SOURCES OF DRAMATIC THEORY

2: Voltaire to Hugo

Edited and annotated by

MICHAEL J. SIDNELL

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This second volume of *Sources of Dramatic Theory* includes major theoretical writings on drama and theatre from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, focusing on issues that are still relevant to our understanding of the genres. Among the writers represented by their own essays or substantial extracts from longer works are Voltaire, Diderot, Goldoni, Dr. Johnson, Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Hegel, and Coleridge. Mlle Dumesnil, Carlo Gozzi, and Joanna Baillie are among the less frequently cited theorists, and there is also a selection of decrees from the French Revolution. Many of the texts have been newly translated for this volume and all have been newly annotated and introduced. Recurrent topics and allusions are traced by a system of cross-references.

Michael Sidnell's introduction explores some of the perennial issues surfacing in these writings, such as: the nature of imitation, the relationship between writing and acting, the role of theatre in making and sustaining cultural and national cohesion, and the effects of performance on audience behavior.

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Volume 2

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NOTE ON THE TEXTS

Many of the translations included in this volume have been specially made for it by the editors, as indicated below. The other translations used are: John W. Miller's of Goldoni; Ellen and Ernest H. von Nardroff's of the selections from Goethe's "Shakespeare: A Tribute," "On Epic and Dramatic Poetry," "Shakespeare Once Again," and "On Interpreting Aristotle's *Poetics*"; Thomas Carlyle's of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*; F. J. Lamport's of Schiller's Prologue to *Wallenstein*; John Black's of Schlegel (with revisions by A. J. W. Morrison and Jean Wilson); and T. M. Knox's of Hegel.

The primary responsibilities for the notes, commentary, and the new translations are as follows:

Barbara Kerslake: the translations of, the introductory notes to, and the annotation of, the selections from: Voltaire and Diderot.

Lawrence Kerslake: the translations of, the introductory notes to, and the annotation of, the selections from: Beaumarchais, Stendhal, and Hugo.

Domenico Pietropaolo: the translations of, the introductory notes to, and the annotation of, the selections from: Metastasio and Gozzi, and the introductory notes to, and the annotation of, the selection from Goldoni.

Natalie Rewa: the translations of, the introductory notes to, and the annotation of, the selections from: Decrees and Documents of the French Revolution, Dumesnil, and de Staël.

Michael J. Sidnell: the general introduction, including the translations from Diderot and Beaumarchais; the introductory notes to, and the annotation of, the selections from: Steele, Johnson, Hume, Baillie, Hegel, Coleridge, and Hazlitt; and the cross-references and Bibliography.

Jean Wilson: the translations of, the introductory notes to, and the annotation of, the selections from: Lessing, Schiller (except for the translation from *Wallenstein*), and Kleist; the introductory notes to, and the annotation of, the selections from Goethe and Schlegel.

ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout the volume a system of cross-references has been used to signal and locate for comparison passages that appear either in this volume or in volume 1. These cross-references are in the form <1:Cv/129>, which refers to p. 129 of the Castelvetro entry in volume 1, or <Gt/136>, which refers to p. 136 of the Goethe entry in this volume. In the case of Horace's *The Art of Poetry* the line number follows the page number: <1:Hr/69:180>. The abbreviations used are:

Ar	Aristotle
Bl	Baillie
Bm	Beaumarchais
Cd	On *Le Cid*
Cg	Congreve
Cn	Corneille
Co	Coleridge
Cv	Castelvetro
Db	D'Aubignac
Dd	Dryden
Dl	Dumesnil
Dn	Donatus
Dt	Diderot
Ed	Edwards
Fr	Decrees of the French Revolution
Gd	Giraldi
Gl	Goldoni
Gm	Giacomini
Go	Gozzi
Gt	Goethe
Gu	Guarini
Gz	Grazzini
Hg	Hegel
Hm	Hume
Hr	Horace
Hu	Hugo
Hw	Heywood
Hz	Hazlitt
Ig	Ingegneri
In	Introduction to volume 1 or 2, as indicated
Jh	Johnson
Jn	Jonson
Kl	Kleist
Lg	Lessing
Lp	Lope de Vega
Mt	Metastasio
Nh	Torres Naharro
Od	Oddi
Pl	Plato
Rb	Robortello
Rc	Racine
Rm	Rymer
Sa	de Staël
Sd	Stendhal
Se	Saint-Evremond
Sg	Scaliger
Sl	Schlegel
Sr	Schiller
St	Steele
Sy	Sidney
Tm	Tirso de Molina
Vt	Voltaire
Wh	Whetstone

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INTRODUCTION

In this final decade of the twentieth century, having survived a phase in which its very existence was in question, Western theatre flourishes; and it does so despite the dominance of dramatizations in other artistic media. One reason for this renewed vitality is that, having all but lost certain historic communicational and social functions to television, video, and film, theatre has reaffirmed its distinctiveness as a Hegelian mode of knowing through involvement <Hg/206; Hz/241>, a medium for live actors performing for present spectators in real time. On this understanding, it has drawn on the performance traditions of many cultures as sources for renewal,[1] and has partly thrown off the old submission to playwrights – or rather to writing – that has shaped its history for nearly five hundred years. But Western theatre has by no means surrendered its claims to the performance of literature: on the contrary, it has tended to widen its scope to include the staging of novels and other kinds of non-dramatic writing, in addition to the playscripts which remain its staple material.

The fourth volume in this series will attempt to match the intercultural emphasis on performance that animates contemporary theatre, but this second volume (and the third) will be concerned, like the first, with ideas about drama as a social practice that assumes – sometimes questionably – the stage performance of works written for that purpose; and assumes also that the dramatic literary genre and theatrical performance are congruent. In Schlegel and Hegel <Sl/193; Hg/209> especially, this supposed congruence is founded on (performed) drama's unique capacity for combining the sensuous with the ideal.

Before the end of the eighteenth century, "dramatic" usually referred to theatrical performance but during the nineteenth the term acquired more literary connotations and, in the course of the present century, began to provide English with the handy though insufficient distinction, now commonly used, between written texts ("drama") and performance

[1] See Barba and Savarese 1991 and Fischer-Lichte, Riley, and Gissenwehrer 1990.

("theatre").[2] In France, Mlle Dumesnil had tried much earlier to establish an equivalent verbal and conceptual distinction <Dl/95> by way of asserting the performer's claims to a creativity equivalent to that of the playwright.[3] In their wider uses, the two terms frequently imply different evaluations: "dramatic" words and deeds being generally more estimable than "theatrical" ones.[4] This distinction, and the greater flexibility of the term "drama" – sometimes embracing film, television, and theatre, as well as literature – are consistent with the emphasis on the linguistic and literary components in most European dramatic theory <1:In/6–7>; and also with an actual practice in which the written text has aspired to dominate theatre. The valuation that Castelvetro, in the sixteenth century, gives to non-verbal theatrical expression <1:Cv/129> is exceptional in the context of theoretical writings of his time and earlier, and it remains so long afterwards.

