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Address of editorial office

Goce Delchev University

Faculty of Philology

Krste Misirkov b.b., PO box 201

2000 Stip, Republic of Macedonia



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THE ORIGINALITY OF DRAMATIC ACTION (*DISPOSITIO*)

Abstract: Composition, of which drama is a result, is defined as the equivalent of *dispositio*, which, especially in theatre, is subject to strong imperatives. The time constraint of the plot, and the invention of the logical sequence of cause and effect are the first phase of this influence.

Our study will strive to develop and analyse this notion of *dispositio* in the first regular tragedies of 17th century France, and to identify some opinions pertinent to these tragedies, by comparing them with the works of Antiquity.

Keywords: *dispositio*, tragedy, regular, composition, rules, theory

In France, from 1623 onwards, various theorists, including Jean Chapelain, developed a classic aesthetic codified by a set of rules issued from the ancient model and the Italian model of the 16th century. Henceforth, art had to be conceived as an “imitation of nature”, which does not only refer to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but can also be explained by the indignation felt by the doctrinaires of the time at finding overly intermingled plots, confusions of tone, and action spread over several years and countries in works that pretended to be tragedies.

The dramatists of the beginning of that century, educated in the school of Baroque and tragicomedy, had too much sense of action and of life to renounce them by conforming to the classical rules. Many writers will therefore remain faithful to a genre that perhaps suits them better, such as Rotrou who will present his *Hercule mourant* (Hercules Dying) to the public without relinquishing tragicomedy. Such was also the case of Scudéry, who had *La Mort de César* (The Death of Cesar) performed in 1635, and later *Didon* (Dido), but who just as soon also wrote the tragicomedy *L’Amant libéral* (The Liberal Lover), borrowed from Cervantes. And, not to forget Corneille, who had the tragicomedy *Clitandre* (Clitander) and the tragedy *Médée* (Medea) performed in turns, after which he went back to the tragicomedy with his *Cid* (The Cid), all the while staging a whole series of comedies in parallel.

Other writers did not know how to distinguish between tragedies and all other plays: tragicomedies, pastoral plays..., and wrongly gave the name “tragedy” to their own plays, which were far from tragedies in their dramatic action and characters.

¹ “Blaže Koneski” Faculty of Philology, Sts Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje

Such was the case of *Panthée* (Panthea), which had a theme from secular history, and was rewritten by Durval and Tristan, and before them by Hardy.

Panthée (Panthea) by Durval bears the subtitle “tragedy”, even though the play is farthest from the genre. Consisting of a mix of heroic, comic and pathetic scenes, this play suggests a tragicomedy in all its aspects. Hardy, according to Rigal (1889), had already elaborated the same subject himself, in order to make of it a true classical tragedy, making Panthea his main character, and establishing a link between her gratitude for Cyrus and the introduction of her husband Abradaste, ready to betray his country and eventually side with Panthea’s supporter. In short, Tristan followed the same development of the action as Hardy, while Durval markedly differs in the background: Panthea tries to persuade Abradaste to leave his country because she is afraid of its new ruler. Durval’s play is consists of a series of scenes taken from Xenophon, without a central character nor tragic action, and of a picturesque atmosphere as in the example of the woman who shoots an arrow at her lover, to which arrow are attached a few hairs as a token of love.

Let us consider some of the comical elements of Durval’s play, for example:

Laue luy bien la teste

et :

ne le dore point tant cette amere pillule (II.2)

et enfin :

taster le poux aux meilleurs combattans

et :

comme des Renards ils se couurent de terre (III.1).²

We can also add this short satire on the topic of physicians (III.3):

Vous veyez imiter les Medecins Chimiques

Et quant il faut guerir les miserres publiques,

Vous pouuez apliquer aux fortes poisons

Vn peu d’essence d’or, et de belles raisons.³

This evolution of *dispositio* in the tragedy genre is not a fact purely characteristic of the 17th century. Similarly, the classical plays from the period of Aeschylus to that of Euripides also underwent a process of evolution. From simple plays where the

