

The Triple Failure of Boileau's *Ode sur la prise de Namur*

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Sharing the duties of royal historiographer with his friend Racine since 1677, Nicolas Boileau took on the task of documenting the advent of Louis XIV's new world order. In specific literary terms, this involved reviving the process of *translatio imperii* celebrated by such classical authors as Vergil during the construction of the Roman Empire. One might expect Boileau to relish the honor of such a heritage and to do it justice by producing a prolific body of writing. Conversely, his failure to produce such a legacy is quite stunning.

A key to the paucity of Boileau's efforts to construct a political foundation for the absolutist state may be found in the difficulties he encountered with his *Ode sur la prise de Namur*. Recent efforts by scholars such as Richard Maber and Tatiana Smoliarova have done much to set the problems of Boileau's *Ode* in a wider aesthetic context, and to understand his framing of the poetics of the piece better. It is also important, at the same time, to emphasize how closely the poetic and formal aspirations of Boileau were integrated with a changing historical and political context and to appreciate that the power of satire against the *Ode* reflects a cultural awareness that goes far beyond what some defensive eighteenth-century French critics dismissed as merely ferocious jealousy of their *civilisation perfectionnée*.

It is clear that Boileau's *Ode*, composed of seventeen dizains arranged in a *rime croisée* followed by a *rime plate* and a *rime embrassée*, was in widespread circulation by the end of 1693. Besides Denys Thierry's authorized edition of the work bearing that date, there appear to have been at least two pirated editions available in French. In addition, a Parisian translation of the *Ode* into Latin hendecasyllables with the *Ode* in original French on the facing recto pages was also published by Thierry. This slim volume attributed to Charles Rollin, the *Ode in expugnationem Namurcae, ex gallica ode Nicolai B*** D*** in latinam conversa*, was one of three Latin versions prepared by scholars attached to the Collège Royal.

Before discussing Boileau's treatment of the siege, it is essential to review a few details of this particular military engagement. In May and June of 1692, Namur was a key defensive point in what was left of the Spanish Netherlands: a gerrymandered state resulting from the pinnacle of Hapsburg glory in the Holy Roman Empire. The fortress, although state-of-the-art in its construction, was defended by a relatively small, weak, and badly maintained Spanish garrison. Its commander, however, was the well-known Dutch military engineer Menno van Coehoorn since the fortunes of war had made Spain and the

Empire allies of the Dutch in the War of the Grand Alliance. The periphery of Namur was surrounded by extensive fortifications, at the center of which was a citadel adjacent to the city proper. The advance against Namur by Louis and his generals, Vauban and Luxembourg, took place in June under very unfavorable atmospheric conditions, for unceasing rain had swollen the adjacent Meuse and Sambre rivers, making maneuvers difficult. To Louis's advantage, the same rain impeded the advance of relief forces sent by William of Orange, King of England and *staathouder* of the United Provinces, to aid the beleaguered city. Also, the French enjoyed a decisive numerical advantage of twenty to one. Thus, despite fairly heavy losses, the different arms of the French besieging force—sappers, infantry, and cavalry—each had considerable success. The attack concluded in a tremendous bombardment from the artillery that forced the city to surrender. Coehoorn, however, was wiler than Louis suspected and arranged a retirement under the truce of his forces to the citadel, which made the final stage of the conquest far more costly than it should have been. Although Coehoorn's Spanish garrison was reduced by at least fifty percent, he was able finally to negotiate a general surrender that allowed the remnants of his troops to march out intact with their arms and colors (a concession that still meant something in those days of military honor).

Paris had been kept well abreast of these developments by letter since much of the court, including Racine but not Boileau, had accompanied the monarch and his army. Racine wrote a very lucid and concise (if not always objective) report of the conflict later published as his *Relations* (400-11). This report informed Boileau's scant knowledge of military affairs. On the basis of these reports, Boileau had more than enough material for a heroic poem of princely proportions, and he proceeded to frame it in the most pompous apparatus he could imagine. In effect, he attempted to achieve a triple victory in his *Ode*: first on the level of artistic innovation by a French writer, second, as a political propagandist able to glorify his monarch, and third, as a polemical victor in the "Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes," which refused to die down completely.

