

What do you see? Helping students understand seventeenth-century Baroque and Classical literary aesthetics

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Abstract: This article explores how using seventeenth-century European Baroque and French Classical visual art can help students grasp the complexities and meanings of the literary aesthetics embedded in seventeenth-century French tragedies.

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1 Avoiding a tragedy

A useful starting point when teaching a seventeenth-century French tragedy seminar might be to simply ask students “what constitutes a tragedy for you?” From my own experience, the usual answer one often receives is “that’s easy: someone always dies!” In the course of my tragedy seminar, one of my primary my goals will be to expand their limited, and sometimes erroneous, vision of what makes a play qualify as tragic. I like to tell students that a tragedy is the intense and often constrained space where the sublime and the horrific collide, or where hate and passion consume the heart of a main character until death. It is that beautiful yet terrifying intensity, that very tension within the play that makes the seventeenth-century French tragedy seminar one of my favourite classes to teach at the upper level. But attempting to familiarize non-native speakers as well as French speaking students with the works of seventeenth-century playwrights Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine is not an easy task. After all, the term for the genre itself, “tragedy,” is often daunting and may even be enough to scare many of them away from registering into the course in the first place. Indeed, for most students today, seventeenth-century tragedies can all too easily be seen as irrelevant, unappealing, and ancient (and therefore boring) texts, which speak only of unrequited love, doomed families, and certain death.

If the badly tainted perception of what is a tragedy for students was not enough to steer them away from studying Early Modern French tragedies, the form itself can be a real impediment for students. Aside from the four centuries that create an enormous temporal divide between texts and today’s students, between the then and the now, the text’s old fashioned language coupled with the austere narrative form of these plays (the unfriendly alexandrine verse) always appear like insurmountable obstacles to students enrolled in any tragedy seminar. Indeed, let us be honest: for this generation of students raised with the vastly resourceful accessibility of the Internet, the expediency of the 5G, and the often monosyllabic narrative of modern texting, encountering foreign rhymes and deciphering alexandrines can be overwhelming if not plain terrifying, even more so when attempting to do it in a second language. How then is an Early Modernist, whose primary goal is to share her/his passion for these plays with students who already have a prejudicial notion of the tragic genre, how is that instructor to transmit and share with them the meaning but more importantly the beauty, the love and the hatred that live at the very core of these verses? In other words, how can one help make the difficult task

of reading a French tragedy, a more text-friendly, exciting and rewarding experience for them? My principal objective in the seventeenth-century French tragedy seminar is that at the end of the semester, students will have conquered their fear or discomfort toward the French alexandrine and feel confident in their abilities not only to understand the four hundred years old rhythmic narrative before them, but also to critically engage with the text. I hope to demonstrate how using seventeenth-century European Baroque and French Classical visual art (whether it be in the form of sculpture, painting or architecture) can be a useful and interactive teaching tool to help third and fourth year students grasp the complexities and meanings of the literary aesthetics embedded in seventeenth-century French tragedies.

2 Defining Corneille and Racine

An overall understanding of French Baroque and Classical aesthetics, which also characterizes the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, will provide students with a better knowledge and appreciation of the play's core issues. In Corneille's plays, for instance, the plot's main tension often centres around ideals of patriarchal glory, duty, and honour, all helping to create daring main characters—men but also surprisingly women (and in this way Corneille's tragedies can be read through a feminist lens¹)—that proudly display and even breathe a kind of virile heroism. It is no surprise that masculine qualities are inherent to Corneille's tragic plays; after all, in the *Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique*, published in 1660, the author himself defined tragedy as a masculine ideal:

Tragedy's dignity calls for some worthy interest of the State, or some kind of passion that is more noble and more male than love, as are ambition and vengeance, and which instills greater sorrows than the loss of a mistress. [...] but love must be content to occupy the second place in the poem, and leave the first place to questions of politic. (*La dignité de la tragédie demande quelque grand intérêt d'État, ou quelque passion plus noble et plus mâle que l'amour, telles que sont l'ambition et la vengeance, que la perte d'une maîtresse. [...] mais il faut que l'amour se contente du second rang dans le poème, et laisse à la politique le premier, 824*²).