2

3 Wash well his head

don’t gild it so much, this bitter pill (II.2)

feel the pulse of the best fighters

like foxes they cover themselves with earth (III.1). (translation by the author)

protagonist had only one decision to make, there was a progress to the tragedies which became more complex, with more characters which impede the denouement and engage in terrible confrontations, where enemy justices oppose each other violently, and where gods and men confront each other. The reversals of fate and the protagonist's own contradictions ensure that he remain a prisoner of a contradictory situation and his actions reveal to him what he is, without him truly seeing the cause of his flaw, nor of his actions. Such is Greek tragedy, whose themes are also borrowed by Latin poets who rework the *dispositio*, the tragic action, to emphasize the horror and despair and thus further reach the viewer. From pathetic subject matter and moral teachings, gnomic or lyrical parts and the use of a chorus – which does not really serve the plot, because it focuses too often on long monologues – we move on to works where effective action is in the foreground and where conflict is at the heart of the plot. A crisis begins after a conflict between gods and men, between men, or within man himself. This is a truly tragic sight, but not in the same manner as Greek tragedy. To ensure the effect of fear, the dramatic poem of the 17th century, on the other hand, has to submit itself to the limitations of the classical rules whose goal is to concentrate emotion. Passions are presented to the audience in order to show them all the disorder that they have caused, and vices are depicted in such a way as to convey and hate deformity. Sovereignty, tyranny, legitimacy, marriage, love, or choice of a religious exile, are all themes both modern and classical. Tragedies do use some classical themes, but also transform them in order to make them understandable and believable for the contemporary audience.

To illustrate our thoughts, we will rely on the comparison of the dramatic action of the plays from our corpus of study with that of their sources.

The action of *Saül le furieux* (Saul the Furious) by Jean de la Taille, written in the 16th century, is based on 1 Samuel 18 and 31, and 2 Samuel 1. The play opens with Saul experiencing an excess of dementia, which calls to mind Seneca's strong influence on the authors of the 16th century, without which the action as a whole would be reduced to the representation of Saul's character on the eve of his death. The play contains no plot twists (peripeties), it does not even have a proper plot. Psychological conflicts which are characteristic of 17th century tragedies are absent here, because the fight, whose seat is the hero's soul, is different. We are not dealing with action governed, act after act, by the decisions or oscillations of the hero's will. Based on this understanding of tragic interest that *Saül le furieux* proposes, this play can be considered a Renaissance tragedy. The composition and style of the play were classically influenced, even if the three unities of drama, specified by the author himself in his *Art de la Tragédie* (Art of Tragedy), are respected; including that of place. We are *in medias res*, near the disaster, but the tragedy still continues after the death of the hero. The poet also uses stories, narratives and descriptions, while atrocities are banned from the scene. Nevertheless, the stories in *Saül le furieux* are too many for the play to be accepted as a classic work. Despite this, there is a notable restriction

in the number of monologues, as well as an absence of the usual lamentations at the beginning of the play – which are characteristic of the 16th century. Ultimately, we can conclude that Jean de la Taille really instilled a certain modernity in the dramatic action in relation to its classical sources, and a more or less visible approach towards the classical constraints distinguishes itself in the most humane character of his hero by his clemency, transforming him into a character who reasons, but, because struck down by fate, is nothing more than a mere toy in the hands of the gods.

Montchrestien, meanwhile, likes to keep in his plays a languid dramatic action, which is one of the characteristics of 16th century plays. Instead of fighting, his characters express themselves through long tirades. Thus, his Mary Stuart narrates all the misfortunes of her life in a long series of lines, while the dramatic action does not progress even one step. Montchrestien did not have Mary Stuart confront her enemy, that is to say this meeting would have been contrary to history, but the construction of these five acts of *L'Ecossaise* (The Scottish Queen) is fairly light and somewhat disjointed, which can be seen in the frame of the play: Act I. Elisabeth hesitates to have Mary Stuart killed. –Act II. After hesitating again, she decides to spare her life. –Act III. Mary Stuart laments all her misfortunes; she is told of her conviction. –Act IV. Her farewell to life. –Act V. An account of her death. This work is more like a “dramatic elegy” than a tragedy, particularly because of the lack of thorough character analyses.