If the traditional assumptions – or prejudices – about the fundamental literariness of drama are clearly limiting, they have also proved highly productive in the context of Western drama and theatre, sustaining theatrical, as well as literary efforts; and supplying the concepts and analytical methods for a theoretical discourse that has been in progress, now, for over two thousand years. In this discourse, the tripartite division of three genres of literature remains remarkably stable until, with Hugo, the neo-classical distinctions between lyric, epic, and dramatic begin to break down and the genres to fuse <Hu/260>. But, if the genre of dramatic literature is stable, the assumed literary-theatrical compound of drama in performance is less so, especially in the period covered by this volume, from the early eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, when the separation of its literary and theatrical constituents is sometimes quite unsettling for theorists of drama and playwrights. "Theatre is literature in action," says de Staël <Sa/184> but Baillie <Bl/178> is only one of many playwrights who find in the theatre action that is anything but literary.

The importance commonly attached to dramatic literature is associated with that of language itself in instantiating cultural coherence and expressing national sentiments; and, when one adds to the literary and linguistic aspects of drama, the theatrical ones of culturally specific non-verbal conventions and manners, and immediate, collective reception, there is good reason for theatre to be more bound up with ideas (and prejudices) about ethnicity and nationhood than other fine arts; and for national theatres to be seen as vital political institutions: "if we had a national theatre," says Schiller, "we would also be a nation" <Sr/161>.

[2] See also the brief account of "dramatic" in Williams 1983, 109–10.

[3] François Riccoboni, similarly motivated, attempted to distinguish "l'art du théâtre" and "le poëtique du théâtre", the latter signifying the art of *writing* tragedies and comedies, and the former signifying the art of performance. Riccoboni 1750/1971, 4–5.

[4] See Barish 1981, 323ff.

Such ideas are by no means new – in Lope de Vega <1:Lp/184> and Dryden <1:Dd/285> they are fundamental – but they are especially common in the dramatic theory of the period covered by this volume; and they are subject to critical scrutiny in the writings of Schlegel and de Staël, especially.

The usual privileging of the literary genre is founded on three main assumptions: first, that the writing precedes the playing; second, that what is essential in drama is, as Aristotle insisted – but with respect to tragedy only – accessible through reading <1:Ar/7>; and third, that written drama can actually inscribe theatricality and is thus distinct from other literary genres – lyric, for instance – that theatre uses. The first of these assumptions is founded on a general practice in Western theatre. In Diderot's theory, however, allowance is made for a non-verbal content supplied by actors: "We talk too much in our plays, and consequently the actors have little chance to act," says Diderot's Dorval <Dt/42>. He also allows his actors to "rearrange the text" somewhat, with the idea that such freedom enables that strong emotional involvement of the spectators which is stirred by representations of moments of silence and incapacity for speech. More oppositionally, we see writing set off against playing in Gozzi's defense of the *commedia dell'arte* <Go/103> from Goldoni's attempt <Gl/72> to reform the genre by bringing theatre more firmly under the control of literature, and thus making it socially critical. We also have the extraordinary dramatic spectacle – as it was conceived in its own time and has been since (Butwin 1975) – of the French Revolution, in which theatrical performance is regarded as, first and foremost, a political activity. Rather paradoxically, though, the officially preferred basis for such celebrations of republican citizenship was old tragedies <Fr/173>. In England, we hear the reiterated complaint <Bl/180> that "legitimate drama" is being driven from the theatre by all manner of "illegitimate" shows, about how ill-accommodated dramatic literature is by actual theatre practice.

The second assumption privileging the literary genre is tersely articulated by Dr. Johnson: "A play read, affects the mind like a play acted" <Jh/86>. The epigrammatic certitude of this statement is enabled by the ambiguity of "play," as it has developed in English usage from a word signifying such physical activity as dancing and leaping for joy to a term for a literary text: reading a "play" is rather like eating a bill of fare, from a certain etymological point of view. The French language does something similar in entitling a playwright's collected writings *le thèâtre de* ... somebody or other. In such usages there may be lurking the understanding that, if the staged play represents the world, the read play represents not the world but the stage <Sl/193>. Shakespeare's plays are particularly prone to be praised as dramas for which staging is superfluous.

As to the third assumption privileging writing, the idea that it can inscribe theatre, Steele asserts that "the greatest effect of a play in reading

is to excite the reader to go see it," but what the spectators saw of his *The Conscious Lovers* was not what he had devised for them, and he made publication an occasion for pointing out, and doing his best to make good, the stage production's substitution of instrumental music for a song <St/18>. Goethe remarks that "a good play can be in fact only half transmitted in writing, a great part of its effect depending on the scene, the personal qualities of the actor, the powers of his voice, the peculiarities of his gestures, and even the spirit and favorable humour of the spectators" (Goethe/Eastlake 1967, xxviii). Hazlitt agrees with him <Hz/241> but, on the other hand, mostly prefers his Shakespeare read, rather than performed. And, on this point, Goethe agrees with *him*, claiming that Shakespeare's "living world" is better conveyed by reading aloud than by stage performance <Gt/146>. Either way, to define what may be and cannot be transmitted in the theatre, or what may be and cannot be "committed to paper" – that is to say, what the relationship might be between the inscripted and unscripted parts of a "play" proves a compelling, intractable, and often contentious problem.

One thing is certain, though: in an age deeply preoccupied with the theory and practice of acting, ideas about acting are critical to the understanding of what belongs to writing and what to the stage. The different views and practices of the Riccobonis, father and son, bear on this issue, as do those of the rival French players Clairon and Dumesnil <Dl/94>, or of two later players commonly paired, Bernhardt and Duse.[5] François Riccoboni and Hippolyte Clairon both advocate systematic study and conscious application of acting technique, and tend thus towards the idea of the actor as an interpretive medium bodying forth the character drawn by the writer. On the other hand, Luigi Riccoboni's insistence on real feelings on stage, like Dumesnil's reliance on passion, intuition, and nature, comes from the conviction that the actor is a creator – not just an interpreter – of roles; one who introduces into the work an *authentic subject*, another author.