While Corneille's tragedies promote a form of masculine idealism and his rather extroverted heroes are all about showing off the male qualities and passions (as defined by Corneille) that set them apart from ordinary human beings and that elevate them to a heroic level at the conclusion of the play, Racine's tragedies reflect a much more quiet, even suffocating atmosphere. Compared to Corneille's heroic characters, Racine's heroes are deprived of excessive showmanship. The excess present in these plays, rather, is that which derives from the love literally consuming Racinien characters. If Corneille's hero normally succeeds in surpassing those around him by overcoming or ignoring his amorous passion for the benefit of the State, Racine's hero fails utterly. Indeed, as the play unfolds, each of Racine's tragedies slowly develops a space where men and women, frustrated by their unrequited passion and doomed by the devastating

¹For feminist readings of Corneille's plays, see for instance C. Carlin's *Women Reading Corneille: Feminist Psychocriticisms of Le Cid* and Josephine Schmidt's *If There Are No More Heroes, There Are Heroines. A Feminist Critique of Corneille's Heroines*, 1637–1643.

²*Discours du poème dramatique, Oeuvres complètes*. This is my translation.

effects of their burning desire, attempt but in vain to prevail over their passion and change their tragic destiny. To help students envision the intrinsic hopelessness facing the Racinien hero as well the simplicity of the playwright's aesthetics, compared to Corneille's more boisterous style, I begin by showing them a *mise en scène* from one of Racine's tragedies, *Britannicus* (1669), directed by Brigitte Jaques-Wajeman in 2004 and performed by the company of the Comédie-française at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier, in Paris. Upon gazing at the image of this modern and ultra minimalist décor, comprising only of two sofa chairs (side by each and situated centre stage), two rectangular tables (each one set against an opposite wall), two exit doors (opposite each other), and three stage walls completely bare and painted dark stone colour, students can observe immediately that the director wanted to stress the simplicity of Racine's style, its lack of superfluosness, as well as create a dramatic staging that strongly underlined how the characters are virtually confined and soon to be the victims of their sombre destiny.

3 Introducing Baroque Art

Now that students have a general sense of Corneille and Racine's contrasting styles, it is time to begin our exploration of the Baroque aesthetics in visual arts, which will lead eventually to a textual application. The Baroque aesthetics that define Corneille's narrative style and that is so vital to the comprehension of his dramatic concept will be quickly lost on most students. Therefore, before asking students to read *Le Cid*, the first of Corneille's three plays on our syllabus, I briefly outline for them the principal differences between Baroque and Classical styles. I say briefly, because in no way do I claim that my tragedy seminar is an art history course, nor that I am an art specialist. Nonetheless, one can still discuss essential characteristics of Early Modern European art and thus add another disciplinary approach to literary studies, making student-learning a more multidisciplinary and fulfilling experience. To that effect, I start by explaining that essentially, whether in literature or in visual arts, the Baroque refuses the straight line so cherished by Classical aesthetics in favour of the crooked line, and the moving line. Aside from emphasising movements, I tell them that it can also manifest itself by representing strong emotions, such as rage, pathos, and laughter. I add that it often displays strong contrasts of light and colour, and depicts images of the monstrous and the horrifying, such as those where violence and blood abound. Other Baroque traits can also be found in various themes underlining different ranges of emotions, such as humour and madness, or images relating to the theme of concealment, such as masks, disguises and illusions. Where Classical works tend to exploit simplicity and order, Baroque art may lean toward the superfluous and the chaotic. Finally, I explain that there is a space within its aesthetics for the body to be revealed, for nudity, and where the world is at times represented as upside down, as bizarre, and where the line between reality and allegory or fantasy may become blurred.

