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*Violence tragique et guerres antiques  
au miroir du théâtre et du cinéma  
(XVII<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*

sous la direction de  
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ANCIENT TRAGEDY VIOLENCE IN THE FRENCH TRANSLATIONS  
OF GREEK TRAGEDIES (1692-1785)

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**Résumé :** La tragédie grecque représente pour les dramaturges français du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle une référence incontournable, dont l'autorité ne peut être remise en cause. Néanmoins ce théâtre se montre à bien des égards étranger à l'esthétique régulière construite à partir de la lecture d'Aristote. La question de la violence et de l'horreur, qu'ils distinguent, confronte en particulier les auteurs à un paradoxe : à la suite d'Horace, ils condamnent la représentation de l'horreur sur scène, mais certains constatent l'importance des effets violents dans le plaisir tragique procuré par le théâtre grec. Si les adaptateurs des pièces antiques peuvent contourner les difficultés en modifiant l'action dramatique, les traducteurs qui entreprennent alors de donner accès au texte grec original doivent prendre position dans des commentaires additionnels. Dans un contexte d'essoufflement du modèle classique, de découverte de Shakespeare et de promotion de la sensibilité, ces traductions et lectures du théâtre antique contribuent ainsi au renouvellement de la poétique en privilégiant l'intensité des émotions, par le biais des images scéniques et des effets paroxystiques.

**Mots-clés :** traduction, théâtre grec, violence, horreur, poétique classique, sensibilité, émotion, bienséance, plaisir tragique.

**Abstract:** For French playwrights in the eighteenth century, Greek Tragedy constitutes a key reference, one whose authority cannot be questioned. Nonetheless, this theatre proves to be in many respects a stranger to the aesthetics of regularity that developed from a reading of Aristotle. In particular, the question of violence and horror, between which these playwrights draw a distinction, confronts the authors with a paradox: following Horace, they condemn the representation of horror on stage, yet some of them point out the importance of violent effects in the tragic pleasure provided by Greek theatre. While the adapters of Ancient plays can get around difficulties by modifying the dramatic action, the translators who endeavor to give access to the original Greek texts must take up a stance in their additional commentaries. At a time when the classical model is flagging, French playwrights have discovered the talent of Shakespeare, and sensibility is increasingly favored, these translations and readings of Greek theatre contribute to the renewal of poetics in giving more importance to the intensity of emotions, aroused by stage images and paroxysmal effects.

**Keywords:** translation, Greek theatre, violence, horror, classical poetics, sensibility, emotion, bienséance, tragic pleasure.

**E**ighteenth century tragedy is often considered an inferior reiteration of the great classical tragedy, a dying form of an old genre that was soon to be replaced by drama. This teleological vision of the history of theatre has often been a barrier to clearly appreciating the complexity of the theoretical discussions regarding the form and function of tragedy before the French Revolution. These debates were indeed still lively after the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, especially among those who tried to defend the interest of ancient tragedy: the French translators of Greek theatre. Their editions of Greek plays included both the translations of the tragedies and commentaries on them. After Dacier published *Oedipus* and *Electra* by Sophocles in 1692, Pierre Brumoy ran his *Théâtre des Grecs* in 1730, for which a new edition was written and completed by Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort and François Jean Gabriel de La Porte Du Theil in 1785.

I will examine the reception of ancient tragedy violence in those texts and set out to understand whether the strangeness of the ancient practices allowed these thinkers to renew or to strengthen their conception of tragic theatre, and peculiarly their thoughts on the effects of tragedy.

All of these translators considered tragedy within the framework of the rules that had been established in the seventeenth century, among which the principle of '*vraisemblance*' was central. First, we will see that violence was supposed to be in contradiction with this precept. But then, we will show how the eighteenth century's translators of Greek plays were led to link violence with the efficiency of theatre, and renew the 'classical' model.

In tackling ancient tragedy and its violence, the theoreticians of the modern period were confronted with the limits of the classical conception of tragedy and paved the way to a different conceptualization of theatre, in which strong emotions would play a major role. In doing so, they echoed the experimentations carried out at the beginning of the century by Crébillon, who attempted to put horror on the stage.

