

Abstract

Conceptualization of *Mores* in Seventeenth-Century French Tragedy

This thesis is devoted to the study of interpretations of how tragic characters should be portrayed (“mores”, “ethos”, “mœurs”) in French seventeenth-century theories on Tragedy.

The theoretical writings of Jean Chapelain, La Mesnardière, Pierre Corneille, d’Aubignac, René Le Bossu, Rapin, Saint-Évremond, Jean Racine and André Dacier are examined in detail. Their findings are compared with the Latin and Italian commentaries on how the Aristotelian notion “character” (“éthé”, “éthos”) ought to be perceived and understood and what its impact is on dramatic action.

The main focus is paid to the detailed analysis of very divergent and often incompatible interpretations of the four Aristotelian conditions outlined briefly in Chapter XV of *Poetics* and on how the French theorists and dramatists responded to Aristotle’s requirements.

The first condition requires dramatic character to be „good of its kind“ (“chrestos”, “ethos” “chreston”, “ethe chresta”). The detailed study of contemporary criticism draws us to a conclusion that there are schematically two approaches on how the French theorists conceptualized this very elusive criterion.

Whereas Chapelain in his *Préface à l’Adone* explicitly rejects the moral meaning of “chrestos” and thus reduces the first two of the four Aristotelian conditions (goodness and appropriateness) into a new category of *le bienséant*, La Mesnardière links the goodness to what he calls *exemplarité*. La Mesnardière’s conceptualization of *mœurs* and his lengthy polemic with Lodovico Castelvetro clearly shows that his understanding of *chrestos* converges with Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but the terminology he adopts leaves no doubt to his preference for “virtuous” characters (“mœurs vertueuses” / “exemplaires”). La Mesnardière never raises the question of whether the portrayal of a good character be useless in regards of a dramatic plot unlike Chapelain in his *Sentiments*.

The debate on what *chrestos* should mean and whether this meaning denotes a technical („*techne*“, „*ars*“) rule or rather a moral value belongs to the most controversial points amongst the French Seventeenth-Century dramatic theories. Nevertheless most theoreticians share Chapelain’s view and turn to a consideration of appropriateness which is the second of Aristotle’s requirements.

The enlisted properties draw mainly on the traditional criteria such as age, gender and social status and theoreticians refer frequently to Horatius’ *De Arte Poetica*. Daniel Heinsius gives a detailed account of appropriate behaviour as is found in Terence’s comedies. La Mesnardière considers the character’s appropriateness closely whilst paying careful consideration to their arguments (“*dianoia*”, “*sentiments*”).

There is little disagreement on a theoretical level, but when it comes to polemics raised in the defensive prefaces, some of the criteria of appropriateness do appear in a sharper and more controversial light. How should a dramatist portray a witty *suivante* or an old king in love with a young princess (Corneille’s Aegée in *Médée*)? Is it appropriate to portray a young noble man with no respect for women (Racine’s Hyppolite in *Phèdre*) or a married queen in love with a young suitor (Mairet’s Sophonisbe in *Sophonisbe*)? What about a young noble woman with a little respect to her social status (Corneille’s Chimène in *Le Cid*)?

The third Aristotle’s requirement considers the “likeness” of a character, of which there are three divergent interpretations in the Seventeenth-Century Theory on Drama.

Chapelain advocates the verisimilitude, thus he combines the third Aristotelian requirement with the consistency. He argues that the character should resemble himself and behave consistently throughout the play. Corneille’s Chimène (Corneille, *Le Cid*) is the main target of his criticism. Her character, that of a young noble woman, does not correspond with her behaviour. The prevailing interpretation is that the character should „resemble us“, however this creates controversy as it forces one to question who the theater-goer really is.

We clearly see that the idea of La Mesnardière’s “*honnête homme*” by no means corresponds with the “*rozza moltidune*” described by Castelvetro. A similar differentiation can be seen in Saint-Évremond’s grievance about the poor taste of the self-centred French men and women who refuse the noble qualities of foreign queens in Corneille’s tragedies and prefer “*les Héros amollis*” who shed tears.

The ultimate interpretation of likeness is that a portrayed tragic character should resemble what he “really” was or as to how we perceive him, especially if it is a legendary Hero or a known Statesman.

Corneille therefore states in his *Discours* that there is an apparent contradiction between Aristotle’s requirements. How does one satisfactorily portray a Hero who does not meet the criteria of appropriateness? Corneille thus suggests that the second Aristotle’s requirement regards only the fictitious characters, whereas the third (likeness, resemblance) is applicable to mythological and historical protagonists.

This seems at first sight a satisfactory solution. However Corneille contradicts his theory with the portrayal of some of the characters in his plays. The contemporary critics Le Bossu and Dacier have shown that Corneille had little hindrance in embellishing his characters if the plot demands it (Maurice in Corneille’s *Héraclius*).

The final Aristotelian requirement is that characters ought to be consistent. There should be no contradiction between the portrayed character and the plot. This is also the main criticism of Chapelain’s *Sentiments* as we have seen above and Corneille is not very convincing in his later defence against Chapelain’s reprehensions.

We have tried to detect the main arguments as it is posed by the contemporary critics and we also draw some genetic lines between the texts. Especially some of Corneille’s remarks which seem to be adopted from Tasso. Racine had probably known the Italian commentary by Alessandro Piccolomini as we suggest in our analysis of *Britannicus*.

But the main focus is to describe the theoretical frames with which the dramatists were confronted. This knowledge allows for a better appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of the French Seventeenth-Century Tragedy for today’s reader and theater-goer.