

# The Popular and the Academic

## The Status of the Public's Pleasure in the Quarrel of *Le Cid*.

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#### ABSTRACT

The unprecedented success of *Le Cid* (1637) triggered a ferocious literary quarrel about the value of the judgement of the least “considerable” part of the theatre audience – the people. This article explains how the social and gendered distribution of the audience in the few Parisian theatres of the period could reveal the difference of the appreciation of various categories of the audience. The article then develops that at this time in France, the notion of the “public” does not refer to the audience but to the *res publica*, the edifying character of the plays meant to serve the public good. Indeed, the theatre was given a moral dimension, as an heritage to Horace's *Ars poetica* in which the role of theatre was to please and instruct.

This is followed by a discussion of two aspects of the quarrel. It was first set off by the fact that Corneille with his attitude disrupted the rules of the economy of cooptation in vigour in the Republic of letters, thus deeply shocking his peers. The second aspect of the quarrel pertained to the dramatic rules which were being established at the time. *Le Cid* transgressed some of these rules, in particular the rule of decorum. But the condemnation of the transgression of these rules put in question their purpose and their value. Corneille maintained that like Aristotle, he was concerned with the public's pleasure and that Horace's precept of moral instruction was secondary in theatre.

The conjunction of the criticism of peers concerning the non-respect of the dramatic rules and the actual success with the public posed the question of the valid tribunal of literary works – peers or the public. Ultimately, the fact that the play had touched all categories of the audience – the people and the courtiers – facilitated the valorization of the people's pleasure and the people's judgement vis-à-vis the peers.

#### KEYWORDS

Corneille; Quarrel of *Le Cid*; Seventeenth-century French theatre; Public.



## The Popular and the Academic

### The Status of the Public's Pleasure in the Quarrel of *Le Cid*.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on Horace's *Ars Poetica*, various manuals in poetics and rhetoric written in early modern France claim the role of the theatre as being to *plaire et instruire* – to give both pleasure and moral instruction. Thomas Sébillet discussed the heritage from Antiquity in the French theatre of the sixteenth century:

The farce retains little or nothing of the Latin comedy [...] Because the real object of the farce or the French *sottie* are jests, tomfoolery, and every *sottie* inducing laughter and pleasure.

The object of the Greek and Latin comedy were altogether different, because they contained more morality than laughter, and often as much truth as fable. Our *moralités* hold between us the places of tragedies and comedies indifferently...<sup>2</sup>

While *les moralités* were soon to be supplanted by other genres of theatre, notably tragedies, farces were greatly enjoyed in France in all levels of society at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and were played in marketplaces all over France as well as at the court. According to the journal of Jean Héroard, the physician of King Louis XIII, and other contemporary sources, the young

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to Professors Ásdís R. Magnúsdóttir and Hélène Merlin-Kajman as well as the journal's editors and anonymous referees for their helpful remarks and insights.

<sup>2</sup> Sébillet 1990 [1548], 129. This and the following English translations are mine except when otherwise stated.

King and his court attended more than one hundred plays in the years 1612-14, even in the midst of preparing a war.<sup>3</sup>

But just as the round theatres of the Middle Ages were to be substituted by long and narrow rectangular spaces such as the Théâtre de Bourgogne, separating the actors from the spectators;<sup>4</sup> tastes were to change from the tomfoolery of the farces, criticized by the poets of the Pléiade, to a more elegant form of comedy. The cultural politics of Richelieu aimed for the substitution of the farce by comedies reflecting the lives of good society, and provoking smug smiles,<sup>5</sup> rather than outbursts of laughter. The request for morality along with the development of strict dramatic rules mirrored an aim for a higher refinement of the audience. As such, the audiences became the object of scrutiny and criticism from the doctes, resulting in a separation of the audience. *Le peuple*, the popular and the farce were treated with contempt by the doctes who imposed their own tastes and attempted to expel this popular dimension from the theatre.<sup>6</sup> This development was to prove itself particularly cumbersome for Pierre Corneille.

