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Neoclassical Dramatic Theory in Seventeenth-Century France

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Overview

The classical period in France, roughly speaking from about 1630 until the end of the seventeenth century, is preoccupied with theories of drama, and more particularly theories of tragedy, by far the most prestigious theatrical form of the day. While the strong interest in dramatic theory at this time is not new – the rediscovery and dissemination of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the sixteenth century helped fuel a great deal of theorizing, especially in Italy, long before 1630 – what is particular to the classical period in France is the development of a highly codified set of rules that is generally held to apply to all serious dramatic output, including not only tragedy but also other theatrical genres, albeit less strictly. By the time the classical period reached its height under Louis XIV, whose independent reign began in the early 1660s, composing "irregular" tragedies that did not conform to these rules – which had been, in fact, in existence in some form for nearly a century at the outset of the classical period but had been sketchily applied – became unthinkable.

The rules that came to govern French classical theater in the seventeenth century did not spring fully fashioned from the mind of a single theoretician; rather, they were refined and codified over a long period of time. The two greatest ancient influences on French classical theories of tragedy were Aristotle's *Poetics* and, to a lesser extent, Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Horace was already well known in France in the sixteenth century, and starting in the mid-sixteenth century, quite a number of published commentaries on Aristotle's treatise, mostly but not exclusively Italian, gained currency in France. These commentaries include (but are not limited to) those of Robertello (1548), Scaliger (1561), Castelvetro (1570), and Heinsius (1611), the latter being particularly influential in disseminating Aristotelian thought in the decades leading up to French classicism – although the precise attitude of French theoreticians toward Aristotle's theory of tragedy is far from simple.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century the French humanist Pierre de Ronsard emphasized the importance both of following in the footsteps of the ancient tragedians and of writing tragedies in French rather than in Latin, but it was not until the early seventeenth century that French theoreticians began to participate fully in the discussions about tragedy that had already been taking place in Italy for decades. Among the theoreticians of tragedy writing in France from the 1630s through the 1650s, the first decades of French classicism, particularly influential are Jean Chapelain, Jules de la Mesnardiere, and the Abbé d'Aubignac. Although tragedies were written and produced in France in the second half of the sixteenth century and the first three decades of the seventeenth, these plays are not today considered part of the classical repertoire, which is generally held to begin in the 1630s, the period corresponding to the codification of the rules of theater.

While the influence of Greek and Latin theoreticians is indisputably one of the chief components of French classical theories of tragedy, it is quite difficult to generalize about the precise role played by the works of the Attic tragedians and their Roman counterparts in the formation of the French classical aesthetic. Euripides and Seneca are probably the most influential and best-known ancient tragedians of the French classical period, although other Greek and Latin playwrights also have some influence, direct or indirect, upon particular French tragedians. Even before the production of the first tragedy written in French, Jodelle's *Cléopâtre captive* (1552), several Greek plays were translated into French, including Sophocles' *Electra* (Lazare de Baïf, 1537) and Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*; many Greek tragedies were known in their Latin translations (Lanson [1895] 1951: 412). But the only French classical tragedian of note who read Greek well enough to make extensive use of the Greek tragedians in the original language was Jean Racine, who was not active until the second half of the seventeenth century.

As for the most important Latin model for French classical tragedy, Seneca's plays were quite widely read throughout the period. They were much admired for their rhetorical dexterity and their moral vigor, both of which traits would be central to the French classical aesthetic. The extreme, violent nature of Senecan tragedy also had a certain appeal in the period leading up to the beginnings of French classicism, although this element was to be increasingly frowned upon or at least driven underground as the classical aesthetic, which places a premium on propriety and decorum, developed (Tobin 1971; Levitan 1989).

While the principal rules that came to govern tragedy in France in the seventeenth century are mutually reinforcing and form a coherent unit, the concerns raised by writers about tragedy are actually quite diverse; they are not only theoretical but can also be practical and concrete. The principal rules are largely based on abstract, difficult-to-quantify problems such as believability, decency, and the moral impact a play might have, but far more mundane issues are also touched upon: for example, the number of hours appropriate for a theatrical production, the number of scenes that should be in each act, and the most effective way to carry out the transition between two scenes. Theoreticians write extensively both about what they see as the elements

of an ideal tragedy and about the flaws and strengths – with an emphasis on the former – of particular plays. The theoretical issues raised are generally of greatest interest to today's readers; in my subsequent discussion I will focus on these.

Aristotle and Descartes, Authority vs. Reason

Although it is difficult to characterize French neoclassical writing about tragedy in any global way, dramaturgical texts do fall into certain meaningful patterns that reflect some of the deep-seated tensions and contradictions of the period. One of the central conflicts fueling debates about the theory of tragedy can be understood in terms of the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive (or proscriptive) discussions of theater. Descriptive treatments take the plays themselves as a starting point, and try to describe what they do: how they operate, their different elements, and the patterns into which they fall. Prescriptive or proscriptive treatments, by contrast, take theoretical and/or ideological concerns as their starting point, and explain what plays ought to do: how they should function, what different elements should (prescriptive) or should not (proscriptive) be included, and the patterns or rules to which they must conform.

Descriptive treatments of drama generally lead to an inductive approach to the theory of tragedy, while prescriptive treatments tend toward a more deductive approach (a given theoretician may, of course, alternate between the two). On the one hand, descriptive treatments take the plays as objects of scrutiny, describing how they function in an attempt to infer dramatic theory from dramatic practice. This is essentially an inductive process: the theoretician studies the dramatic corpus and seeks out a set of principles that might help to account for this or that aspect of the plays. On the other hand, the kind of rule-making, both positive and negative – musts and must-nots – that characterizes much seventeenth-century dramatic theory reverses the process, as theoreticians, motivated by various ideological and aesthetic concerns, formulate rules which should provide a starting point for any playwright setting out to compose a drama. This is essentially a deductive process: the theoretician posits an idealized set of principles, applies it to existing plays, and judges the plays accordingly; or, in terms of future productions, the playwright reads the rules of dramaturgy and keeps them in mind while writing new plays.