Since the first three plays to be discussed in our tragedy seminar will be those of a Baroque author, Pierre Corneille, following our discussion on general Baroque aesthetics, I proceed by showing students various images of European Baroque art. The first slide I usually select is one of Caravaggio's masterpieces, *Amor* (1602). At this stage, I simply ask them to carefully look at the image and to tell me what they see. I remind them to let themselves be guided in their reading of the image by the broad Baroque characteristics we have just discussed. It very is important to let them know that I am not looking for

them to elaborate on the *meanings* of these images, but rather that they must simply discuss what strikes them as obvious Baroque traits. At the beginning, students may feel a bit out of their comfort zone trying to articulate what for many will be a new experience. However, within a short time and some gentle encouragement, they quickly start to get excited about the image before them. *Amor* is indeed an excellent place to begin for the novice, since everything about Caravaggio's Cupid (smile, body, and teeth) appears crooked and thus defies the straight line so coveted by Classical taste. Before too long, students will comment on the distortion of his body, the remarkable contrast in dark and light, the movement of Cupid himself—who seems to be balancing gingerly on one foot—and the obvious humour depicted by the child's grin. Finally, they will also note the chaos of the setting (featuring musical instruments and a music score scattered on the floor) and the nudity of the adolescent boy, which is dramatically highlighted by the effect of the light. Caravaggio's crooked and playful Cupid is thus an excellent introduction to what constitutes a Baroque work.

Once students have this first experience under their belt, they move on to discuss another well-known Baroque masterpiece: *The Ecstasy of Saint-Teresa* (1647–1652) by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. From my experience, the sudden change of medium, from oil on canvas painting to marble sculpture, does not seem to impede students' ability to find Baroque characteristics in this image. On the contrary, they will immediately detect the movement of Saint-Teresa's garment (reflected in the many exaggerated curves and flowing lines of her habit). They will also note the intense emotion on the woman's face (depicted by her mouth half-opened, her eyes closed, and her head dropped back slightly, all signs of the mystique and erotic experience that is consuming her). The bright golden arrow (which has just penetrated her heart) is the cause of this powerful facial expression in which it is difficult to distinguish her pain from her pleasure. Finally, the golden rays coming down from heaven contrast the whiteness of Saint-Teresa's marble dress. But the exaggeration of the movement in the religious habit and intensity of the woman's feelings is what students will observe first and foremost in Bernini's famous Baroque piece.

Another of Bernini's work, *The Rape of Proserpina* (1621–1622), is also useful to help students understand some of the Baroque's characteristics. In this piece, it is the physical violence that strikes them most. Here, a nude Pluto, the god of the underworld, is powerfully grasping a young woman by the waist; his fingers are visibly imprinted in her skin, denoting the brutal strength and physical desire of the god. His victim is fighting back as best she can by pushing against his face with her hand, while a tear can be seen running down her cheek. Pluto has grabbed his victim's naked body in mid-air, showing impetuosity and speed. The muscles on his legs are contracted in an attempt to hold on to the young woman's body. This sculpture thus primarily accentuates the contrasting emotions of the couple (the god's burning desire against the young woman's fear) and the violence of their movements (his whole body is intent on forcing her into submission to rape her, while she is desperately trying to escape his powerful grasp). Finally, Pluto's expression denotes the intensity of his desire for the young woman, a desire completely out of control as portrayed by the craze in his eyes. However, his inability for self-restraint is also depicted by his beard and hair, which appear untamed and uncontrollable. For students then, this particular Bernini's sculpture is mostly Baroque by the very intensity of its violence.