## VIOLENCE AND MORAL

'Decorum', or *bienséance*, was one of the chief rules of the classical canon, which itself had inherited it from Horace. And it is important not to forget that this principle was inseparably moral and dramatic. The moral balance between the characters represented and the supposed audience was an essential condition for guaranteeing the efficiency of tragedy. Thoughts on theatre focused on the idea that a play would only achieve its goal if the interest of the spectator were held. And the spectator's interest depended on how far the fiction matched his own representations of the world and of himself. Thus, the request for *bienséance* did not only aim to preserve the moral purity of theatre but was also considered a necessary condition to make the spectator believe or take interest in the fiction.

The issue that our corpus of translations had to deal with could then have been limited to this question: how does one tackle violence in a theatre of *bienséances*?

At first glance, it seems that, in a way, Greek tragedy triggered some kind of cultural shock in eighteenth century France, as Brumoy wrote: ‘some fiction and certain old customs [are] too shocking for us’.

[J]e n’ai pas cru qu’il fût possible de traduire tout au long la plupart des tragédies grecques. Et je doute qu’en ceci M. et Mme Dacier eussent tenu la parole qu’ils semblaient avoir donnée au public. Ils auraient été rebutés [...] par le préjugé invincible contre quelques fictions et certaines coutumes anciennes trop choquantes pour nous.<sup>1</sup>

We find this same reaction in all our authors, who each explain this shock by the relativity of cultures, like Father Rapin, who in 1674 explained that English people, because of their insularity, liked blood, whereas French people were more human and preferred love<sup>2</sup>.

The situation was easier for the adapters of Greek tragedies, who quite freely changed some aspects of the play, or, as Rochefort said in the preface of his adaption of *Electra*, tried to ‘accommodate [the action] to [their] theatre’, because ‘there are some sorts of particular conventions that [they] have to respect’<sup>3</sup>. This was notably the case for the ending of *Electra* by Sophocles, in which Agamemnon’s grieving daughter encouraged her brother to hit their mother even harder. This passage was unanimously considered intolerable by French commentators and translators in the eighteenth century.

Je suis persuadé que le sujet de cette pièce paraîtra aujourd’hui trop horrible, et que l’on ne pourra souffrir un fils qui tue sa mère, et une fille qui exhorte son frère à ce meurtre.<sup>4</sup>  
J’avoue cependant qu’il faudrait bien se garder de vouloir tout imiter dans le poète grec, et que le dénouement de l’Électre, quelque bien préparé et quelque théâtral qu’il soit, paraîtrait aujourd’hui trop horrible pour être souffert patiemment sur notre théâtre.<sup>5</sup>

In Crébillon’s *Electra* in 1708 for instance, Orestes kills her mother without realizing it and immediately regrets it. Rochefort, at the end of the century, had Clytemnestra move Orestes’ hand and sword herself to her breast<sup>6</sup>. This kind of accommodation was unthinkable for the translators who claimed their transpositions were accurate.

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Brumoy, *Le Théâtre des Grecs*, Paris, Rollin, 1730, « Discours sur le théâtre des Grecs », p. xxj.

<sup>2</sup> René Rapin, *Les Réflexions sur la poétique d’Aristote et sur les ouvrages des poètes anciens et modernes*, Paris, Muguet, 1674, II, 20, p. 183-184.

<sup>3</sup> « [O]n verra encore qu’en m’assujettissant scrupuleusement à la marche de Sophocle dans les quatre premiers actes, j’ai été obligé d’y incarner des rôles, pour préparer, pour conduire, pour motiver l’action autant que j’ai cru qu’elle devait l’être, en l’accommodant à notre théâtre. Il est des sortes de convenances particulières auxquelles nous sommes obligés de nous prêter. » Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort, *Électre, tragédie en cinq actes, imitée de Sophocle*, Paris, Michel Lambert et Baudouin, 1782, préface, p. xxij.