The danger of the deductive approach to the rules of theater is that applying previously established, inflexible rules to theatrical productions does not necessarily lead to the composition of good plays, a problem memorably evoked in a hilarious passage of "De la tragédie ancienne et moderne" (Of ancient and modern tragedy) by Saint-Évremond. Saint-Évremond reports (spuriously) on the reaction to a play presented by the Abbé d'Aubignac – who also happens to be the author of one of the century's most important dramatic treatises – a play written strictly according to the rules: " 'I am grateful to Monsieur d'Aubignac,' said Monsieur le Prince [le Grand Condé], 'for having followed Aristotle's rules so well; but I cannot forgive Aristotle's

rules for making Monsieur d'Aubignac write such a bad Tragedy' " (Saint-Évremond 1962: 4: 170–1).[1]

Not surprisingly, playwrights like Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine, who also write about theater,[2] often seem to resent deductive approaches to tragedy, at times defending their plays on an empirical basis by pointing out that the acid-test of theatrical practice must be audience reaction. A writer like Corneille, who often feels more constrained than assisted by the rules of theater, is adamant in his position that within reasonable limits, a playwright must be free to use whatever he discovers from experience will move and please the audience.

This tension between descriptive, inductive approaches to the plays and prescriptive, deductive ones results in part from the complexities of neoclassical interpretations of Aristotle, whose influence, both direct and indirect, is very great indeed: his *Poetics* provides the foundation of neoclassical dramatic theory in France. Aristotle himself straddles descriptive and prescriptive approaches in his treatment of tragedy. While he deals with issues like the length of time of tragic action – a question that would inspire much controversy in seventeenth-century France – in a descriptive way, stating that most tragedies take place within a single revolution of the sun or slightly beyond, he does not hesitate to pass aesthetic judgments on the relative worth of different forms of reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis), for example.

Interpretations of Aristotle's work in this period are far from uniform. An ongoing subject of debate is whether the Greek philosopher is to be considered as an authority simply to be respected and followed or, on the contrary, as an outmoded theoretician whose ideas, while useful, no longer fully apply to the present day. This debate in fact anticipates the literary quarrel of the ancients and the moderns later in the seventeenth century.

Indeed, an important cultural trend that greatly affects theories of tragedy in the neoclassical period is the conflict between authority and, for lack of a better word, "reason." The ongoing movement toward the apotheosis of human reason in an era imbued with the work of French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596–1650) is concomitant with the gradual breakdown of various kinds of orthodoxy, especially religious, but also scientific and philosophical, Aristotle being both a key authority figure for traditionalists and a prime target for iconoclasts. Cartesian rationalism is a major influence on the neoclassical period in France, including drama and theories of drama. Descartes' seminal *Discours de la méthode* (Discourse of the method) dates from 1637, contemporary with Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*, a play whose premiere in January 1637 is sometimes taken as the starting point of the classical period in France. In the primordial importance Descartes gives to the analytical breakdown of questions into their constituent parts, he formulates a method that requires the freedom to question authority and orthodoxy – the often unreflective acceptance of traditional models – in the name of reason. Whether influenced by Descartes or affected by the same intellectual context as he is, theoreticians of tragedy often demonstrate a willingness to question authority, especially that of Aristotle and other ancient models like Horace, and also show an eagerness to analyze and system-

atize tragedy – sometimes in reductive or spurious ways – that resonates with many of Descartes' ideas.

The Rules of Theater

Let us turn now to a discussion of the principal rules of theater, as formulated by theorists of the classical period in France. They are: (1) *vraisemblance*, verisimilitude or plausibility; (2) *bienséance*, propriety or decorum; and (3) the three unities: unity of time, place, and action.

Vraisemblance

The most important of the rules is *vraisemblance*,[3] variously translated as "verisimilitude," "plausibility," or "likelihood"; neoclassical theoreticians saw the other rules as the natural result of respecting *vraisemblance*.[4] The rules of French classical tragedy are formulated partly in reaction to popular theatrical genres influenced by the novel, such as tragicomedy and pastoral, forms that are little concerned with the internal logic of either characters or events and which draw their most striking effects from variety, heterogeneity, and surprise. By contrast, classical tragedy takes as gospel the idea of presenting characters and events that make *sense*. Characters are asked to act coherently and not in contradictory ways. If possible, all events and plot developments are internally motivated – they should seem inevitable, the logical outcome of the situation at hand – and at the very least they must not appear out of nowhere or offer inconsistencies that might distract the viewing or reading public from the play's central action.

Theoreticians of theater take great pains to distinguish *vraisemblance* from *vérité*, truth: the truth might be something quite difficult to believe; it might entail events so extraordinary that the viewing public would not be able to see them as sufficiently motivated by the dramatic context. Conversely, a chain of events that spectators might believe likely or even inevitable might be one that would never happen in real life. Verisimilitude deals neither with what actually happened nor with what could happen or is likely to happen in some theoretical sense, but rather with what the theatergoing public of the time believes could happen or is likely to happen; verisimilitude is a function not only of reason, but also of belief. To take a twenty-first-century example, people who believe in the traditional division of labor between men and women might not find a female construction worker *vraisemblable*; even as the world changed around them and more and more construction workers came to be female, their belief would not necessarily change, and they could be introduced to any number of actual female construction workers and still find some way to think of them all as aberrations, as *invraisemblable*, or implausible.[5]