Corneille's *Le Cid* enjoyed an unprecedented success when it was first put on stage in early January 1637 at the Théâtre du Marais in Paris. Fifteen years after the first night, historian Paul Pellison wrote of the play:

It is difficult to imagine with what approbation this play was received at the Court and by the public. People wouldn't tire of seeing it, one would hear spoken of nothing else wherever people met, each and everyone knew some piece of it by heart, people would have children learn parts of it, and in many regions in France it had become a proverb to say: This is fine like *Le Cid*.<sup>7</sup>

The *approbation* of the public fuelled the discontent of Corneille's peers as they found the play lacking in morality. The Académie française severely condemned it, both in terms of the moral defects of the main female character and in terms

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<sup>3</sup> Mazouer 2006, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Rey-Flaud 1998, 297.

<sup>5</sup> Mazouer 1992, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Mazouer 2008, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Mongrédien 1972, 57.

of the disrespect of the dramatic rules. Still, the main issue for Corneille was to please the public as he was to theorize with irony many years later:

It is true that Aristotle in all his treaty of Poetics never once used this word [utility]; that he attributes the origin of poetry to the pleasure that we take in seeing imitated human actions [...] but it is nonetheless true that Horatio teaches us that we cannot please all, if we do not blend in utility, and that serious and grave people, the elders, the lovers of virtue, would be bored if they found in it nothing from which to benefit.<sup>8</sup>

By discussing the artistic and moral value of the play, the quarrel of *Le Cid* contributed to determining whose pleasure was to be acknowledged and whose judgement was to be deemed valid. The differentiation of the audiences and a judgement of their value as actors in the public space became an intrinsic part of subsequent literary quarrels. The career of Pierre Corneille reflects the tension between the dramatist's desire to please the public and the profound social changes taking place during the seventeenth century, mirrored by the changes in the composition of theatre goers and the dialogue between the dramatists and the savants. While Corneille gave great thought and attention to the dramatic rules, he claimed independence over them and applied them in his own manner, developing a poetics of suspense as a means to please his public.

### **THEATRE GOERS IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PARIS**

Even a huge success such as *Le Cid*, the lines of which were repeated all over the kingdom of France, could hardly be defined as popular in the French language of the period. Indeed, the dictionary of the Académie française of 1694 refers the word "populaire" to the word "peuple" which was given a variety of definitions, one of which being "the least considerable part of the inhabitants of the same city, the same country."<sup>9</sup> Hélène Merlin-Kajman has extensively researched the meaning of the word *peuple* as it was used in the seventeenth

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<sup>8</sup> Corneille 1987b [1660], 119.

<sup>9</sup> Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, première édition (1694), Dictionnaires d'autrefois, Analyse et traitement informatique de la langue française, ATILF, <http://portail.atilf.fr/cgi-bin/dico1look.pl?strippedhw=peuple&dicoid=ACAD1694&headword=&dicoid=ACAD1694>.

century.<sup>10</sup> While the meaning of the term seems to be unclear when applied to theatre audiences of the seventeenth century, there are enough contemporary sources to make certain that the theatre audience in Paris in the first half of the seventeenth century was a mixed one.<sup>11</sup> A traveller thus described the audience and the sitting arrangements at the Hôtel de Bourgogne at the turn of the century:

The shows take place in a big hall, on a stage stretched with tapestry; the common people pay only half price on the condition of remaining standing. But spectators paying full price can go up in the galleries, where they can sit down, stand up, or lean on a handrail, thus seeing much better. That is where the ladies go.<sup>12</sup>

Originally built as a tennis court, the Théâtre du Marais was long and narrow. Spectators would stand in the pit or sit in the galleries or boxes on the sides.<sup>13</sup> Further to the success of *Le Cid*, it became fashionable to sit on the stage. The corners on the stage had before been reserved for the pages of gentlemen, who entered with their masters without paying and who found seats where they could. When the actors realized that others took the habit of sitting there, they placed chairs and banks on the stage and started to charge for them at the same price as the seats in the galleries.<sup>14</sup> Mondory, the actor who played Rodrigue, thus described the affluence to see *Le Cid*:

The crowd was so large at our doors and our venue turned out to be so small that the corners of the stage, which had previously served as niches for the pages, became much sought after seats by the *Cordons bleus* and the stage became, on a regular basis, decorated with badges of the Knights of the Royal Order. [...] *Le Cid* has charmed all Paris. It is so fine that it has gained the love of the most reserved Ladies, whose passion has, even on several occasions, burst out on the public stage. We have seen sitting together on the banks of these galleries those who

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<sup>10</sup> Merlin 1994. See also: Merlin-Kajman 2000, 2001, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Lough 1972 [1957], 79.