<sup>4</sup> André Dacier, *L’Œdipe et l’Électre de Sophocle, tragédies grecques, traduites en français avec des remarques*, Paris, Cl. Barbin, 1692, « Préface sur Électre ».

<sup>5</sup> Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort, *Électre, op. cit.*, préface.

<sup>6</sup> André Dacier had presented those two solutions as the only acceptable: « Si on mettait ce sujet sur le théâtre, il faudrait ou qu’Oreste tuât Clytemnestre sans la connaître, et qu’il la reconnût après, ou bien qu’elle s’enferrât elle-même en voulant secourir Egisthe, et c’est la méthode que tout poète doit suivre, quand il traitera de pareils sujets. », *L’Œdipe et l’Électre de Sophocle, op. cit.*, p. 498. And Pierre Brumoy, *Le Théâtre des Grecs, op. cit.*, p. 197: « On voudrait qu’Oreste fût vengé, mais par une autre main, ou s’il tue sa mère, qu’il le fit sans le savoir et malgré lui. »

Therefore, all of them added prefaces, notes or commentaries, exposing their opinions on the scenes composed by the author they were translating.

## VIOLENCE AND EMOTION

Some violence, though, was accepted in tragedy, depending on its nature and on the way it was integrated into the drama.

The words 'violent' and 'violence' are rarely used in the texts that I have studied. 'Horrible', 'cruel' and 'atrocious' are much more frequent. When it is used, the adjective 'violent' qualifies feelings more than actions, according to its main meaning at that time<sup>7</sup>. Violence was seen as a psychological trait, a vice (impetuosity or anger), which for Dacier characterized both Oedipus and Electra<sup>8</sup>. For him, *Oedipus Tyrannos* was an allegorical play, condemning curiosity, pride, violence and anger<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, Rochefort designated Oedipus as a violent man:

Œdipe était un de ces hommes violents, qui se révoltent contre les obstacles, qui s'abandonnent aisément aux plus injurieux soupçons, qui se précipitent en aveugles dans les dangers, et chez qui toutes les passions ont un degré de force que rien ne peut arrêter.<sup>10</sup>

The violence of Oedipus lies in his resistance to the truth and in the impetuosity of his passions.

In the eyes of the eighteenth century readers of ancient Greek plays, violence was thus first a subject for tragedy and one of the targets of its didactical function. By reasoning while watching the play, the audience was supposed to conclude that violence was dangerous.

But, as we know, the Aristotelian catharsis was not based solely on the intellectual reaction of the public but also on an emotional mechanism. Here is the first point of disagreement between our translators. All of them assigned the same goal to tragedy, i.e. to moderate the violence of passion in the spectator's soul.

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<sup>7</sup> Antoine Furetière, in his famous dictionary, defined « violent » as follows: « impétueux, véhément. », Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, seconde édition, 1707, t. 1, p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> André Dacier, *op. cit.*, « Remarques sur l'*Électre* », p. 234-235: « Sophocle oppose le caractère de Chrysothémis à celui d'*Électre*, c'est-à-dire un caractère de douceur, et de prudence, à un caractère de violence et d'emportement. [...] Chrysothémis reconnaît qu'il y a plus de justice, et plus de courage à pleurer Agamemnon, et à haïr ouvertement ses meurtriers, comme fait *Électre*, qu'à dissimuler ses sentiments ; mais il n'y a pas tant de prudence, et tout le monde ne peut pas pousser les vertus à cet excès en se dépouillant de l'amour propre qui nous est si naturel, et qui nous porte à travailler à notre conservation. *Électre* fait mieux, mais Chrysothémis ne fait pas mal. La Justice peut être accompagnée de prudence, et on peut s'accommoder au temps sans la violer ; cela convient même beaucoup mieux à une femme. ». « *Électre* rendrait son caractère moralement bon si elle suivait en quelque manière les avis de Chrysothémis ; car elle modérerait ses emportements et ses violences », *ibid.*, p. 437.

