

# Resisting the Constraint: The Constraint as a Methodological Tool for a Performance-Oriented History of the Theater

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**Abstract** This article investigates the way the notion of constraint could be extended to theater studies and theater history, focusing on the case of French classical tragedy in the seventeenth century. Can classical poetics be regarded as a set of constraints? Rather than viewing the constraint as a literary technique, the authors argue that it is also relevant to other, nonliterary phenomena, for example, to the theater. There the idea of constraint can be put to use as a tool for theoretical reflection on and critical or historical analysis of performance practice. The article pays special attention to (1) the way Aristotelian poetics developed throughout the seventeenth century from a flexible set of tips to a hegemonic theoretical practice; (2) the increasing use of textual and performative constraints to resolve the disorder and friction typical of French (early) modern theater practice; (3) the divergence between theory and practice, between the intended and the actual performance; and (4) the relationship between the notion of constraint, on the one hand, and that of discipline, on the other.

## The Constraint and the Classical Theory of Tragedy: The False Aristotelian Dogma

In traditional literary history (for example, Lanson 1952 [1894]), French classical tragedy is commonly considered a coherent whole of extremely specific rules whose normative force is so strong that we may compare them to constraints. Among these, the Alexandrine is the most immediately identifiable but not the only rule (unity of place, action, and time; *vraisemblance*; *bienséance* are the other major components of French classicist poetics). From this same traditional perspective on literary history, this generic code of the tragedy would then be respected with more or less freedom by the authors, performed by the actors, and recognized as such by the public; it would, in other words, be permanently reiterated. This code would have a theoretical great grandfather, Aristotle; a series of fathers, Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine, Hippolyte Jules Pilet de La Mesnardière, Abbé François Hédelin d'Aubignac, and so forth; admiring children during the eighteenth century, like Voltaire (2005 [1751]); and respectful grandchildren, the French twentieth-century public.

However, as a number of recent critical studies (Biet 2003; Forestier 2003) have shown, this utterly teleological version of French theater history not only reduces it to the history of drama rather than of theater, it also provides a schematic and monolithic perspective on the very varied theatrical corpus of the French seventeenth century. Moreover, one should also take into account that the idea of a theatrical constraint necessarily functions against the background of what one might call the *séance* (Biet 2005), that is, the theatrical event, which is not only the mere enunciation of a text on a stage but also functions on both an economic and a social level (Sauter 2004). Indeed, as historical evidence and contemporary testimonies reveal (Ravell 1999), the *séance* is both a moment of economic exchange—artists exchange their performance for money and for the sheer presence of the spectators—and a moment of social exchange between artists and a public that is always and necessarily distracted, because it is as interested in what happens in the pit as in what happens on stage. Both actors and spectators should make the exchange work. Each performance is, in other words, a matter of coproduction, both public and performers contributing to a complicated and multifaceted process of signification, in which the constraint functions as a crucial parameter.

At the same time, as we will discuss, theatrical constraints inspired by Aristotle played an increasingly important role, certainly in the period between 1660 and 1680, in the wish to regulate and to streamline the behavior of the public. This despite the fact that the wish largely remained

a theoretical concern that exercised certain critics. It was not translated to actual practice, because the theatrical *séance* was fundamentally irreconcilable with this—classicist—desire for regulation. As Klaas Tindemans (2008: 325) has shown, Aristotle’s theory itself fitted “neatly into a political-theoretical framework, or if one puts it more brutally, an ideology.”

The *Poetics* of Aristotle was not the sole guideline for writing tragedies in the seventeenth century, when this seminal work was relatively little known in its original version (Magnien 1990) despite notable exceptions, such as Racine. He was perfectly familiar with the classical authors (*ibid.*: 61–74), and in his preface to *Phèdre*, for example, he explicitly acknowledges the importance of Aristotle (Racine 1999: 819). Generally speaking, however, the theory of seventeenth-century theater was far from monolithic. It would appear to be a field of opposing points of view, where attacks were constantly met by counterattacks, via literary prefaces and theoretical works (Forestier 2003: 29–70). In this context, one must not forget that, in seventeenth-century France, the reality of the performed tragedy and the elaboration of its theoretical foundations took place simultaneously. Performance was repeatedly put to the test by the theoretical debates about the laws that should govern dramatic poetry and vice versa. The incident known as *la querelle du Cid* (1637), a vehement debate on the very nature of tragedy, in which Corneille affronted the Académie française, was a first point of culmination of this constant tension between theory and practice.