Moving from sculpture to architecture, the final image on which students will be asked to comment is one that incorporates both Baroque and Neoclassical aesthetics:

Versailles' mirror gallery (1684), a project conceived by Louis XIV's architect Jules Mansart and decorated by the King's master painter Charles Le Brun. Normally students have no problems identifying the main Baroque components of this room: the majestic size of the gallery, its overabundance of gold, its oversized paintings on the ceiling, its infinite sense of natural incoming light, and the sheer number of immense mirrors on display. The multitude of mirrors creates a space where visitors, gardens, and surrounding grounds become reflected almost infinitely. In this way, the gallery is essentially Baroque because of that illusionary quality. Its spectacular décor is definitely aimed at overwhelming the visitors' senses. Although predominantly Baroque, I like to point out to my students that the obvious symmetrical layout of the mirror gallery foreshadows the strong Neoclassical taste that is beginning to appear in the late second half of the seventeenth-century, in the architecture of Versailles but also in European art in general, and one that is meant in part to reject the curved and moving line so typical of Baroque art.

4 Finding the Baroque in a Narrative

After that interactive exercise featuring some of Europe's most well known Baroque master pieces, students generally feel more confident and the discussion on what Baroque means more specifically in a textual narrative can now take place. Corneille's *Le Cid*³, our first play on the programme, is probably the most Baroque of Corneille's tragedies. Based on the Baroque characteristics students detected earlier in the visual slides, I ask them whether they can pick out similar images in a scene I have selected from *Le Cid*. As in its visual manifestation, the Baroque in literature will reflect themes of horror, carnage, and violence, as well as show an outpouring of strong feelings and a vivid contrast of emotions. Since the Cornelian hero tends to dwell in his/her showmanship (whether in affairs of the States or love), their narrative usually stresses a lack of confinement or containment. Indeed, Corneille's narrative is colourful, even at times, superfluous in essence. It also contains an emphasis on images referring to dissimulation, mask, and illusion. Its manifestations of the monstrous and the brutality are often emphasised with the help of contrasts in colours or black and white. Being a narrative of movement, it refers to the instability of the world, its ever-changing nature. Many of these characteristics can be found in this passage, where the heroine Chimene explains to the King that she has just found the corpse of her father (killed in a duel by Chimene's lover, Rodrigue). She describes to the monarch how her father's dead body was asking her to seek revenge:

Sire, my father is dead; and as he died
I saw the *blood pour from his noble side*;
That blood which often preserved your walls,
That blood which often won your royal wars,
That blood, which shed *still smokes in anger*,
At being lost, not for you but another.
What in the midst of flame war did not dare
To shed, Rodrigue has, on the courtyard stair.

³Corneille's play was first performed in 1637 as a tragicomedy, but published in 1648 (with few details modified) as a tragedy.

I ran to the place, *drained of strength and colour*,
 And found him lifeless. Forgive my *pallor*,
 Sire, my voice fails me in this tale, oppressed;
My tears and sighs should rather speak the rest.
 Sire, honour too great attends my distress.
As I have said, I found him there, lifeless;
His side was pierced, and to rouse me truly
His blood in the dust inscribed my duty;
 Or rather his valour, reduced to such a state,
Spoke to me through his wounds, urging haste;
 And, to be heard by the most just of kings,
 Lends me the *voice of those sad openings.*
 [...]

My father is dead, and I ask vengeance,
 For your interest not mine in this instance,
 You lose by a death one of noble breath;
Avenge it by another, death for death.
Slay him, not for me, but for your crown,
 For your grandeur, for your own renown;
Slay him, I say, Sire, for the royal good,
A man so proud of spilling noble blood. (II, 8; my emphasis)

In this passage, I like to discuss with students how Chimene's cry to avenge her father's death contains many characteristics of a Baroque narrative: the pathos and excess of her emotions (unable to speak, Chimene's "tears and sighs should rather speak the rest"), the carnage (her father's bloody body, his side "pierced," and her repeated demand to the King to "slay him"), the horror (the repetition of the word "blood," the opened wounds created by "th[e] sad openings" of Chimene's father, which are speaking to her of vengeance, the blood that writes on the ground Chimene's duty), the movement (the pouring and writing of the blood), and finally the contrast in colours (between the father's blood and his lack of colour, between his blood and the "palour" of the heroine). This excerpt truly helps students solidify their understanding of Baroque literary aesthetics.

