

OLD AND NEW AUTHORS AT SWORD POINT: FRENCH CLASSICISM AND ITS “QUARREL”

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ABSTRACT. What we suggest in this study on French Classicism is not a look into this particular literary and cultural movement via its chronological unfolding, and not even in parallel with neighboring currents such as the Renaissance or the ensuing Enlightenment in view of the commonalities of their artistic perceptions of art, nature, and society. On the contrary: all references to such concepts and divergent views on literature, monarchy and their respective purpose will be inspected from the inside, *i.e.* comparing the very literary elites that formed the King’s state apparatus and reflected his take on the “Grand Siècle” Image that he erected in 17th-century France. We will investigate the contradictions of this seemingly homogenous era through the lenses of the infamous essay “Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns” comprising the raw “debate” between Nicolas Boileau and Charles Perrault on auctorial legitimacy in light of the then Court aesthetics. Our intention is to point towards the dichotomy that they deepened at the Court and show that Renaissance both as inspiration and representation was not on everyone’s lips within French Classicism, which is why a viable future for French literature was even possible after Louis XIV.

KEY WORDS: French Classicism, Racine, *les précieuses*, Perrault, modernism

Introduction

The classical movement in art and literature is claimed primarily from the aesthetics of the Renaissance, which consists in the interest for the philosophy and art of Antiquity, but also for man as the center of artistic creation. With an ideology of artistic perfection and greatness behind it, classicism first appeared in France, being supported by the class that, in the opinion of the artists of the time, embodied the ideal of perfection and morality, namely the absolutist monarchy of Louis XIV (the Sun-King), in spite of the social con-

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traditions brought by it. The golden age of French politics also meant the birth of classicism in France, because the King's control over culture and the newly created academies on the artistic and scientific level meant the glorification of the general achievements of this era. Henceforth, the portrait of the King is deeply heroic, as he is the initiator of culture, but also a patron of luxury goods, industry, technology and territorial expansion (see Bénichou 1973). This being said, the state's patronage of the arts and literature also implied a certain censorship in both a moral and political sense: texts with scandalous Renaissance or libertine derivation (*i.e.* with seemingly pornographic overtones) were prohibited (for instance, Molière's play *Don Juan*, a work that was initially intended for the stage, remained unpublished during the author's life, while in 1682, when the complete works of Molière appeared, it looked considerably shorter especially in the sensitive scenes; the play was published as in the original only in the 19th century). The main reason for such measure was that they failed to represent the King's Catholic religion. On the other hand, no work of political nature which had been found incompatible with the views of the monarchy was ever circulated in the Empire, which begs the question as to the probity of Court chronicles written by men of letters during the long reign of Louis XIV.

Therefore, the imperial censorship as prerogative of French Classicism, was primarily the result of the meaning prescribed to morality, which in the era had to reflect the King's political act. Bénichou, for instance (1973: 3 ffw), acknowledges the three great moral directions of the then culture: the first was deemed to be the aristocratic heroism promoted by Pierre Corneille, seconded by the anti-heroic pessimism of the Jansenist Blaise Pascal, and concluded with the moral positivism opposed to all vicissitudes, as represented by Molière (see also Stierle 2004: 231). Consequently, from the Renaissance, French imperial Classicism preserves more the King's aspirations to supreme power in the state and to the accumulation of cultural treasures of the ancient and modern world, which are both an expression of the King's aggrandizement. From the second half of the 17th century until the first half of the 18th century, Louis XIV (1643-1715) and Jean-Baptiste Colbert, his minister between 1662-1683, created in France the so-called "Grand Siècle", which was not to be countered until later in the second half of the 18th century, when the Enlightenment put an end to the sham stability and social routine, as well as the theatrical and courtly air that the state had received under this king and previously, during the time of Cardinal de Richelieu. (Born Armand-Jean du Plessis, the name of Cardinal de Richelieu is linked to the consolidation of the French monarchy during the Franco-Habsburg conflict

in the Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648, which included the German, Italian, Bohemian and Dutch states.)