Aristotle’s ambition was not to develop a normative set of rules or constraints to which one should necessarily and always adhere. Instead, he wanted to provide his readers with a technique, a *technè*, a set of “tips” or technical skills that should enable an aspirant writer to compose a good tragedy. He formulated this technique through a painstaking analysis of existing tragedies that are commonly considered to be major works of art. *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles would certainly be one such masterpiece, since Aristotle cites it seven times. Even though the *Poetics* was clearly aimed at playwrights and actors, its “classical” readers and critics in the middle of the French seventeenth century, such as d’Aubignac in his *La pratique du théâtre* (2001 [1657]), focused on the way a tragedy should be written: its mode of representation became of secondary importance within this particular context (Lim 2006; Vanhaesebrouck 2007).

A crucial idea in Aristotle’s (1994–2000, IV) mode of thinking is imitation (*mimesis*), which he considers inherent to human nature, humans being “the most imitative of living creatures”; for him, the arts are fundamentally mimetic. In other words, the artist observes nature, imitates the natural order of things, without having the obligation to present a faithful

or exact copy of that order. Hence the artist can represent reality in his or her own way, enjoying a certain degree of freedom in the choices of how to imitate. This allows the artist to exploit our natural disposition for melody and rhythm, by using the *technè* at his or her disposal. In short, the idea of imitation does not exclude the liberty of invention (Redmond 1980; Pasquier 1995). And this, following Aristotle's line of thought, is why a poem should be considered the figuration of the *relation* between nature and its mimetic image rather than an exact copy of nature. More importantly, the mimetic work should constitute a whole, and all of its parts should contribute happily to this wholeness. Thus tragedy "should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it" (Aristotle 1994–2000, XXIII). Its composition should thus be coherent and aim at harmonious unity, a point that was stressed and preached by seventeenth-century classical theorists such as La Mesnardière (*Poétique*, 1639) and d'Aubignac (*La pratique du théâtre*, 1657). The tragic text, which later takes the form of poetic discourse performed, is essentially an imitation of nature, which simultaneously exhibits its own mode of representation, the very mechanics at work behind the imitation.

Taking the idea of imitation as a starting point, Aristotle proposes a number of particular rules or constraints to which the author of a tragedy should adhere in the writing, so as to compose it skillfully:

- In the first place, the poet should establish the general argument of his or her tragedy: "poetry tends to express the universal" (Aristotle 1994–2000, IX).
- He or she should develop this argument while avoiding an abundance of secondary episodes: "a well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain" (*ibid.*, XIII).
- He or she should ensure the internal coherence of his or her work: the action should be neither too long nor too short; it should have a comprehensive and clear story line, a clear objective, and a clear ending.
- The author should carefully choose the *peripeteia* and the moments of recognition into which enact "a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune" (*ibid.*, XI). By living through these moments, the hero learns his or her identity, his or her fault, or his or her destiny.
- This story should be "necessary or probable," as it should be able to

convince the spectator of the likelihood of the actions witnessed and thus to exclude the irrational and the miraculous (ibid., XV).

- Finally, the pleasure of the spectator should be entirely directed toward fear and pity, and “the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place” (ibid., XIV). Pity and fear should be engendered by the narrative deployment, since they arise from changes in fortune, which at best surprise the reader.

As for the often discussed unity of time (“Tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit” [ibid., V]), it is, within the theoretical framework of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, a mere additional rule. Moreover, the alleged companion rule, the unity of place, is not mentioned at all by Aristotle. Only from the sixteenth century onward—first in the editions of *The Poetics* by Julius Caesar Scaliger (1561) and Lodovico Castalvetto (1570), later in the writings of Jean Chapelain, who established, with the support of Richelieu, Aristotelian dramaturgy as the official poetic model in France—that these two unities would be considered essential and would be perceived in dogmatic terms, even though they were generally not respected until the middle of the seventeenth century (Bray 1963; Scherer 1968). In contrast to the early modern perspective on the *Poetics*, then, Aristotle’s text should not be considered a restrictive and normative framework but a set of rules within a practical handbook that intends to help the writer generate the desired effect on the audience. His rules should be viewed as constraints, self-imposed, with a dynamic and creative rather than restrictive *modus operandi*.

### Multiplicity of Constraints

Let us now return to French tragedy, a genre that supposedly functions by means of constraints, and how it incorporated Aristotelian poetics in its own particular way.