<sup>12</sup> Platter 1896 [1599], 34. Quoted by Lough 1972 [1957], 20.

<sup>13</sup> For a description of the Théâtre du Marais, see Pasquier and Surgers 2011, 61-64.

<sup>14</sup> Adam, "Notes," in Tallemant des Réaux 1961, 1526.

ordinarily one does not see outside of the *Chambre dorée* and on the seat of the fleur-de-lis.<sup>15</sup>

This seating arrangement became a means to be more visible, but also safe from the tumult of the pit, as suggested by Tallemant de Réaux:

There is, presently, an awful inconvenience in the Theatre, that is that both sides of the stage are full of young men sitting on straw chairs; this is because they do not wish to go to the pit, even if there are often soldiers at the door, and if the pages or lackeys don't bear swords anymore. The galleries are very expensive, and must be thought of well in advance: for one écu or half a louis, you have a seat on the stage; but that spoils everything, and you need but one quarrelsome person to disturb everything.<sup>16</sup>

As drama became more fashionable, the audience turned more aristocratic, though the bourgeois class and servants continued to frequent the theatres throughout the century.<sup>17</sup> The men standing together in the pit for many hours were more numerous than the other spectators and their reactions tended to determine the success or the failure of a new play. The specialization of the architectural space and the distribution of the audience in the theatre reflected a social and gendered segmentation of the public. The potential divergences of appreciation of these groups, which were both spatially and socially differentiated, were likely to raise the question of the value of each group's judgement. The Quarrel of *Le Cid* was indeed to make explicit a hierarchy given to the value of the public's judgement.

## THE PUBLIC SPACE IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FRANCE

Jürgen Habermas has defined the bourgeois public sphere around public opinion as follows:

In seventeenth-century France *le public* meant the *lecteurs*, *spectateurs*, and *auditeurs* as the addressees and consumers, and the critics of art and literature; reference was still primarily to the court, and later also to portions of the urban nobility along with a thin bourgeois upper stratum whose members occupied the

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<sup>15</sup> Montdory, *Lettre à Balzac*. Mongrédien 1927, 45. *Les Cordons bleus* and *Les Chevaliers de l'Ordre* describe the highest officials, *la Chambre dorée* designates the parliament and the *fleurs de lis* royalty.

<sup>16</sup> Tallemant des Réaux 1961, 778. This arrangement became a source of laughter, see Molière's *Les Fâcheux*, (1,1:13-74).

<sup>17</sup> Lough 1972 [1957], 209.

loges of the Parisian theaters. This early public, then, comprised both court and 'town'.<sup>18</sup>

Discussing the public in modern times, Habermas has considered the literature of the seventeenth century, at best, as a preparation for the critical public of the Enlightenment – a kind of proto-participation in politics. Indeed, the absolutist monarchy did not suffer political participation of its subjects. Yet, the seventeenth century was a remarkable moment in the development of the notion of the public, as H el ene Merlin-Kajman has demonstrated. In her article “Le *public*: Quelques r eflexions historiques,” she explains that the concept of *public* was different from the one of Habermas for whom the term “public” refers to audience. Rather, the concept of public referred to the *res publica* – the common good. As they state in their forewords, the French seventeenth century dramatists “give to the public” their works and through this act of donation “participate with honour to the public good.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, while the absolutist regime confined its subjects to their private domains by prohibiting political debate, literature was left open to individual expression. Thus, the literary quarrels of the period constituted an arena for debate, however thwarted. Merlin-Kajman cites a text by Guillaume du Vair from 1594 stating an intrinsic incompatibility between the monarchy and the public exercise of eloquence:

Because the Prince, in devoting his watch and his care to our salvation and in placing himself as in continuous guard over us, has slowed down the course of our spirits and has somewhat relegated them off and towards the conduct of their private families.<sup>20</sup>

In order to fight the intellectual servitude and drowsiness which he sees as linked to the private space, Du Vair calls for the exercise of rhetoric in the French theatre. Indeed, as the political government became the preserve of the Prince, the only free space left for eloquence and intellectual debate was theatre and literature. Staged or represented rhetoric, while modelling the authors and their readers to the *ethos* of Ancient Greek and Roman orators,

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<sup>18</sup> Habermas 1992, 31. Here I will follow the argumentation of H el ene Merlin-Kajman, see Merlin 1994, 24-37.