Taking grandeur as watchword, and personal merit as individual motto in culture and sciences, Louis XIV was not only the promoter of the time's cultural and political mannerism, since he also initiated several achievements specific to classicism, with consequences on literature and philosophy as well. With the emergence of the academies, the King began to support the use of medallions to popularize the new scientific and cultural discoveries, so that the technique of portraiture and engraving developed along the way, the King's image especially being the object of the so-called royal series of historical medallions. The bust technique on these medals or sculpted works represents the King's head always accompanied by the solar symbol, the reverse depicting the commemorated event. The solar symbol of the King is also present in engravings depicting the his royal birth, alongside the royal motto "Nec pluribus impar" ("None inferior"). The engraving represents the standards of monarchy, including the abolition of the duel, the glorification of justice (displaying the scales and the sword), the expansion and beautification of Paris as royal residence, the generosity to hospitals, monasteries and places of culture, alongside eloquence, poetry, astronomy and history. Later engravings depict the King during the Dutch War (1672-1678) showing his skills as a strategist, an image also captured in the literature of Boileau and Racine, renown classical writers with dispositions towards historiography.

Boileau, the Literary Superintendent

From a literary angle, classicism borrowed its principles from Aristotle's *Poetics*, wherein the Greek philosopher established some general norms for both poetry and tragedy, the fact of having imposed the rule of the three units on the dramatic species falling considerably on his shoulders. The emphasis on reason before everything was also linked back to Aristotle by the French classics of the 17th century, namely Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (Molière), Nicolas Boileau Despreaux, Jean de La Fontaine and Jean de La Bruyère. The imitation of the ancients and the moral purpose of art were not exclusively desired by the literati, but also by the King and the Academy as Cardinal Mazarin took over from Richelieu. Thus, only writers who adhere to a few common laws, with general features, would be accepted in the Academy: clarity in expression and exposition, scenic and logical order, and measure in temperament and character were the words of the day, all synthesized in *L'Art Poétique* issued by Boileau in 1674). As the first stanza in

his four cantos, Boileau's *Art Poétique* emphasizes the primacy of reason in all literary works, the authors being summoned that from reality they retain the truth firsthand. Truth is the haven of order and rigor, thus their efforts should envisage generality and essentiality, the moral meaning of art and a most necessary critical, penetrating spirit:

La rime est une esclave et ne doit qu'obéir./Lorsqu'à la bien chercher d'abord on sévertue,/ L'esprit à la trouver aisément s'habitue;/ Au joug de la raison sans peine elle fléchit/ Et, loin de la gêner, la sert et l'enrichit./ Mais, lorsqu'on la néglige, elle devient rebelle,/ Et, pour la rattraper, le sens court après elle./ Aimez donc la raison: que toujours vos écrits/ Empruntent d'elle seule et leur lustre et leur prix." ("Rhyme is a slave and must only obey./ When we first try to look for it carefully,/ The mind gets used to finding it easily;/ To the yoke of reason she easily bends/ And, far from hindering it, serves it and enriches it./ But, when neglected, it becomes rebellious,/ And, to catch up with her, meaning runs after./ So love reason: that your writings always/ Borrow from her alone its luster and its beauty. (Boileau 1872: I.204)

The same could be compared with the poetic art of the ancient Horace:

In a word, be your subject what it will, let it be merely simple and uniform. The great majority of us poets, father, and youths worthy such a father, are misled by the appearance of right. I labour to be concise, I become obscure: nerves and spirit fail him, that aims at the easy: one, that pretends to be sublime, proves bombastical: he who is too cautious and fearful of the storm, crawls along the ground: he who wants to vary his subject in a marvelous manner, paints the dolphin in the woods, the boar in the sea... Ye who write, make choice of a subject suitable to your abilities; and revolve in your thoughts a considerable time what your strength declines, and what it is able to support. Neither elegance of style, nor a perspicuous disposition, shall desert the man, by whom the subject matter is chosen judiciously. (Horace 1928: I.25-33, 38-42)

Also from Horace, and on the Aristotelian line, Boileau borrows his binaries or the idea of combining the useful with the pleasant and the good with the beautiful, which Horace called *utile dulci* (more precisely, "Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci", see *Ars Poetica* v. 343). Regarding the rule of unity as a consequence of rationalism, Boileau shows that the unity of action refers to the grand genres, *i.e.* the epic, tragedy and comedy, and the unity of place and time refers exclusively to the theater: "Mais nous, que la raison à ses règles engage,/ Nous voulons qu'avec art l'action se ménage;/ Qu'en un lieu, qu'en un jour, un seul fait accompli/Tienne jusqu'à la fin le théâtre rempli". ("But we who obey the law of reason/ We want art to also direct the course of action./ A

place, a specific day and a single complete fact/ They will eventually hold the entire amphitheater” (Boileau 1872: III, 222).