Thus verisimilitude, which is presented by many as a tool of pure reason, actually has a strong ethical component. In his highly influential 1570 commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Castelvetro defines "the possible" in a fairly straightforward way,

as anything that can be carried out or can happen without any objections or obstacles preventing it from occurring; by contrast, he defines verisimilitude as the state of something that, given the circumstances, had to happen as it happened (Bray [1945] 1983: 195). But that only raises further questions: what do people believe had to happen, and why? In the end one can only *believe* that something had to happen as it did; one cannot prove it. And what one believes had to happen owes as much to one's ethical principles and assumptions about the world as to one's power of reasoning. Still elaborating on Aristotle, Castelvetro points out that an event that is possible is not suitable for tragedy unless it is also *vraisemblable*, whereas one that is *vraisemblable* is suitable, whether it is possible or not, a sentiment echoed by a number of seventeenth-century French commentators, including Jules de la Mesnardière in Chapter 5 ("La Composition du sujet") of his *Poétique*: "Although truth is everywhere adored, plausibility [*Vraisemblance*] still wins out over it; and *something false but plausible*, must be accorded greater esteem than strange, miraculous, and unbelievable true things" (La Mesnardière [1640] 1972: 34). Thus in the end verisimilitude is a profoundly conservative principle: it speaks to the necessity of respecting and conforming to the audience's beliefs rather than shaking up their ideas about the world.

One strong defender of verisimilitude (among many) is the Abbé d'Aubignac, whose *Pratique du théâtre* (Practice of the theater), commissioned by Louis XIII's Prime Minister, Cardinal Richelieu, in the early 1640s but not completed and published until 1657, is a particularly painstaking and complete statement of classical doctrine. Here is d'Aubignac's discussion of verisimilitude:

> But when the playwright scrutinizes his tragedy as a true story [*Histoire véritable*] or one that he assumes to be true, the only thing that concerns him is to keep the verisimilitude of things, and to compose all the Actions, Discourses, and Incidents, as if they had truly [*véritablement*] happened. He creates a harmonious relation between people and their thoughts, time and place, consequences and general principles. Indeed he is so attuned to the Nature of things that he is unwilling to contradict either their state, or their order, or their effects, or their conventions; and in a word he takes as his sole guide verisimilitude, and rejects everything that does not have its character. (d'Aubignac [1657] 1971: 31–2)

A playwright well-versed in verisimilitude does not treat events and characters as being true in themselves; rather, he treats them as if they were true, which gives a particular slant to the word "true": in trying to get to the "nature of things," the playwright is free, up to a point, to transform his sources, whether historical or mythological, not only to conform to his audience's beliefs but also to show them profound truths. The dramatist makes everything hang together: characters' thoughts and words are appropriate to their personality, their station in life, their situation; causes lead to expected effects. In other words, he gives to the representation of the *véritable* the kind of coherence that true events rarely enjoy.

It may seem astonishing to us today, but this kind of transformation of "true" into "believable" applies indifferently to plays based on historical sources and ones based

on mythological sources; in fact, there is no hard-and-fast distinction between the two meanings of the word *histoire*, history and story, in the seventeenth century. This doesn't mean that people believe in the actual existence of mythologically based characters like Phaedra or Oedipus as much as they believe in the existence of historically based characters like Nero or Augustus, but from the point of view of verisimilitude – of seeing events played out in a way that is plausible and makes sense to the audience – the difference between historical and mythological sources is minimal. Racine, in his second preface to *Andromaque* (1676), justifies having modified Euripides' *Andromache*, one of his main sources, by making Andromaque's endangered son be her child by Hector rather than by her captor, Neoptolemos/Pyrrhus, for the extraordinary reason that this is how his audience sees the myth of Andromache:

> In this I believed I was conforming to the idea that we have nowadays of this princess [Andromaque]. Most of those who have heard of Andromaque know her only as Hector's widow and Astyanax' mother. People do not believe that she is to love [*On ne croit point qu'elle doive aimer*] another husband or another son. (Racine 1999: 297–8)

What is the value of the word *doive* – from *devoir*, "must" or "to have to" – that Racine uses to characterize how his audiences believe Andromaque should be? Does the verb here connote supposition (it must be raining, since the pavement is wet) or obligation (it must rain, or the crops will fail)? I would argue that in this case in particular, as with verisimilitude in general, we are in a gray area between supposition and prescription: Racine seems to be saying that his public either doesn't know about versions of the story in which Andromache has a child by her captor ("she *must not* love another husband" as a supposition), or would not like them ("she *must not* love another husband" as an obligation); or perhaps that they would forget or ignore those other versions because they would not like them. If verisimilitude may be used to justify Racine's revisionism (he was indeed attacked for having modified the myth in his *Andromaque*), this is because the term itself straddles perception (our suppositions about what does happen in the world) and moral judgment (our ideas about what should happen in the world).

Many theoreticians, including d'Aubignac, present verisimilitude as something universal and natural (*la Nature des choses*), as a kind of reasonableness with which sane spectators in any culture or era would agree. But with the benefit of three-and-a-half centuries of hindsight we would likely conclude otherwise; it seems hard to overlook the importance of cultural differences in viewer and reader expectations, and expectations, of course, reflect beliefs. Rather than calling verisimilitude an example of universal reason, we would be more accurate in saying that it reflects the classical era's mythification of the power of reason. To say that all reasonable spectators ought to object to this or that contradiction, or would appreciate the cohesiveness and inevitability of the plot in a given play, is to make audience reaction itself an object of verisimilitude. It is as if the theoreticians were saying: this is how the viewing public

will most likely reason, or how they ought to reason about the situation. We might conclude, then, that at the center of the complex principle of verisimilitude is a *belief* in *reason*.