<sup>9</sup> « Le but du poète est de faire voir que la curiosité, l'orgueil, la violence et l'emportement précipitent dans des malheurs inévitables les hommes qui ont d'ailleurs de fort bonnes qualités ; et voilà les passions qu'il veut que l'exemple d'*Œdipe* purge en nous. », André Dacier, *L'Œdipe et l'Électre de Sophocle*, *op. cit.*, Préface.

<sup>10</sup> Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort, *Électre*, *op. cit.*, p. xj.

Les péripatéticiens, persuadés qu'il n'y a que l'excès des passions qui soit vicieux, et que les passions sont utiles et même nécessaires, ont simplement voulu faire entendre *par purger les passions*, emporter l'excès par où elles pèchent et les réduire à une juste modération.<sup>11</sup>

Les tragédies grecques [...] ne devaient avoir d'autre objet que d'exciter la terreur et la pitié, dans la vue d'affaiblir ce que ces passions pouvaient avoir d'immodéré parmi ce peuple pour qui ces pièces étaient faites.<sup>12</sup>

La poésie procure deux avantages considérables à l'humanité, l'un d'adoucir les mœurs des hommes comme l'ont fait Orphée, Linus et Homère ; l'autre, de rendre leur sensibilité raisonnable et de la renfermer dans de justes bornes, comme l'ont pratiqué les poètes tragiques de la Grèce.<sup>13</sup>

But Dacier did not see the exact mechanism in exactly the same way as Brumoy or Rochefort. Indeed, Dacier rejected the exacerbation of passions on stage, whereas Brumoy and Rochefort could accept it on certain conditions.

In his translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Dacier commented on chapter 15, establishing there a formula that he would use repeatedly in his commentaries on *Electra* two years later: 'Theatre is the enemy of atrocity'<sup>14</sup>. Contrary to Horace, he did not banish bloody or violent actions from the stage but only what he called 'atrocity'. Moreover, on several occasions in his commentaries, an action or a situation was depicted as 'too atrocious to be put before the eyes of the audience'<sup>15</sup>, like the moment when, in Aeschylus' *Choephorae*, Clytemnestra beseeches her son not to kill her. More than the moral problem of matricide, the unbearable here is the emotional tension that this scene would produce if acted on the stage and not simply narrated. According to Furetière's dictionary, atrocious means '*outré, excessif, énorme*' (outrageous, excessive, enormous).<sup>16</sup> The excess that Dacier banished from the stage was thus the violence of a flood of emotions, transgressing the moral and social norms of behavior.

How could Dacier explain that tragedy tended to moderate violent passions, if he banished them from the stage? According to him, this catharsis was more an intellectual than emotional process. That is why atrocity could be forbidden on stage but could nevertheless be the aim of the play. For Dacier, catharsis worked with a double mechanism: one homeopathic and the other intellectual. The spectator should, on the one hand, feel compassion and fear, moderate emotions, when watching tragedy, which would prepare him to bear those passions more easily were he to be confronted with them in real life. And, on the other hand, the story of the tragedy would teach him that violent passions are dangerous.

<sup>11</sup> André Dacier, *La Poétique d'Aristote traduite en français avec des remarques*, Paris, Cl. Barbin, 1692, « Remarques sur le chapitre VI », p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort, *Électre*, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Brumoy, *Le Théâtre des Grecs*, *op. cit.*, p. liij.

<sup>14</sup> « Le théâtre est ennemi de l'atrocité », André Dacier, « Remarques sur l'*Électre* », *L'Édipe et l'Électre de Sophocle*, *op. cit.*, p. 495 *sqq.* This expression was already used by Dacier in his translation of Aristotle's *Poétique*, *op. cit.*, « Remarques sur le chap. xv », p. 220.

<sup>15</sup> « Les deux défauts les plus considérables de la pièce d'Eschyle, c'est que la reconnaissance se fait dans le premier acte, et de la manière la plus grossière, et qu'on voit sur le théâtre, après la mort d'Egisthe, Clytemnestre qui prie son fils de ne pas la tuer. Cela est trop atroce pour le présenter aux yeux des spectateurs », André Dacier, *L'Édipe et l'Électre de Sophocle*, *op. cit.*, « Préface sur l'*Électre* », p. 255.