This key issue of the collaboration, intervention, or suppression of the performer as a distinct creative source and subject-presence arises in many forms. Diderot's fictional-theoretical actors of *Le Fils naturel* play themselves: in the most intimate possible relation between acting and living they *are* the characters they play <Dt/35>. Lessing discovers that mediocre plays leave more room for the actor-subject than great ones <Lg/115>, a view shared by Hazlitt <Hz/241>. In Goethe's *Wilhelm*

[5] In his *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différents théâtres de l'Europe, avec les pensées sur la declamation* (1738) the *commedia dell'arte* actor Luigi Riccoboni (1676–1753) advocated the achievement of illusion through the actor's emotional immersion in the role: his son, Antonio Francesco Riccoboni (1707–72), in his *L'Art du théâtre: à Madame xxx* (1750), favored detachment, technique, and control. On Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) and Eleonora Duse (1858–1924), see States 1987, 166–70.

Meister, the Manager, Serlo, insists that the actor give himself utterly to the character but also considers how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* might best be adapted to the demands of the public <Gt/143>! Elsewhere Goethe contrasts the epic narrator, who should be invisible, with the actor who should be intensely present to the audience, but only as the embodiment of the character represented <Gt/145>. Hegel insists that actors should be regarded as genuine artists but, at the same time, that the actor should be a "sponge," bound by the conditions of theatrical art to immolate all selfhood in the realization of the character drawn by the playwright <Hg/213>. Most insidious, because it appears to be a truism, is the view that the actor's person should conform with the playwright's imagination; that typecasting (as it has come to be called) is a given of theatrical performance. On this understanding, the playwright (or director) may rightly require that the actor not only "match as far as possible the prevalent conceptions of his fictitious original in sex, age, and figure, but assume his entire personality" <Sl/193>. In such matching of gender, age, and physique the theatre performs silently its office of imitating life and, at the same time, confirms prejudices, stereotypes, and ideals; as when Goethe's Wilhelm Meister persuades himself that Hamlet must be blue-eyed, blonde, and plump <Gt/140>. But Diderot – the later Diderot, at least – would not have found it impossible to accept today's conventions (which are not operative in the non-theatrical media and not ubiquitously on the stage, of course) whereby a black actor may be cast as an eighteenth-century European, a woman play a male role, or an adult actor represent a child. In the period covered by this volume, the discussion is about how actor and character might merge – whether by empathy or technique – rather than whether they should; though there is also a recognition that the spectators go to see a David Garrick or an Edmund Kean more than the characters they play <Hz/246>.

Garrick, indeed, was for many spectators the outstanding example of what, in theory, acting should be. Diderot, who became acquainted with him during Garrick's Continental tour of 1763–65, found in the English actor's performances the model for an art whereby the character's emotions might be conveyed through technique and control, rather than through the personal emotion or empathy of the actor. So, in the posthumously published *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, he writes:

> As far as I am concerned, [a great actor] must have excellent judgment; he must have within him a cool and detached observer; it follows that what I require of him is perspicuity and not sensitivity, the art of imitating everything or, what is the same thing, an equal aptitude for all sorts of characters and roles. ... What confirms me in this opinion is the unevenness of actors who play from the heart. Expect no unity from them; their acting is alternately strong and weak, hot and cold, flat and sublime.

> Tomorrow they will miss the moment that they have excelled in today; they will make up for this by excelling where they failed on the previous occasion. On the other hand, the actor who plays from premeditation, from the study of human nature, from a consistent imitation of some concrete conception, from imagination, from memory, will be coherent, the same at every performance, always equally proficient: everything has been weighed, combined, learnt, and mentally ordered. In his delivery there is neither monotony nor dissonance. Passion is progressive with its peaks and abatements, its beginning, its middle, and its end. The intonations are the same, the positions are the same, the movements are the same; if there is any difference from performance to performance, it is usually in the superiority of the most recent. He will not change day by day; he is a mirror, always poised to reflect actualities and to show them with the same precision, the same power, and the same truth. Every bit as much as the poet he will draw from nature's inexhaustible depths rather than confronting the exhaustion of his own resources.[6]

For Lessing, another admirer of Garrick, the sustained analysis of acting and theatrical production was the motive for initiating the series of papers later collected as *Hamburg Dramaturgy* <Lg/107>. His abandonment of this original intention in favor of a series of more abstractly theoretical discussions of drama, though it opened the way to achievements of other kinds, was a significant failure, anticipating some of the difficulties that have confronted later attempts to make objective analyses of the intersubjective arts of the theatre. But, in the early numbers of the periodical, Lessing does make really penetrating observations on the relation between writing and acting. For him, this relation is fundamentally a dialectical one, whereby the speech, gesture, and expression of the actor far from offering simply to reiterate, illustrate, or interpret anterior verbal meanings, should register, even resist, the impact of the given (abstract) words on a natural being – the actor <Lg/109>. In Kleist's subtle and prophetic meditation on marionettes, however, naturalness, knowledge, and self-awareness are antithetical to a non-human performative perfection <Kl/235>.

For Lessing, it would appear, the transformation of the playwright's words into the utterances and other physical expressions of the actor (in dialogue with the spectators) is the second stage of a transformation of the arbitrary signs of language into the natural signs of speech <Lg/126>. The first stage of this transformation (which is the antithesis of the *de*familiarization associated with Brechtian theory) is writing in dialogue form, from which the supremacy of drama among the arts (for Lessing as for Hegel) derives; dramatic dialogue being the medium that, to a greater extent than

[6] Newly translated from Diderot 1967, 128–29. See Burwick 1991, 44ff. for a succinct discussion of the levels of paradox in the *Paradoxe*.

any other, effects a sensuous, natural representation of abstract ideas (or spirit) <Hg/211>.

In Lessing, the processes of dramatic and theatrical naturalization serve to disclose the operations of a providential nature, which all proper art necessarily reveals <Lg/121>. Diderot (to whose thought Lessing is so heavily indebted) illustrates theatrical mediation between providence and human society in an extraordinarily subtle and complex work, of which it might be said that its mixture of genres is its message. The play it contains (*Le Fils naturel*) is deliberately – and perhaps rather deceptively – non-theatrical in that it is incorporated in a narrative context and is the occasion for a theoretical dialogue <Dt/45>. Overall, the work is generically less theatrical than narrative, more theoretical than theatrical. In it, Diderot envisages a role for the playwright as the (reluctant) dramaturge of his family's crisis, which he scripts for performance by its members, who play themselves for themselves alone. This performance is intended by its supposed originator to be a kind of secular, domestic ritual (celebrating the avoidance of unconscious incest) and it should be a more inspiring legacy than painted family portraits can ever be. Given in the privacy of the family drawing-room, such a performance is altogether different from others of its day but not radically different, in terms of its social function, from ancient theatre, perhaps. The kind of theatre envisaged by Diderot would be immune, incidentally, to the strictures against public theatres and professional players that Jean-Jacques Rousseau re-invokes in his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758).[7] But a better match for Rousseau is the unpuritanical Hazlitt, who sees actors as exemplars of style and grace and who experiences the theatre as matter for conversation, as a medium of history and morality, and as an engine of civility <Hz/243>.

