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978-0-521-15535-9 - Robert Garnier and the Themes of Political Tragedy in the Sixteenth Century

Gillian Jondorf

Excerpt

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## 1

## THE APPROACH

Robert Garnier is a writer whose reputation has suffered from the fact that the *genre* of which he was one of the earliest exponents—classical tragedy—became something very different in the hands of seventeenth-century writers; and seventeenth-century tragedy has come to be a norm by which earlier as well as later experiments are judged. His contemporaries, including Ronsard, thought him a great tragedian and ranked him with the Greeks.<sup>1</sup> In modern works of literary history he is almost always named as the most important sixteenth-century figure in the development of French tragedy. But Garnier's contemporaries mention the specific qualities which they admire in his work: his evocation of the supernatural and the underworld, his erudition, the pathetic quality of his plays, their relevance to contemporary troubles, the dignity and grandeur of his style.<sup>2</sup> Modern critics, on the other hand, seem to place him on a pedestal only to knock him down again, criticizing his plays for weakness of construction, thinness or inconsistency of character-drawing, over-indebtedness to Seneca. Often, explicitly or implicitly, the final judgment seems to be one of regret that this precursor of Corneille and Racine did not write Cornelian or Racinian tragedies. One of the extreme instances of this (but there are many others) is in the speech made at the unveiling of a bust of Garnier at his birth-place in 1934 where the speaker, the Duc de la Force, after talking about 'les vagissements de la tragédie de Garnier' and 'cet excellent devoir de rhétorique' at last finds something he can praise, in these terms: 'Ouvrons

<sup>1</sup> See *liminaires* by Robert Estienne (Pinvert, p. 12), Paschal Robin du Faux (Pinvert, p. 167), Amadis Jamyn (Pinvert, p. 93) and Ronsard (Pinvert, p. 92); also Dorat's tribute (*J. Aurati . . . Poemata*, Paris, 1586, 2e partie, p. 65).

<sup>2</sup> Evocation of the underworld: Flaminio de Birague (Pinvert, p. 11). Erudition: Belleau (Pinvert, p. 10). Pathos: C1. Binet (Pinvert, pp. 11–12). Relevance: Robert Estienne (Pinvert, p. 13). Style: Ronsard (Pinvert, p. 92; Lebègue 1, p. 10)

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maintenant la *Troade*: voici un passage qui semble une variante d'*Andromaque*'.<sup>1</sup> When Garnier is praised, it is often rather for his lyrical powers, for the importance of his work as a stage in the history of the drama, or for the felicity of selected *beaux vers* and *sentences* than for any central qualities or merits of his theatre. As Thierry Maulnier remarks: 'L'oubli ou le mépris vaudraient mieux pour lui que la condescendance avec laquelle on lui reconnaît quelques mérites'.<sup>2</sup>

It may seem that a study of the political elements in Garnier's work runs the same risk of undue emphasis on a peripheral aspect; but I hope to show that the political elements are central, not accessory, to Garnier's tragedy, and an examination of these elements and of the way in which they are incorporated into the plays ought to result in a more satisfactory way of looking at each play as a whole. As a partial justification of this point of view I shall begin by examining the reasons why some of the approaches to Garnier most often used seem inadequate.

To begin with one of the more recent, there is the 'baroque' approach. Because of the failure to find a satisfactory and generally accepted definition of how the word 'baroque' is to be used in literary history or criticism, the critics who consider Garnier a baroque writer seem to have no common reason for doing so. To different people, Garnier's imagery, his descriptions of physical cruelty, his religious themes and even his use of stichomythia have appeared baroque.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach may be helpful and stimulating in directing our attention to certain interesting features of Garnier's style; but it seems to lead to distortion. Thus Dora Frick emphasizes some characteristics of Garnier's imagery unduly, and by her stress on images of chaos and horror she tends to cover up more 'classical' aspects of Garnier's work and also to lose sight of the possibility that the

<sup>1</sup> Duc de la Force, *Inauguration d'un buste de Robert Garnier, à La Ferté-Bernard (16 septembre, 1934)* (Paris, 1934), pp. 10, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Thierry Maulnier, *Introduction à la poésie française* (Paris, 1939) p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Dora Frick, *Garnier als barocker Dichter* (Zurich, 1951); Philip Butler, *Classicisme et baroque dans l'œuvre de Racine* (Paris, 1959); Darnell Roaten, *Structural forms in the French theater, 1500–1700* (Philadelphia, 1960).