<sup>16</sup> Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, seconde édition, 1707, t. 1, p. 154.

For Rochefort, though, the process was different. Electra was also characterized by her absence of control and moderation, but this acute sensitivity was not considered a character defect in itself:

Que voit-on dans Électre ? une âme sensible et courageuse à l'excès. [...] les transports qu'elle fait paraître après avoir reconnu [Oreste] appartiennent bien moins aux intérêts de sa vengeance qu'aux plaisirs inexprimables de son excessive tendresse. [...] c'est une sensibilité extrême, qui ne connaît plus ni loi ni règle. [...] En vain, son frère lui recommande de se modérer.<sup>17</sup>

What do we see in Electra? an excessively sensitive and courageous soul. [...] It is extreme sensitivity, which knows no laws nor rules. [...] Her brother urges her, in vain, to be more moderate.

For Rochefort, catharsis was only homeopathic, functioning like 'that enthusiastic music, that, accustoming the hearts to violent passions, weakened their dangers'<sup>18</sup>. Sensitivity was a positive aspect of the human being but had to be controlled to make society possible.

There is a chiasm both between Dacier and Rochefort's anthropological visions, and between their contrasting conceptions of the functions and mechanisms of theatre. Those differences follow of course the evolution of mentalities and esthetics across the eighteenth century.

On the one hand, we find a form of esthetics of moderation, based on an ethical and physical system of balance and harmony, which tears the individual away from his passions; on the other hand are thoughts on theatre as a social art, whose efficiency is founded on the sensitivity common to man.

The conception of Man and society changed between the end of the seventeenth century and the French Revolution, following the development of philosophy, from rationalism to sensualism; and the comprehension of the role of violent passions in theatre varied with these representations. But the model of the relationship between spectator and play remained unchanged: in accordance with the logic of *vraisemblance*, fiction acted on the stage had to correspond to the spectator's conceptions.

## VIOLENCE AND PLEASURE

But what about the other kinds of violence, namely bloody actions, incest, parricide?

As we said earlier, horror was usually considered contradictory to *bienséance*: the shock felt by the audience was supposed to lead to a rejection of the fiction and prevent the play from having any effect. For Rochefort, the question is even purely esthetic. He believed that horror could simply stop any pathetic effect and block out emotion.

Il faut, dit-il [Aristote], mettre une distinction entre l'horreur et la pitié. Amasis voyant un de ses fils conduit à la mort ne pleura point ; ce spectacle est un de ceux qui constitue l'horreur : mais, quand il vit le second de ses fils réduit à mendier sa vie, ce fut alors qu'il

<sup>17</sup> Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort, *Électre*, *op. cit.*, p. vij.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.



versa des larmes, voilà la pitié. « Ainsi, l'horreur, poursuit Aristote, exclut ordinairement la pitié. » Pouvait-il donc, d'après ce principe, permettre dans la tragédie ce sentiment repoussant et exclusif, qui en détruisait tout le charme ? Aussi ne l'a-t-il pas fait. Aussi a-t-il eu soin de proscrire, dans l'art poétique, tout ce qui passe les justes bornes de la terreur et de la pitié.<sup>19</sup>

Horror has to be distinguished from compassion. Seeing one of his sons taken to death, Amasis didn't cry; this image can be associated with horror. But, when he saw his second son forced to beg for his living, then he shed tears: this is compassion. « Horror thus, Aristotle says further, usually rules out compassion. » Could he, then, in accordance with this principle, allow in tragedy this hideous and exclusive feeling, that destroyed all its charm?

The charm of tragedy, according to Rochefort, lies in its capacity to arouse emotion, especially compassion. And horror does not provoke tears, thereby preventing tragedy from offering any pleasure to the audience.