As playwright, Diderot's Dorval has the office of giving performable shape to actual events, which in practice requires that the thoughts and feelings of the players, who have incomparably the most intimate understanding – but also a too involved and self-reflexive one – of the roles they play, be not only articulated but restrained by formal requirements. This playwright mediates between the personal involvement of the participants in the actual events and their mimetic reiteration of it, in order to make representation possible; but the playwright in Diderot's narrative is not "really writing for the stage" <Dt/38> and, what is more important, the players in it are unable, finally, to sustain the detachment necessary for the re-enactment of what they have lived through and are still, therefore, living. And this, perhaps, is the salient point: that the representation is *not*

[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) wrote it in response to d'Alembert's article on Geneva in Diderot's *Encyclopedia*. Rousseau uses some standard and some ingenious arguments <Lg/116> in favor of the prohibition of theatre in Geneva. His argument that drama ineluctably presents vice in an attractive form is echoed by Schiller in "Preface to *The Robbers*" <Sr/155>.

quite possible. Actual stagings of *Le Fils naturel*, or attempts to evaluate its "stage-worthiness," negate this theme of the work, of course.

Conflicts between the needs of representation and the circumstances of performance necessarily arise in a medium founded on intersubjective relations amongst performers, and between performers and spectators. Lessing was surprised to discover what Hazlitt so acutely realized, that even writing about performances interferes with performances, and that acting does not consist of objective phenomena. Goethe's Wilhelm Meister <Gt/137> comes to understand, through his intimate involvement in it, the modifications that theatrical performance undergoes in response to the pulsating emotional life of the occasions in which it is immersed. A very direct channel between the work and life is the dialogue with the audience that Hegel supposes to be a necessary characteristic of all works of art <Hg/209>. In the theatre, playwrights and actors may compete for control over that dialogue <Sl/194>, especially if they do not share with the audience, and with each other, an understanding about a creative polyphony <Dl/100>.

For playwrights, one radical solution to the problems of theatrical intersubjectivity is to avoid the theatrical medium. Dramatic form is employed without theatrical restraints or contamination for an audience of readers. This closeting of drama becomes a practice commoner in the nineteenth century than at any earlier time. Fears about the social effects of the theatre, contempt for its degenerate condition, a pre-cinematic drive toward visual images more fluid, extensive, and objective than scenography can match, and even, ultimately, the conviction that the compelling action in drama is an imaginative one that can only be hampered by physical action on the stage, and will be brought to a halt by dancing – all these conspire, in various combinations, to make "drama" separated from the theatre a viable and estimable literary genre.

Insofar as Joanna Baillie was a closet dramatist, she was so by default and her critique <Bl/178> of architectural determinants of performance, of the obstacles imposed by enormous theatres to certain kinds of plays and acting, discloses significant incongruities between ideas about dramaturgy on the one hand and about performance (and economy) on the other. This was a matter of concern for many writers but few inquired into it as closely as Baillie did. More commonly, contemporary theatrical practice was proposed as a major cause of the perceptible "decline of the drama."

Many poets write plays, they say, without ambitions for the theatre; or not, at least, for the theatre of the day. Schiller's *The Robbers* is a renowned example of a play intended for the closet, using the literary methods of drama in order to "catch the most secret operations of the soul," as Schiller says in his Preface <Sr/154>. Schiller's implication that dramatic form is an analogue of these "most secret operations" harks back to Plato and

anticipates many modern attempts (such as the Nighttown episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*) to dramatize subjective life. But the main reason Schiller gives for not staging the play is that its portrayal of vice is too realistic and (necessarily) too attractive for a proper decorum of the stage, given theatre's peculiarly immediate appeal to the spectators. (In the event, though, *The Robbers* proved immensely successful in the performance it was soon given.) Verse drama, especially, tends to retire to the closet, where the "supersensuous" ambitions of poetry <Sr/153> may be least inhibited. Byron, despite his personal and official (though brief) attachment to the theatre, and despite the fact that many of his plays were staged, often disavows any theatrical intentions in writing them. In the Preface to *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice* (produced at Drury Lane in 1821) he insists that he "never made the attempt, and never will" to write "a play which could be deemed stage-worthy" (Byron 1844, 196). But Byron encouraged Drury Lane to produce Joanna Baillie's plays <Bl/177> and urged Coleridge to write for the stage <Co/219>, in the belief that playwrights with the requisite poetic ability were in a position to reform the theatre.

But the theatre's shortcomings are not always the reason for insulating "drama" from it. Sometimes the best artistry of the stage, especially acting, is what makes it an uncongenial medium. Charles Lamb takes both views in his commentary on the "painful and disgusting" spectacles offered by productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. On the one hand, theatrical presentation may be all too effective; on the other hand, it may demonstrate the hopeless representational inadequacy of the theatre. Lamb's undisguised susceptibilities to theatrical (as opposed to literary) effects are apparently founded on fundamental differences between reading and spectating:

> The state of sublime emotion into which we are elevated by those images of night and horror which Macbeth is made to utter, that solemn prelude with which he entertains the time till the bell shall strike which is to call him to murder Duncan, – when we no longer read it in a book, when we have given up that vantage-ground of abstraction which reading possesses over seeing, and come to see a man in bodily shape before our eyes actually preparing to commit a murder, if the acting be true and impressive, as I have witnessed it in Mr. K[ean]'s performance of that part, the painful anxiety about the act, the natural longing to prevent it while it yet seems unperpetrated, the too close pressing semblance of reality, give a pain and an uneasiness which totally destroy all the delight which the words in the book convey, where the deed doing never presses upon us with the painful sense of presence . . . .

But, as with attempts to stage *King Lear*, the inherent feebleness of theatrical representation may also be an insuperable obstacle:

> The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear . . . .[8]

Lamb's rather ingenuously emotive responses to book and stage, like Schiller's rationalist concern with stage decorum, are not inconsistent with Lessing's developed theory in his *Laocoön*, published in 1766. This work may be said to ground such intuitions in a theory of the non-transferability of the content of representations, all such content being radically affected by the particular artistic medium.