Despite what any champion of the *Anciens* would consider a winning combination, this piece of poetry encountered many obstacles from the very beginning, and it may be argued that it was doomed to fail on strictly formal grounds before even taking politics into consideration. The key element on the innovative front was the resuscitation of the Pindaric type of ode. Only this obsolete form, one of the most daunting poetic genres, could render justice to this victory, Boileau reasoned. However, in Pindar's case, the ode form had been used mainly to celebrate athletic victories rather than military ones. In trying to adapt classical style, Boileau actually added some constraints that made his own task infinitely harder. The most immediate stumbling block was the unusual seven-syllable line, a form much more suited to the concision of ancient Greek than to seventeenth-century French. While it is commendable that Boileau did such a careful job of observing the rules of the genre as formulated earlier in the century by Malherbe, including the observance of *caesurae* in the interior of the lines, one wonders if a bit more freedom from these self-imposed laws might not have produced a better piece of poetry. Even Malherbe's disciple Racan, who is acknowledged by most as the master of the Pindaric ode in the seventeenth century, frequently used alexandrines or other lines instead of heptasyllables. Furthermore, Racan had been extremely unfettered in his choice of subject and approach in

his odes.¹ In Boileau's hands, the heptasyllables too often sound like overly long alexandrines abruptly chopped in half and furnished with awkward pauses after uneven feet of verse. One is hardly surprised that the anonymous author of an untitled text against the work noted Boileau's "vers durs et secs" (Magne 286; BN MS 5561). Even worse than simply aesthetic condemnation, these verses lend themselves to ridicule since the closest line in usual poetry was the odious octosyllable almost entirely reserved in the *grand siècle* for burlesque, bawdy, or epigrammatic poetry.

To Boileau's eyes, these vulnerable points were probably outweighed by the possibility of realizing a new experience in the sublime, and it is true that later authorities such as Rapin and Houdart de la Motte at least tacitly accorded him this achievement, as did future emulators like Jean-Baptiste Rousseau. Rousseau respected Boileau's perfection of the strophic breaks at the third and seventh lines that were originally advocated by Malherbe, but scarcely perfected by him.² For the purposes of this study, however, it is more appropriate to focus on the uncoupling of the heroic ode from the encomiastic propaganda, particularly of a military nature, that followed Boileau's failure.

The full extent of Boileau's inability to fuse stylistic innovation with overarching political goals becomes most obvious in the works of those writing from overseas (beyond the reach of French royal censorship or disfavor). Mocking Boileau's Pindaric flights, his *émigré* detractor, Pierre Motteux, later wrote from London:

Dans sa Chanson pedantesque,
Comme un hibou tenebreux,
Boileau, sérieux-burlesque,
Fuit loin des vulgaires Yeux. (5; stanza II)

Within France, the *décalages* between Boileau and his Greek model were more likely to be limited to the stricter logic of poetics itself. For example, there seems to be a simple inherent contradiction in the strategy of a champion of the *Anciens'* faction in French letters emulating Pindar through such a purportedly innovative poem. The author of an incisive epigram points this out when he observes: "Il agit contre lui s'il efface Pindare / Il passe pour un sot s'il ne l'efface pas" (Magne 283; BN MS 12691).

The first two stanzas of Boileau's *Ode* contain a rather bizarre invocation that immediately attracts attention to the author's apparently fantastical and unreasonable approach:

Quelle docte et sainte yvresse
Aujourd'huy me fait la loy ?
Chastes Nymphes du Permesse,
N'est-ce pas vous que je voy ?
Accourez, Troupe sçavante,
Des sons que ma Lyre enfante

¹ When Racan chose the seven-syllable line, as in the following example from his "Pseaume CXVIII," he was able to achieve a natural clarity that often seems to have eluded Boileau: "Que ceux dont l'ame est soûmise / Aux preceptes de la foy, / Puissent dans la vraye Eglise / Se rejoindre aveque moy ; / Qu'avec eux dans l'innocence / Dessous ton obeissance / Conduisant mes actions, / Jamais je ne puisse entendre / Mes ennemis me reprendre / De mes imperfections" (399).

