The influence which Aristotle’s Poetics has exerted on dramatic theory is one of the most interesting chapters in the history of literary criticism. It is amazing to see how a book which was written in the fourth century BC was still regarded as authoritative for centuries afterwards. The key word here is ‘authoritative’. Aristotle based his conclusions on Greek drama which was only the first stage in the development of European drama. Although the theatre of the Renaissance and subsequent centuries was strongly influenced by the classics, it developed in very different circumstances and therefore shows great differences. Nevertheless it was commonly accepted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that Aristotle had laid down ‘rules’ which were valid for all times and which all dramatists had to obey. This led to all kinds of strange interpretations of Aristotle, for views which were regarded as self-evident in those times had to be read into the Poetics. In most cases the critics could not or would not perceive the differences caused by historical circumstances.

The Trois Discours sur le Poème Dramatique of Pierre Corneille is a very instructive example of this kind of interpretation. After thirty years in the theatre he wrote these three essays in 1660 and gave an account of his views on drama. At the same time he tried to determine his own attitude towards Aristotle and the ‘rules’, which were not always clearly distinguished and which were commonly accepted as the main criterion in judging a play. Corneille was an individualist who frequently rebelled against commonly accepted opinions, and therefore his interpretation of Aristotle is of special interest.

To see this interpretation in the right perspective it is first necessary to indicate the principal differences between Aristotle’s views on the best kind of tragedy and the most striking features of Corneille’s plays. On Aristotle I can be short for I only wish to mention a few points which are important for the development of my argument: Aristotle prefers a tragedy in which the hero suffers a calamity due to a combination of circumstances which he cannot fully control; the hero is partly responsible for these events, but he is punished more severely than is justified by any guilt which can be ascribed to him. Kurt von Fritz has stated it very succinctly in his brilliant essay Tragische Schuld und poetische Gerechtigkeit in der griechischen Tragödie: ‘Sein Leiden (ist) nicht in irgendeiner Weise mit dem, was ihm etwa an subjektivem Verschulden zugerechnet werden kann, kommensarabel’. 1 Secondly, Aristotle prefers the hero to suffer through ignorance of his true relationship with a member of his

family. This is the reason why he devotes so much attention to plots of this kind and attaches such importance to the recognition. In the third place he describes the ‘ideal tragic hero’, as he is traditionally called, as some one who does not excel in virtue or justice but whose misfortune is not brought about by vice or depravity. So he does not regard a character who is completely virtuous or completely vicious as suitable for tragedy; he should rather be like one of us — óμοῖος. Finally it is evident that Aristotle prefers a tragedy with an unhappy ending, although he concedes that this is a debatable point.

In Corneille’s case I do not wish to discuss disputed questions of his dramatic practice but shall only try to indicate a few important characteristics of his plays. He shows a marked preference for heroic characters of extraordinary, nearly superhuman greatness. They are usually of noble descent and are convinced that they must act in a way which is worthy of their origin; généreux is a word frequently used to describe them, and the resemblance with Sophocles’ heroes who are called ἀγαθεῖς is remarkable. The principal characters are mostly exceptionally virtuous and magnanimous. A few of them, however, are exceptional villains; they are thoroughly vicious but they pursue their evil designs with such determination that we cannot help admiring them a little, e.g. Medea or the Syrian queen Cleopatra who wants to murder her husband and her two sons in an attempt to retain the sovereignty.

Corneille’s characters are usually involved in an inner conflict. They must choose between alternatives and have to decide what motives are going to turn the scale. They are not exactly lacerated by this conflict, but the debating of motives by a character is typical of this dramatist and contributes to the nobility of his heroes. Max Kommerell puts it very well: ‘Corneilles eigenste Naturgabe war die Bewegung des grossen Willens, gross an Leidenschaftlichkeit, aber auch an Dauer, eines Willens, der sich gegenüber der Aussenwelt ebenso gebieterisch verhält wie gegenüber der eigenen Seele, der die grossen Ziele der menschlichen Gemeinschaft: Herrschgewalt, Staatsidee, religiöse Hingabe, in sich aufnimmt und sie in persönliche Leidenschaft verwandelt, aber ebenso auch als private Willensnatur auftritt in der Form eines die ganze Seele von Entscheidung zur Entscheidung reissenden Affekts . . .; es bedarf keines Hinweises, dass nicht die moralische Richtung, sondern die Dauer, die Ungebrochenheit, die Grenzenlosigkeit den Rang dieses Willens bestimmt; genauer: seinen Rang bestimmt die Probe, über wie viele, wie starke, wie hohe andere Antriebe er Herr wird im Haus halt des eigenen Selbst wie in der Welt; seinen Rang bestimmt “der Seelenkampf”’.