Lessing argues for the distinct potentialities of the visual arts and of poetry: the first are founded on spatial arrangements of bodies (which also exist in time, however), and the second, poetry, on temporal sequences of actions (which are, however, embodied). He was frustrated by the opposing current of Romanticism in his attempt to arrest a tendency towards the confusion of the arts and did not himself follow up the question with respect to drama's apparent *fusion*, if not confusion, of the arts. In Coleridge, we find the common understanding of the stage as "a combination of several, or of all the fine arts to an harmonious whole having a distinct end of its own" <Co/224>; in Hegel the stage is comprised by a totalizing conception of an art of drama, which is now "liberated" from dance and music. The idea of a single art of drama appears to gather strength through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the mid-twentieth century it was still current, as in the following instance:

> People are so used to defining each art by its characteristic medium that when paint is used in the theatre they class the result as "the painter's art," and because the set requires building, they regard the designer of it as architect. Drama, consequently, has so often been described as a synthesis of several or even all the arts that its autonomy, its status as a special mode of a great single art, is always in jeopardy. (Langer 1953, 320–1)

The habit of "defining each art by its characteristic medium" is precisely what Lessing hopes to encourage in *Laocoön*. He makes discriminations between the semiotics of the various artistic media in order to further the appreciation and interpretation of particular works employing them (Wellbery 1984). So, in the art of acting, the particular sensuous expression in itself, apart from (and in addition to) the fictive or other content of the representation is a major concern:

> The reporting of someone's scream produces one impression and the scream itself another. The drama, designed for living presentation by the actor, might perhaps for that very reason have to conform more strictly to material representation [as?] in painting.

[8] "On the tragedies of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for stage representation," in Lamb/Lucas 1912, 123–24.

> . . . The closer the actor approaches nature, or reality, the more our eyes and ears must be offended; for it is an incontrovertible fact that they are offended in nature itself when we perceive loud and violent expressions of pain. (Lessing/McCormick 1962, 24)

Lessing's analysis in the *Laocoön* is a considerable theoretical clarification – or transformation – of earlier ideas about decorum and reception; an analysis that also presents them in a more aesthetic, less socio-political, context. But, regrettably, *Laocoön* offers only a few glimpses of the implications for theatre of Lessing's analysis.

One such is that the proclivities of different artistic media for respectively temporal and spatial arrangement bears on the long and mostly barren discussion of the "unities" <1:In/10>. But though, in *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lessing observes that the actor's art "stands midway between the plastic arts and poetry" <Lg/110; Hg/214>, his ideas about spatial and temporal dynamics in various arts are never given the theatrical application that they invite. Their potential for a revitalized conception of the unities went unnoticed, even by Lessing himself, for though his theory strongly implies a distinctive coordination of poetic-temporal and scenic-spatial media in the theatre, he pays little attention to scenography and his attack on the neo-classical unities was conventionally rationalistic.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the achievement of verisimilitude is frequently a main reason given for adherence to the unities of time, place, and action <1:In/8–9>, as is respect for what was supposed to be the practice of the ancients and the doctrine of Aristotle <1:In/9–10>. But Antoine Houdar de la Motte (1672–1731), who ranged himself on the side of the Moderns against the Ancients in the so-called "Quarrel" between them, proposed a general "unity of interest" <Vt/25; Dt/52; Sl/202; Co/232> and, in theory, made the spectators' pleasure decisive in the judging of plays, rather than formal criteria. Voltaire and, more pragmatically, Diderot <Dt/37> defend the unities. For Diderot the unity of place is the necessary recourse of a theatre incapable of the rapid changes of scene that he would welcome. De Staël sensibly remarks that the discussion of the unities is "overworked" but finds it necessary to engage in it <Sa/185>, as do most theorists of the period. Even Hegel finds it necessary to work them into his paradigm of dramatic art <Hg/207>, though Schlegel had effectively dealt with the matter <Sl/201> on terms that are more consistent, probably, with Hegel's own conception of drama. Voltaire defends the unities against de la Motte partly out of reverence for the great practitioners of the previous generation – Corneille <1:Cn/234>, Racine <1:Rc/257>, and Molière – and also as the means of achieving credibility founded on an implacable rationality: "a single action cannot occur in several places at once," he says. "If the characters I see are in Athens in the first act, how can they be in Persia in the second?" <Vt/24>

Dr. Johnson answers Voltaire with an opposite and equal rationalism of his own:

> an action must be in some place; but the different actions that complete a story may be in places very remote from each other; and where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens, and then Sicily, which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre. <Jh/84–5>

Coleridge views this encounter of rationalists as a meeting of extremes <Co/230> and seeks to shift the discussion away from disputes about the structures of plays to consideration of audiences' states of mind. Following in Lessing's and, more particularly, in Schlegel's footsteps <Sl/198>, he regards theatrical illusion as a matter of conventional and volitional responses to the medium rather than as the consequence of a relation between the stage representation and the world, or as the product of certain formal characteristics of drama.

If questions about illusion and delusion are fundamental to the experience and understanding of theatre, the answers are such as to lead one to suppose that different individuals, or the same individuals on different occasions – or even at different moments – are infinitely various in their responses; and that problems concerning theatrical illusion pertain to all representation and hence to life itself.[9] For Lessing, like Robortello before him <1:Rb/86>, the language of poetry is distinguished from ordinary language by virtue of making its audience forget the linguistic means by which a mental image is sustained – so strongly sustained that it arouses feelings like those produced by its equivalent in reality. This being his view of theatrical images also, interruptions of the illusion, such as references to the theatre itself, are to be avoided <Lg/118; Bm/132>. In Schlegel and Coleridge, on the other hand, the voluntariness of the theatrical illusion, which depends on a degree of sophistication in the spectator, is cardinal.

Theatrical illusion is a theme for fiction, as well as theory. Diderot makes it such in his *Les bijoux indiscrets* (1748), in which compelling illusion is conceived as the chief source of theatrical pleasure. Henry Fielding, also, satirizes perfect theatrical illusion in *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling* (1749), in which Mr. Partridge, the very model of a naive, deluded spectator, gives more entertainment than the stage performance does to all those within earshot of him. Partridge's opinions on the acting are, in their own way, a great tribute to the star:

> ... Jones asked him, "Which of the players he had liked best?" To this he answered, with some appearance of indignation at the question, "The King, without doubt." – "Indeed, Mr. Partridge," says Mrs. Miller. "You are not of the same opinion with the town; for they are all agreed that Hamlet is acted by the best player who ever was on the stage." – "He the best player!" cries Partridge, with a contemptuous sneer; "why, I could act as well as he myself. I am sure, if I had seen a ghost, I should have looked in the very same manner, and done just as he did. And then, to be sure, in that scene, as you called it, between him and his mother, where you told me he acted so fine, why, Lord help me, any man, that is any good man, that had such a mother, would have done exactly the same. I know you are only joking with me; but indeed, madam, though I was never at a play in London, yet I have seen acting before in the country: and the king for my money; he speaks all his words distinctly, half as loud again as the other. – Anybody may see he is an actor."[10]

[9] For an excellent study of this issue throughout the period see Burwick 1991.