² See Maber's excellent treatment of these questions in "Boileau et l'esthétique de l'ode héroïque."

Ces arbres sont réjouïs.
Marquez-en bien la cadence ;
Et vous, Vents, faites silence :
Je vais parler de LOUIS. (vv. 1-10)

While the mythological focus of this stanza is not in itself surprising, the opening apostrophe to the “Nymphes du Permesse,” an obscure group of stream dryads, launches the reader into the most obscure footnotes of classical erudition. The appearance of these minor deities is inserted in a negative interrogative sentence, rendering the identification even more uncertain: how can the reader relate to these nymphs if Boileau himself seems hesitant to recognize them? His lyre, giving birth to this uneven music, creates a rather effeminate impression. The musical birth itself seems to have gotten off to a bad start, which will invite some of his latest parodists to call it a “pauvre coq à l’asne” (“Ode à M. Boileau,” *Vers à la louange du Roy* 20). Boileau places the battle for seventeenth-century superiority in culture and in war on a strangely pastoral footing, prompting the reader to recall that the poet himself had not been an eyewitness to great military feats of daring.

Perhaps sensing the weak points in his approach, Boileau makes a poetic distinction in his opening between himself and his predecessor, Pindar, whose immortal songs took flight on eagles’ wings and flew up far from vulgar eyes (and, one supposes, ears). This disclaimer repeats his reminder in the preface that the great Horace himself declared he was likely to fall short in imitating the Greek poet.³ Nevertheless, in the *Ode*, Boileau reinvoques his own lyric powers, assuring that “Si, dans l’ardeur qui m’inspire, / Tu peux suivre mes transports” (vv. 16-17) the beauty of his creation will make the oaks on the Thracian hills resonate so that nothing will surpass “La douceur de tes accords” (v. 20). In fact, the difficulty of following Boileau’s leaps of imagery renders this task so impossible. One of the epigrams assembled in BN MS 12691 implies that Boileau must have been drunk on Greek wine:

Oui, Despréaux, de ton ivresse,
Ton ode nous est caution,
Mais que ce soit des liqueurs du Permesse
C’est une belle question. (Magne 282)

Another, from BN MS 5561, flatly states that he did not have to go as far as Greece for his drunken inspiration: “Chacun le croit dans l’ivresse, / Non pas de l’eau du Permesse, / Mais du méchant vin d’Auteuil” (Magne 284). Still another from BN MS 12691 shows that Boileau badly imitated his model since he only understood half of Pindar’s technique:

... tu suis assez mal ses pas
Dans tes emportements bizarres,
Car si, loin du bon sens, comme lui tu t’égares
Comme lui tu n’y rentres pas. (Magne 282)

³ “Je ne répons pas d’y avoir réussi ; et je ne sçay si le Public accoustumé aux sages emportemens de Malherbe, s’accommodera de ces saillies et de ces excès Pindariques. Mais, supposé que j’y aye échoué, je m’en consolerais du moins par le commencement de cette fameuse Ode Latine d’Horace *Pindarum quisquis studet aemulari*, etc. où Horace donne assez à entendre que s’il eust voulu luy-mesme s’élever à la hauteur de Pindare, il se seroit crû en grand hazard de tomber” (Boileau, “Discours sur l’ode” 14).

As Boileau advances into the actual description of the conflict in the third through fifth stanzas, he breaks with his own poetic precedents by not peopling his ode with everyday characters of the court and the town, as he did in his *Satires*. Instead, he peoples it with a host of suitably lofty mythological figures:

Est-ce Apollon, et Neptune
Qui sur ces Rocs sourcilleux
Ont, compagnons de fortune,
Basti ces murs orgueilleux ? (vv. 21-24)