At times, concerns for verisimilitude and the assumption that spectators will "naturally" question certain conventions of theater as illogical – or, more to the point, that all conventional aspects of theater could ever be eliminated, yielding plays that are a perfect mirror of the "nature of things" – are taken so far they might be said to impoverish rather than enrich the classical aesthetic. The rhetoric of French classical tragedy, for example, is closely scrutinized by theoreticians, whose eagerness to point out incoherent metaphors and distasteful images is one of the main reasons why the language of French tragedy becomes abstract, almost disembodied: striking physical images run the risk of being unsettling, so that once the rules become deeply ingrained, original concrete imagery comes to be avoided by playwrights like Racine. A highly developed system of conventional metaphorical language that borrows heavily from the language of preciosity – *flamme* for passion, *courage* for heart, and so on – allows tragedians to play it safe, steering clear of an excessive physicality that might be deemed degrading and of jarring combinations of words or concepts that might be criticized on the grounds of incoherence.

Another example of the rather censorious effect of verisimilitude is the criticism of conventional theatrical devices like soliloquies and overheard speech that are used to great effect by Shakespeare and other tragedians but that, largely because of verisimilitude, are used relatively sparingly by French classical dramatists. As d'Aubignac puts it:

> When a speaker who thinks he is alone is overheard by another person, he ought to be speaking quietly: all the more so as it is not *vraisemblable* that a man alone would scream at the top of his lungs, as actors must do in order to be heard. . . . And even though it sometimes happens that a man says out loud something that he thought he was saying or that he should have been saying to himself, we still cannot put up with it in the theater, where human foolishness should not be so roundly represented. (d'Aubignac [1657] 1971: 231–2)

It is not that what d'Aubignac is saying is untrue; it is rather that he seems to be implying that it would be possible and desirable to eliminate all conventions such as those governing soliloquies, whereby speakers say aloud what is going on in their heads.

Ironically, while this kind of extreme rationalization sometimes hinders playwrights as much as it helps them, it can also lead writers to find ingenious ways around the rules. In reaction to the problem of soliloquies, for example, Jean Racine, whom most consider to be France's greatest tragedian, develops the role of the confidant in complex, compelling ways. He thereby fends off objections about characters orating alone, but more importantly also creates pivotal figures like Oenone, Phèdre's nurse and confidante, whose role in *Phèdre* is key to the development of the play's titular character.[6]

And yet, while verisimilitude may indirectly goad playwrights into creating characters, one could argue that more often than not, it limits their freedom to develop them. Jean Chapelain, for example, one of the most influential theoreticians of the early decades of classicism, implies that a character must never fundamentally change, stating that "within the work each character must act in conformity with the habits that have been attributed to him; a bad person must not, for example, form a good plan" (Chapelain 1936: 162–3). While a concern for consistency is understandable, the idea that bad characters cannot have good intentions implies that character is quantifiable and fully graspable by reason and that people do not change or contradict themselves; both in earlier tragedy and in real life numerous examples of people at odds with themselves might be conjured up to challenge this stance. While the contradictions inherent in a tragic situation – the opposing forces, demands, or allegiances such as duty and love, or filial love and conjugal love, that create tension within characters – could not be completely disallowed without eliminating the tragic conflict, characters' responses to these contradictions are subjected to close scrutiny lest they do something other than what they say they will do in a given situation. One of the results of this aesthetic of rationality and coherence is that playwrights have to find clever ways of showing characters' conflicting thoughts and feelings. Ironically, it is possible that the preoccupation with rationality is one of the factors that drives Racine to create so many characters who seem to be teetering on the edge of madness, a state that at least can be used to explain voicing contradictory or conflicting feelings and ideas.

Bienséance

Another rule of classical theater that is so closely linked to verisimilitude that it is often difficult to distinguish from it is *bienséance* (sometimes used in the plural, *bienséances*), decorum or propriety. While verisimilitude may apply to either events or individual actions, *bienséance* tends to be used of characters, both their actions and their feelings. The basic idea of *bienséance* is that characters must behave in a manner that is fitting, appropriate, and seemly, this in spite of the need for actions of doubtful moral value in tragedy – Aristotle's *hamartia*, tragic error or flaw, is widely acknowledged and accepted in this period and is generally interpreted to mean a crime or moral failing of some sort. Although the audiences who attended performances of French classical tragedies were not exclusively aristocratic, especially for productions staged in Paris rather than at the court in Versailles, the plays were written essentially for and about the nobility, and playwrights were highly conscious of maintaining a certain level of propriety, however extreme the tragic situation might be. Thus tragedians deal with characters who are noble both in the social sense and in the moral sense of the word: they are not perfect, but they should never seem debased, undignified, or truly wicked.

For this reason violence is generally banned from the stage, except in the form of speeches reporting on offstage events. In the case of warfare, the justification for not

showing violence onstage is as much *vraisemblance* and the unities as it is *bienséance*, but even the kind of familial or self-directed violence that is not uncommon in Shakespeare, for example, is strongly frowned upon in French classical tragedy. Corneille's *Horace* (1640), one of the first classical tragedies, originally staged the death of the female protagonist, Camille, at the hands of her brother; Corneille, in response to criticism, simply moved the murder *derrière le théâtre*, i.e., behind the theater, or offstage. In Corneille's *Rodogune* (1644), Cléopâtre takes poison and begins to feel its effects onstage in the final scene, but she is discreetly led away to die. Racine's Phèdre dies onstage, although the act of taking the poison that kills her takes place offstage; in fact Racine resorts to only one clear-cut onstage suicide, Atalide in the final scene of *Bajazet* (1672).