The classic triumvirate of Molière, Corneille, and Racine has acquired a central position in French literary history, where their work is considered both foundational and fundamental to the very essence of modern France. So much so that one is liable to forget the generic diversity of seventeenth-century tragedy: through an intricate process of canonization (Viala 1993), the hegemonic position of the French classicist patrimony reduced the seventeenth century to the work of these three writers. However, in this

period tragedy is a diverse genre, certainly if one takes into account the fact that in the first half of the seventeenth century opera spectacles and comic ballets are still described in terms of *tragédie*, *tragédie lyrique*, or *tragédie mêlée de musique et de danse*. For example, one can read in *La pratique du théâtre* by d'Aubignac (2001 [1657]: 351–52) how important the spectacular component is, even for tragedy, and that it largely exceeds the violin interludes between acts, the trumpets and the rolling thunder that accentuate the primary passages. Rather than a reductive or strict constraint, tragedy in that particular era is actually a rather general code, very adaptable and composite. It thus allows the incorporation of song, dance, and machines, as was the case in the lyrical tragedies and the tragicomedies and also the elaborate corpus of the so-called *tragédies de collège*, or college tragedies, those sumptuous and hybrid spectacles of dance, music, and theater performed at the Jesuit colleges during the ancien régime which aimed at both pleasing and instructing their public and participants.

However, from 1670 onward that lyricism gradually leaves the habitual forms of tragedy (that is, *tragédie lyrique*, *pièces à machines*, *tragic-comédie*) as it becomes increasingly embedded in the opera genre. In the same way, the internal poems composed in heterometric verse gradually disappear in the middle of the century, monologues grow limited in number, and alternating verse is only allowed for letters or for reporting oracles (Biet 1996: 43–64; Viala 1997: 155–230). At this moment, the development of the classical “code” perceptibly starts. Seventeenth- (and eighteenth-) century classical tragedy then becomes a theater play necessarily divided into five acts, written in classical Alexandrines, with a subject generally borrowed from mythology or history; it recounts events that involve illustrious characters and mainly represents an action that generates pity and terror by showing the audience human passions at work and the calamities they engender. However, this tragedy is not an invariable frame of reference but an ever-developing and expanding code. As a system of representation, it is not even necessarily *tragic*—in the ancient or nineteenth- and twentieth-century sense, which does not always match the plays which the classical era categorized as tragedies. One should thus always take into account the specific generic characteristics of French tragedy on both a theoretical and a practical level (Biet 1996: 43–144; Viala 1997: 155–230).

With the development of the classical code in France, which was enforced step-by-step by the Académie française as an official doxa, the number of (self-imposed) constraints gained in importance. Tragedy involves a restricted number of characters (a self-imposed rule that might easily count as a constraint in the contemporary sense of the word); it represents the world through poetic discourse; the conflict—of man with the gods,

among men, with oneself—is at the very heart of its plot and necessarily leads to a crisis. However, rather than limiting the imaginative powers of the poet, such constraining “rules” help the poet focus on the emotive effect of his or her play. In other words, taking the rule of the three unities as paradigmatic, the writer is thereby able to prevent the attention of the spectator being dispersed.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, writers added two other constraints (which they did not always faithfully follow) to the rules of unity of place, time, and action and to the then fashionable preference for order and reason. These two rules of *bienséance* and *vraisemblance* mainly serve to control certain excesses or variations of language or imagination that are no longer tolerated by the new sensibility of the era.

Accordingly, French classical tragedy, as practiced between 1660 and 1680, is characterized by illustrious characters (kings, princes, heroes), exceptional but probable events, and the observance of the three unities, of the rules of *bienséance* and *vraisemblance*, and of the unity of tone (hence *le style noble* and the Alexandrine). Tragedy, then, unfolds before our eyes a crisis of which the outcome is almost necessarily violent (but not always) as divine fatality or human passion inevitably leads the characters to their ruin. The authors thus aim at a more or less moralizing finality, which should be able to instruct a public that, as we now know, was distracted rather than attentive (Ravell 1999), the theater being first and foremost a place to see and to be seen. At the same time, these moralizing drives went hand in hand with an emotive pleasure, with a frenzy felt by the public when witnessing another’s passionate behavior: French seventeenth-century libertine César Vichard de Saint-Réal nicely described it as “le plaisir du mal” in his *De l’usage de l’histoire* (2000 [1671]). For the authors, this frenzy was at least as important as the moral implications, since the first aim of this staging of human passionate behavior is the representation of disorder (Biet 2003). Hence the twofold importance that the aesthetic doctrine of classicism attaches to such concepts as reason, *vraisemblance*, and utility: by appeal to them, the writer can lead the spectator from the immoral actions he or she is witnessing to moral insight, besides the entertainment provided in and through the exceptional events.