Is it possible to speak of tragic guilt in the case of Corneille’s main characters? K. von Fritz discusses this question in his above-mentioned essay. He shows that it is incorrect to talk of tragic guilt in Greek tragedy but that Seneca in his tragedies deliberately stressed the guilt of his characters in order to warn his

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readers against excessive passions. Then he argues that Corneille followed Seneca in this respect. Von Fritz here seems to give a one-sided view of Corneille’s plays. It must be admitted that in theory Corneille does attach great importance to tragic guilt. In his explanation of catharsis he says that, if we see how the hero is afflicted by misfortune because he gives way to his passions, we are induced to restrain or eradicate these same passions in ourselves. But in actual practice this idea of tragic guilt on the part of the tragic hero remains in the background and it is rather his nobility and his inner conflict which are emphasized. Most of his heroes are either completely innocent or otherwise their admirable qualities preponderate over their guilt. Von Fritz especially discusses his play *Horace* in which the three Horatii refuse to relinquish their position as champions of their nation even when the citizens have decided that they need not fight against their relations, the Curiatii; subsequently the sole survivor of the Horatii kills his sister when she blames him for killing her lover. Von Fritz describes this play as a ‘Tragödie schuldhafte Leidenschaft’. The element of guilt cannot be denied but the dramatist does not emphasize it at all in the last scenes of the play in which the hero is discharged, and it is questionable whether his main purpose was to warn against the overpowering ambition of Horace. In other plays, like *Le Cid* or *Polyeucte*, this element of guilt is completely absent. Even in the plays with complete villains as heroes their guilt is not stressed. Kommerell rightly says that not so much morality is emphasized as strength of will.

Finally it must be noted that most plays of Corneille do not end in an unmitigated catastrophe. In most cases the end is fairly happy for the hero; the death of the martyr Polyeucte is really a triumph. The question can even be raised whether these plays should be called tragedies, and in recent criticism the tendency is to reply in the negative. R. J. Nelson says: ‘But it seems to me that by no theory of tragedy can Corneille be considered a tragic writer, for he does not allow for that which one finds common in all tragic theory: initial defeat of the human, a limitation on human possibility’.3 Everything, of course, depends on what is meant by ‘tragic’. We find the same problem in the case of dramas which the Greeks called ‘tragedies’, but which we would not call ‘tragic’. Room must be left for different conceptions and the classification suggested by Albin Lesky seems very useful.4 He distinguishes between tragedies with a fundamentally pessimistic view of life, tragedies which end in the defeat of the hero but do not leave the impression that life is meaningless, and tragedies with a tragic situation in which the hero is threatened with destruction but is saved in the end. Most of Corneille’s plays would fall in the last category and could still be called tragic. L. Herland has put it very well: ‘Le tragique cornélien consiste essentiellement dans la lutte du bien et du mal, que ce soit

seulement dans le cœur de certains personnages, ou, comme dans ces tragédies du quatrième type, et c'est pourquoi elles sont les plus sublimes, à la fois entre les différents personnages et dans le cœur des meilleurs. La pièce gagne en tragique à la défaite finale des coupables, par la crainte salutaire qu'elle nous inspire, et ne gagnerait rien à la défaite des bons, qui est de ces événements indépendants de l'homme auxquels Corneille refuse toute valeur pathétique. Ce qui est pathétique, c'est, quelle qu'en soit l'issue, le conflit d'un fils et d'un père indigne par exemple; il suffit que de tels conflits soient possibles pour donner à la vie un sens tragique; car, ce qui est tragique, c'est pour le juste le conflit de la justice et de la nature et d'avoir, ne fût-ce qu'une fois, découvert dans ce qu'il aime la méchanceté de l'homme. 5