But, on the contrary, some dramatic thinkers of the eighteenth century considered that horror could also be a source of pleasure for the audience, by offering strong emotions. The moral or dramatic prohibition of horror competed, then, with the claim for pleasure in tragedy.

Following Boileau, Dacier insisted on the fact that bloody acts could delight the audience, provided they were narrated. Horror was only bearable on the condition that it was conveyed by imitation, i.e. art. But then, it was really interesting and valuable because it aroused overwhelming interest in the spectator. Commenting on the scene where Oedipus blinds himself, Dacier thus defended Sophocles rather than Corneille, who had withdrawn this scene from his version. Indeed, in Corneille's *Oedipus*, the king simply abdicated without doing any harm to himself. The playwright explained that he thought that the modern audience, especially the women, would not have been able to stand it. Dacier stressed the fact that, on the contrary, the narration of this horrible scene could excite curiosity and pleasure in the public:

Je ne suis pas de son avis. Si ce prince se crevait les yeux sur le théâtre, il n'y a personne qui pût le voir ; mais tout le monde en écoute le récit avec avidité ; je puis dire même que naturellement on le souhaite, et que plus la chose est horrible plus on serait fâché de ne pas savoir de quelle manière tout s'est passé.<sup>20</sup>

If this prince blinded himself on the stage, nobody would stand seeing it; but everybody listens eagerly to its narration. I can even say that naturally we wish it, and that the more horrible it is, the more we would regret not to know how it happened.

Far from condemning horror, Dacier considered thus its esthetical value. When well imitated, horror gives great pleasure to the audience; the problem is then to maintain an artistic medium between the spectator and the bloody event.

Furthermore, in considering this paradoxical pleasure of tragedy, the French theoreticians wondered whether the prohibition of horror, as required by the classical rules, was not in fact destroying the tragic effect. This idea first appeared in Father Rapin's *Thoughts about the Poetics of this Time and the Works by the Modern and Ancient Poets*

<sup>19</sup> Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort, *Électre*, op. cit., p. 213.

<sup>20</sup> André Dacier, *L'Œdipe et l'Électre de Sophocle*, op. cit., « Remarques sur l'Œdipe », p. 230.

(1674). Defending ancient tragedies against modern plays, he regretted the intensity of the emotions triggered by the Greek playwrights:

[L]es tragédies mêlées de galanteries ne font point ces impressions admirables sur les esprits que faisaient autrefois les tragédies de Sophocle et d'Euripide : car toutes les entrailles étaient émues par les grands objets de terreur et de pitié qu'ils proposaient.<sup>21</sup>

The tragedies mixed with love don't provoke in the minds these admirable impressions that aroused in the past the tragedies by Sophocles and Euripides. All the insides were then moved by the great subjects of terror and compassion that they offered.

Fifty years later, Brumoy, in trying to prove the interest of Greek theatre for a modern audience, considered again the link between strong emotions and tragic pleasure. For him, tragic emotions were pure pleasure, in comparison with the same emotions in real life. Influenced by Plato's theory in the *Philebus*, Brumoy explained that painful emotions were always mixed with pleasure: the situation causing emotion is painful, but the emotion itself is a pleasure that eases the pain. When watching tragedy, one can feel the pleasure of emotion without being affected by the real situation. The stronger the emotion is, the greater the pleasure. The Greeks had this sense of great emotion and great pleasure which was essential to obtaining the tragic effect. The Moderns had lost it, and that is why their tragedies, mixed with love, were not as powerful as the ancient ones.

Beyond the capacity of violence to increase the spectator's interest, this representation of strong and terrifying emotions might thus even have been the essential basis of the tragic effect. By condemning violence, the Moderns risked losing the tragedy. This idea was given prominence by Brumoy, who, following Dubos, based his evaluation of a play's value on his own feelings while watching it. Commenting on the horrible matricide committed by Orestes, he developed a major paradox: horror, although unbearable for a modern audience, might be the necessary source of a real tragic experience<sup>22</sup>.