5 Contrasting Baroque with Classical Art and Narrative

Throughout the next few weeks, students will have to read two more plays from Corneille and will become increasingly comfortable with finding and understanding Baroque images and characteristics in his narrative. They will no longer shy away from the alexandrines; in fact they seem to welcome the challenge and enjoy tackling head on the dramatic poem before them. By the time they are comfortable reading Corneille's tragedies, we move on to Racine's work. As much as Corneille offered students a world of heroic excess, of dramatic movements and contrasts, and of bloody descriptions, Racine's tragedies will appear more tamed in comparison. His space is one of intense containment, of repressed passions, of near silent agonies, all traits that are definitely not present in the boisterous Cornelian hero. Although Racine is often referred to as the perfect example of French Classical writing, his tragedies (not unlike Versailles) can reflect a blend of Baroque and Classical characteristics. As I did with Baroque images,

before attempting to discuss the first of Racine's plays on our syllabus, I introduce students to the general characteristics of French classicism: its taste for the straight line and for symmetry; its elegant, simple and natural style, without ornament, that embraces sobriety and rationality (thus its refusal of superfluous and excess); its return to Classical subject matter (mythology); its emphasis on the real and not the illusion; and its preference for containment which in turns leads to a troubling intensity.

To better acquaint students with those characteristics, I have them examine a series of images. The first one is Laurent de La Hyre's *Paysage avec la Paix embrassant la Justice* (Justice and Peace Embracing in a Landscape, 1654). In this image featuring two women dressed in togas embracing each other in a Classical décor, students will note the simplicity of the landscape, the straight lines, the French Classical taste for sobriety, and the natural setting. I then move on to a few images of Versailles' gardens, where students quickly comment on the use of symmetry throughout and on the straight lines.

After reading these images, students will then be expected to find similar characteristics in Racine's *Phèdre* (Phaedra, 1677), without a doubt Racine's most acclaimed tragedy. In this passage, taken from the beginning of the play, Phaedra is hiding from the sun, waiting to die of shame, for she is in love with her husband's son, Hippolyte. The weight of this incestuous passion (which has so far remained a secret) is literally slowly killing her. It is worth noting that Racine's tragedy featuring a shameful and criminal love finds its source in Classical mythology, of course, but this return to mythology, which was absent from Corneille, is much more than a simple Classical backdrop in this play. Indeed, although physically absent from the play, the gods and their direct influence on the main characters are felt throughout the play. For instance, at the beginning of the play, the reader discovers that both Phaedra and Hippolyte are the victims of a persecution by Venus: Phaedra burns for Hippolyte while he, who until now had remained untouched by any passion, feels the torments of love for the first time for the young Aricia, his father's prisoner. The gods exercise their power on the characters until the very end, for it is Neptune who will be directly responsible for Hippolyte's death at the conclusion of the play. The gods in Racine's tragedy thus completely control the destiny of humans. Both Phaedra and Hippolyte, under the power of Venus, love against their will; in this way their fate is sealed. In the following scene, prompted by her nurse and confidant Cœnone, who despairs at seeing her mistress so close to death, Phaedra finally breaks her silence and utters the truth about her feelings for her stepson:

Cœnone: Do you love?

Phaedra: I feel *all the furies of desire*.

Cœnone: For whom?

Phaedra: You shall know all my deepest fire.

I love... *At the deadly name I tremble, shudder.*

I love....

Cœnone: Whom?

Phaedra: The son of that Amazon mother:

You must know that prince I myself oppressed so long?

Cœnone: Hippolyte! You gods!

Phaedra: Yes, him, you are not wrong.