From this brief review it is clear that there are certain irreconcilable differences between Aristotle's and Corneille's views on tragedy. Nevertheless, Corneille tries his best to bring his views into line with those of Aristotle. To us it is clear that this was an impossible task. Jules Lemaître in his study on Corneille and the Poetics characterizes his critical work as follows: 'L'œuvre critique de Corneille n'est dans son ensemble qu'un commentaire subtil et tour à tour triomphant et désespéré de la poétique aristotélicienne, ou, pour mieux dire, un long duel avec Aristote'. 6 It is very easy to regard this attempt of Corneille as ridiculous, as Lemaître frequently does; he even calls this struggle with Aristotle a comedy. But such a superior attitude does not contribute to a real understanding of Corneille's position. Undoubtedly there are serious differences between Aristotle and Corneille but the real problem is this: Why did he attempt at all to reconcile his own view with that of Aristotle? A modern dramatist would not dream of justifying himself before the tribunal of Aristotle because he realises that the differences in approach are caused by changed circumstances. Why did Corneille then attempt to do this?

It is true that even in Corneille's time, especially about 1630, there were critics who completely rejected Aristotle's authority and maintained that his directives were only valid for the Greeks and not for themselves. Their number was small, however, and their point of view did not gain ground; in 1660 the authority of Aristotle was generally acknowledged. Nevertheless, such opinions were expressed and Corneille could have joined their number if he really believed in their cause. He never hesitated to defend unpopular views. But from the beginning he was an individualist and refused to join either the attackers or the defenders of the 'rules'. He did not wish to tie himself down to them, but was prepared to experiment with them when it suited him. As the rules gained ground, Corneille was more inclined to accept them, provided he did not have to sacrifice his independence as an artist. He even entered the lists himself and began to use Aristotle against his critics!

It is interesting to follow this development in the prefaces to his plays. In the preface to *Clitandre* (1632) he takes a very independent view of the classical writers: 'Je me donne ici quelque sorte de liberté de choquer les anciens... Puisque les sciences et les arts ne sont jamais à leur période, il m’est permis de croire qu’ils n’ont pas tout su, et que de leurs instructions on peut tirer des lumières qu’ils n’ont pas eues. Je leur porte du respect comme à des gens qui nous ont frayé le chemin, et qui après avoir défriché un pays fort rude, nous ont laissé à le cultiver'. A few years later, in the *Epître Dédicatoire* to *La Suivante* (1637) he writes: ‘Savoir les règles, et entendre le secret de les apprivoiser adroitement avec notre théâtre, ce sont deux sciences bien différentes; et peut-être que pour faire maintenant réussir une pièce, ce n’est pas assez avoir étudié dans les livres d’Aristote et d’Horace’ (Barnwell, p. 179).

But in the *Epître* of *La Suite du Menteur* (1645) Corneille appeals to the authority of Aristotle when he argues that the primary purpose of drama is to please (Barnwell, p. 184); in 1647 he speaks of ‘notre unique docteur’ (Barnwell, p. 190), and in 1648 in the *Avertissement* to *Le Cid* he highly praises Aristotle: ‘Ce grand homme a traité la poétique avec tant d’adresse et de jugement, que les préceptes qu’il nous en a laissés sont de tous les temps et de tous les peuples’ (Barnwell, p. 192). He even alleges that the great success of *Le Cid* was due to the fact that it observed the rules of Aristotle. One may ask whether Corneille is sincere in asserting this, but it is in any case clear that he is prepared to argue on the basis of Aristotle’s views. This development reaches its culmination in the *Trois Discours* where he gives the most detailed account of his attitude towards Aristotle. He attempts to recognize his authority as far as possible without abandoning his own views. It is interesting to examine the ways in which he tries to achieve this purpose. Before discussing a few examples I shall first try to give a general description of his approach. We shall see that there are really several different approaches and that he even combines more than one approach in discussing the same problem.