<sup>19</sup> Merlin-Kajman 2003, 101-6.

<sup>20</sup> Du Vair 1908 [1594]. Quoted by Merlin-Kajman 2003, 107.



helped maintain the public virtue of eloquence as a regulatory force in a society where actions in the public domain were not tolerated. According to Merlin-Kajman, this explains, to a certain extent, the remarkable development of theatre in the seventeenth century, in particular that of Pierre Corneille, and would constitute the specificity of the public space in the seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup>

As the role of theatre was recognized to be *plaire et instruire*, and as the theatre was one of the few spaces in society where public rhetoric could be exercised, the relationship between the texts and the audience became an important issue in literary debate, in particular in terms of the ability of the audience to appreciate good poetry. Many thinkers of the time wrote about the lack of refinement of the lower classes and their incapacity to enjoy good drama; thus La Mesnardière:

Thus the benefits of the performances displayed in tragedy are reserved for great souls, to whom either an illustrious birth, eminent dignities or good breeding convey that condition. And if we would like to pass from the benefits to the pleasures, which the philosophers have judged inseparable from one another, it is easy to infer that the coarse multitude can find no pleasure in a serious, grave, chaste and really tragic discourse, and that this many-headed monster can experience, at the most, the ornaments of theatre.<sup>22</sup>

The alleged immorality of *Le Cid* was therefore all the more problematic as its success came in contradiction to the moral role of the theatre – as a misuse of the public space.

### **CORNEILLE VS. THE ECONOMY OF CO-OPTATION**

On the first night of *Le Cid*, Pierre Corneille was already an acclaimed playwright. He had gained the attention of Cardinal Richelieu, chief minister of King Louis XIII, a great lover and protector of the theatre, toying with dramatic poetry himself. This success of the provincial playwright caused quite a stir on the contemporary theatre scene. When Corneille's father was granted nobility "for

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<sup>21</sup> Merlin-Kajman 2003, 107.

<sup>22</sup> La Mesnardière 2015 [1640], 117.

him, his children and posterity,” the day after the printing of *Le Cid*,<sup>23</sup> it was without doubt a manner by which to gratify the poet and seems to have fuelled some jealousy. Corneille had already written a not very modest foreword to his comedy *La place royale* in January that same year 1637. But it was the tone in his poem, *Excuse à Ariste*, which made the literary arena in Paris run amok. *Excuse à Ariste*, published in late February or March 1637 was a reply to someone under the pseudonym Ariste,<sup>24</sup> who had asked him to write song lyrics. In his poem, Corneille most politely refused this request, arguing that he would do a poor job as he had no talent for music. Indeed, he continues, his talents resided in dramatic poems and were quite considerable in that domain as no one was a better poet than he or even his equal. This was insufferable to his colleagues. Not only did Corneille deny the teamwork that every theatre show demanded, but he also placed himself above his colleagues, breaking all the etiquette linked to the economy of reciprocal praise. Indeed, poets usually wrote hyperbolic forewords to their colleagues’ plays, showering them with praise. This was not something one should do for oneself. This was an economy of co-optation in a “republic of letters.”<sup>25</sup> In this intellectual society, poets were co-opted by peers. The rhetoric discourse of the hyperbolic praises required a decoding to decrease the level of the praise. That Corneille should write in the *Excuse à Ariste* : “I owe my fame only to myself,”<sup>26</sup> was considered outrageous and provocative, also because this outing cancelled the value of the intricate use of preliminary notes where the author presented his text with modesty, claiming to work not for his own glory but for the general public.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Le Cid* was published 23 March 1637 and the letters of nobility were presented to his father and to “ses enfans et posterité” on 24 March 1637. Civaridi 2004, 27-28.

<sup>24</sup> There have been many theories as to the identity of Ariste. The pseudonym means “the very good, the excellent”. Georges Couton suggests the famous musician Michel Lambert (1610-1696) who cooperated with Benserade, Molière and Lulli, or another musician. In Corneille 1980, 1514.

<sup>25</sup> Merlin 1994, 157 and *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> *Excuse à Ariste*, line 50, in Corneille 1980, 780.