To some degree, Boileau undercuts the mythological effect by the rhymed double personification of the rocks (“sourcilleux,” “orgueilleux”), linking the mythology to a chronic dismeasure. Similarly, the feeble Spanish garrison becomes “Dix mille vaillans Alcides” (v. 31), and Louis XIV naturally makes his entrance as Jupiter in person. First and foremost, Boileau places Louis XIV in a proper godly role at the center of everything, giving all credit to his patron in an example of the encomiastic tradition. Racine had written in a similar vein, virtually eliminating Vauban from the battle in favor of the King (400-11). However, the sustained inflation of style leads Boileau into an odd historical anachronism when he states:

Namur, devant tes murailles,
Jadis la Grece eust vingt ans,
Sans fruit veu les funerailles
De ses plus fiers Combattans. (vv. 41-44)

The French public could not forget that Spanish soldiers by the latter half of the century were more likely to be described as Matamores than as Alcides, and most readers knew enough classical history to realize that Athens and Sparta had never attacked Belgium. If Boileau is making his French public into figurative Greeks and making the siege of Namur last over twice as long as that of Troy, it is hardly surprising that readers would feel wounded in their sense of *vraisemblance*.

Nor does the poet manage to regain control of the imagery in the sixth and seventh stanzas where he speaks of the fear of the enemy commander, William III, whose armies are represented by a menagerie of figures including the Belgian or Nassau lion, the German (or more properly Hapsburg Austrian) eagle, and the leopard (it was common in early modern heraldry to describe the British lion rampant as a leopard). To these, he fancifully adds the Spanish and Portuguese, whose riches acquire an entirely imaginary source: “Ceux-là viennent du rivage / Où s’enorgueillit le Tage / De l’or qui roule en ses eaux” (vv. 65-67). Even Scandinavians are placed among the foreign troops, although their homeland does not exactly resemble the fjords: “Ceux-cy des champs où la nége / Des marais de la Norvège / Neuf mois couvrent les roseaux” (vv. 68-70). Is Boileau putting the Norwegians into the polders of the Zuider Zee or the Dutch at the North Pole? The excuse of Pindaric “ivresse” is becoming so thin at this point in the poem that the readers may begin to realize that the search for rhymes is making the author take them for fools. An epigram of 1693 captures what was probably a common reaction among the literary public to the misbegotten innovations in the *Ode*:

A un langage si bizarre,
A ces traits d'un esprit si faux
Je reconnais le vieux Pindare
Mais je ne reconnais pas Des Preaux. (Magne 283; BN MS 12642)

By the eighth stanza, the poem introduces a flood of water imagery that proves most unfortunate in that it also provides an excellent springboard for later parodists. Boileau seeks to unify the struggles of man and nature by foregrounding the terrible rainstorms, thus dignifying the siege as a cosmic struggle. Whatever it is that is swelling the River Sambre, it is due to a strange happenstance of the horoscope since the Gemini of May are terrified by the cold rains of December falling out of season. No wonder poor Ceres, the goddess of harvests, "s'enfuit éplorée" (v. 75) when she sees the boreal wind blowing down the grain and the stormy Hyades dumping their "urnes fangeuses" (v. 78) all over her vegetal treasures. When at the beginning of the next stanza Boileau bids man and nature alike "Déployez toutes vos rages" (v. 81), he could have been speaking of himself. Indeed, a parody with the incipit "Quelle est la nouvelle ivresse" went on to strike at these very verses: "Là, dans des phrases sauvages, / Vous verrez tout en un tas / Déployer toutes les rages ..." (Magne 285; BN MS 5561). Boileau's churning, muddy eddies resemble a disorganized pile of words and lend themselves to further images of failure such as ships out of control and dangerous reefs. Another epigram says, "Le pauvre Boileau s'égare : / En voguant comme Pindare / Il se brise au même écueil" (Magne 284; BN MS 5561). The failure of the flood imagery is directly associated with the bad foundation of Boileau's innovative strategy since nothing about the battle itself obliged him to make this a cornerstone of the rhetorical *inventio* that framed the composition of his work.