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tragedies may embody a serious and consistent political or moral doctrine. This leads to another objection to the 'baroque' approach—that it deals almost exclusively with form and style; thus Dora Frick discusses imagery and vocabulary, Darnell Roaten the structure of the plays, but it would be interesting to hear about what Garnier is saying as well as how he says it.

Then there are critics who have appreciated Garnier for his lyrical powers.<sup>1</sup> I certainly do not wish to deprecate Garnier's supple use of metres, the poignant melancholy of a chorus such as 'Comme veut-on que maintenant' (*Les Juifves*, Act III), the solemn grace of the lament at the end of *Porcie*, the balanced construction and firm movement of the hunting chorus in the first act of *Hippolyte*. But if Garnier's tragedies are only worth preserving for their choruses then they fail as tragedies. Indeed, it is usual for praise of the lyrical elements in the plays to be accompanied by severe criticism of construction, handling of plot or other dramatic elements.

It seems that these criticisms of Garnier as a dramatic poet are based on criteria formed from seventeenth-century tragedy. This is clear when Emile Faguet writes: 'Ce que nous demandons, avec nos idées modernes, à une tragédie, c'est de nous montrer les forces opposées qui sont les ressorts du drame, se rencontrant, se heurtant de plein contact . . .' and quotes as examples scenes from seventeenth-century plays such as *Le Cid*, *Britannicus* and *Phèdre*.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly we shall not find in Garnier the tight, unilinear construction, the delicate balance between inevitability and dramatic surprise, which characterize a Racinian tragedy; but why look for them? This tendency to regard seventeenth-century tragedy as representing some kind of 'norm' for the *genre* is probably the origin of another frequent, and equally unhelpful, approach to Garnier, that which places the plays in an order of merit based on their 'psychological' value. This leads to widely varying conclusions; thus M. S. Bernage finds that *Hippolyte* is,

<sup>1</sup> 'Ce sont les parties de son talent, non pas les seules recommandables, comme on l'a trop dit, mais incontestablement les plus brillantes.' Emile Faguet, *La Tragédie française au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle (1550–1600)* (Paris, 1883) p. 255.

<sup>2</sup> Emile Faguet, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

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with *Marc-Antoine*, 'son plus faible ouvrage' and suggests that the reason why *Marc-Antoine* is so poor lies in the character-drawing, because the character of Cléopâtre is 'trop peu conforme à l'histoire pour nous arrêter longuement'; Emile Faguet on the other hand considers *Marc-Antoine* 'la première pièce vraiment recommandable de Garnier' and praises the 'fond vrai et naturel' of Marc-Antoine's character while regretting that the character-drawing is rather swamped by rhetoric; he also comments on the psychological subtlety in the character of Phèdre in *Hippolyte*; Raymond Lebègue says that Marc-Antoine is the only character with any solidity in the Roman tragedies.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is nothing in the writings of sixteenth-century theorists of tragedy, nor in the prefaces of Garnier and other writers of tragedies, nor in the comments (e.g. in *liminaires*) by the contemporary admirers of these writers, to suggest that presentation of character, or psychological analysis, entered into their conception of tragedy. Thus Grévin: 'La Tragédie donc (comme dit Aristote en son art poétique) est une imitation ou représentation de quelque faict illustre et grand de soymesme, comme est celui touchant la mort de Jules César.'<sup>2</sup> Jean de la Taille: 'La vraye et seule intention d'une tragedie est d'esmouvoir et de poindre merueilleusement les affections d'un chacun.'<sup>3</sup> Ronsard: 'La Tragedie et Comedie, lesquelles sont du tout didascaliques et enseignantes'.<sup>4</sup> Garnier: 'Je sçay qu'il n'est genre de Poëmes moins agreable que cestuy-cy, qui ne represente que les malheurs lamentables des princes, avec les saccagemens des peuples'; 'les cris et les horreurs de mes Tragédies'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. S. Bernage, *Etude sur Robert Garnier* (Paris, 1880) p. 66, pp. 58–9; Emile Faguet, *Tragédie française*, pp. 200, 197, 190; Raymond Lebègue, *La Tragédie française de la Renaissance* (Brussels, 1944) p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Grévin, *Brief discours pour l'intelligence de ce théâtre* (1561), in *Théâtre complet et poésies choisies*, ed. L. Pinvert (Paris, 1922), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Jean de la Taille, *De l'Art de la tragédie*, ed. F. West (Manchester, 1939), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre de Ronsard, *La Franciade* (1572), *deuxième partie*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. P. Laumonier (Paris, 1914–67), vol. xvi, part 2, p. 334. (This phrase is in the 1587 preface to the *Franciade*, prepared for publication by Cl. Binet after Ronsard's death).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Garnier, dedicatory letters of *La Troade* (Lebègue I, p. 9) and *Cornélie* (Pinvert, p. 90).