The concern for *bienséance* is apparent in the strong moralizing bent apparent in much theoretical writing about French classical tragedy, itself a reflection, in part, of the doubtful moral light in which theater is still seen in this period. Although Louis XIV was a great patron of the arts and the Catholic Church had little choice but to tolerate the grandiose theatrical productions he so enthusiastically supported, theater was still officially condemned by the Church, and its practitioners were excommunicated – in 1673 Molière received a Christian burial only after the King's intercession. While the Aristotelian and Horatian notions that tragedy is or should be morally beneficial are well known, many classical theoreticians seem to share to some extent Plato's mistrust of tragedy as a potential corrupter of morals and are consequently vigilant about its dangers. The Jansenist Pierre Nicole, who wrote about the arts, including theater, is an extreme example of this strain, as is pointed out by Béatrice Guion:

> In the end the Platonic influence [on Nicole] is revealed by the very status he accords art. He recalls . . . [Plato's] condemnation banishing poets from the ideal city. If Nicole points out the excessiveness of Plato's action, it is not, apparently, without a certain regret: "it would be too great an undertaking to attempt to persuade people to give up completely an art for which they have such a powerful inclination." (Guion 1996: 32)

Few writers about the theater are as extreme as Nicole, whose objections to theater are motivated by religious conviction, but even those who are quite accepting of tragedy keep a close watch on it. The vast majority of theoreticians agree with the Horatian notion that tragedy aims both to please and to instruct the audience, but most believe that tragedy must be carefully monitored so that the necessary ethical component is not subordinated to the pleasurable aspect.

It could be argued that the greatest French tragedies are as morally ambiguous as the greatest tragedies of Sophocles or Shakespeare, and yet a tragedian like Racine goes to great lengths to present his works as exercises in public instruction. In defense of what, in the eyes of history, will become his greatest tragedy, *Phèdre et Hippolyte* (today generally referred to as *Phèdre*), Racine, in a tone of moral outrage, fends off criticisms that his play is immoral:

> Moreover, I cannot yet ascertain that this play is in reality the greatest of my tragedies. I leave it up to readers and to history to decide what it is truly worth. What I can ascertain is that I have never written a tragedy in which virtue is so clearly revealed as it is in this one. In it, the slightest faults are severely punished. The very thought of a crime is viewed with as much horror as the crime itself... Passions are made manifest only to show the great disorder they lead to. And vice is depicted, from beginning to end, in a light that reveals it as something deformed and hateful. That is, strictly speaking, the goal that any man working for the Public must give himself. And that is what the earliest tragedians had in mind on all matters. Their theater is a school in which virtue is no less well taught than in the philosophers' schools... It would be worthwhile if our own works were as solid and full of useful lessons as theirs. (Racine 1999: 819)

Independently of one's interpretation of the play itself, it is interesting to observe Racine's eagerness to present himself as a protector of public morality, an upstanding purveyor of *bienséance*.

Bienséance is also one of the rules invoked to purify the form of tragedy. Language must be lofty and formal; all classical tragedies use the extremely stylized Alexandrine verse, with its unremitting twelve-syllable line, neatly divided into two equal hemistiches of six syllables each, and a strict alternation between "feminine" rhymes, those whose last syllable includes a mute "e," and other types, "masculine" rhymes. The vocabulary must be suitable to personages of noble birth and character; individual words may be criticized by theoreticians on the grounds of being inappropriate. Comedy has a great deal more leeway on this score than does tragedy; mixed genres like tragicomedy, however, which were quite popular at the beginning of the classical period, were not long tolerated once the rules were in place. *Bienséance* requires that a funny play be funny and that a serious play be serious. A mixture of tones is seen as inappropriate, and the kind of comic relief that one sometimes finds in Aeschylus or Euripides is not deemed acceptable in French classical tragedy.

A representative discussion of *bienséance* comes from René Rapin's 1674 *Réflexions sur la poétique d'Aristote*:

> People sin against this rule either because they confuse seriousness with humor..., or endow characters with manners disproportionate to their station..., or are not careful to carry through people's characters..., or are not modest..., or talk about everything under the sun without discretion... In a word everything that is against the rules of time, morals, feeling and expression is against *bienséance*. (Bray [1945] 1983: 215)

If *bienséance* is designed, like verisimilitude, to avoid shocking the audience, it apparently does not take all that much to shock the audience: having nobles use even a single term more appropriate to their lackeys or chambermaids can draw criticism on the grounds of a violation of *bienséance*. Rapin's observations are not untypical of the period in that the list he draws up does not consist of examples of *bienséance* but of counterexamples, infractions against the rule. This in itself is not insignificant: if the rules of theater work properly, the audience should not even be

aware of their existence; they act as a kind of buffer against the audience's potential reaction of indignation at something distasteful.

As is the case with verisimilitude, *bienséance* is also presented as so important that if need be it should take priority over raw truth, as Jean Chapelain points out:

> If the playwright is forced to adapt historical material of this sort [i.e., material that includes shocking elements, like Corneille's *Le Cid*], he must reduce it to the terms of *bienséance*, even at the expense of truth. Under those circumstances it is preferable to change the entire story rather than to leave a single blemish incompatible with the rules of his art, which seeks out the universal aspect of things and purifies them of the flaws and particular irregularities that history, because of the severity of its laws, is forced to put up with. (Chapelain 1936: 165)

Here again, as with verisimilitude, a doctrine based on the actual tastes and values of the culture of a particular place and era is presented as ideal, universal, and general.