The poet may have chosen to inflate his water imagery in order to shore up what had traditionally been the weakest point in the French arsenal: their navy. It was grossly inferior to the English and Dutch fleets. Consequently, French attempts in the 1690s to land as many as twelve thousand Irish troops in their homeland to combat William III were foiled time and again, and Louis's French regiments had not been enough to insure victory in the earlier Battle of the Boyne. French shipbuilding technology was so backward that the very flagship of the fleet, the *Royal Louis*, was built from a cookie-cutter design in Holland during one of the rare truce periods between the countries. Its sister ship, Sweden's *Gustav Vasa*, capsized during its first maneuvers in the Stockholm harbor. Earlier in the war, the French fleet had taken advantage of a golden opportunity to defeat the combined English and Dutch fleets in 1690 at the Battle of Beachy Head. They had actually controlled the Channel for a little over a year until stunning reverses at the Battles of Barfleur and La Hogue in 1692 annihilated their fleet and handed the command of the seas back over to the British. Given that Louis's dominion over the watery elements is one of the themes of the sculptures of Versailles, it would be no surprise if Boileau had made a conscious effort to incorporate it into poetry as well. It would lead to one of his most laughable mistakes: his reference in verse 123 to a tiny stream called the "Mehagne" (instead of to the mighty Meuse or the well-known Sambre) in an obvious struggle to find a rhyme for "Espagne" (v. 121). Meant as a Homeric note, this came over instead as a burlesque element noted in several parodies.

These examples of badly handled water imagery serve to show how Boileau's failure on

the front of poetic innovation also endangered the success of his mission as a political propagandist. After all, in his introduction he had called the capitulation of Namur one of the greatest military events of the age. In verse 50 and again in verses 87-90, he makes a long list of Louis's previous victories: Mons, Lille, Courtrai, Ghent, Saint-Omer, Besançon, Dole, Ypres, Maastricht, and Cambrai. Yet he never follows up this litany with physical descriptions of battle. Instead, in the fashion of much of the occasional verse of the time, he sidesteps the military details by concentrating on impressions and emotions instead of on tactics and strategy. This is already apparent as early as the third stanza, where puzzling switches between third person singular and third person plural suddenly terminate in an explosive cannonade: "Et par cent bouches horribles / L'airain sur ces monts terribles / Vômit le fer, et la mort" (vv. 28-30). The synecdoche of brass for ordnance is certainly permissible, and the notion of a cannon vomiting iron balls is something of a cliché. Nevertheless, doubling the synecdoche by replacing effect for cause with "la mort" while offering a rich but extremely predictable rhyme of "horrible"/"terribles" creates a bit too much dissonance, and makes this passage ripe for mockery.

Further on in the twelfth stanza, after having invited the enemy generals to gaze upon the "Athletes belliqueux" (v. 107) of France scaling the defenses, Boileau urges them to consider Louis XIV:

Contemplez dans la tempeste
Qui sort de ces Boulevards,
La plume qui sur sa teste
Attire tous les regards.
A cet Astre redoutable
Toûjours un sort favorable
S'attache dans les combats. . . (vv. 111-17)

Attracting all attention to the feather on a hat rather than to a more traditional item of warfare such as a standard or a drawn sword, and then changing the feather metaphorically into a star is perhaps the most awkward of the poet's lapses of taste. A sonnet published in a collection of Dutch epigrams is aptly entitled "A Monsieur Des P. [Depréaux] sur la ridicule metamorphose de la plume du R. [Roi] L. [Louis] XIV en astre." The bizarre image of Louis's "plume fatale" (554) leads to a most unflattering comparison with William III, who was victorious in turn after retaking Namur in 1695: "Ton Héros, à t'en croire, efface les Césars, / Alexandre, Annibal, Scipion, Nassau, Mars, / Sans s'exposer comme eux, et sans tirer l'épée" (555).