To begin with it must be made clear that Corneille frankly admits that his final criterion is neither Aristotle nor the rules, but his own experience of what has been successful in the theatre. Time and again he says that he does not wish to condemn that which has pleased the public: ‘Le commentaire dont je m’y sers le plus est l’expérience du théâtre et les réflexions sur ce que j’ai vu y plaire ou déplaire’ (Barnwell, p. 27). Elsewhere he tries to modify the rules of Aristotle ‘pour n’être pas obligés de condamner beaucoup de poèmes que nous avons vu réussir sur nos théâtres’ (Barnwell, p. 36).

There are a few cases in which Corneille openly declares that he does not agree with Aristotle, although this does not happen very frequently. When he discusses catharsis he first says: ‘en quoi véritablement je ne comprends point

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sa pensée', and further on gives as his opinion: 'et j'ai bien peur que la raisonnement d'Aristote sur ce point ne soit qu'une belle idée qui n'ait jamais son effet dans la vérité' (Barnwell, pp. 31, 32). Here he openly dares to assert that Aristotle's reasoning is wrong. In other cases, however, he puts it more cautiously. Circumstances have changed since Aristotle's time and the taste of seventeenth century France differs from that of the Athenians of the fourth century BC. He even ventures to assert that, if Aristotle had lived in the seventeenth century, he would have thought differently. When he discusses Aristotle's treatment of the kinds of incidents which arouse fear and pity he makes two very interesting statements: 'Ce n’est pas démentir Aristote que de l’expliquer ainsi favorablement, pour trouver dans cette quatrième manière qu’il refute, une espèce de nouvelle tragédie plus belle que les trois qu’il recommande, et qu’il leur eût sans doute préférée, s’il l’eût connue. C’est faire honneur à notre siècle, sans rien retrancher de l’autorité de ce philosophe; mais je ne sais comment faire pour lui conserver cette autorité, et renverser l’ordre de la préférence qu’il établit entre ces trois espèces' (Barnwell, pp. 40-41). And further on he writes: 'Il y a grande apparente que ce qu’a dit ce philosophe des ces divers degrés de perfection pour la tragédie avait une entière justesse de son temps, et en la présence de ses compatriotes; je n’en veux point douter; mais aussi je ne me puis empêcher de dire que le goût de notre siècle n’est point celui du sien sur cette préférence d’une espèce à l’autre, ou du moins que ce qui plaisait au dernier point à ses Athéniens ne plaît pas également à nos Francais; et je ne sais point d’autre moyen de trouver mes doutes supportables, et demeurer tout ensemble dans la vénération que nous devons à tout ce qu’il a écrit de la poétique' (Barnwell, pp. 42-43). If Corneille had consistently adapted this approach it would have saved him much trouble, but neither he nor the majority of his contemporaries were prepared to go to such lengths. They occasionally disagreed with Aristotle but were not prepared to reject his authority completely. It is noticeable that even when Corneille rejects his conclusions he still does homage to his authority.

This is the reason why he frequently adopts another approach. He tries to adapt Aristotle’s rules to his own opinions. Although Aristotle makes a statement which does not agree with his own dramatic practice, he regards it as possible to extend or moderate his rules in order to smooth over the differences; s’accommoder is a term which he frequently uses. He says, for example: ‘Trouvons quelque modification à la rigueur de ces règles du philosophe, ou du moins quelque favorable interprétation, pour n’être pas obligés de condamner beaucoup de poèmes que nous avons vu réussir sur nos théâtres’ (Barnwell, p. 36). There is a further complication, however. It is not always exactly clear what Aristotle meant and in the seventh century the uncertainty as to Aristotle’s real meaning was even greater than today. In these cases, in which different explanations were current, Corneille had more room for manoeuvring. He could choose between different interpretations and even give his own
explanation of a difficult passage, as he himself admits: ‘Dans cette diversité d’interprétations chacun est en liberté de choisir, puisque même on a droit de les rejeter toutes, quand il s’en présente une nouvelle qui plaît davantage, et que les opinions des plus savants ne sont pas des lois pour nous’ (Barnwell, p. 16). I do not think that one does Corneille an injustice when one concludes that in these cases, consciously or unconsciously, he preferred the interpretation which was nearest to his own views on drama. In the first Discours he admits that he ought to have studied the commentators on Aristotle and Horace more thoroughly but that he preferred to devote his time to the writing of new plays! In spite of this humility it is clear that he had an extensive knowledge of the Italian commentators on the Poetics as C. Searles has shown.8 Thus he had a wide choice of interpretations. In all fairness towards Corneille it must be added that he not only misinterpreted Aristotle but sometimes explained him more correctly than his contemporaries, for example, when he insisted that for Aristotle the primary purpose of a drama was to please.