The unities: time, place, action

The unities of time and place, which elicit great controversy and a good deal of heated discussion, can be seen as a logical extension of verisimilitude. Theoreticians reason that if a playwright sets the action at a particular time and place in the first scene of a play, it strains the audience's belief to move to another time or place in the course of the five acts. Writers about the theater stress repeatedly the importance of establishing and maintaining an illusion of reality as part of the theatergoing experience. An excellent example of this position is Jean Chapelain's letter to Pierre Godeau of 1630 entitled "Lettre sur la règle des 24 heures" (Letter on the twenty-four-hour rule) in which the theoretician states:

> One of the fundamental principles is that imitation in all works of art must be so perfect that no difference appears between the thing imitated and the thing that is imitating it, for the main source of effectiveness for the representation is to proffer objects to the mind as if they were true and present . . . ; something that, although it holds for all genres, seems particularly applicable to the art of theater, in which the person of the playwright is hidden simply to have a greater impact on the viewer's imagination and to eliminate obstacles so as to lead viewers more effectively toward the kind of faith in what is being represented that one wishes to instill in them. (Chapelain 1936: 115)

The playwright's absence commented upon here is emblematic of the viewers' necessary acceptance of the premise that they are observing a series of events actually unfolding; anything that breaks that illusion is seen as weakening dramatic impact. And in the eyes of many theoreticians – indeed, by about 1640 in the eyes of nearly all of them – a change of scenery or a discontinuity in time frame do just that.

The unity of time, generally referred to in the seventeenth century as unity of day (*unité de jour*), is an issue with a very long history. Aristotle observes that most plays

take place within one turn of the sun, or slightly longer (*Poetics* 5), although the Greek text has been variously interpreted, including by some who exclude the possibility of ever going beyond 24 hours. While many scholars and critics today seem to go on the assumption that the unity of time limited the action to 24 hours, at least three distinct interpretations of this rule held currency in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: 24 hours; 12 hours; and the same length of time as the play itself took to stage, usually 2 or 3 hours, but sometimes as much as 8.

The notion of a 12-hour unity of time apparently originates from a particular interpretation of Aristotle's text whereby a turn of the sun is construed to mean the time between sunrise and sunset, or, conceivably, sunset and sunrise. As early as 1548, the Italian commentator Robertello hypothesizes that Aristotle is referring to the daylight hours: he argues that people don't act at night but during the day, so that at any rate the additional 12 hours would be superfluous (Bray [1945] 1983: 254).

In 1570 Castelvetro, in his commentary on Aristotle, compresses the unity of time even further by stating that if the playwright wishes to create an illusion of reality, the play ought to last no longer than the spectators actually spend in the theater. Since 12 hours is too long for a single production, the action would have to be limited even further chronologically in order for the audience to believe in what is happening onstage.

The three interpretations of the rule – 24 hours, 12 hours, or what we might today call "real time" – continued to be aired by theoreticians in the seventeenth century, and some refinements are brought to the debate, but nothing that fundamentally questions or alters the fundamental principle of having the action limited to, at most, a single day. For example, intermissions are said to provide a bit of flexibility in that the temporal break makes a jump of a few hours in the time of the action somewhat palatable, as Jean Chapelain notes:

> I do see your objection that it is just as difficult to imagine that one has spent twenty-four hours at a performance that has lasted a mere three as it is to think that a story that lasts ten years might take place within the bounds of those very same three hours . . . But I believe the separation of the acts and the time when the theater empties of actors, and the audience is entertained with music or interludes, must take the place of some time such that one can imagine the time stretching out to twenty-four hours. (Chapelain 1936: 121–2)[7]

A musical interlude might last just a short while, but because it leaves the framework of the representation of action, Chapelain argues that the audience experiences the temporal break between acts in a different way than it experiences the passage of time during the play itself.

By the 1650s the unity of time is no longer a matter of great debate in itself, which leaves the Abbé d'Aubignac free to indulge in a miniature lesson in astronomical geography:

> We mustn't interpret [Aristotle's] *single turn of the sun* too loosely to mean the time of its presence on the horizon; for it is known that there are places that are sunlit continuously

for five or six months a year; or else one would have to limit the meaning of these words to the city of Athens, as if the philosopher had not written for other places. What remains to be said is that *a single turn of the sun* means its daily movement; but as the day can be considered in two different ways, one being... what we call *natural day*, or *twenty-four-hour day*; and the other, by the presence of its light between its rising and its setting, being what we call *artificial day*, we must observe that Aristotle is speaking only about artificial day. (Abbé d'Aubignac 1971: 108)

I would argue that this passage is more interesting as an illustration of the pervasiveness of Cartesianism in neoclassical theoretical discussions of theater than as a discussion of the unity of time.

Two main principles emerge from the century of controversy about the unity of time: (1) in France, from about 1640 on, the need for unity of time in tragedy and other theatrical forms is well established and little questioned; (2) in terms of how the rule is applied, although there continues to be some disagreement, the general principle is: the shorter the better, and no longer than 24 hours. There are voices of dissent; Pierre Corneille, who sometimes has difficulty fitting his action-laden plots into the space of 24 hours without eliciting satirical commentaries, points out as late as 1660 that novelists, not constrained by the unities, have all the luck:

We are bothered in theater by place, by time, and by the inconveniences of the performance... The novel has none of these constraints: it gives the actions it describes all the leisure they need to unfold... Theater tells us nothing except through people onstage viewed by the public in a short space of time. (Corneille 1963: 837)

Corneille's frustration at limiting himself to a single day and place is almost palpable, and yet after the quarrel set off by *Le Cid* (see below), even he does his best to conform to rules about which he seems to have harbored some doubts. Concentration and economy of language and action ultimately win out and become central not only to classical theater in France, but also to the French aesthetic long after classicism has died out.

To some extent unity of place follows logically from unity of time – one cannot travel very far afield in the space of a few hours – but here again the French carry things to quite an extreme, ultimately presenting as an ideal – not always reached, however – no change of scenery at all, not even different parts of a single building. The problem of unity of place is complicated by seventeenth-century performance practices. A popular stage configuration at the beginning of the classical period is to have two or three settings onstage simultaneously, and to vary the scenes between or among them, thus adding excitement and visual interest to the production. The purveyors of the unities see this as undermining the spectators' belief in the veracity of events and work to stamp it out.