Mais ni tout son art [celui de Sophocle], ni l'énormité des crimes d'une mère, ni les mauvais traitements, ni la mort, ni même l'ordre absolu d'un Dieu, ne peuvent étouffer les cris de la nature dans des spectateurs qui ont de l'humanité. On voudrait qu'Oreste fût vengé, mais par une autre main, ou s'il tue sa mère, qu'il le fît sans le savoir et malgré lui. [...] C'est pourtant là le fondement du tragique étonnant qu'on voit régner dans les trois Électres. Comment accorder des sentiments si opposés dans le cœur des hommes ? [...] [Les Grecs] ont bien senti qu'ils ne pouvaient déguiser ce fait à des spectateurs instruits, ou que s'ils venaient à l'adoucir, cet assaisonnement ferait évanouir le tragique.<sup>23</sup>

But neither all his art, nor the enormity of the crimes of a mother [...] can stifle the cries of nature in spectators who have humanity. One would have liked Orestes to get his revenge, but by another hand; or, if he kills his mother, for it to be done unconsciously, and in spite of himself. [...] This is nevertheless the basis of this amazing tragic effect reigning in the three Electras. How to tune such different feelings in the hearts of men? [...] [Greeks] have felt that they couldn't hide this fact from educated spectators, or that if they softened it, the tragic effect would vanish.

<sup>21</sup> René Rapin, *Réflexions sur la poétique de ce temps*, op. cit., p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> This idea had already been developed by Rapin at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Brumoy, *Le Théâtre des Grecs*, op. cit., p. 197.

The spectators of this monstrous crime felt two contrasting feelings: the natural rejection of it and a stunning emotion, which constituted the particular pleasure of tragedy. Brumoy considered this tension, this contradiction the real root of catharsis, an esthetical catharsis that required strong and contrasting emotions.

Because of its purity, ancient violence presented the French partisans of ancient tragedy with a theoretical problem. Some kinds of violence could be the subject of tragedies, whose role was declared precisely to soften and moderate the violence of passion. But some scenes aroused horror rather than compassion and fear and so could produce an effect of astonishment that would momentarily stop any possibility of feeling or understanding among the spectators. By reconsidering this analysis, and thinking that horror did not stop emotion but rather strengthen it, Brumoy and his followers met some interrogations of their time. The utility and benefit of violence had indeed been discussed among the authors and specialists of theatre since the beginning of the eighteenth century. The experience of theater, especially the spectacular and often horrific drama implemented by the lyric stage from the end of the seventeenth century on<sup>24</sup>, along with the promotion of sensibility and the discovery of Shakespeare in the 1730's had led some theoreticians and authors to highlight the emotional impact of violence on stage. Voltaire, notably, in his paradoxical *Éloge de Crébillon* (1762), had emphasized the esthetical interest of the famous ending scene of Crébillon's *Atreus*:

Ce n'est donc point parce que la coupe pleine de sang est une chose horrible qu'on ne joue plus cette pièce, au contraire, cet excès de terreur frapperait beaucoup de spectateurs, et les remplirait de cette sombre et douloureuse attention qui fait le charme de la vraie tragédie.<sup>25</sup>  
It is not because the cup full of blood is something horrible that this play isn't performed anymore. On the contrary, this excess of terror would strike a lot of spectators and fill them with this dark and painful attention, in which lies the charm of real tragedy.

For Voltaire, violence is an acute problem, one that French theatre must address should it want to measure up to Greek tragedies and Shakespearean drama. Those models are both flawed, but both of them contain priceless beauties that French plays lack. When terror reaches a climax without turning into sheer horror, it can set off actual tragic effects that 'bienséance' and 'vraisemblance' often prevent.