It is interesting to note that, although the *Recueil Moetjens* is dated 1695, the critique of this particular passage must have started much earlier during the period when the poem was still circulating in unpublished form. The "Avis au lecteur" accompanying Thierry's edition contains an apology for the verses as one of Boileau's "figures . . . audacieuses," which can only be explained by the point already having arisen in Paris (Boileau 13).⁴ The "Astre" is given a more plausible comparison to a comet, a traditional omen of woe "fatale à nos Ennemis, qui se jugent perdus dès qu'ils l'aperçoivent" (Boileau 13-14). Nevertheless,

⁴ The "Avis au lecteur" published by Thierry and the "Discours sur l'ode" in the edition by Boudhors (13-14) are the same text. Our quotes were taken from the edition by Boudhors.

the problem would not go away among Boileau's critics. Writing from London two years later, Motteux, in his parody of Boileau's *Ode*, turned the French poet's own lines against him:

Contemplez, dans la tempeste
Ou Louis fut *dans vos vers*,
Guillaume exposant sa teste,
Pour delivrer l'univers. (11; emphasis in original)

Another fairly obvious blooper came in the form of Boileau's evocation of Mars over the walls of the besieged city: "Mars en feu qui les domine / Soufle à grand bruit leur ruine . . ." (vv. 95-96). This turgid passage is ruined by the incorrect suggestion of a fire-breathing war god. Even an elementary student of the classics knew that it was not Ares but the steeds that pulled his chariot who breathed fire. Here it is obvious that Boileau is no better than an awkward singer who cannot tell a cowboy from his horse. Even if the Grand Alliance had not retaken Namur in 1695, it is unimaginable to consider the *Ode* as a positive exemplar of propaganda. As it transpired, the work attracted even sharper barbs with the fall of the city to the Allies, for as an epigram in the *Recueil Moetjens* concludes, instead of making permanent the triumph of Louis XIV, "Des Preaux fit sans y penser / L'Eloge du Roy d'Angleterre" (Magne 283).

In addition to the weak points demonstrated so far in Boileau's *Ode*, an abrupt about-face in the final stanza inexplicably directs the poem in an entirely different and disastrous direction. Here we find that the Dutch War, with its far-reaching implications for the new world order of European and world politics, all at once takes a back seat to the aesthetic war raging between Boileau's Ancients and the Moderns led by Charles Perrault:

Pour moy, que Phebus anime
De ses transports les plus doux,
Rempli de ce Dieu sublime,
Je vais, plus hardi que vous,
Montrer que sur le Parnasse,
Des bois fréquentés d'Horace
Ma Muse dans son declin,
Sçait encore les avenuës,
Et des sources inconnuës
A l'Auteur de Saint-Paulin. (vv. 161-70)

Beginning with the strong re-orientation of "Pour moy," the discourse shifts away from the King, who fades to a vaguely-defined Phoebus serving mainly to inspire the centrally-placed poet. The warrior god gives way to a god of the sublime, and he is subsumed into Boileau's poetically organized universe. The reason for this shocking transition is not, as one might have expected, the engagement of politics and martial strength, but rather a personal test of Parnassian poetic strength. The final stanza evokes the *Anciens'* model Horace both as a standard of excellence in general and as the specific model for Boileau's own *Art poétique*. The "Avis au lecteur" that precedes both Thierry's edition of the *Ode du sieur D*** sur la prise de Namur* and the *Ode in expugnationem* makes a similar reference.

It was widely accepted that Boileau himself was the author of this unsigned "Avis." In the *Ode*, he claims the aesthetic high ground ("les avenuës" of Horace) for himself.

Admitting in his poem that he has reached an advanced age, which puts his Muse *in decline*, he states that he will still arrange a decisive joust against his opponent in the “Querelle”: Perrault. Indeed, he hints that the polemic in the *Ode* may not be his final word on the subject since the “Avis” threatens that “quelque autre Ouvrage” will carry the battle still further. Boileau demeans Perrault in the “Avis” as “un Homme sans aucun goust, qui croit que la Clelie et nos Opera sont les modeles du Genre sublime” (Boileau 13). Reducing his rival figuratively to the least successful of his works, an unfortunate heroic piece on Saint-Paulin, Boileau attempts to assert his own superiority. Yet, he obtains a Pyrrhic victory at best since it is obvious to the public that both of these literary giants are represented here by their most flawed works.