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Robert Estienne :

France, appren par ces vers, que ton Garnier t'adresse,  
 Appren ce que tu dois pour ton bien éviter;  
 Que les malheurs d'autrui te puissent profiter,  
 Et sois sage aux despens de Rome et de la Grèce.<sup>1</sup>

The elements of sixteenth-century tragedy suggested by these statements are a dignified subject easily lending itself to political treatment ('la mort de Jules César', 'les malheurs lamentables des princes, avec les saccagemens des peuples'), an element of pathos and a didactic intention. A comparison of Garnier's prefaces, where he emphasizes the appropriateness of his themes to the troubled years of the French religious wars, with for example Racine's preface to *Phèdre*, of which the first four paragraphs are devoted to a discussion of the characters, gives a fair picture of the totally different approaches of the two writers. It seems only just not to criticize Garnier for failing to fulfil intentions which were not his. This does not mean that we cannot discuss Garnier's characters at all, nor that Garnier does not differentiate them, giving them words appropriate to the idea he intends us to form of them. But both his methods and his intentions are different from those of seventeenth-century dramatists. His characters are to some extent 'types'—the Tyrant, the Conqueror, the Good King—which means that they are without the complexity of a seventeenth-century 'individual' character.<sup>2</sup> Nor have they the rigorous internal logic of a Racinian character. If Garnier's *Phèdre* is compared to Racine's, she seems to lack consistency because her progress from one state of mind to another is not traced; we are merely presented with the succeeding attitudes as they occur. In terms of our experience of other people's feelings this may be as 'realistic' a method as Racine's; but to defend it on these grounds would be to replace one misleading approach by another. It seems truer to say that those aspects of a personality are used which are dramatically necessary. Thus *Phèdre*'s nurse changes from strong disapproval of

<sup>1</sup> Robert Estienne, *liminaire* to Garnier's theatre (Pinvert, p. 13).

<sup>2</sup> See M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and conventions of Elizabethan tragedy* (Cambridge, 1935) chapter 111 ('Conventions of action'), for a full discussion of the dramatic convention of 'typical characters'.

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illicit love to eager plotting on Phèdre's behalf because that is the way in which the next incident is to be brought about. One is tempted to compare this technique with that of Rabelais, whose Frère Jean, for instance, may be a good monk, a bad monk or no monk at all, according to the use Rabelais wishes to make of him at a particular moment in the story.