<sup>27</sup> Merlin 1994, 160-61.

The second offense that Corneille committed was to have *Le Cid* published too soon after the first night. According to the custom, the theatre company had the exclusive right to stage a play until its publication, after which any company could stage it. During this time of “copyright pre-history,” dramatists sold to editors their plays or their privilege, i.e. the right to print a play at prices much too low to maintain living standards high enough to frequent the people whom they wished to please. This is why Corneille would wheel and deal with the privileges in order to obtain a higher price for them.<sup>28</sup> Further to the success of the play, Corneille requested that the theatre company share with him some of the unexpected gain. Upon the company’s refusal, he made arrangements as early as in January to have the play printed.<sup>29</sup> Corneille was much criticized for this treacherous move towards his actors, and his avarice. More importantly, the publication of the text exposed the play to scrutiny, out of context with the charm of the live performance. This proved to be devastating for him. Indeed, it allowed his rival authors to plunge into the text, which they did, to maintain that there was nothing good in the play as it was immoral and did not respect all the Aristotelian precepts.

The first lampoon was entitled *L’Auteur du vrai Cid espagnol, à son traducteur français*,<sup>30</sup> in which Corneille was accused of plagiarism. Indeed, Corneille had re-used the plot and several lines from another play, *Las Mocedades del Cid* by Guillén de Castro from 1618, which was a common practice. Poets tended to use the same themes but to tell the stories in a new manner, as a way to honour and build on tradition; the creativity lay in the expression and composition more than the subject-matter, which could quite acceptably be borrowed from the literary heritage. The anonymous lampoonists criticized Corneille for having treated the subject badly and for the immoral attitude of the main characters, particularly Chimène who shockingly still loves the man who

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<sup>28</sup> Martin 1999.

<sup>29</sup> The privilege of printing was granted to the editor Courbé on 21 January 1637, meaning that the request had been made several weeks before. The play was printed on 23 March 1637. Civardi 2004, 25-26.

<sup>30</sup> “*The author of the true Spanish Cid to his French translator.*” Civardi 2004, 327.

killed her father, does not attack him wholeheartedly and thus assimilates herself symbolically to the killing. This was a severe accusation as parricide was considered, during the seventeenth century, to be the worst of all crimes.<sup>31</sup>

However, it was Corneille's smug line, "I owe my fame only to myself," which so deeply angered his colleague and former friend Georges de Scudéry that he found himself compelled to publish *The Observations concerning Le Cid* in which he wrote:

...when I saw that he spoke of himself as we normally speak of others, and that he had put in print the advantageous opinions he had of himself.... I considered that I could not, without injustice or cowardice, abandon the common cause...<sup>32</sup>

*Les Observations sur Le Cid* launched an avalanche of lampoons most of which were anonymous. The printing of *Le Cid* and the *Excuse à Ariste* were considered to break all the unspoken rules of "the republic of letters." Corneille's proud attitude and disdain for the unspoken rules of literary circles made him an easy target for his rivals' attacks.

## **THE DRAMATIC RULES**

The most explicit issue of the quarrel was the question of respecting the Aristotelian precepts of tragedy. This was a time when the classical theatre was being formed, so the necessity to obey the three rules of unity – unity of time, space, and action, along with the rule of verisimilitude and the rule of decorum – was gradually imposed upon dramatists by contemporary theatre specialists. The authors who constituted themselves opponents to Corneille blamed him for not respecting the rules, in particular the Aristotelian precepts of verisimilitude and decorum. They said that it was not credible that a young noblewoman would accept seeing the killer of her father in her own house while the body of her father was still under her roof, and that a noblewoman who respected herself would never behave this disloyally. Scudéry went so far as to treat Chimène as a parricide, a monster, and as a girl who behaved like a prostitute.<sup>33</sup> Cor-

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<sup>31</sup> Merlin-Kajman 2000, 210-12.

<sup>32</sup> Scudéry, *Observations sur le Cid*, in Corneille 1980, 783.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 785, 788 and 792.

neille refused for a long time to enter this debate. Only once did he respond directly to the letters and the lampoons. This was on the occasion of the *Lettre apologétique*, published in April-May 1637. Far from apologizing, he countered all of Scudéry's arguments.