I now wish to discuss a few examples of how Corneille interpreted the Poetics, but I must emphasize again that my main purpose is not to demonstrate that he interpreted Aristotle wrongly but to examine the reason why he did so. To begin, I wish to refer briefly to his views on the purpose of drama, especially the question whether drama should have an edifying effect on the spectator. Previously, in the Epitre of La Suite du Menteur (1645) he asserted that Aristotle said nothing about the moral purpose of drama. Now, at the beginning of the first Discours, he repeats this statement which is diametrically opposed to the generally accepted view of his time, but he modifies it a little. Aristotle says that the sole purpose of dramatic poetry is to please the audience but the dramatist must please according to the rules, and that is impossible without at the same time supplying a moral purpose! In this way he maintains his opinion but also satisfies the demands of his contemporaries. In his opinion it is more rewarding to discuss the ways in which a play can serve a moral purpose. The dramatist can insert maxims and moral instructions in the play, or he can merely describe the vices and virtues in such a way that they will be clearly distinguished. Thus virtue is presented as admirable, even if it is unfortunate, and vice as hateful, even if it is triumphant. Corneille discerns clearly that this was sufficient for the writers of classical times, but he also shows a special understanding of the taste of his own time when he observes that the public wants to see the just rewarded and the wicked punished. If this is the case, the spectator is encouraged to be virtuous and deterred from vice, and this is the third way in which drama serves a useful purpose. He emphasizes, however, that this is not a precept but a usage which the dramatist ignores at his own risk.

The fourth manner in which drama can serve a moral purpose is the process of catharsis which Corneille discusses at length in his second Discours. He complains (and that in 1660!) that there are numerous explanations of this term, but thinks that it is possible to deduce from Aristotle’s own words what he really meant. His own interpretation is based on that of Beni: ‘La pitié d’un malheur où nous voyons tomber nos semblables nous porte à la crainte d’un pareil pour nous; cette crainte, au désir de l’eviter; et ce désir, à purger, modifier, rectifier, et même déraciner en nous la passion qui plonge dans ce malheur les personnes que nous plaignons, par cette raison commune, mais naturelle et indubitable, que pour éviter l’effet il faut retrancher la cause’ (Barnwell, p. 29). I do not wish to point out all the errors in this interpretation; Lessing already did so at length. The most conspicuous misinterpretation is that he connects the purification with the passions which are portrayed on the stage and not with the emotions of pity and fear. It is more instructive to see how he subsequently uses this explanation of catharsis, although he does not fully believe in it. His objections are clearly stated when he discusses Aristotle’s chapter on the ‘ideal tragic hero’. He summarizes the argument, mentions the examples of Oedipus and Thyestes, and then declares that he does not understand Aristotle’s line of thought. His reasons are interesting: ‘Le premier (Oedipe) me semble ne faire aucune faute, bien qu’il tue son père, parce qu’il ne le connaît pas, et qu’il ne fait que disputer le chemin en homme de coeur contre un inconnu qui l’attaque avec avantage. Néanmoins, comme la signification du mot grec ἁμαρτήμα can s’étendre à une simple erreur de méconnaissance, telle qu’était la sienne, admettons-le avec ce philosophe, bien que je ne puisse voir quelle passion il nous donne à purger, ni de quoi nous pouvons nous corriger sur son exemple’ (Barnwell, p. 31). Corneille shows great insight when he refuses to look for a ‘sin’ in Oedipus and when he concedes that ἁμαρτήμα can be used for an error of judgement. But he gets into trouble when he tries to apply his explanation of catharsis as a purification of harmful passions to the case of Oedipus, since he cannot find an excessive passion in which Oedipus indulged. With Thyestes he has the same problem, for he cannot see of what passion his story should purify us.

