

# SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CLASSICAL LEGACY AND NEW PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES: TRAGEDY'S SUCCESS

*Fabrice MOULIN, Lecturer in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University*

*Renaud BRET-VITTOZ, Professor of Literature, Paris Sorbonne University*

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## Part 1 – A lack of understanding

FB: Hello Renaud Bret-Vittoz. You're an expert in 18th century playwriting and tragedy. So, let me start by asking you the devil why we're no longer studying these plays today, why we no longer know anything about these works, why we're no longer performing these tragedies which played such an essential role at that time?

RBV: The lack of knowledge in this genre stems from a misunderstanding, sadly shared by the wider public, as well as the people in theatre. According to the wider public, these plays are unoriginal, too formal in comparison with the previous century, and deemed unpassable in terms of tragic focus and simplicity. What's more, the style is seen as impure when compared to the alexandrine verses written by the noble Racine. Among the people working in theatre, there are several critics who still compare these plays with the classics, strictly speaking, only to draw attention to the genre's decline in popularity.

As for comedians, they believe that 18th century verses are laboured, less melodic and even difficult to speak. And yet, it is the contrary. Subjects and themes are original and bolder when it comes to criticising political policies when compared to how they were in Racine's time; verses are less elegiac and certainly closer to versed prose, but with real lexical and stylistic daring, like neologisms, incongruous metaphors or eloquent pauses which interrupt the verse, leaving a place for ineffable emotion, like in Voltaire's famous verse: "Zaïre, you're crying".

One must not, therefore, judge these plays under the same light as what came before, but rather according to their progressive emancipation when compared to the rules laid down by Aristotle and also according to poets' taste for the unexpected, the audacious, even provocative literature.

## Part 2 - Racine and Corneille's legacy

FB: If tragedy is still a well-liked, well-respected genre in the 18th century, it is in large part thanks to the glorious legacy of the classics and classical tragic models. So, what are these great models exactly, these well-known figures such as Corneille, Racine, of the theatrical world and in the dramatic creation of the Enlightenment?

RBV: Plays by Corneille and Racine continued to be performed regularly during the 18th century but for more diverse reasons than are evident today. Aside from poignant plays such as *Phèdre* or *Andromaque*, *Athalie*, which would only be performed in public from 1716 onwards, is considered as the model for theatrical tragedy which was extremely popular in the 18th century. It was often accompanied by theatre scores, choirs and sumptuous decoration for big ceremonies, like the opening of the theatrical season or a royal marriage. The great tragedian playwright Lekain, taught by Voltaire, particularly liked Corneille and reinterpreted him in his own way throughout his career, by reducing, for example, the static, rhetorical debates in *Nicomède* in favour of action, and by favouring plays with dramatic acting style like in *Rodogune* or *The Death of Pompey*.

## Part 3 – Voltaire and the revival of tragedy

FB: Apart from classical legacy, Enlightenment tragedians gave the public renewed enthusiasm. What did this revival consist of?

RBV: Firstly, the revival can be found in the subjects and themes addressed, thanks to new Enlightenment ideas and to the diversity of historic sources. The historic tragedy concentrated on largely unknown horizons such as those of America, the Orient as a whole, China, India and even Japan, and even periods in time considered less prestigious than the Antiquity, like the Middle Ages with its troubadour-styled tragedies, such as *Adélaïde du Guesclin* or *Tancrede*. Every one of these plays outlines, in its plot line, a peculiar law or an old or different political system to be debated, analysed.

Tragedy, therefore, is steeped in political and philosophical themes which were abound at the time; limitations of the monarchy, abandonment by the upper classes, a crisis of aristocratic ethics but also religious radicalism and tolerance, civil equality in the history of humanity and the arts. Moreover, tragedy, heavily influenced by opera, its main competitor, adopted many technical and decorative advancements of the century and even experimented with original scenographies like a tripartite stage, set changes, fantastical apparitions in Voltaire's *Sémiramis* and physical acting styles in *William Tell* or *La Veuve du Malabar*.

## Part 4 – Tragedy after Voltaire

FB: With the death of Voltaire in 1778, a page is turned in the story of philosophical tragedy. However, am I not right in thinking that tragedy found a new breath of life thanks to the French Revolution? What do you think, Renaud Bret-Vitoz?

RBV: By exploring subjects largely ignored by the wider public such as official history, Voltaire had numerous fans like Saurin or Lemierre who had been active since the 1760s and who continued to innovate in the footsteps of this great man. They pulled ideas for situation tragedy from paragraphs or simple notes, from the *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, a piece of work written by Voltaire which revolutionised historical writing. This scholarly curiosity and a taste for the dramatic and graphic largely fed the production of tragedies after 1778.

Moreover, from 1789, with Marie-Joseph Chénier or even Gabriel Legouvé, political speech as well as egalitarian and liberalising social issues at the outbreak of the Revolution came to the forefront, even if they were already addressed through plebeian characters in the role of a tragic hero; a hero without

nobility, rank or fortune, often simple soldiers, slaves or shepherds who had passed through tragedy since the 1730s.

During the Revolution, the Antiquity made a comeback and the character of the tribune of the plebs in Roman tragedies and that of lawyer in a courtroom were the direct inheritors of this new heroism. The public speaker, under a secularised and familiar form, sometimes of very low social standing, became a reoccurring, tragic figure which, in turn, inspired the righter of wrongs character in the melodrama and heralded certain social traits of a romantic and idealistic hero.

FB: Thank you Renaud Bret-Vitoz for this overview which gives us a better idea of the vigour and creativity driven by tragedy during the age of Enlightenment.