As has been remarked, the converse equivalent of Partridge's response to David Garrick's acting was felt throughout Europe, Garrick being the supreme example of an art of acting that, by concealing art, achieved moving effects of "naturalness."

Whether Partridge's reception of *Hamlet* is proper or not is easier to judge, perhaps, than whether he gets more or less pleasure than his fellow-spectators. Dr. Johnson has no time for Partridgery: "The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more" <Jh/85>. But Partridge accepts both the reality of the Ghost and the theatricality of the presentation; and his enjoyment of his emotional involvement with the action includes fear. His responses are, in fact, quite complex, and, like those of more experienced spectators, strongly emotional.

David Hume's view of the pleasure in tragedy has something in common with Johnson's but adds a specifically aesthetic dimension. For Hume, the pleasure in tragedy comes from the "consciousness of the fiction" together with its emotional truth. It arouses passions which correspond with those excited by real occasions but these passions are transmuted by art and felt with a certain detachment. So we may weep and find pleasure at the same time. Hume anticipates Kant's theory of the disinterestedness of art and of aesthetic response. In doing so, he mediates between doctrines positing real emotions aroused by close imitations, as expounded by Diderot, for whom "the real world [is] the only source of pleasure for the mind" <Dt/45> and, on the other hand, Schiller's, Hugo's, and the Romantic conception of an autonomous art reaching for a realm of moral freedom <Sr/165>. Access to such a realm can be inhibited by theatrical illusion, naturalism, and prose and may be enabled by deliberate artificiality, such as Schiller's use of the chorus as a wall to preserve the poetic freedom of the theatre from the real world <Sr/167> by symbolism and, for Hugo <Hu/258>, by the mixture of the grotesque and sublime. Drama that partakes of the poetic, says Schlegel, should express "thoughts and feelings which ... are

[10] Fielding 1950, 761.

eternally true, and soar above this earthly life" and yet it must also "exhibit them embodied before us" <Sl/193>. These demands may seem the more mystical in their origins when we recall Schiller's assertion that "Nature itself is only an idea of the spirit" <Sr/166>.

Much of the theoretical discussion, in this period, is conducted, as usual, in terms of genre: the new genres of serious and bourgeois drama proposed by Diderot <Dt/57; Bm/127>, traditional tragedy and comedy, and romantic drama. Beaumarchais works both sides of a generic street, experimenting with the new genre of *drame* and, more successfully, with traditional comedy. In the dedication to the reader of his *The Barber of Seville* (1772) he repudiates (in a rather double-edged way) his earlier conception of serious drama and his practice of it:

> What writer ever had more need of the indulgence of the reader than I? In vain I would like to conceal it. I once had the weakness, Sir, to offer you, at different times, two sad *drames*, monstrous productions, as is well known, for it is no longer possible to deny that there is no genre between tragedy and comedy. That's a settled issue: the Master [Aristotle?] has said so, the school re-echoes it and, as for me, I am so thoroughly convinced of it that if today I wanted to put on the stage a mother bathed in tears, a betrayed wife, a distraught sister, a disinherited son, in order to present them decently to the public, I should begin by inventing for them a fine kingdom where they would have reigned to the best of their ability. It would be somewhere near one of the archipelagos or in some other such corner of the world. After that I would make sure that the implausibility of the tale, the extravagance of the deeds, the turgidity of the characters, the immensity of the ideas and the overblown language, far from being imputed to me as a reproach, would underwrite my success.
>
> Present middling men despondent and miserable – not on your life! One should never put such types on display except for ridicule. Ridiculous citizens and unhappy kings – there you have all the theatre that there is and can be, and I take it as a given: that is how it is and I do not want to quarrel with anyone.
>
> So, I once had the frailty, Sir, to compose *drames* which were not well-conceived as to genre, and I now deeply regret it.[11]

Redefinitions of tragedy, which posit, as in Hume, a special aesthetic pleasure in it <Hm/89> or, as in Schlegel and Hegel, its revelation of a spiritual realm in which human suffering and conflict are transcended <Sl/193–4; Hg/215>, recuperate the traditional genre by differentiating sharply between the classical and modern practice of it, between Aristotelian and Romantic poetic theory; that is to say, the discussion of the classical genres is historicized and neo-classical formalism is thus overtaken.

[11] Newly translated from Beaumarchais/Allem & Courant 1973, 160.

Associated with questions about genre are those about appropriate linguistic forms: whether prose is appropriate for tragedy, as de la Motte argues in the preface to *Inès de Castro* (1723); whether rhyme and metre <Vt/26; Sr/166> are essential to poetry (as opposed to verse); whether French alexandrine is more or less viable than English blank verse <Sa/185>; whether verse is mimetically restrictive <Bm/131; Sd/254> or imaginatively liberating <Sr/166–7; Hu/264>. In Schlegel such questions are transformed by the infusion of historical awareness into critical discussion <Sl/189>, and in Hegel by a fusion of historical with aesthetic theory <Hg/206>. An open dialectics of "Romantic" and "Classical" displaces the implacable oppositions of "Ancient" and "Modern." But there remain irresolvable tensions between the possibilities of representation and those of performance, in both writing and playing.

Throughout this period (and later) one playwright comes more and more to dominate, and is often employed to subvert, the theoretical discussion. Standing as a mighty opposite to antiquity and the corrective of neo-classical rigidity, his works supreme examples of "organic form" <Sl/204> or even utterances of nature <Co/220>, Shakespeare supposedly confirms the expendability of all theoretical reflection on drama and even drama's transcendence of the stage, which cannot be "a vehicle worthy of his genius" <Gt/150>. In this way, Shakespeare transcends even Schlegel's multicultural historicism <Sl/202>. For Victor Hugo "Shakespeare is drama," and, in the name of such creative genius, Hugo asserts "the freedom of art against the despotism of systems, codes and rules" <Hu/265>. Lessing, though no less an admirer of Shakespeare's work than Hugo, had warned against taking genius as a model <Lg/106>, but the warning went largely unheeded, alas, by playwrights and theorists alike.