Corneille has now had the temerity to disagree with Aristotle and is encouraged to go further. He expresses doubt whether purification really takes place at all, even when the plot conforms to Aristotle’s requirements, as in Le Cid. The hero Rodrigue and the heroine Chimène suffer misfortune owing to an excess of love for each other, and in theory their experience should purify us from too much love, but Corneille rightly doubts whether this really happens. Therefore he draws the conclusion that catharsis in Aristotle is nothing but a brilliant idea which he invented to refute Plato’s attack on dramatic poetry.

but which has no basis in reality. It is clear why Corneille does not believe in catharsis as he himself explains it. As we have shown, the element of guilt in Corneille's heroes is mostly kept in the background so that his plays are less suitable to deter the spectator from sinful passions. Moreover he prefers heroes of superhuman greatness and does not like the idea of the ὀμοιὸς, the man like us, the hero of 'médiocre bonté' as he calls him rather contemptuously elsewhere (Barnwell, p. 117).

But after he has rejected Aristotle's point of view he seems to back down a little: 'Cependant, quelque difficulté qu'il y ait à trouver cette purgation effective et sensible des passions par le moyen de la pitié et de la crainte, il est aisé de nous accommoder avec Aristote' (Barnwell, p. 34). He leaves catharsis aside for the moment and concentrates on the awakening of fear and pity. He hits upon a brilliant idea which enables him to bring many of his dramas into line with Aristotle's views. According to him fear and pity can be separated and need not be aroused at the same time and by the same character. In this way he can fit in both his virtuous and his vicious characters, for the former excite pity and the latter fear. He argues that this interpretation is supported by the fact that Aristotle speaks of plots which arouse neither fear nor pity. Therefore he concludes that he would be satisfied if one of the two is aroused. The example of Oedipus seems to strengthen this conclusion for he excites only pity. On seeing his story presented on the stage no one will become afraid of killing his father and marrying his mother.

It is interesting to see how Corneille succeeds in getting round Aristotle's rejection of the completely vicious hero. It must be noted that his argument is once again based on the assumption that tragedy by arousing our fear purifies us from vices. A completely vicious character does not excite pity because he is unworthy of it, and does not arouse fear in the spectators because he is too unlike them. But according to Corneille it is possible to distinguish between different kinds of crime. An honourable person would not commit a crime like a deliberate assassination, but an overpowering passion may induce him to commit crimes which are perhaps not so serious as those of the vicious character but are still of the same kind. The Syrian queen Cleopatra in the play Rodogune planned to kill her two sons in order to retain the throne. There are few mothers who would go to such lengths but many who enjoy their riches and hold on to them as long as possible. When they see how Cleopatra is punished they may be moved by fear for a similar fate and be cured of their excessive love of possessions (Barnwell, pp. 33-34).

Corneille also manages to justify the completely virtuous hero. According to Aristotle the fate of good men passing from prosperity to adversity arouses neither fear nor pity but is merely shocking. The Greek word μέτριον is usually translated as 'shocking', but Corneille renders it 'because it is a completely unjust event' (Barnwell, p. 30). He then argues that the misfortune which a virtuous man suffers, arouses more indignation against the person who causes
It than pity for the sufferer, and therefore is less suitable in a tragedy. This line of argument is completely alien to Aristotle but gives Corneille an opening to justify his virtuous heroes. If the indignation against the persecutor can be eliminated a virtuous hero will be acceptable. He suggests two possible ways: The virtuous character may be persecuted but may escape, whereas the persecutor himself is punished. In such a plot the virtuous hero arouses pity and indignation does not predominate over it, for the spectator keeps on hoping that the hero will escape. Such a plot, in fact, gives us that poetical justice in which the virtuous are rewarded and the vicious punished, a conclusion which was expected by the public of his time, as Corneille has already pointed out. A second possibility is the following: The persecutor may be a weakling who is forced by circumstances to persecute the hero because he is not brave enough to refuse, e.g., Felix, the father-in-law of the martyr Polyeucte. In this case we rather pity than hate the persecutor, and this does not interfere with our pity for the sufferer (Barnwell, pp. 36-37).