Cenone: Just heaven! *All the blood's frozen in my veins.*
O despair! O crime! O you race without shame!
Unfortunate voyage! O, miserable shore!
Why did you come then to this place of danger? (I, iii; my emphasis)

Students will notice that despite acknowledging her passion for Hyppolite, Phaedra never pronounces the name of the man she loves. She is simply physically unable to (“I love... At the deadly name I tremble, shudder”). While her passion (“all the furies of desire”) for her stepson is consuming her against her will, the only power left for her is to refrain from naming him. This focus on control, on repressing the name of Hyppolite, on containment, is characteristic of French Classical traits. Students will also note the simplicity of Racine’s language compared to Corneille’s; his narrative is more sober and thus more attainable to students. While Racine’s tragedy illustrates main Classical characteristics with its emphasis on containment (despite its eventual failure since everyone will finally learn the truth about Phaedra’s passion and Hyppolite’s love), its focus on Classical mythology, and its simple and elegant style, the play also features Baroque aesthetics. The references to the horror of her criminal love, the furies of her passion, the contrast or tension embedded in the images of “deepest fires” and frozen veins are all reminiscent of the Baroque, images which continue to permeate Phaedra’s speech in the following reply:

Phaedra: Yes, him, you are not wrong.
[...]
I saw him, *I blushed: I paled at the sight:*
Pain swelled in my troubled heart outright:
My eyes saw nothing: I couldn’t speak for pain:
I felt my whole body frozen, and in flame.
I recognised Venus and her fearsome fires.
Of a race whose remorseless torments she desires.
[...]
When my mouth called on the name of the goddess,
I adored Hippolyte: my vision of him endless,
Even at the altars’ foot where I lit the flame,
I offered all to that god I dared not name.
I avoided him everywhere. O height of misery!
My eyes sought him in his father’s reality.
At last I dared to rise against my own being:
I roused my courage to persecute, with feeling.
Submitting to my husband, hiding pain instead,
Caring for the fruits of our fatal marriage bed.
Useless precaution! Cruel destiny!
Brought by my husband to Troezen, only to see,
Once more, the enemy that I’d sent away:
My wound, still living, quickly bled again,
It’s no longer an ardour hidden in my veins:
It’s Venus fastening wholly on her prey.
For my crime I now conceive a perfect terror:
I view my life with hatred, my love with horror.

Dying, I wish to protect my name by that act:
And conceal from the light a flame so black. (I, iii; my emphasis)

Racine's Classical aesthetics can be seen in the simplicity of his syntax. But the playwright also makes Venus come alive in this passage, as she is clearly made solely responsible for Phaedra's passion. While the language is simple and elegant, and the narrative sober, Phaedra's attempts at containing her passion fail, as we suddenly face a woman unable to restrain her love narrative any longer. That very secret which Phaedra has been attempting to keep contained is finally unleashed. The movement of Phaedra's emotions from containment to revelation is transmitted through the many contrasting feelings within her ("blushed" against "paled"; her body "frozen" while "in flames"; she can see nothing but she sees him everywhere; her love for him is set against her self-hatred). In addition to these contrasting emotions, at the end of the passage we note that Phaedra emphasises the "horror" of her passion. Students will have little difficulties finding these Baroque characteristics in Phaedra's discourse. Having finally uttered the criminal and incestuous words, Phaedra will now drift in and out of despair. Indeed as the play progresses, we begin to see her move further and further away from the domain of reason, so dear to French classicism, and closer toward being a creature of excess, a Baroque creature, one that the other characters attempt, in vain, to flee.

6 The Result

Students in my tragedy seminar have told me on several occasions that the introduction to Baroque and Classical aesthetics I provide them in class with the aid of European visual art has helped them perform a more active reading of the plays and engage more critically with the text. They also gain a better appreciation and understanding of the plays' main issues. Certainly, these Early Modern aesthetics have reinforced for them the overall distinctions between both playwrights: Corneille's boisterous and proud heroes contrast Racine's more natural and psychologically complex characters. While the former creates heroes that tend to celebrate their egos and their ability to set themselves apart from the rest of humanity, the latter underlines their lack of power in controlling their own destiny. Resorting to Baroque and Classical aesthetics to help them gain that appreciation is just one way to make the genre of tragedy more interactive and a little less terrifying.

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