exposed. By endowing him with a cynical penchant for self-revelation, Voltaire allows the prophet to define himself in his scenes with Omar and Zopire: 'Je suis ambitieux' (II.v), he admits to Zopire. 'Ah, connais mes fureurs et toutes mes faiblesses' (II.iv), he declares to his lieutenant when he confides his love for Palmire. Everything in Mahomet's path must be submitted to his will to power. His need to dominate is seen not just in his manipulation of his followers' enthusiasm, but also in his attitude toward love and natural instinct. He declares to Omar that his passion 'est égale aux fureurs de mon ambition' (II.iv), but his reaction to Palmire's death proves that he is no Orosmane. As Jack Vrooman notes, (p.137) the last lines of the play show a Mahomet who will 'destroy whatever human feelings he may have' to rule over his own heart and others. All this is not to say that the prophet does not exercise a certain fascination. The audience is perhaps not completely insensible to the magnetism his courage, charisma and epic vision exert on his disciples. But because the spectator sees the whole Mahomet, he feels not admiration but revulsion.

Zopire's character is designed to highlight the prophet's. The sheriff's passion for truth and justice strips away the veneer of Mahomet's noble sounding principles to lay bare the expediency which is the source of his success. But Zopire's primary trait is intransigence. By resisting Mahomet at every step, Zopire forces him to reveal his hand. Yet at the same time one wonders if the intensity of Zopire's hatred for the prophet is not at least in part responsible for his downfall. If the sheriff had only been a little more conciliatory with Palmire in his first interview with her, he might have won her over. Likewise, his confidence in the justice of his own cause leads him to underestimate Mahomet's capacity for evil. It is also important to note that even a figure of the importance of the sheriff has been conceived in terms of Mahomet. Zopire has no independent programme of his own; nor does he illustrate every aspect of Voltaire's idea of the perfect ruler. Rather his piety,

uprightness and sensibility have been chosen to contrast with Mahomet's vices.

If Zopire is meant as a foil for the prophet, his children provide an anatomy of fanaticism. Their sensibility is a sign of their fundamental goodness, but just as their intelligence is blocked by prejudice, their hearts are blocked by the upbringing they have received in Mahomet's camps. Palmire puts it succinctly, 'Mahomet a formé mes premiers sentiments (i.ii)'. For fanaticism is not solely an intellectual disorder. Omar's description of the perfect fanatic makes clear that both the head and heart are involved (II.vi):

Il faut un cœur plus simple, aveugle avec courage,
Un esprit amoureux de son propre esclavage.

It is a 'fureur', a 'rage' that invades the whole personality, cutting the fanatic off from all who are not infected by the same enthusiasm¹⁷. Thus Séide's hesitations, rather than being a dramatic flaw, as Flaubert¹⁸ saw them, allow Voltaire to portray the mechanism of fanaticism as the two lovers waver between natural instinct and indoctrination.

One other important actor remains to be discussed. Not Omar, the opportunistic follower, who is for the most part merely an extension of his master, but the people of Mecca. The principal characters refer frequently throughout all five acts to the people's presence in the background, and when the citizens finally appear on stage in the last act, it is their credulity which makes possible Mahomet's victory. Surprisingly enough, both sides evaluate the

¹⁷ compare this discussion of 'Fanatisme' in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*: 'Le fanatisme est à la superstition ce que le transport est à la fièvre, ce que la rage est à la colère . . . Lorsqu'une fois le fanatisme a gangrené un cerveau, la maladie est presque incurable . . . Il n'y a d'autre remède à cette maladie que l'esprit philosophique'.

¹⁸ 'Au lieu de cette hésitation de Séide, de cette mollesse de caractère qui lui fait faire des réflexions contraires à sa passion et tenir les raisonnements que tiendrait son adversaire, si on le voyait calme, mystique, radieux, avec cette douceur qui suit les gdes résolutions'; Gustave Flaubert, *Le Théâtre de Voltaire*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Studies on Voltaire, I-li: 1967), i.168.