Je suis bien loin de proposer que la scène devienne un lieu de carnage, comme elle l'est dans Shakespeare [...]; mais j'ose croire qu'il y a des situations qui ne paraissent encore que dégoûtantes et horribles aux Français, et qui bien ménagées, représentées avec art, et surtout adoucies par le charme des beaux vers, pourraient nous faire une sorte de plaisir, dont nous ne nous doutons pas.<sup>26</sup>

I am far from suggesting that theatre should become a place of carnage, as it is by Shakespeare [...]; but I dare to believe that some situations that seem merely repulsive and awful to French people, when well prepared, artistically represented, and above all softened

<sup>24</sup> On the development of horrific effects on the lyric stage, see Nicholas Dion, *Entre les larmes et l'effroi. La tragédie classique française, 1677-1726*, Paris, Champion, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Voltaire, *Éloge de Crébillon* [1762], in *Œuvres de Voltaire*, t. XL, Paris, Lefèvre, Firmin-Didot, Werdet et Lequien Fils, 1830, p. 473.

<sup>26</sup> Voltaire, *Brutus*, Discours sur la tragédie à Mylord Bolingbroke [1730], in *Œuvres de Voltaire*, *op. cit.*, t. II, p. 357.

by the charm of beautiful verse, could bring us some sort of pleasure that we were not expecting.

The intensity of violence interests the playwright, even though he defends the classical rules and their promotion of moderation, because he relies upon his own experience as a reader or spectator: in London, he had been impressed by Caesar's murder performed on stage, a 'monstruous spectacle' that he preferred to the 'confidences of a cold love, or political reasoning'<sup>27</sup>. Even if Voltaire cares for 'bon goût' and respect for the politeness of French theatre, he is sensitive to the effectiveness of tragic performance and fluctuates between condemnation and praise of violence on stage. Whereas he defends the simplicity of classical tragedy, he has to admit that the audience likes the powerful and sometimes frightening impact of spectacular visual effects:

Les hommes, en général, aiment le spectacle ; ils veulent qu'on parle à leurs yeux : le peuple se plaît à voir des cérémonies pompeuses, des objets extraordinaires, des orages, des armées rangées en bataille, des épées nues, des combats, des meurtres, du sang répandu ; et beaucoup de grands [...] sont peuple.<sup>28</sup>

Men, in general, like spectacle; they want their eyes to be aimed: people like to see ceremonies full of pomp, extraordinary objects, storms, armies ready for battle, bare swords, fighting, murders, blood spread; and a lot of noble men [...] are people.

Voltaire's hesitations regarding Shakespeare's excesses are typical for the position of his contemporaries concerning violence on stage. In this context, Greek tragedies, because of their authority as first models for French modern theatre, constituted an even sharper goad to reconsider the place of bloody or terrifying actions in drama.

At the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, the success of lyric tragedy on the Royal Academy of Music's stage, along with the loss of impetus of classical drama, spurred to rethink the impact of visual and emotional effects on the public. From the 1730's on, the discovery of Shakespearean drama in France contributed to sharpening these controversial issues. The first translators of Greek theatre in French – since the attempts of humanists in the sixteenth century – participated this debate in grasping the violence of the ancient drama. Greek tragedy, because it represented both a model and a strangeness for French theoreticians and readers, allowed them to think out of the usual and regular framework of classical theory. The commentaries accompanying the translations became then a critical laboratory, where a renewed esthetic conception, based on contemporary theatrical experiences, could emerge. As a pioneer, Brumoy aimed to bring ancient theatre out of the pedagogical and erudite circles, to rebuild a lost theatrical experience for a modern audience. After him, Rochefort and La Porte du Theil, who completed his great monument, *Le Théâtre des Grecs*, with translations of Sophocles and Aeschylus, didn't give the same importance to feelings: as members of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres, they defended a more philological approach. Their differences illustrate the paradoxical role of Greek tragedy in classical France: supposed

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<sup>27</sup> Voltaire, *Observations sur le Jules César* de Shakespeare, after the translation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* [1764]: « J'avoue qu'en tout j'aimais mieux encore ce monstrueux spectacle que de longues confidences d'un froid amour, ou des raisonnements de politique encore plus froids », in *Œuvres de Voltaire*, *op. cit.*, t. VII, p. 547.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

model of the Aristotelian theory, it actually proved to lead some of its readers on the way of a non-Aristotelian theatre, where pictures and violent emotions would dominate.

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