Boileau’s and, to be sure, the French Academy’s insistence on not blending the literary genres, or their purism resides in the desire to gain more depth both at the ideological level and at the level of psychological or character analysis, a fact later certified by La Bruyère’s *Caractères/Characters* and La Fontaine’s *Fables*. The classical authors considered this non-mixing of genres a sort of guarantee that the path to the other features of a true work of art now lay open: poetry, they thought, needed balance, harmony, order, clarity, measure, precision and the ensuing sobriety of style and language.

Racine, the Ancient

These traits are then majestically exemplified in the work of Jean Racine (1639-1699), who was by far one of the most entrusted pillars of French literature in its Golden Age. Racine knew from an early age the meaning of the rigor of the classical period, first in the family, being used to the roughness of life from the tender age of 4, when he was orphaned and raised by his grandparents, and then, in the pre-adolescent and adolescent period, when he joined the by his grandmother at the Catholic convent in Port-Royal. Here he will also meet the philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, together sharing at the Petites Écoles de Port-Royal the faith of a special branch of Catholicism, namely Jansenism of Augustinian origin, under the Abbé de Saint-Cyran (Lewis in Hollier and Bloch 2001: 320). Although tolerated during the reigns of Louis XIII and XIV for the attachment to the qualitative study of the Greek classics, their mythology and the Greek, Latin and Hebrew languages, later, at the beginning of the 18th century, various papal bulls (see that of the pope Clement XI from 1708) cataloged Jansenism as heresy, and the Jesuits, subsidiaries of the pope, forced the monks and nuns to evacuate the monastery, excommunicating them from the Catholic Church under the accusation of pro-Calvinist views.

Upon leaving Port-Royal, Racine heads towards artistic life under the tutelage of Nicolas Boileau, whose friend he soon becomes, and he writes his first opera on June 20, 1664, under his advice. The play *Amasie* did not have the expected success, and it was immediately followed by Racine’s tragedy in 5 acts *La Thébaïde ou les frères ennemis/The Thebans*, which failed to be performed before the Court of Louis XIV at the Palais-Royal theater in Paris. Only when Racine’s plays began to be staged by Molière, instant fame came with *Alexander the Great*, performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which was the first head-

quarters of the French Academy. Moreover, in 1667 Racine wrote his tragedy in 5 acts *Andromaque/Andromache*, a play that would propel him as leading author among the classics, while in 1668 he staged the comedy *Les Plaideurs* (1668) only to compete with those of his rival Molière.

Racine's plays essentially use a legal language, according to the writer's own formation as a legislator from Port-Royal. His only comedy is followed by other plays like *Britannicus* (1669), *Bérénice/Berenice* (1670), *Bajazet/Bayezit* (1672), *Mithridate/Mithridates* (1673), *Iphigénie* (1674) and *Phèdre/Phaedra* (1677), and finally his "sacred tragedies" *Esther* (1689) and *Athalie/Athaliah* (1691). In order to please the King and the Academy, however, Racine decided to tackle subjects with a secular, mythological or contemporary historical background (see his *Bajazet*), and only towards the end of his life he returned to subjects with a religious background expressed in his Jansenist views; however, that period was already marked by Racine's conversion into Louis XIV court historian, just like Boileau before him, in which capacity he wrote the History of Port-Royal Monastery (see Weinberg 1963).

Racine's tragedies emphasize verisimilitude, just like Pierre Corneille's before him (see Flowers 1979: 26), and in so doing they show a simple, almost Spartan action, seconded by a grave and toned-down dialogue in line with the author's own language, however not void of elegance and harmony. To please the Court even more, Racine proved that his language could wield power over the plot as well, which is why his characters display a wide array of passions and violence. Historical truth is backed up, just like Corneille's, by the idea that contemporary society must have its say regarding the sense of morality and exceptionality: as in Euripides' plays, wherein female characters prevail, the inner life of his heroines is profuse, therefore the action itself is void of twists and turns and useless fascinating events. Love seen as tragical, but otherwise full of pathos is the key element that makes Racine's plays stand out, which is to say that will and reason are powerless compared to his characters' passion. Nevertheless, Racine does not resort to melodramatism in the tormented love-hate, pride-capitulation trials that form the nexus of his plays. If it were to translate his plays into any other language than French and then compare his style to Renaissance playwrights such as Shakespeare, for instance, the first obvious detail is that the recurrence of dramatic expressions in Racine's plays is minimal, while to a greater extent his characters vocabulary comprise usual words which would have been familiar to a larger audience.