Two preliminary conclusions arise. First, the hegemonic model of classical tragedy was largely established a posteriori. In other words, the classical constraints were not at first uniformly approved and applied as traditionally thought; they long provoked debate instead, and for every advocate, such as d’Aubignac, there were a number of countervoices, such as Charles de Saint-Evremond or Saint-Réal (Vanhaesebrouck 2007). Furthermore, the set of rules did not apply to all dramatic genres but was one among

other artistic strategies: a choice, a self-imposed restriction which, it was hoped, would facilitate both the encoding and the decoding of the dramatic text.

Second, as from 1660 onward the set of classical rules gradually obtained its hegemonic position within the cultural system, the classical constraint developed to a convention of a more obligatory nature. No longer a creative principle, it became a mandatory device of restriction, limiting the possible artistic choices and trying to channel the public's response.

### Tragedy and Aesthetic and Political Discipline

Rather than seeking the irregular pleasure of invention for its own sake—in the hope of dazzling the public—the classical doctrine emphasizes the pleasure of utility, the polite, honest, and civil pleasure of order and reason. This is a political and moral pleasure that coincides with the wishes of both the monarchical power and the contemporary theorists and artists close to this power (Tindemans 2008). It is also a pleasure which takes the form of a *reasonable* emotion (see also Apostolidès 1981, 1985 for the relationship between the theater of the seventeenth century and monarchical representation). The aesthetic pleasure generated by reading or viewing a tragedy would then be engendered by the recognition of clarity and order, the ultimate goals of all tragic theorists. Thus performing tragedy with great clarity, and thereby facilitating the interpretive task of the spectator, should provide a better comprehension of the world.

In other words, the classical set of rules aims at channeling the response of the spectator: at reducing the number of possible interpretations of the actions and words on stage. Following this development (especially from 1641 onward, when Richelieu and Louis XIII published the famous *Déclaration du Roy Louis XIII au sujet des comédiens*), tragedy becomes a genre for honest men (*l'honnête homme*), as against those who do not conform to this definition of honesty and politeness. The members of this last category have other genres and spaces at their disposal: the Théâtre du Marais, where tragicomedies and pièces à machines are staged, the fairs and other public places, where they can watch the farceurs, and later on the opera house (Biet and Triau 2006).

French classicist tragedy is a poetic discourse in the first place, its inventors and users strongly opposed to spectacular action and unrestrained imagination, privileging discourse over spectacle. Reading or watching a tragedy means participating in a distinctive pleasure of conformity. Hence the relationship between writer and reader or spectator is founded on a common perception of nature and of the world (Forestier 1998: 1728). They



share a frame of reference, in which *vraisemblance* is the central notion and takes the form of a common code of representation established by the ancients and adapted by contemporary theorists. The notion of *vraisemblance* also presupposes a harmony among all the theatrical parties concerned (author, spectator, actor, characters); it involves congruence and an agreement concerning the representation of nature. The term does not, as is often wrongly thought, refer to a certain sense of the real. Instead, it denotes a constraint, a self-imposed rule that should enable the author (production) and the spectator (reception) to inhabit the same normative and perceptual frame. A tragedy therefore can be *vraisemblable* only if it respects this constraint. On the other hand, the idea of the real, even a certain sense of the real, can contradict or obscure the clarity of demonstration and is accordingly of secondary importance.

The concept of the *vraisemblable* thus assumes a central position in that it corresponds to the tastes of the time, and inversely, it valorizes the act of attending such a performance, distinguishing its spectators from those who attend other theatrical forms, which are not noble. As such, the doctrine called “classical” is indeed a modern way of theorizing theater in the sense that the classical era is all about norms: to impose or to respect those norms is a way of being modern. Hence this normative matrix is regarded as absolutely mandatory, as the sole path to excellence. Through the establishment of an aesthetic consensus that marks a definite break with the supposed disorder of preceding genres, the classical movement developed a model impossible to circumvent: subscribing to it meant both accepting the associated norms and values and belonging to a literary and social community that described itself as noble. Therefore (or at least this is what writers such as d’Aubignac and La Mesnardière hoped) everything should conform to the model, whose set of rules would enable every writer to write a good tragedy and would finally bring France to its moment of perfection.