In the writings included in this volume major conceptual transformations are evident, mostly associated with the transition from neo-classical to Romantic modes of thought. But, as in the first volume, certain issues are recurrent, such as: the relations between representation, illusion, and performance; or those between writing and staging; the sources and paradoxes of emotional response, as in their moral effects, or the pleasure taken in painful spectacles; how dramatic literature and theatrical production are or should be coordinated; whether actors are creators or interpreters, what effects they may properly aim for, and how these might best be achieved; and what the possibilities might be in dramatic genres old and new. In representing such issues, whole documents or substantial extracts have been preferred over a wider-ranging selection of writers and works and, though the arrangement is, for convenience, chronological, each selection has been made for its intrinsic theoretical interest.

Michael J. Sidnell, Toronto, 1993.

2

SIR RICHARD STEELE
(1672–1729)

The two things Steele had uppermost in mind in his writing of *The Conscious Lovers* were money and a new example for comedy. He hoped that the play would supply both, relieving him of his considerable debts and demonstrating the efficacious wholesomeness of a comedy which would move the audience to tears rather than laughter and emphasize virtue rather than vice. Steele succeeded amply on both counts.

The comedy, which was Steele's fourth, was some six years in the writing and was further delayed in its arrival on stage by his difficulties – extraneous to the play – with the Lord Chamberlain, or so it appears (Loftis 1952, 121ff.). But the interval between the writing of the play and its performance was not wholly disadvantageous since great expectations were built up in advance of the production not only through Steele's own references to the play in his journalism but also through other published news and views about it, not the least of which was John Dennis' <Jh/76> savage pre-performance critical attack.[1]

The Conscious Lovers was based on Terence's *Andria*,[2] though with very extensive transformations, modernization, and elaboration of the classical model. Colley Cibber, who played the servant Tom, apparently had more of a hand in reshaping the play for performance than the Preface below indicates, though Steele would later claim that Cibber's alterations were for the worse (Steele/Kenny 1971, 278). The production, when it came, was lavish, with new costumes and sets, and vastly successful, running for eighteen nights and bringing in the biggest gross in the history of Drury Lane. The critical reception was by no means of the same order, the play being vigorously attacked and ridiculed, and more moderately defended. Frequently printed and much translated, the play was not only widely read but remained popular for another fifty years and more in the English theatre, enjoying many revivals in London and the provinces. As Steele had intended, *The Conscious Lovers* established itself as a model of the kind of didactic, sentimental comedy that he commends in the Preface.

For further reading

Loftis 1952; Steele/Kenny 1971.

[1] "A Defense of Sir Fopling Flutter," Dennis 1943, II:241–50. John Dennis (1657–1734) was the chief, often controversial, critic of the day, as well as a playwright and poet.

[2] Terence's first comedy, *Andria* (*Woman of Andros*), was produced in 166 B.C. Though the *mores* in the two plays are very different, both have to do with the conflict between the older and younger generations about whom the latter shall marry.

Preface to *The Conscious Lovers*[3]

This comedy has been received with universal acceptance, for it was in every part excellently performed; and there needs no other applause of the actors, but that they excelled according to the dignity and difficulty of the character they represented. But this great favor done to the work in acting, renders the expectation still the greater from the author to keep up the spirit in the representation of the closet, or any other circumstance of the reader, whether alone or in company: to which I can only say, that it must be remembered a play is to be seen, and is made to be represented with the advantage of action, nor can appear but with half the spirit, without it; for the greatest effect of a play in reading is to excite the reader to go see it; and when he does so, it is then a play has the effect of example and precept.

The chief design of this was to be an innocent performance, and the audience have abundantly showed how ready they are to support what is visibly intended that way; nor do I make any difficulty to acknowledge that the whole was writ for the sake of the scene of the fourth act, wherein Mr. Bevil evades the quarrel with his friend,[4] and hope it may have some effect upon the Goths and Vandals that frequent the theatres, or a more polite audience may supply their absence.

But this incident, and the case of the father and the daughter,[5] are esteemed by some people no subjects of comedy; but I cannot be of their mind; for anything that has its foundation in happiness and success, must be allowed to be the object of comedy, and sure it must be an improvement of it, to introduce a joy too exquisite for laughter <Dt/59; Go/103; Lg/115; Bm/130>, that can have no spring but in delight, which is the case of this young lady. I must therefore contend, that the tears which were shed on that occasion flowed from reason and good sense, and that men ought not to be laughed at for weeping, till we are come to a more clear notion of what is to be imputed to the hardness of the head, and the softness of the heart; and I think it was very politely said of Mr. Wilks[6] to one who told me there was a general weeping for Indiana, I'll warrant he'll fight ne'er the worse for that. To be apt to give way to the impressions of humanity is the excellence of a right disposition, and the natural working of a well-turned spirit. But as I have suffered by critics who are got no further than to inquire whether they ought to be pleased or not, I would

[3] 1723. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

[4] In Act 4, scene 1, Bevil Junior courageously and kindly avoids the acceptance of a challenge to a duel made by his jealous and rash friend Charles Myrtle. Steele's dialogue moralizes the situation.

[5] In Act 5, scene 3, Mr. Sealand and his long lost daughter rediscover each other, with much emotion.

[6] Robert Wilks (1665–1732) was well known as an actor in spirited and refined roles. In Steele's play he acted Myrtle and also spoke the Prologue. Wilks was also one of the joint managers of Drury Lane.

willingly find them properer matter for their employment, and revive here a song that was omitted for want of a performer, and designed for the entertainment of Indiana; Sig. Carbonelli instead of it played on the fiddle, and it is for want of a singer that such advantageous things are said of an instrument which were designed for a voice. The song is the distress of a love-sick maid, and may be a fit entertainment for some small critics to examine whether the passion is just, or the distress male or female.

I
From place to place forlorn I go,
With downcast eyes a silent shade,
Forbidden to declare my woe;
To speak, till spoken to, afraid.
II
My inward pangs, my secret grief,
My soft consenting looks betray,
He loves, but gives me no relief;
Why speaks not he who may?

It remains to say a word concerning Terence, and I am extremely surprised to find what Mr. Cibber told me, prove a truth, that what I valued myself so much upon, the translation of him, should be imputed to me as a reproach. Mr. Cibber's zeal for the work, his care and application in instructing the actors, and altering the disposition of the scenes, when I was, through sickness, unable to cultivate such things myself, has been a very obliging favor and friendship to me.[7] For this reason, I was very hardly persuaded to throw away Terence's celebrated funeral,[8] and take only the bare authority of the young man's character; and how I have worked it into an Englishman, and made use of the same circumstances of discovering a daughter, when we least hoped for one, is humbly submitted to the learned reader.

[7] Usually, the author himself would have overseen the staging of the work.
[8] On Cibber's advice Steele substituted a masquerade for the funeral in Terence's *Andria*, as the occasion on which the lovers' attachment to each other is revealed.