Besides its restrictive lexicon, Racine's theater does not abound in colorful, rich images, and even the inherent artistic metaphors either, as his plays' message is generally conventional. Love is, as the public itself knows, a "fire", a

“fruit” or “fight/hunting”, etc. This is why the particular description of Orestes’ madness, likened to the beasts raging on the promenade or to a menagerie of horrors – strong metaphors used to seize the moment – might not be Racine’s own, but rather added in the act of translation. This urgency to diversify Racine’s otherwise stubbornly sober vocabulary, his economy of expressions and imagery, metaphors and symbols is unspecific to depict his characters’ moral nature in the way intended by Racine, since it causes ambiguity. And ambiguous Racine was not: his characters were meant to be blunt and their passions easily acknowledged by the others, who understand from their unaffected language (words are “daggers”) or looks (eyes “burn” with either hate or love) their place in the relationship. In Racine, language is fully experienced through the most voracious of images: blood, honor, revenge, blackmail, death, etc., which in turn are deeply rooted in the internal mechanism of human life (Barthes 1992). Despite all attempts to confine Racine to one or another frame of interpretation, his heroes are ultimately defined by their actions and origins, and no structuralist anthropologies or psychoanalytic criticism can hinder the “personal and social genesis” of Racine’s theater (see Alter in Hollier and Bloch 2001: 390).

Perrault, the Modern

However, Louis XIV and his Court in Paris and subsequently at Versailles was far from absconded, ballanced, and reserved in terms of its expectations and luxury even at the level of literary expression. Racine retained merely the role model of the French monarchy in his plays dealing with tragic characters and their teetotalism in relation with their family, their country, and their destiny. All these are antinomies of the era that caught the eye of younger aspirants to the graces and generosity of Louis XIV not only culturally, but also financially. Charles Perrault (1628-1703), for instance, whose name today is mainly known for his dynamic, intricate, and charming fairy tales (such as *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*/ Little Red Riding Hood; *Cendrillon*/ Cinderella; *La Belle au bois dormant*/The Sleeping Beauty, etc., and his late children stories subtitled *Les Contes de ma Mère l’Oye*/Tales of Mother Goose from 1697) depicted this state of affairs in both *Le Siècle de Louis le Grand* and in his essay “Querelle des Anciens et des Moderns” (“Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns”). Especially the latter work grabs our attention here, given that it was released in around 1677, that is, fourteen years into his appointment as first clerck of Colbert, the famous finance minister of Louis XIV, and twelve years after being bestowed the ministerial honors as lead general to the royal build-

ings, while at the same time conducting his own private affairs with poetry, which granted him a place in the reputed French Academy in 1671 (see [www. Breteuil.fr](http://www.Breteuil.fr)). We here find that Perrault was also appointed by Colbert as his right hand in charge with instilling the royal cultural propaganda within the newly established academies, and in this capacity he revisited his essay on the ancients and the moderns ten years after his first attempt at a comparison between them, situating himself once again on the moderns' side, that is, praising the accomplishments of Louis XIV's visionary men of letters like himself in opposition with names such as La Fontaine, Boileau, and Racine, considered examples of classical writers with no sympathy for the state-of-the-art productions of the young writers (see Perrault 1688). And when one says "praising", Perrault's essay was something of a shock upon its publication, because in the readers' hearts it triggered mixed feelings of awe and revulsion. It certainly spoke highly about the new academies' attempts at modernizing cultural life in France, matching the King's magnificent reign, superior to previous known monarchies. This was not a new form of appraisal at Louis XIV's Court: in fact, it was expected of the literary and scientific elites to assent to and advert His Majesty's jurisdiction in everything secular and religious.