The classical poetic system quickly became or tried to become a form of discipline and exclusion rather than a set of rules or constraints: it made specific forms of cultural signification more legitimate than others. From that moment on, the constraint becomes a means of distinction in that it has immediate representational implications: some situations or characters are considered appropriate for theatrical treatment, others not. Rules that appear to be arbitrary at first sight prove to be far from innocent on a closer scrutiny, which discloses their clear-cut ideological tendency: the primary function of the rules consists in leading the spectator toward the desired understanding, in facilitating the interpretive work performed during a *séance*. Constraints are intended to serve as a means of theatri-

cal disciplinarization in the Foucauldian sense of the word (Foucault 1991, 2001), reducing the audience's liberty to the extent of confirming them to a preconceived scheme of interpretation. That, at least, is the theory.

### Theatrical Materiality; or, The Performative Point of View

However, when one takes into account the nature of the *séance* itself (for example, the rowdy pit, the polemical atmosphere, the game of social roles and negotiations), one quickly comes to notice that this classicist dogma is not as stable as theory wants us to believe, not even in the period between 1660 and 1680, but rather dynamic and flexible. When executed or performed, the classical scheme of representation and interpretation is resisted and questioned, since large parts of the audience cannot but perceive it as a disciplinary framework. Theater is and has always been a battlefield of contradictory forces rather than a *locus* of harmony, order, and balance. The battle takes place among the entities or groups involved: each of them has a different social, theoretical, and topological point of view on the theater and wants to gain or maintain control over the mode of representation. (For a topology of French early modern performance practice and further developments, see Biet 2002, 2003.) The way the *séance* is organized goes against the classical doctrine and its desire for order, balance, and discipline. From the end of the sixteenth to the early eighteenth century, theater in the city has the following schematic configuration (Chapuzeau 1875 [1673–74]; Ravell 1999; Biet and Triau 2006):

- The actors, who, with the help of their art and their individuality, try to obtain control of the place where they perform, endeavor to survive by attracting spectators (and private or official sponsors) who are willing to pay and try to acquire a certain social prestige (which would deliver them from a social position equal to prostitution).
- A public, which is very heterogeneous and which assembles to dispute, to shout, to applaud, to whistle, the performance serving as a mere pretext for a social event that can be both diverting and interesting.
- The writers of plays, who are gradually becoming authors in the professional sense of the word. They try to become the dominant factor in the theater's artistic process as they deliver the basic material from which the performance itself derives. Such, at least, is their point of view, which nevertheless tends to become the dominant one.
- Finally, the theorists, the *doctes* (who sometimes are also authors), who increasingly share this view with the authors: the text counts

as the principal element, provided that it respects all the necessary rules. Accordingly these theorists supply both abstract and artistic arguments for this point of view. The more so because they privilege the written text and the represented fiction over the spectacular performance, which is in their eyes suspect. Rather than taking the performance as the basic *sui generis* object of evaluation, they see it as their task to evaluate and, if necessary, praise or criticize the adequacy of the (controlled) representation of the text. As such, the position of the theorist seems similar to that of the censor.

- However, one should not forget the moral and religious theorists, who are strongly opposed to theater as a social and aesthetic practice. They do not operate within the artistic system but try to suppress it in the name of other types of representation, whether theatrical (*les tragédies de collège*) or religious.

Even though this schematic picture is imperfect of course, it shows that theater practice cannot possibly be considered stable, homogeneous, or unambiguous and that the different participants do not subscribe to the same principles. On the contrary, in this play of opposition, and specifically this lack of a monolithic interpretive framework, lies the very essence of seventeenth-century theater practice. There a number of people who do not necessarily agree with each other converging at a particular place and time to experience and discuss a represented fiction. The outcome of this social event ranges from cohesion, pleasure, and emotion to dissention from others and the sheer pleasure of it, from the harmonization of the groups present to radical disharmony (see, for example, Greenberg 1994; Ravell 1999).

Consequently the classicist constraint should be regarded as an idealization, a theoretical fiction: the context of the *séance*, which is political, social, and artistic in nature, works against the constraints proper to classicist poetics. In other words, there seems to be a divergence between the disciplining intentions of this normative theory, on the one hand, and the actual performance, on the other. Theater is neither a philosophical nor a theoretical system but a social practice which, just like all other representational arts, is characterized by a permanent friction between intention and effect.

## Conclusion

As Jeffrey Ravell, for example, has shown, the late-seventeenth-century city theater is far from being a moral or harmonious place ruled by order

and ratio. The spectacular infamy of those who are observed (actors), the heterogeneity and erratic disorder among the spectators (a very diverse public), and the fundamental porosity between stage and auditorium and between the theater and the surrounding world all contribute to an artistic practice that is hardly controllable from the viewpoints of an aesthetic order that is firmly established and of a political and social order whose absolute power is gradually developing.