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people similarly. Both realize that the populace is fickle, and that in its eagerness for peace it can be easily swayed. Both show a certain scorn of the people's weakness. They differ, however, in their response. Zopire has a paternalistic attitude based on *noblesse oblige*. On the other hand, Mahomet, perhaps because of his own popular origins which are emphasized in the play, knows how to manipulate them to his own advantage. The prophet's estimation seems more correct: while the children of the aristocratic Zopire ultimately shake off their fanaticism, the people, leaderless after the death of the sheriff, fall prey to Mahomet's claims.

But the spectator, because the plot provides him with the complete pattern of events, has an entirely different response. The first two acts may do little to advance the action, but they do provide the essential discussion scenes in which the prophet's pretensions are unmasked. Even though these debates are stalemates as far as the characters in the play are concerned, the spectator has the satisfaction of seeing the prophet's arguments energetically and convincingly repulsed. When the focus shifts in the third act to the ensuing murder, pathos, then horror dominate. Voltaire varies the tempo here to heighten this emotional response. He increases the spectator's anguish in the fourth act by prolonging Séide's hesitations before the murder and his disarray after it. The pace speeds up in the last act where horror gives way to indignation at the sight of Mahomet's false miracle. Séide and Palmire may be dead, but their determined revolt against fanaticism, the legacy of their father, becomes the spectator's. Likewise, the hidden family ties which make the crime a parricide and provide the touching recognition scenes were certainly meant by Voltaire to increase the anguish. Finally, the plot's complications contribute greatly to maintaining this emotional intensity throughout the last three acts. The feverish pitch of the fifth act where reversal follows reversal is symptomatic of the tension between Mahomet and Zopire underpinning the whole play. Although the advantage is always slightly in the prophet's favour, his opponents are usually close enough to checking him to sustain suspense. Realizing how little

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separates Zopire from a timely reunion with his children, the spectator sympathizes with them all the more. Moreover, this suspense, by mitigating the inevitability of Mahomet's victory, encourages a reaction of indignation rather than resignation in response to the bleak denouement. Thus the plot, with its pair of youthful lovers wavering between the rival camps of their elders, allows both an intellectual and an emotional demonstration of the dangers of fanaticism.

Mahomet is perhaps the most powerful of these three plays because it is a warning, a denunciation. The revulsion and indignation it arouses have a negative quality that produces a sharper, more abrasive reaction than the more optimistic *Brutus* and *Alzire*. Debate, dilemma, parricide and contrasting characters—all previously used by Voltaire—are here transformed by centring the play around a real villain. The result is that Mahomet's effort to win over followers to his new cult only alerts the spectator to the menace he represents.

If *Œdipe* marks an important point in the introduction of philosophy on the French stage, it is because of the promise the young Voltaire showed by establishing a coherent pattern of allusions throughout the play. But in the decade following his return from England he rapidly learned to coordinate the dramatic elements as he developed the formula which was to serve him the rest of his career. His experiments with different ways of involving the spectator resulted in his being able to better integrate his philosophical concerns with the action. His mastery is proved by his creation of three successful philosophic plays, each with a distinct orientation. In *Brutus*, he remained faithful to the French tragic tradition which aimed at arousing fear, pity or admiration; he chose only to emphasize the political implications inherent in the consul's decision by accentuating the exemplary character of Brutus's role. *Alzire* takes another tack, for in it Voltaire attempted to satisfy more fully his audience's desire for romantic interest while giving it a lesson in tolerance. By amplifying the religious

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and political aspects of his heroine's dilemma, he was able to combine more closely love and philosophy than in *Brutus*, where the Titus-Tullie romance is subordinate to the central action. The sensibility which underlies *Alzire* is not absent from *Mahomet*, but this later play is much more aggressive. Its action is unequivocally directed against fanaticism; it is an exposé, meant to stir up the spectator.