The newly established Académie française (1635) was founded by Richelieu in order to support and regulate the literary life in France and to set standards by which authors could measure themselves. The rules of the new institution stipulated that the Académie examine only the texts of its members and the texts which were freely submitted for examination by their authors. Hence, Scudéry submitted his *Observations sur Le Cid* to the Académie. In his letter, he wrote that it was of "national interest" to have it proclaimed a bad play, that it was of the utmost importance that the Académie française announce to the whole of Europe that *Le Cid* was not at all a masterpiece written by the best playwright in France, but merely a bad play by Corneille.<sup>34</sup> As Richelieu took this case much to heart, Corneille was pressed by his friend Boisrobert to request the Académie's judgement. He refused on several occasions, but wrote at one point that "the gentlemen of the Académie can do what they want; since you write to me that Monseigneur would be pleased to see their judgement and that it will amuse His Eminence, I have nothing to say."<sup>35</sup> Richelieu had the Académie's judgement thoroughly prepared. Contemporary sources mention the general surprise that the chief minister of a country at war spent so much time on a single cultural affair. Richelieu's involvement has often been considered an author's jealousy, such as by Paul Pellisson.<sup>36</sup> The condemnation published in *Les Sentiments de l'Académie française sur Le Cid* was the defining moment of the quarrel. The Académie criticized the work as calling equally for "admiration" and "censorship" and stating that "[...] all truth is not good for the

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<sup>34</sup> *Lettre de monsieur de Scudéry à l'illustre Académie*. In Gasté 1970 [1898]. Quoted by Merlin 1994, 218.

<sup>35</sup> Corneille 1980, 804.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Pellisson, *Relation contenant l'histoire de l'Académie française*, in Corneille 1980, 803.

theatre [...] There are some truths which are monstrous, or that must be eradicated for the good of society....<sup>37</sup>

The quarrel of *Le Cid* and subsequent literary quarrels around his work – the quarrel of *Horace*, the quarrel of *Sophonisbe*... – deeply troubled Corneille who published an essay specifically devoted to the dramatic rules from which he reclaims artistic licence:

It is easy for the speculators to be stern, but, if they wished to give ten, or twelve poems of this nature to the public, they might perhaps widen the rules, even more than I do, as soon as they had recognized from experience, how many constraints are brought by their exactitude, and how much beauty it bans from our theatre.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, the very scene which horrified the literary intelligentsia – when Chimène pronounces her famous line: “But I don’t hate you!”<sup>39</sup> (3,4:973) – was the central scene which thrilled the public. Corneille wrote of it many years later, remembering “this certain quivering in the assembly, which marked a marvellous curiosity, and the highly increased attention to what they had to say in such a pitiful state.”<sup>40</sup> This delightful excitement was the result of the suspense generated by the plot. Suspense as a theoretical concept seems to have been an early modern invention, different from the Aristotelian precept concerning surprise.<sup>41</sup> According to Scudéry, the secret of good theatre

consists in intertwining events in such a way that the spectator’s mind, caught suspended between joy and sorrow, hope and fear, cannot guess how the tale will end, and is agreeably surprised by this invisible knot that disentangles the whole play.<sup>42</sup>

Suspense was recognized as a source of pleasure for the spectator – a mixture of joy and pain – but also a means for the dramatist to satisfy the audience and keep the upper hand. Thus the Abbé de Pure describes the reactions of the audience to a bad play:

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<sup>37</sup> *Les Sentiments de l’Académie sur Le Cid*, in Corneille 1980, 809.

<sup>38</sup> Corneille 1987a [1660], 190.

<sup>39</sup> Corneille 1993, 48. English translation by Noel Clark.

<sup>40</sup> Corneille 1980, 702.

<sup>41</sup> Cave 1999, 129, quoted by Harris 2014, 109-110.

<sup>42</sup> Harris 2014, 111. English translation by J. Harris.

it easily revolts, it becomes a judge, and becoming on a whim indulgent or severe is disgusted at what it sees, finding pleasure now only in criticizing and contradicting.<sup>43</sup>

The spectator must be held in suspense, intellectually occupied, or he will start criticizing and imposing his judgement on the play. The “many-headed monster,” referred to by La Mesnardère, must be kept at bay at all times.