The 'Senecan' approach to Garnier is one which has often produced misleading judgments on his plays. Garnier's debt to Seneca has frequently been exaggerated. It is worth remembering for a start that he uses only three subjects treated by Seneca—the themes of Hippolytus, the Trojan women and Antigone. Even when he is translating or paraphrasing a specific Senecan model, he does it with more selectiveness and originality than might be supposed from the comments of some critics and editors. This is true even of *Hippolyte* which is, of all Garnier's plays, the one closest to Seneca; Lucien Pinvert says of it: 'Garnier s'est inspiré [...] de l'*Hippolyte* de Sénèque, qu'il suit pas à pas.'<sup>1</sup> Emile Faguet regards it as a translation.<sup>2</sup> Yet in the passage which is perhaps closest of all to Seneca, the scene of Phèdre's declaration of love to Hippolyte, there are considerable differences between the two texts. The most obvious is that Garnier's version is half as long again; the passage from 'Je prendray le soucy de vos enfans, mes frères' to 'Ayez pitié de moy' (Pinvert, pp. 292–4) is sixty-two lines long, to Seneca's forty. Garnier gives more details of description and sensation, lengthens the comparison of the burning building, fills out Seneca's over-epigrammatic style, and at the same time passes over, in the composite portrait of Theseus-Hippolytus, the *pudor* and the suggestion of arrogance which form part of Seneca's description. He improves on his model by cutting out the discursive passage in which Phaedra comments that Hippolytus resembles his mother as well as his father. He also leaves out the lines in which Phaedra protests that her life hitherto has been irreproachably pure. There are other modifications, such as the way in which Garnier changes the emphasis when translating

<sup>1</sup> Pinvert, p. x.<sup>2</sup> Emile Faguet, *Tragédie française*, pp. 188, 256.

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Seneca's

domus sorores una corripuit duas:  
te genitor at me natus.

( *Hippolytus*, 665–6)

This becomes in Garnier's version 'Tu as aimé le père [. . .] et moi j'aime le fils', with Phèdre as the agent, not the helpless victim. This is the play in which Garnier is following Seneca most closely, and this is the scene of that play which is nearest to Seneca, but even here Garnier makes the text his own; and the emphasis of the play as a whole is in any case changed from the start by the prologue, spoken by Egée's ghost, which directs the attention to Thésée rather than to Hippolyte or Phèdre.

In short, Garnier's 'Senecan' tragedies are far from being close reproductions of the text of Seneca. We shall examine the differences in tone and treatment more closely in the next chapter.

I have tried to show why I consider various approaches to Garnier's plays to be unsatisfactory or misleading; in the course of this study I shall put forward an approach which seems to me more satisfactory because it takes account of the period in which Garnier wrote, his own statements about his plays, and possible relationships between these plays and other, overtly political, writings of the period. I am considering Garnier as a political dramatist; that is, a dramatist who is making a statement of political views, or airing political problems in his works, and whose dramatic technique can best be understood in the light of its connection with this political content.

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## SENECA REVISITED

In the previous chapter I pointed out one defect in what I have called the Senecan approach to Garnier—that it implies a closer imitation of Senecan texts than Garnier practised and therefore overlooks some elements of Garnier’s originality. But the whole question is more complicated than this and calls for detailed examination. There are really two points to be discussed: firstly, was Senecan influence on early classical tragedy in France a bad thing? secondly, what are the advantages of looking at sixteenth-century French tragedy as ‘Senecan’ tragedy?

## THE MIXED BLESSING OF SENECA

There is a tendency among critics commenting on the great influence of Seneca on the development of French tragedy to assume that this influence was regrettable. Seneca, they seem to feel, was the worst calamity that could have happened to the promising new *genre*. If only Seneca had not been known, or at least not admired, in sixteenth-century France, if only French authors had gone straight to the Greeks, or to non-dramatic sources such as the Bible, the historians or Ariosto, then (they seem to imply) there might have been tragedies like Racine’s in the sixteenth century. It hardly needs saying that this would have been impossible; but it is worth considering, in opposition to this ‘might-have-been’ world of sixteenth-century tragedy without Seneca, some of the positive benefits arising from the popularity of Seneca. One benefit can be seen very clearly by an analogy with Petrarch. The reason why Petrarch was so widely imitated was that so much in the *Canzoniere* was imitable. For writers trying out a new poetic language (in England, the Tudor lyricists; in France, the Pléiade) the set of easily translatable themes and images which they found in Petrarch, and even more