One important consequence of the unity of place is the increased need for reported action in the form of speeches narrating offstage happenings. As we have seen, events like battles would be unsuitable at any rate on other grounds, particularly *vraisem-*

blance, but unity of place would also condemn them, as it would popular uprisings, meetings of the Senate, and many of the events routinely occupying the kind of political tragedy popular in the period. Some of the most famous passages in the entire repertoire of French classical tragedy are in fact reports of actions or scenes taking place offstage, occasionally in the distant past, particularly in the works of Racine: to name only a few examples, Andromaque's narration of the fall of Troy in *Andromaque*, the murder of Narcisse and the rescue of Junie by the people of Rome at the end of *Britannicus*, and the death of Hippolyte in *Phèdre*.[8]

Of the three unities, unity of action, which Aristotle also touches upon (*Poetics* 8), excites the least controversy in the classical period, which is quite easy to understand if one views classical theater in counterpoint to what precedes it: the open-ended, complex plots of the Baroque, including tragicomedy, pastoral, and even nontheatrical genres like the novel. Here is how unity of action is defined by d'Aubignac:

> From the vast material available our playwright will choose a notable action, and, so to speak, a point of history that is striking in its recounting of the joy or misfortune of some illustrious figure and in which the playwright can include the rest in an abridged form, and while limiting himself to the representation of a single part, make everything take place skillfully before the public's eyes, but without putting too much into the main action, and without leaving out any of the beauties necessary for the carrying out of his work. (d'Aubignac 1971: 74)

Unity of action, a matter of effective framing, is intimately linked with the other two unities: the playwright must know when and where to begin the action and what characters and events to include. Subplots might be interesting and promising in themselves, but insofar as they distract from the main story, they cannot be allowed.

The Process of Codification

Although the play generally considered to be the first tragedy written in French, Jodelle's *Cléopâtre captive* (1552), alludes vaguely to the unity of time, at that early date it is unclear where the playwright would even have come into contact with the concept (Bray [1945] 1983: 260). And indeed, one consequence of the nearly century-long gestation period between the presentation of the first French tragedies in the mid-sixteenth century and the codification of the rules of theater in the seventeenth is that dramatists and theoreticians are to varying degrees aware of the debate about the rules of theater long before those rules become codified in the 1630s and 1640s. The problem of "regular" and "irregular" theater is one of the central issues upon which discussion of theater focuses in the century or so preceding the classical period in France. Most of the basic elements of what would in the seventeenth century become the rules of theater are already being discussed in the sixteenth century, and some quite early playwrights hold to some of the rules. But they are not systematically formulated or applied in France until at least the 1630s.

This decade sees such an intense transformation of attitudes that it could fairly be considered the period in which the basic groundwork for the rules and their application were laid. Two nearly simultaneous events are key to this development, both affecting changes in themselves and reflecting changes that have gone on in the minds of the theatrical community, playwrights, theoreticians, and the theatergoing public. These events are the founding of the Académie française in 1634 and the 1637 theatrical sensation, Pierre Corneille's tragicomedy (later dubbed a tragedy) *Le Cid*, and the explosive debate about theater that it fuels.

The Académie française, which still today remains one of the most prestigious institutions in France, has rather humble origins. It began as a discussion group, nine individuals who met weekly to discuss current events, the arts, and other matters. When Richelieu got wind of the existence of the group, he decided to use it as the kernel of a French Academy, an organization officially sanctioned and supported by the government to oversee matters related to the French language and to books written in French (Adam 1962: 220–5). The Academy, founded in 1634, took a few years to get off the ground, but when in 1637 Pierre Corneille presented *Le Cid*, one of the great theatrical sensations of the century, the Academy used the production of this controversial play as a taking-off point to launch Richelieu's plan to impose order and authority on French theater.

Le Cid was an enormous success – the public loved it. As well as being one of the masterpieces of French theater, the play can be read as a cultural artifact that reenacts the birth pangs of classicism. Corneille, aware of the debate about the rules of theater, does actually try to respect some of them at least, but even though the play is a great success on its own terms, Corneille's efforts at following the rules are so clumsy and heavy-handed that often we are simply made aware of the attempt to conform to regularity, rather than any real integration or assimilation of the rules into the playwright's aesthetic.

Le Cid almost immediately drew attacks and counterattacks: Georges de Scudéry, one of Corneille's rivals, wrote his scathing "Observations sur *Le Cid*," complemented soon thereafter by "Les Sentiments de l'Académie française sur la tragi-comédie du Cid" penned, under pressure from Richelieu, by Jean Chapelain, a member of the new Academy. The two men take Corneille to task on a number of issues. If he has tried to respect the unity of time, it is only at the expense of plausibility. In the space of a day or so – the exact chronology of rhe play is not completely clear – the young lovers, Chimène and Rodrigue, lay the groundwork for their engagement, helped along by the King's daughter, who is also in love with Rodrigue; the King names a new tutor for his son; the fathers of the two lovers argue over the King's choice; Rodrigue challenges Chimène's father to a duel; the two men fight, and Chimène's father is killed; Chimène demands revenge; Rodrigue demands Chimène's forgiveness; the Moors attack; Rodrigue raises an army to repel them, and defeats them; he returns to court and fights a duel fot the hand of Chimène; and finally the King orders Chimène to let enough time pass for her to accept Rodrigue, her father's killer, as her husband. Corneille himself was undoubtedly nor unaware of the problem; when in act

4 he is running out of time and still has to have Rodrigue fight for Chimène's hand, he gives us the following exchange among Don Diègue (Rodrigue's father), Chimène, and the King, Don Fernand:

> DON FERNAND: Chimène, will you entrust your feud to his [Rodtigue's adversary's] hand?
> CHIMÈNE: Sire, I have promised.
> DON FERNAND: Be ready to fight tomorrow.
> DON DIÈGUE: No, Sire, we mustn't put it off:
> A man is always quite ready when he has heart.
> DON FERNAND: Just off the battlefield, how can he fight immediately?
> DON DIÈGUE: Rodrigue caught his breath while he told you about the battle.
> (Corneille 1963: 237; *Le Cid* 4.5.1443–8)

It is difficult to know what the tone of these lines is meant to be; perhaps the scene was performed with no hint of humor, but the allusion to the problem of an overcharged plot does risk compromising the solemn, austere atmosphere of the tragic situation.