In this way Corneille gets away from Aristotle’s hero who is like us and tries to justify his own superhuman heroes. There is another passage in which this aim is even clearer. It appears in another context but also illustrates my point. In the first Discours Corneille discusses Aristotle’s requirements for a tragic character, especially the first one, that a character should be good. He cannot understand the critics who conclude from this that a character should be virtuous. Most dramatic poems, ancient as well as modern, would be in a poor state if one removed from them all the characters who are either vicious or have moral failings. He even appeals to Horace; in his well-known description of the characteristics of the different age groups he mentions more vices than virtues, and in his advice to dramatists to retain the traditional characteristics of mythical heroes he does not emphasize their virtues. Consequently Aristotle must mean another kind of goodness: ‘Je crois que c’est le caractère brillant et élevé d’une habitude vertueuse ou criminelle, selon qu’elle est propre et convenable à la personne qu’on introduit’ (Barnwell, p. 14). Again he mentions the example of the Syrian queen Cleopatra. She is anything but virtuous: ‘Mais tous ses crimes sont accompagnés d’une grandeur d’âme qui a quelque chose de si haut, qu’en même temps qu’on déteste ses actions, on admire la source dont elles partent’. He also mentions other interpretations, but it is unnecessary to examine them, for it is clear that he prefers this explanation. I agree with Kommerell that this passage reveals Corneille’s deepest nature, in contrast with other passages in which his hands are tied: ‘Um so bedeutender ist dann ein Durchbruch; und ein solcher unverkennbarer Durchbruch in dem rücksichts- und hüllenlos eine Natur sich selber anzeigt, ist es, wenn Corneille, der die moralischen Anforderungen an die Tragödie bis zur Unerträglichkeit anspannt, andererseits die aristotelische Forderung guter „Sitten“ dahin auszulegen wagt, dass mit dieser Güte die Grossartigkeit der Erscheinung sowohl guter wie schlechter Sitten gemeint sei! Dies lässt sich
This passage aroused Lessing’s indignation because in this way Corneille eliminated every difference between good and bad.11

The last interpretation I wish to discuss is connected with Aristotle’s treatment of the incidents most suitable to arouse fear and pity. It is one of the passages in the Discours which throws most light on the fundamental difference between Aristotle’s and Corneille’s view of the tragic plot. Aristotle states that the most moving incidents are those in which relations or friends are involved. There are several possibilities: First, a character may plan to kill a relation in full knowledge of the relationship and carry out his intention; thus Medea kills her children. Secondly, the deed may be done in ignorance and the tie of kinship be discovered afterwards, e.g. Oedipus. Thirdly, some one may plan in ignorance to kill a relation but discover it just in time, as when Iphigenia nearly sacrifices Orestes. Fourthly, some one may be about to kill a relation and refrain from doing so. Aristotle regards the last possibility as the worst, the first as better, the second as still better and the third as best. Here we clearly see his preference for a plot in which the misfortune is due to circumstances, especially ignorance. Corneille’s reaction to this classification is illuminating. He is quite willing to accept the condition that tragic incidents should involve relations or friends, for this suits his own preference for a conflict between duty and passion: ‘Les oppositions des sentiments de la nature aux emportements de la passion ou à la sévérité du devoir, forment de puissantes agitations qui sont reçues de l’auditeur avec plaisir; et il se porte aisément à plaindre un malheureux opprimé ou poursuivi par une personne qui devrait s’intéresser à sa conservation, et qui quelquefois ne poursuit sa perte qu’avec déplaisir, ou du moins avec répugnance’ (Barnwell, p. 38). He does not, however, wish to tie himself down to this requirement and points out that in many Greek tragedies this is not the case.