3

VOLTAIRE (FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET)
(1694–1778)

Voltaire's interest in the theatre was lifelong. He began writing tragedies at an early age, enjoyed acting, and built several private theatres, including one at Ferney, his home. His version of *Oedipus* was begun when he was eighteen and completed during his eleven-month sojourn in the Bastille. It was first performed in 1718, achieving considerable success, and remained popular for some years (Voltaire/Moland 1877, 11:47). When it was published, in 1719, it was accompanied by several letters, giving Voltaire's ideas on tragedy, and the difficulties he sees in trying to imitate ancient authors, as well as answering or anticipating criticism of his own play. He evaluates and compares three different versions of *Oedipus*, by Sophocles, Corneille <1:Cn/234>, and himself.

The Preface to the 1730 edition of *Oedipus* was in part a reply to Houdar de la Motte <In/11>, who wanted to free tragedy from the tyranny of the unities and of rhymed verse. With his admiration for Corneille and Racine and his insistence on the use of poetry in tragedy, Voltaire reasserts traditional values.

The "Discourse on Tragedy," which accompanied his tragedy *Brutus* and which was dedicated to Lord Bolingbroke,[1] brings English influence into the equation. Having spent over two years in England, and having had a taste of greater intellectual freedom, Voltaire seeks to broaden the experience of French audiences and show them new possibilities of action and spectacle on the stage. He walks a delicate line between the loosening of the rules of *bienséance* – decency and what is suitable to be shown on the stage – and insistence on the classical rules of the unities. As in the previous century, verisimilitude <1:In/9> is still highly prized.

For further reading

Cardy 1982; Williams 1966.

[1] Henry St. John Bolingbroke (1678–1751), the Tory Secretary of State, philosopher, and essayist. At the accession of George I, he was convicted of treason and fled to France. It is from this time that most of his essays date. Having been pardoned, he returned to England in 1725 (where Voltaire himself was in exile from 1726 to 1729). Bolingbroke's collected works, posthumously published in 1754, revealed his religious skepticism.

From letters on *Oedipus*[2]

Letter III: Containing the Critique of the Work of Sophocles

Sir,

My lack of erudition prevents me from determining "whether Sophocles' tragedy imitates by language, number, and harmony, which Aristotle explicitly calls pleasingly heightened language" <1:Ar/42>. Nor will I discuss "whether it is a play of the first kind, simple and complex, simple because it has only a single catastrophe and complex because it has both recognition and peripety" <1:Ar/46–47>.

I will simply point out to you in all candor the passages which I did not like, and for which I require assistance from those with greater knowledge of the ancients, who can better excuse all of their defects....[3]

M. Dacier,[4] who translated Sophocles' *Oedipus*, maintains that the spectators are very impatient to find out what stand Jocasta will take, and how Oedipus will carry out against himself the maledictions he has uttered against the murderer of Laius. I had allowed myself to be swayed by this argument because of my respect for this learned man, and I was of his opinion when I read his translation. The performance of my play has clearly disabused me, and I realize that there is no harm in praising the Greek poets to our heart's content, but that it is dangerous to imitate them <Sd/251>....

You see that in my criticism of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, I have concentrated on pointing out only those weaknesses which are commonly recognized at all times and in all places. Contradictions, examples of absurdity, or speeches that merely strive for effect without advancing the plot or revealing character, are considered weaknesses in every country. I am not surprised that, in spite of so many imperfections, Sophocles should have won the admiration of his contemporaries. The harmony of his verse and the pathos of his style were able to captivate the Athenians, who, for all of their intellect and high degree of civilization, could not possibly have an accurate idea of the perfection of an art which was still in its infancy.

... Thus Sophocles and Euripides, with all of their imperfections, were as successful with Athenian audiences as Corneille <1:Cn/234> and Racine <1:Rc/257> were with us. While we may find fault with Greek tragedies, we must still respect the genius of their authors. Their weaknesses can be ascribed to the time when they lived; their beauty is theirs alone. And it is probable that, had they been born in our time, they would have perfected the art that they practically invented in their own.

[2] Newly translated from Voltaire/Moland 1877, 11:18–46.

[3] Here follows a detailed reckoning of the formal inadequacies of the play and absurdities of the plot.

[4] André Dacier (1651–1722) was an editor and translator of classical texts. His edition of Aristotle's *Poetics* (1692) was regarded as authoritative in England as well as France.

Letter IV: Containing the Criticism of Corneille's *Oedipus*[5]

... Certainly I have much more respect for this French author than for the Greek playwright, but I have even more respect for the truth, to which I owe the highest consideration. Indeed, I believe that those who are unable to recognize the weaknesses of great men, are also incapable of appreciating their perfections. I therefore dare to criticize Corneille's *Oedipus* <1:Cn/250>....

Corneille was well aware that the simplicity, or rather the sterility of Sophocles' tragedy was unable to provide the entire scope of action that our plays require. It is a great mistake to think that all of these subjects which were used successfully in the past by Sophocles and Euripides – *Oedipus*, *Philoctetes*, *Electra*, and *Iphigenia in Tauris* – are suited for dramatic treatment and easy to handle. They are, on the contrary, the most unrewarding and impracticable subjects, yielding material for one or two scenes at the very most, but not for an entire tragedy. I realize that more terrible or more touching events than these are scarcely to be seen on the stage, and for that very reason it is more difficult to achieve success with them. They must be combined with passions that prepare for them and make them credible. If these passions are too strong, they overpower the subject, and if they are too weak, they fall flat. Corneille had to make his way between these two extremes and from his own fertile imagination make up for the aridity of the subject....[6]

Letter V: Containing the Critique of the new *Oedipus*

Sir,

I have arrived at the easiest part of my treatise – the criticism of my own work. In order not to waste time, I shall begin with the first problem, which is that of the subject. According to the rules, the play ought to end in the first act. It is unnatural for Oedipus not to know how his predecessor died. Sophocles made no effort at all to solve this problem. In trying to avoid it, Corneille does even worse than Sophocles, and I was no more successful at correcting it than either of them....

Here is a more glaring fault, having nothing to do with the subject, and for which I alone am responsible; it is the character of Philoctetes. He seems to have come to Thebes solely in order to be accused, and even so, there may be little ground for suspicion against him. He arrives in the first act, and leaves again in the third. He is mentioned only in the first three acts, and not a word is said about him in the last two. He contributes to some extent to the central complication of the play, and the dénouement

[5] The play was first produced in 1659 at the Hotêl de Bourgogne.

[6] Voltaire's critique begins with Corneille's choice of subject (the episode of Thésée and Dircé, ending with their marriage, to which Oedipus' misfortunes are subordinated) and continues with detailed remarks on the shortcomings of the treatment.