Let us give another example: the *Médée* (Medea) by Corneille. The author points out the political background of the story of Medea, and complicates the amorous plot by introducing in his play the character of Aegeus, who is in love with Creusa and a rival of Jason. The public loves this new genre, as it is charming to their eyes “by the diversity and change of scene.” Corneille felt that this play was the least successful, however we believe that this piece is noteworthy because of the transformation that Corneille imposed on the tragic action, thus making it different from its source.

This tendency towards variety, movement and horror developed by Corneille in his *Médée* is also seen in Rotrou's tragedy of *Crisante* (1635), which shows a dying man stepping onto the scene and throwing himself on the body of his wife, who has just stabbed herself, all of which happens two steps away from the bloody head of the Roman officer who dishonoured them both; where we see Calpurnia or Herod suddenly awakened from a restless sleep; Hercules and Creusa collapsing on stage by surrendering to pain; where we see the unexpected intervention of Deianira in the middle of a gallant declaration of love by Hercules to Iole, and sudden changes in Medea's attitude at a time when we believe she is out of danger.

The first three acts of Corneille's *Horace* (Horatius) are incomparable from a technical point of view, from a point of view of the action and because of the unexpected twists. The tragedy could have ended with the death of Curiace and the heroism of Horace, but Corneille goes further with the last two acts - an extension of the story that he has not borrowed from the legend, nor the historical account by Titus

Livius. Some parts, however, artificially delay the denouement, such as certain scenes of declamation, monologues, and the Scene 4 between Sabine and Camille. The unity of action seems to suffer from this artificial device. Corneille admits this himself. He condemns the murder of Camille, he calls it “the second peril Horace falls into after having exited the first.” Her murder is horrible, but the character attracts less pity than we might have thought. Camille had to perish because she could not have lived resigned to her misfortune. Moreover, Corneille faithfully followed the legend which should be held solely responsible for the violation of the laws of Aristotle and for the apparent duplicity of the action.

The dramatic action is designed differently in *Cléopâtre* (Cleopatra) by Benserade, and in one of its sources, *Marc-Antoine* (Mark Antony) by Garnier. Benserade approaches the theme more directly. The long monologues of the beginning of Act I, whose role is to inform the audience of the hero’s story and the position he finds himself in just before the beginning of the tragic action, are replaced by an introduction more personal and sentimental in tone, conveyed through a dialogue between two people. The stories of the exploits, the remembering of the divine origins and mythological powers that decided the life and destiny of men are not mentioned.

In Act I of the play by Benserade, there is also the dialogue between Cleopatra and her confidantes, with a statement on the choice of Cleopatra between her love for Mark Antony and for her country. On the other hand, in the play by Garnier, the same dialogue is located in Act II, and the dramatic action is therefore more extended. The Benserade Act II takes place in the opposing camp, where a discussion between Caesar and Agrippa is held. The continuous compression of the dramatic action and the dialogue between Mark Antony and Lucilius from Act III by Garnier is found in Act II Scene 2 in the play by Benserade; the short dialogue between Caesar and Agrippa from Act II Scene 1 by Benserade is, in fact, Act IV in Garnier’s play. Moreover, Dircet does not retell the death of Mark Antony to Caesar and Agrippa anymore, as is the case in the play by Garnier, but in fact tells it to Cleopatra (in Benserade, Act II, Scene 3). Benserade also took the liberty to add an episode in the plot that does not appear in Garnier: Cleopatra tries to fake her death in order to show Mark Antony that she loves him more than she loves her country, and that she can no longer suffer his jealousy.

The death of Mark Antony is told by Dircet to Caesar in the play by Garnier, while in Benserade’s play the deaths of Eros and of Mark Antony happen on stage. The event is crucial to the play, and is what led Benserade to develop it. In the play by Benserade, the cause of the death of Mark Antony is the “death” of Cleopatra, which proves that love is an important means of propelling the action in 17th century plays, while in the play by Garnier, Mark Antony kills himself because he does not want to be a prisoner. Here he is a victim of war, not a victim of love.