But Corneille does not agree at all with Aristotle’s order of preference. He is especially disturbed by his rejection of the fourth possibility, that a character may plan a deed in full knowledge and fail to do it. He fears that this implies a condemnation of many of his best plays in which the hero is prevented by circumstances from carrying out his intention, e.g. Le Cid in which Chimène tries to secure Rodrigue’s condemnation but is thwarted by the king. It is very likely that Corneille’s fears are groundless, for I do not think that Aristotle meant to condemn such a plot. J. Vahlen’s remarks on this passage are interesting: ‘Wird aber die gewollte und schon begonnene Tat nicht etwa durch eine unerwartete Änderung in der Stellung der Personen zueinander (denn beide sind einander bekannt), sondern durch eine äussere Zufälligkeit, die der Handelnde nicht in seiner Gewalt hatte, oder vielleicht durch ein

Corneille explicitly rejects a sudden change of resolve, and it is not exactly an external coincidence which prevents his characters from carrying out their plans. Nevertheless, there is a more fundamental contrast between Corneille and Aristotle who in any case does not describe the kind of plot which Corneille prefers. The latter makes it quite clear that he regards this type, when a character plans a deed and is prevented from carrying it out, as the best and he can only save Aristotle’s reputation by supposing that he did not know this type.

This fundamental contrast becomes clearer when he criticizes the two kinds of incidents which Aristotle rates first and second. When the relationship between the characters is discovered in time and the tragic deed is prevented, no pity is aroused, according to Corneille. The only effect is ‘a certain sentiment of inner trepidation’ on the part of the spectator which causes him to fear that the deed may be committed before the characters recognize each other and to long for that recognition, and after the recognition there is only joy. When the recognition takes place after the deed, there is little scope for pity: ‘La compassion qu’excitent les déplaisirs de celui qui le fait périr ne peut avoir grande étendue, puisqu’elle est reculée et renfermée dans la catastrophe’ (Barnwell, p. 41). From these remarks it is clear that Corneille cannot really appreciate the typical Aristotelian tragedy. He is thinking of another kind of drama: ‘Mais lorsqu’on agit à visage découvert, et qu’on sait à qui on en veut, le combat des passions contre la nature, ou du devoir contre l’amour, occupe la meilleure partie du poème, et de la naissent les grandes et fortes émotions qui renouvelent à tous moments et redoublent la commiseration’ (Ibid.). Corneille prefers an inner conflict in which the character consciously weighs one argument against the other.

This becomes even clearer from his remarks on recognition. He admits that it can be a great embellishment but considers that the dramatists are frequently so concerned with recognition that they neglect fine opportunities for the portrayal of an inner conflict. He gives a good example. The Italian dramatist Ghirardelli wrote a tragedy on the death of Crispus, whose father, Constantine the Great, condemned him to death after he had been falsely accused by the empress Fausta. According to Ghirardelli’s play Constantine did not know that Crispus was his son. Corneille considers that the tragedy would have been much more moving if Constantine had been aware of this relationship. What inner conflicts in Constantine and even in Fausta could the dramatist have portrayed! But he preferred to treat the story according to the Aristotelian

pattern and therefore, in Corneille's opinion, wrote a much less effective tragedy.

I have given only a few examples of Corneille's way of interpreting Aristotle, but they are sufficient to give an impression of his approach. Finally, the question may be raised whether Aristotle exerted an influence for better or for worse on the drama of the seventeenth century. In some cases his influence was undoubtedly harmful since he forced critics to use all kinds of ingenious and far-fetched arguments. I do not consider, however, that Aristotle ever forced dramatists to adopt a dramatic form which was not to their taste. R. Bray has shown that they always put reason above Aristotle. They rather used him to justify what they themselves wished to do. And the necessity of an Auseinandersetzung with Aristotle forced them to give a clearer account of their own conception of drama.

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