

BOURGEOIS TRAGEDY

Fabrice MOULIN, Lecturer in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Introduction

Bourgeois tragedy, what is also called "serious genre" or simply "tragedy" is a pure product of the Enlightenment, invented by philosophers. It was conceived to help in their efforts and, more generally, to propagate the values of a social class, the middle class in particular, whose economic and social ascension was going to find perfect expression in these tragedies. Proof that it was first a philosophical instrument, tragedy existed as a theoretic object. It was Diderot's brainchild. I'm thinking of the *Discourse on dramatic poetry* and the *Conversations on The Natural Son*, texts from 1757 and 1758, which serve as models for this genre.

The deep scar left by tragedy on literary history is owed much to its theoretical workings than the plays themselves, whose success in the eyes of the public spanned a period of barely 30 years, from 1757 to the Revolution. Looking back over *Mélanie* by La Harpe, *The Indigent* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier or even *The Philosopher Without Knowing It* by Sedaine, which would you say is the masterpiece of this genre?

Part 1 – Reviving the theatre

Bourgeois tragedy did not, however, emerge from Diderot's head as a fully developed genre. It was the result of radical ambition of a part of the public, who felt that traditional genres had been played until death and who cried out for a revival of theatre. Comedy had lost itself among mundane frivolities. Tragedy sank in the cold and unyielding deep. One like the other left the spectator indifferent, only getting from him, I quote Diderot, "superficial emotions".

The theatre was chastised, by Diderot mainly, for its artificiality, its old formula, the twists, the anagnorisis, the asides, everything made worse by the stiff and pompous performances by actors. That's without even mentioning the material conditions of the auditoriums; poorly adapted spaces, wobbly stages, etc. Yet, one aspired for the truth, the natural and spontaneous. The performance must allow for illusion so that the spectator may identify himself with the characters so as feel real emotions. So, let's have a look at what this new genre was like.

Part 2 – An intermediary genre

Well, it's first defined by its intermediary position in the genre hierarchy, somewhere between comedy and tragedy. From comedies which made fun at the expense of debauchery, it rejected the tone, but borrowed the characters' inferior social statuses. From tragedy which conveyed the misfortunes of heroes, it abandoned the heroic frame but conserved the seriousness of intrigue.

The plot, let's talk about that. Tragedy immerses us in the intimate world of the middle-class family at a time when it is shaken by a domestic tragedy; a family conflict, conjugal setbacks but also professional boredom, bankruptcy, etc. The suffering felt by these characters, to which the spectator can easily relate, provokes emotion; emotions which no longer fall under dramatic catharsis involving terror and pity, but which are perhaps stronger, more effective since they are relatable. They are in tune with the daily life of the spectator. Finally, this emotion is the perfect catalyst for a moral conveyed by tragedy through the triumph of virtue.

Part 3 – A shake-up in playwriting

Such an ideological programme encouraged a complete overhaul in classical playwriting. Of course, there was little influence over verse writing, since tragedy preferred prose. Stiff, comedic characters who were defined by their character, Harpagon's greed, for example, had their social conditions substituted. Louis-Sébastien Mercier demanded that ordinary people were shown on stage. He went as far as push for a textile worker, a labourer, a journalist. Finally, tragedy pushed back the limits on performance. Decor made way for the meticulous reconfiguration of real places; a sitting room, a bedroom. The actor often described them in long stage directions, in the style of painting descriptions. As for acting, which was traditionally exaggerated or stylised, it would be replaced by the need for something more natural. Body language, what Diderot called "pantomime", became a fundamental component of playwriting since it conveyed emotion more directly. The spectator's emotion, to better understand it, can be described through art. In particular, a painting which Diderot often came back to when he strived for emotional silence, body language and setting; when he strived to give his scenes an artistic flare.

I invite you, therefore, to have a look at a painting, one by Greuze, a friend of Diderot, which perfectly captures all the major characteristics of a bourgeois tragedy. In a modest interior, a family. Interweaving gestures emphasise relationships. This family is pulled apart by a misfortune. The son, on the right, abandons his home to enrol in the army. His father curses him, but in turn curses the heroic values of a tragedy, like military prowess, which the painter will bring into conflict with filial values to teach us a lesson. Incidentally, it is not the distant feelings of horror and pity that the painter is looking to provoke, but he wants us to engage our brains, as well as those of the father, mother, daughter and son. All of the connections between tragedy and spectator can be found here.