Because of their dramatic action, the plays of the 16th century resemble novels more than they resemble the plays of the 17th century. Let us consider the evidence

in Act IV of Garnier's play, the account of Mark Antony's death and his transport to the tomb, ordered by Cleopatra. As she did not wish to open the gates of the city, for fear of being taken as spoils to Rome, she instructs her women to tie Mark Antony, all covered in blood and only just dead, and lift him up through the window. This whole section, worthy of being included in a novel, was not used by Benserade in his play.

The great merit of Scudéry in *Didon* (Dido) is the full use of speeches taken from the *Aeneid*; he begins the action much sooner than his predecessors, at the arrival of the Trojans at Carthage, which leads us to believe that he did not only rely on Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, but also on Books 1 and 2. This is why the crisis erupts as late as Act IV, where we can find gathered the main parts of the dialogue between Aeneas and Dido, used respectively by Jodelle and by Hardy, in Act II. Scudéry's process has the advantage of capturing the attention of the audience throughout the play, as in the *Aeneid*. It shows the birth, life and death of the love between the two heroes, as well as the death of Dido. The temporal boundaries no longer fulfil the rule of twenty-four hours, and the changes in location defy the rule of the unity of place. However, the dramatization of the play is remarkable compared to previous plays.

The scene of the confrontation in Act IV is also inspired by Virgil. Among Scudéry's predecessors, this scene is either cluttered with scholarly allusions as in Jodelle, or drowned in arguments as in Hardy. Act V is surprising, especially because of the great curse and evocation of the stake when Aeneas is not yet gone, and also because of Dido's cunning (the ritual was meaningful in Virgil's *Aeneid* because it was intended to bring the unfaithful to romantic feelings, while in Scudéry's play it is meaningless because the lover is already too far). The construction of the stake is also problematic because it lasts several scenes. These "misunderstandings" could perhaps be explained by the lack of interest manifested by the author for Dido the magician and deadly love. Scudéry is actually much more interested in the theme of gallantry. He is faithful to Virgil's Dido who is prey to the passions of love, but he wants to bend Aeneas to the rules of gallantry. To do this, he removes some lines that would hurt the heart of the lover, such as the line where Virgil's Aeneas affirms that he has never promised to marry her, and adds other lines, such as line 1102, "I will never forget that I was loved and that I love" ("Je n'oublierai jamais qu'on m'aimait et que j'aime"); and the lines where he announces that there would be nothing sweeter than being in Carthage:

Comme aujourd'hui qu'Amour a sur moi l'avantage
Je n'aurais plus de soins que pour ceux de Carthage
(v. 1121-1122)⁴

4 You aim to imitate the physicians' chemistry
But when it's time to cure the people's misery,

or when he seeks, through love, to delay his departure and finally say that if he leaves it is to defend Dido from the vengeance of the gods. All these differences from the original text, or those of the predecessors, are intended to update the work, to make it more contemporary, and satisfy the demands of the audience: Dido has two guards near her throne, she is surrounded by her daughters and her courtiers, and politely addresses her sister and maid of honour Barce as “vous”, who in turn address her respectfully as “madame”. Scudéry’s Dido is thus transformed and no longer narrates a crisis as in the predecessors’ plays, but tells of the birth of a crisis, a process that would come from the romantic tragicomedy. This notion of crisis is still unclear in 1635 and it is far too early to talk of a “tragedy of action” at that time. Scudéry, however, already announces the classical age in his works by the effort of concentration in which he indulges: he shortens a part of the first encounter between the two heroes, beginning the play with the end of the dinner, and he is satisfied to relate the fall of Troy, which is only a small episode in Virgil’s long account of the exploits of Aeneas.

In conclusion, following the analysis of the dramatic action of some plays of the corpus of “preneoclassical” tragedies, chosen for their representativeness, we can say that the visible difference between *dispositio* in a classical tragedy from Antiquity, in the 16th century (lyric and passive tragedy) and in a tragedy of the 17th century is manifested not only by the suppression of the choruses and long monologues, by the suppression of long narratives and multiple plot twists (peripeties), but also a tendency towards the effort of concentration of the action and the plot. Thus, we are no longer immersed in an infinite number of arguments or lamentations, and the amorous plot gains importance, making the man a more gallant being, and the woman a prey to the passions of love.

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