The extent of Boileau’s loss of status due to the *Ode* is important in gaining a wide perspective of the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes.” This dispute only reached a truce when Antoine Arnauld had Boileau and Perrault embrace each other publicly in August 1694, thus symbolically ending their six-year dispute. However, the history of the *Ode* demonstrates that, in 1693, Boileau flung himself into a headlong attack that, from its inception, gave every indication of miscarrying. Boudhors reminds us that, according to Racine (see his letter of May 30, 1693), the *Ode* had originally contained an extra stanza devoted to lambasting Fontenelle, but that this passage was cut from the text in August 1693, on the insistence of Pontchartrain, a powerful minister and a relative of the intended victim (117). The “Avis au lecteur” that prefaces the *Ode* also suggests that Boileau would not be content with a limited foray. In the opening sentence, it attacks Perrault’s *Parallèles des Anciens et des Modernes*, “ces estranges Dialogues qui ont paru depuis quelque temps, où tous les plus grands Ecrivains de l’antiquité sont traités d’Esprits mediocres, de gens a estre mis en parallele avec les Chapelains et les Cotins” (12). Inasmuch as Boileau goes on through much of the preface to belittle Perrault, the lesson in polemics was not lost on the readership. Citing the “Avis,” one of the epigrams on the *Ode* clearly states: “On y retrouve encor le grand Boileau / Il sait encore injurier en prose” (Magne 283; BN MS 12691). Another epigram on the same manuscript points directly to Boileau’s Horatian disclaimer: “Pour prouver ce que dit Horace, / Despréaux suit Pindare et se casse le cou,” going on to add sarcastically that this is a fine present for the Ancients of whom Boileau is so fond (Magne 282). The jarring nature of the final *strophe* tends to discredit many of the claims of loftiness put forward at the beginning of the poem. Another of the anti-Boileau epigrams notes “C’est au fond une satire / Dont Perrault seul est l’objet” (Magne 285; BN MS 5561). Given the domestic failure of the *Ode* as a polemical vehicle for the *Modernes*, even the support of his fellow historiographer royal could not save it from the fate of general opprobrium in the French kingdom itself. Apart from a few close friends and the teachers of eloquence at the Collège Royal who penned Latin translations, most Parisians must have been disappointed. As an epigram in BN MS 5561 complains, “Le grand Racine en vain la prône sans défaut, / Tout Paris pour cette ode a les yeux de Perrault” (Magne 284).

Thus, in summary, one may say that the *Ode* failed demonstrably on all three levels for which it was conceived: innovation, state propaganda, and aesthetic polemic. While it may be too much to conclude that Boileau had sunk to being a “lâche flatteur” as claimed by several critics, one can affirm that his composition was not only shabby, but that it was insistently so. Its major formal elements were faulty in themselves (that is its Pindaric form, its mythological inflation, the importance of emotion over physical description, a

blending of the natural and the human, and the dominating presence of the King). Indeed, Boileau was perhaps not sufficiently aware that the Pindaric ode had already proved itself in classical times to be a lightning rod for effective satire.⁵ Furthermore, they tended to clash with each other in ways that were easily discernible to the critical public and that had already been discussed before the work went to press. In view of this, one cannot, as Boudhors does, simply deny that the *Ode* had any serious intent, that it merely constitutes “Un échantillon français de lyrisme pindarique . . . [qui] tourne le dos aux Perrault, et appelle Lamartine” (118). It seems that Boileau’s reputation was so bruised by the affair that Arnould was actually trying to save face for his admirer when he tried to reconcile him with Perrault. So great was the embarrassment, so obvious the triple failure, that literary history itself was changed. Burned to the water line like the French fleet at La Hogue, the once lofty image of Bourbon literary propaganda limited itself through the next century to a *sournoise guerre de course*.

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⁵ See Smoliarova’s study, “L’*Ode sur la prise de Namur* : Entre ode et parodie,” in which Smoliarova traces the early vicissitudes of the Pindaric ode and relates it, through the methods of Russian formalism, to some of the satires mentioned in this study.

Vers à la louange du Roy, avec une satire contre Boileau-Despreaux et contre la Maintenon.
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