All these contradictory energies needed channeling into a proper goal, the idea being that even doubt or contradiction should have a higher goal when represented. The theater was therefore invested with a role that should “free” it from its own disorder—a higher moral goal which, at the same time, would legitimize theatrical representation as an art form. From then on, political power, which immediately joined with the authors and theorists of French classicism who were themselves interested in this change, understands and claims that it is necessary to promote theatrical representation, as it is to dictate its limitations. The *Déclaration du Roy Louis XIII au sujet des comédiens* (1641) is among the most (in)famous examples of this constant intertwining of political power and theatrical representation:

Nous avons fait et faisons très-expresses inhibitions et défenses par ces Présentes signées de notre main, à tous Comédiens, de représenter aucunes actions mal-honnêtes, ni d’user d’aucunes paroles lascives ou à double entente, qui puisse blesser l’honnêteté publique. . . . Enjoignons à nos Juges, chacun à son district, de tenir la main à ce que notre volonté soit religieusement exécutée. Et en cas que lesdits Comédiens contreviennent à notre présente Déclaration, Nous voulons et entendons que nosdits Juges leur interdisent le Théâtre, et procèdent contre eux par telles voies qu’ils aviseront à propos selon la qualité de l’action. . . . Et en cas que lesdits Comédiens règlent tellement les actions du Théâtre qu’elles soient du tout exemptes d’impureté, Nous voulons que leur exercice, qui peut innocemment divertir nos Peuples de diverses occupations mauvaises, ne puisse leur être imputé à blâme ni préjudicier à leur réputation dans le commerce public.<sup>1</sup>

This desire to control theatrical representation and to discipline both public and artists engendered all sorts of strategies during the seventeenth and

1. “With this document signed by our hand, We forbid all comedians to perform indecent actions, nor are they allowed to use any kind of lascivious or ambiguous language which might damage the morals of the public. . . . We hereby instruct our judges, in all districts, to attend to the strict execution of our will. And in case the actors in question infringe the present declaration, We want our judges to forbid them the theater and to take all necessary steps that they consider appropriate to the case. . . . And in case the said actors perform their actions in the theater in a blameless way, We do not want them to be charged with it, as they can divert our People from various bad occupations, nor do we want their reputation to suffer in public intercourse” (our translation).

eighteenth centuries. One of the primary strategies involved a return and a univocal adherence to Aristotle's *Poetics*, not as a *technè* but chiefly as a means by which to standardize theater practice. From the *Poetics*, these early modern theorists borrowed a number of crucial ideas, such as (1) the notion of *opsis* (the mere pleasure of witnessing a "spectacle" in the etymological sense of the word) in favor of a dramaturgy that would help resolve the disorder of all passionate souls through therapeutic means as obscure as catharsis (experiencing and sharing the suffering of others in the hope of being cleansed of one's own passions); (2) the central position accorded to the text; and (3) the desire to limit all striking effects (machinery, hyperbolic acting style, etc.) in favor of an aesthetics of discourse. Via this return to Aristotle, the theorists try to facilitate the public's task, as it were, by predetermining response. In establishing the value of *vraisemblance* (by a process that proved to be gradual and not without difficulties), these classical theorists hoped to affect the audience through the actions and discourse presented on stage so that they would be able to associate themselves with the fiction and virtually leave the social event in which they actually participated. The public (now regarded as a homogeneous body) would then hear and see, while seated in silence, characters instead of actors and a representation instead of a performance.

Finally, a number of regulations which try to discipline the physical behavior of the public (Ravell 1999) are issued with a view to preventing the loud disorder typical of the theater auditorium from disrupting the efforts made to establish this scene of representation. The theater, now a literary practice in the first place, becomes an aesthetic object and derives its social legitimacy from the mere fact that actors are no longer spectacular objects of the public's avid gaze but embody a living reality and, in a second step, the psyche of a character carefully constructed by the author. So the theater was assimilated to the aesthetic and political power of its time, through a number of disciplining constraints, in an attempt to neutralize its profoundly social implications. However, one must not forget that, even within a highly normative code of representation, disorder and debate remain attached to the medium. This was also observed during the nineteenth century: "The Parisian public is and will always be fundamentally undisciplined, liable to follow an impulse totally different from the one dictated" (Peuchet 1838: 42). There will always be a resistant spectator questioning or eluding the codes proposed and their disciplining effects.

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