In addition to the problem of unity of time, *Le Cid* is also criticized for being disunified in action and in genre. The character of the King's daughter, l'Infante, is seen as a distraction from the love story between Rodrigue and Chimène, all the more so as l'Infante is a member of the royal family and cannot properly disappear into the background. When Corneille presents *Le Cid* he calls it a *tragi-comédie*, and that, too, is part of the problem: as we have seen, classical dramaturgy avoids mixed genres as being indecorous, the combination of tones and the division of interest undermining the concentration and purity so central to the classical aesthetic.

Perhaps more than anything else, however, the play is found morally shocking, an affront to *bienséance* as well as to *vraisemblance*. This is how Scudéry characterizes the dilemma of Chimène, caught between allegiance to her slain father and love for the man who killed him:

> *Le Cid* gives a very bad example: in it we see a denatured daughter who speaks only of her folly when she ought to be speaking only of her misfortune; who complains about the loss of her suitor when she ought to be thinking only of the loss of her father; who loves the person she must abhor; who allows the murderer and the poor body of his victim into the same house at the same time; and – the height of impiety – joins her hand to one that is still dripping with her father's blood. (Scudéry [1637] 1980: 787)

Scudéry's moral indignation at Chimène's tragic plight exemplifies the central paradox of the corpus of tragedies that are composed and produced for the next half-century under the censorious eye of the Académie and other theoreticians preoccupied with consistency, clarity, and decorum. From its origins in ancient Greece, tragedy deals with contradictions; with problems that cannot be satisfactorily resolved; with conflicting desires, allegiances, and obligations; and with violence, physical and/or

spiritual. Classical French playwrights are invited to practice the form as an exercise in prestige for the monarchy, but only if they conform to a set of principles that, taken to an extreme, can be at odds with the very works they are intended to govern and enhance.

Conclusion: The Legacy of French Classical Tragedy

One of the most puzzling aspects of French classical tragedy is the way that it combines a hyperawareness of clarity, coherence, and logic with plays that deal with irrationality, blind passion, and contradiction and paradox. And yet it could be argued that this peculiar combination is precisely the legacy of French classical tragedy. Tragedians are enjoined to compose plays that are clear, regular, and harmonious, and yet the plays deal with violent stories full of emotion; they are performed by actors whose acting style is so extreme that it is not unheard of for them to do themselves harm or even to die during a performance;[9] and a successful production will stir the audience to impressive fits of weeping. This kind of melding of strong emotion with hyperrationalism – and, more specifically, hyperrationalism about strong emotion – is to be found in many of the greatest works of French literature, both in theater and in other genres, from later centuries as well. Indeed, the codification of the rules for theater during the classical age has ramifications that go far beyond the period, deeply informing the subsequent history of French theater. While less restrictive dramatic forms like the eighteenth-century *drame bourgeois* do develop, French playwrights remain keenly aware of and in many cases constrained by neoclassical dramaturgy well into the twentieth century. It has been observed by more than one critic that subsequent French tragedy in particular is stunted by the legacy of the classical period, with its restrictive rules and the daunting model of perfection offered by virtually all of Racine's remarkable tragedies, as well as many by Pierre Corneille. And yet, an aesthetic favoring an intense, often streamlined dramatic action that comes to a head in a short period of time – a notion that originates in the neoclassical rule of the unities of time, place, and action – is central to postclassical French literature, extending far beyond theater into narrative forms and, later, cinema. This taste for austere minimalism is one of the reasons why Shakespeare, whose aesthetic is quite different, did not begin to be appreciated in France until the romantic period. Perhaps the ultimate paradox of French classical tragedy is that the principal beneficiaries of its legacy are neither subsequent tragedy nor other theatrical forms, but rather French literary tastes in a much more general sense.

Notes

1. All translations from the French are my own.
2. In addition to prefaces, Pierre Corneille composed a series of treatises on tragedy entitled "Discours de la tragédie," published in 1660. Racine wrote thought-provoking prefaces to his plays, in some cases revising the prefaces to respond to criticisms of the works in question.
3. See, among others, Bray ([1945] 1983: 191).
4. I mean this in a logical rather than a chronological sense, i.e., without implying that *vraisemblance* preceded the other rules chronologically.
5. To this day a French person who finds a situation bizarre will use this theatrical metaphor and say, "C'est invraisemblable" – loosely translatable as "that's hard to believe" – about something that has indisputably occurred but that the speaker finds hard to fathom or displeasing; what the word expresses is not so much doubt as disapproval.
6. Another play of Racine's in which the role of confidant is key is *Britannicus* (Narcisse); several other Racinian tragedies feature characters who have confidant-like roles, including *Bérénice* (Antiochus) and *Iphigénie* (Eriphile).
7. In fact this argument does not originate with Chapelain, but comes from sixteenth-century Italian commentators.
8. The passages are, respectively, *Andromaque* 3.8.996–1012, *Britannicus* 5.9.1721–64, and *Phèdre* 5.6.1498–1570.
9. One actor is said to have died shortly after performing the scene of Orestes' madness at the end of Racine's *Andromaque*. Molière had a stroke while playing the character of Argan in his comedy *Le Malade imaginaire* and died shortly after the end of the performance.

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