For instance, one aspect that united these personal whims of the King was, beside Perrault's modernizing efforts, the Court's upscale interest in selenography, which along auxiliary discoveries in the field, such as lenses and telescopes used for observing celestial bodies, was a new science, directly linked with the person of the King and his symbolism. In this context, the Polish astronomer Johannes Hevelius (1611-1687), the first to discuss about the different phases of the moon in a modern scientific treatise, benefited all his life from royal pension and access to various facilities offered by Louis XIV. Perrault himself, precisely like the other pensioners of the King, Boileau and Racine included, was an ardent defender of France's expansionist whims in both culture and politics on this earth and beyond. At least in his literary capacity, that was verified up to release of his "Quarrel". Perrault's main intention in this essay, subtitled *Dialogue/Debate*, was however not to flatter but to bolster dichotomy between the followers of the classics, *i.e* those who only wrote in the metre of Greek and Roman Antiquity, and the innovative style of the present literati at the Court, who were indeed suffocated by the former, though advertised as superior to them in every way, just like modernism was deemed superior to Antiquity. This must have been a reminder on Perrault's part that culture needed to be synchronic with developments in the then philosophy and science known as the Scientific Revolution, and not with the old way and its disconcerting imitations and simulations of the Antiquity model. Need-

less to say, the antics were represented by Boileau, who at that time was also known as a promoter of the Ancient style, and also a supporter of his literary friends Corneille, Racine, and Molière. As for the moderns, it is said about Perrault's tale style that it foremost embellished the old fairy tales, which, to be sure, were never folk ribald impromptus, but rather personal inventions and indeed more than adaptations of old Mediaeval tales.

Moreover, although fairy tales, they were written and read at the Court's salons (see Zipes's introduction to Perrault's tales in Carter 2008). As Zipes argues, "critics and scholars have failed to study the [fairy tale's] historical development as a genre" (Zipes 2006: 1), which is to say that when they first made entry individually in verse at the French Court, in revues such as "Mercurie galant", the literary fairy tales (a term coined in 1697, see *conte de fée*) and afterwards in prose in 1697, they were not intended for children, but they rather cosmeticized the literary salons' taste for glamour in conversations, in fashion, and in "gallant" or courtly love in the modern sense, that is. For the first time, Perrault touched an old wound by still associating the "old" French coterie with the blurry days of intellectual life residing somewhere between late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. What he suggests instead is that his and other contemporaries' style (one famous supporter of the modern style being Antoine Houdar de La Motte with his modernized translation of the *Iliad*) reach above Renaissance ideas of art and literature. Their new style would delineate a manner advanced by the many academies that Colbert and Perrault supervised (including L'Académie royale d'architecture), *i.e.* the unique style of Louis XIV, situated obliquely from the Baroque and the Rococo. This was the style of the "précieuses", refined and *à la mode* in every way (Jean 2007: 276-283), to which all previous fashion succumb. Perrault's deadly fault, however, was to have diminished the essence of classical Antiquity to the degree that in 1674 he dared compare Philippe Quinault's libretto to *Alceste*, an opera authored by Lully, the royal composer of Louis XIV, to Euripides' *Alcestes*, and in so doing he decided that the present-day libretto eclipsed the original classic as it modernized it or adapted it to present exigency. What followed was to be expected, starting with Perrault banishment from the Académie and the next ten very difficult years of censorship by Nicolas Boileau, to the final royal decree that the antics (Boileau and his suite) won the debate (see the biographically accessorized debate conducted by Boileau and Perrault in Deschanel 2023).

Conclusions

The main feature of art with a Renaissance allure during the reign of Louis XIV was its infinitude, “l’art éternelle” that is, and the reason why writers like Racine did not have to prove himself as per the language he used in his otherwise sombre plays was tantamount to him writing in the spirit of the ancients, whereas Perrault, his contemporary, had to prove himself precisely against this artificiality: his art was of the moment, the King’s moment in time, and this temporality needed fame in order to be noticed.

“Les précieuses”, or the pomp of the modern-like, Courtly aesthetics was based on glamour, rather than the antique calm; it was political, fashionable, and fascinating, just like Perrault’s tales, and it spoke the language of the King. The “battle” of the antics and the moderns spanned over 30 years of Racine and Perrault’s respective careers, and it finally amounted to the new image of literature as a staple of “Le grand siècle”.

The feeling that the quarell did not end with the passing of their generation is nourished by the wake-up call that Perrault’s “dialogue” represented, which, though faulty in many ways, was still right in arguing that art is not self-sufficient and cannot pretend to have the same effect on stage and in reality that it had centuries ago. If it meant anything at all, the “quarell” was a new attitude toward the status of literature and culture tested at a particular moment in time, and an attack directed to old pretenses that art is as inamovable as nature only because it reflected the grand model of the Renaissance.

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