### **THE POPULAR: FROM THE VAPOURS OF PLEASURE TO THE TRIBUNAL WITHIN**

Indeed, another, less explicit issue of the quarrel was the question of the legitimate judge of the quality of the plays. The conjunction of the criticism of peers concerning the non-respect of the dramatic rules and the actual success with the public posed the question of the valid tribunal of literary works – peers or the public. The question was, if success supplanted the authority of the specialists.

During the entire quarrel, Corneille always refused to accept constraints other than those he imposed upon himself, and refused to write as the specialists told him. His aim was always to please the public; it was the success that mattered and that prevailed over theoretical discussions, or, as he had proudly claimed in his *Excuse à Ariste*: “I satisfy altogether the people and the courtiers.”<sup>44</sup> Corneille used the word “ensemble” which means “together” rather than “both,” which is reminiscent of a period when the people and the court did indeed enjoy the same plays at the same time, and in clear opposition to the attempts of the savants to distinguish, hierarchize, and separate the theatre audience. He aimed for a universality of the public’s pleasure and employed various means and dramatic genres to achieve that. His opponents, on the contrary, were keen to divide the public in order to determine who was authorized to judge the quality of a literary work, whose judgement was valid, and whose should be shunned or ignored. Scudéry went so far as to state that the people, meaning – for him – the bourgeoisie and non-nobility in general, did not pos-

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11. English translation by J. Harris.

<sup>44</sup> *Excuse à Ariste*, line 47. Corneille 1980, 780.

sess judgement, but were seduced by the illusion of the eyes. Only gentlemen were able to perceive the ideas behind things:

I was not much astonished that the people, who make their judgements with the eyes, be misled by the easiest to deceive of all the senses; but that this coarse vapour, which is formed in the pit, could have risen up to the galleries, and that a ghost may have abused knowledge as well as ignorance, and the Court as well as the Bourgeois, I admit that this prodigy astonishes me, and that it is but in this bizarre event that I find *Le Cid* marvellous.<sup>45</sup>

Scudéry refers to the contagious pleasure of the pit as a “coarse vapour.” The term implies an unhealthy quality of the air – miasma – which could potentially be dangerous – physically as well as morally – for the well-to-do – or women – seated in the galleries. Playwright Mairet complained that “the people and women run to see *Le Cid*, but only few skilled people.” Friends of Corneille argued that many gentlemen liked the show but then Claveret riposted that these were mainly nouveaux-riches without merit. The scandal of *Le Cid* was indeed that the pleasure rose from the pit where the people were standing – all men – up to the galleries, where the nobles – and the women – were sitting.

While these spiteful attacks, driven as it would seem by jealousy, had somewhat dulled the joyous spirit of the poet, the Académie française finally came to the conclusion that *Le Cid*, despite its numerous severe faults, meticulously listed and discussed at length, was, all in all, a good dramatic poem. The Académie’s authority closed the debate and in the long run, Corneille’s views on the role of theatre as a means to please the public – the universal public – prevailed. Thus, Guez de Balzac, a literary authority at the time, and who also had been the object of a literary quarrel, wrote to Scudéry in 1638: “Do consider, Sir, that all of France is on his side [...] and it is something more to have satisfied a whole kingdom than to have composed a regular play.”<sup>46</sup>

The public was granted its pleasure and, maybe as a result of the Quarrel of *Le Cid*, the public’s pleasure became an acknowledged reference of the success of a play. Thus, Molière in his *La critique de l’École des femmes*, premi-

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<sup>45</sup> Scudéry, *Observations sur Le Cid*. In Corneille 1980, 782-3.

<sup>46</sup> Guez de Balzac quoted by Merlin 1994, 190.



ered in 1662, had a foolish Marquis condemn the comedy *L'École des femmes* because the audience in the pit had enjoyed it. Molière's Dorante reacts:

I tell you, Marquis, and the others too, that good sense has no reserved seats at the play; the difference between a gold half-louis and a fifteen-sous piece does not at all affect good taste. One can deliver a poor judgement either standing or sitting down. And in general I would be inclined to trust the approval of the pit; for in that audience there are some few who are able to judge a play according to the rules, and the others judge it according to the right method, which is to let oneself be captured by the play, without blind prejudice, or an affectation of favor, or exaggerated delicacy.<sup>47</sup>