Perhaps the key to the effectiveness of these plays is a structural pattern Voltaire first used in *Brutus*, but which he exploited to its fullest in later plays. At its heart is the dilemma of two young lovers who waver between the conflicting demands of their elders. This dilemma usually does not become fully apparent until the second or third act, allowing the early scenes of the play to be reserved for manoeuvring the characters into position. In this initial stage are found the discussion scenes, often formal debates between representatives of the opposing sides. Late in the fourth act, the lovers' attempt to break out of their impasse results in some crime—Titus's treason, Zamore's assassination attempt or the murder of Zopire. Judgment of the offense comes in the last act. If in *Brutus* the verdict is inevitable, in plays where the subject left him freer, Voltaire took delight in providing surprises in his denouements: the conversion of Guzman, or Mahomet's false miracle.

Each of these elements can contribute to influencing the spectator. The preliminary debate defines the issues, while making it clear in the audience's mind which is the enlightened view. Even in *Brutus* the effort to maintain an ideological balance does not preclude a firm stand in favour of the rule of law. Thus, at the beginning of each play the problem is discussed in general terms, as a conflict of two policies or ideologies, before mention is made of the specific case at hand. For example, it is only after the merits of a monarchy versus a republic are thoroughly debated that the continued presence in Rome of Tullie is brought up. In this fashion the lovers' dilemma can become the proving ground for the policies in conflict, a potential test case of their application. The fact that the young heroes, in spite of their virtue, are forced into

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crime to escape the pressures of their dilemma serves as a clear warning of the dangerous consequences of the unenlightened position. Furthermore, the emotion generated by the deed reinforces this response. These plays share a common core of pathos, but different tonalities are achieved by colouring the pathos with other emotions such as admiration or compassion, depending on Voltaire's goal. Finally, he uses the judgment scene to focus the message of the entire play. In *Brutus*, it is by means of the speeches which accompany the consul's sacrifice. Guzman also preaches a short sermon—this time on forgiveness—but Voltaire was counting as much on the feeling of relief and awe engendered by the unexpected conversion. In *Mahomet* the surprise works differently. The anticipated unmasking of the Prophet is replaced by his total victory over Zopire's children, only increasing the indignation of the spectator at Mahomet's success.

This pattern with its discussion scenes and core of pathos allows Voltaire to rely both on appeals to the emotions and to reason. Perhaps less obvious, but equally important, is his reliance on an ethical dimension depending on characterization to sway the audience. An indication of Voltaire's confidence in such proofs is the frequent use of arguments based on personality made by characters within the plays. Thus it is not surprising that Voltaire makes similar appeals directly to the audience. Indeed, *Brutus* and *Mahomet*, and to some extent, *Alzire*, can be considered display pieces for their heroes of epic proportions. The spectator feels an immediate attraction or repulsion for the clearly delineated moral stance of these characters. The intensity of this involvement gives these characters a vitality their lack of psychological depth might otherwise deny them. At the same time, by endowing them with religious or political views which correspond to their moral traits, Voltaire raises them to the level of representative types. This linking of the moral and ideological allows the characters to be allegorical without being cold or abstract.

Whether the strengths of this pattern outweigh its limitations is difficult to assess. Certainly it provides for discussion, but the

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debate is often one-sided, and reason is not the ultimate instrument of persuasion. Sentiment and characterization dominate. Policies are tested in action, but the action always involves love, which tends to detract from the ideological question at stake. Even in *Mahomet*, where Voltaire comes closest to subordinating every dramatic element to a philosophical goal, a key role is assigned to the prophet's unconvincing love for Palmire. Perhaps these weaknesses should be attributed to the passionate involvement with the events on stage which Voltaire sought to arouse in his audience. If he did not turn his back on romantic interest it was because he knew that nothing would hold more firmly the attention of his public. Likewise, he did not hesitate to resort to improbable situations or hidden family ties in order to manœuvre his characters in and out of their dilemmas.

Voltaire's philosophical theatre must be accepted for what it is—a partisan stage which increasingly tried not so much to convince as to move, and which did not aim so much at converting the opponents of enlightenment as at seeking out those already disposed in its favour in order to nurture or confirm their zeal. Given the tragic conventions he inherited from the seventeenth century and the growing sensibility of his eighteenth-century audience, the dramatic structure he created was well adapted to this goal of promoting the rule of law, *bienfaisance* and tolerance.