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clearly in his Italian imitators, provided convenient basic material to work on. By taking over the Petrarchan convention they simplified their task because they had not to work out their own solutions to problems about the nature of love, the relationship between lovers and so on, but could use the ready-made attitudes of Petrarch and his imitators; thus they were free to concentrate on finding solutions to equally important problems concerning form, style, sound-patterns and the manipulation of their own language. It can be seen that Seneca's plays could perform the same service for dramatists as the *Canzoniere* for lyric poets. In Senecan drama French writers found what amounted to a guide for their own experiments. They found a certain form—the use of few characters, the technique of launching the play *in medias res*, alternation of dialogue and chorus, with the chorus used to mark pauses in the action and thus to stress the shape of the play. They found conventions—some stock characters, a habit of keeping most violent action off the stage, the use of a confidant to avoid soliloquies by the leading characters, the use of dreams, of the supernatural and of dramatic irony. They found a highly sophisticated rhetorical use of language which, in spite of its sophistication, included simple, striking, easily imitable devices and effects. This is comparable to what the Pléiade poets found in Petrarchism—the sonnet form, the cycle of love poems, a set of statements about the nature of love and the attitude of the lover, and the verbal formulæ in which to frame these statements. Obviously the convention can become barren and tiresome, but it starts off fruitfully enough.

Another characteristic of Senecan drama which could lead to its influence being at least partly beneficial is its sententiousness. It may be objected that sententiousness is one of the defects of sixteenth-century French tragedy; but whether that is so or not, the point I want to make here is that if this element in Seneca's drama fitted in with sixteenth-century taste, then Seneca was a good model for sixteenth-century playwrights to choose. It seems clear that Seneca's *sententiæ* are in several respects in keeping with sixteenth-century taste. First, the Stoic message which emerges from them, or from a great number of them, namely that happiness is uncertain, Fortune capricious and

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unjust, suffering must be endured, courage is an almost divine virtue, would be acceptable in a period when the possibilities of neo-Stoicism were being explored.<sup>1</sup> It could even be adapted to religious plays, including those by Calvinists, since there is an easy *rapprochement* (though it is one which was repudiated by Calvin) between predestination and the Stoic idea of *Fatum*.<sup>2</sup> Although some of Seneca's *sententiae*, for instance those on suicide, have to be suppressed or remodelled by French writers, many can be taken over without alteration into a Christian framework.

Secondly, the presence of these *sententiae* in a play is likely to win the approval of the sixteenth-century educated public, whose theorists said that tragedy should be didactic. If it is studded with *sententiae* a play can be didactic in two ways at once: the whole work can convey a message by showing the fall of a great prince or the wicked folly of questioning the ways of God, and meanwhile the *sententiae* can cover a wider field of subjects and at the same time make more pointed and precise statements about them than the general assertion which is made by the whole theme and direction of a play.

Thirdly, the *sententiae* are an important element in the rhetoric. It is as *beaux vers* as well as for their moral content that they are emphasized by typographical devices such as quotation marks or a contrasting type-face. They provide a mould which can easily be used to form new specimens, and some of the *sentences* in French plays which sound most proverbial, and which one might imagine to be translations, are in fact original. We can judge of the success which the *sententiae* in Seneca and the *sentences* in French dramatists had with the reading public from the way in which anthologies were made of them, and collections of them were used as school-books because they exemplified both sound moral principles and fine style. Seneca was one of the main sources of *sententiae*. The anthologist Mirandula, for example, quotes from a score of authors, but

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of Seneca's *sententiae*, see Paul Kahnt, *Der Gedankenkreis der Sentenzen in Jodelle's und Garnier's Tragödien und Seneca's Einfluss auf denselben* (Marburg, 1887).

<sup>2</sup> See L. Zanta, *La Renaissance du stoïcisme au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1914).