Ironically, Corneille himself became, a few years later, a victim of the same criteria which had previously been denied him. In his dissertation presented to the Duchess of R\*, playwright and theoretician of theatre, Abbé d'Aubignac, wrote concerning the reception of Corneille's tragedy *Sophonisbe*, presented for the first time in January 1663, i.e. 25 years after the Quarrel of *Le Cid*:

I noted that during the whole show, the theatre burst out but four or five times at the most, and that otherwise it remained cold and without emotion; for it is an infallible proof that the affairs of the stage were languishing, the people are the first judge of such works. It is not that I wish to degrade them to the bad sentiments of shop workers and servants; by people I mean this heap of law-abiding citizens who are entertained by them, and who lack neither natural enlightenment nor inclinations towards virtue to be moved by the beauty of poetry and good morality, because even if they may not all be instructed in the delicacy of theatre to grasp the reasons for the good and the bad that they find in it, they certainly feel it. They do not know why the things are such as they feel them, but they certainly have in their ears and at the bottom of their souls a secret tribunal who cannot be wrong, and in front of which nothing is disguised.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, for d'Aubignac, the people were indeed the "first," i.e. the most important judge of the value of a dramatic play. One may note that the process, which credited the people with a valid judgement, proceeded in two ways. First, by rejection as d'Aubignac still excludes categories of incompetent judges of the arts, such as shop workers and servants. Secondly, however, he grants that most people do possess the ability – natural enlightenment and virtuous disposition – providing them with a "secret tribunal", which recognizes true artistic beauty and which, in turn, makes them the appropriate tribunal to judge the value of a literary work. This criticism of Corneille's tragedy, even if it was at his

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<sup>47</sup> Molière 1962, 205. English translation by Morris Bishop, in Molière 1957, 108.

<sup>48</sup> D'Aubignac 2008 [1663], 211-12.

own expense, was a consecration of the direct face-to-face meeting of a play with its public, a consecration of the encounter that Corneille had called for as the sole valid test of the quality of a dramatic poem and its author.

But before this paradoxical consecration, Corneille had had the occasion, twenty years earlier, to allow himself an elegant revenge in his own manner, in verse and on stage. In 1643, six years after *Le Cid*, he would re-use the tone and the words employed by his rival in the tragedy *La mort de Pompée*. Thus, Scudéry's claim: "I attack *Le Cid* and not its author. I loathe his work and not his person,"<sup>49</sup> became, in the mouth of Photin, the machiavellic counsel of the Egyptian King, Ptolomée, seeking advice on how to greet the Great Pompey fleeing Cesar after his defeat in Pharsalus: "I loathe his disgrace and not his person"<sup>50</sup> (1,1:97). Needless to say, the treacherous Photin receives, in due course, his just retribution (*nemesis*) as he ends up despised by all and killed upon Caesar's command.

The quarrel deeply shook Corneille who spent the rest of his life writing perfect plays abiding by the rules, who during his whole life rewrote parts of *Le Cid* and who reedited the play in 1660 as a tragedy. The original tragicomedy was unavailable for a long time. Today, the original text is more often the one to be played and read.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the seventeenth century, the notion of the public, being associated with the noble and political meaning of the *res publica*, was an undifferentiated concept. At the same time, the theatre architecture differentiated the audiences through a clear segmentation of the audiences' distribution in space depending on social rank, gender, and economic means. The success of *Le Cid* and the quarrel it provoked caused a new question to emerge: What was the value of the appreciation of the major part of the public, and not necessarily the most "considerable"? Those who accused Corneille of breaking the rules of the "republic of letters" and the Aristotelian rules of drama found themselves obliged

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<sup>49</sup> Scudéry, *Observations sur le Cid*, in Corneille 1980, 783.

<sup>50</sup> *La mort de Pompée*, in Corneille 1980, 1081.

to dis-parage the value of the play's popular success. In contrast, the unanimity of the success appeared to Corneille, his friends, and a number of observers as a criterion of a value of a play, much in the spirit of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The contagious pleasure, which rose from the pit to the galleries – from the men to the ladies – and filled the theatre, pointed to the possibility for the people to appear as the appropriate tribunal of the quality of a play. Meanwhile, the nature of the pleasure experienced in theatre became, in early modern France, linked with suspense. The higher cognitive demands put on the spectator went hand in hand with the effective separation of the audience as the lower classes were gradually to become excluded from the Parisian public theatres.

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