

**François Hédelin,
Abbot of Aubignac** 1604–1676

The Whole Art of the Stage 1657

Book One

Chapter I

As for those spectacles which consist as much in discourse as action, such as formerly were the disputes upon the stage between the epic and dramatic poets, they are not only useful but absolutely necessary to instruct the people and give them some tincture of moral virtues.

The minds of those who are of the meanest rank and condition in a state are generally so little acquainted with any notions of morality that the most general maxims of it are hardly known to them. 'Tis in vain, therefore, to make fine discourses, full of convincing reasons and strengthened with examples, to them: they can neither understand the first nor have any deference for the latter. All the elevated truths of philosophy are lights too strong for their weak eyes. Tell them of these maxims—that happiness consists less in the possession of worldly things than in the despising of them, that virtue ought to seek its recompence in itself, that there is no interest in the world considerable enough to oblige a man of honor to do a base thing—all these, I say, are paradoxes to them, which makes them suspect philosophy itself and turn it into ridicule. They must therefore be instructed by a more sensible way, which may fall more under their senses, and such are the representations of the stage, which may therefore properly be called the People's School.

One of the chiefest and indeed the most indispensable rule of dramatic poems is that in them virtues always ought to be rewarded, or at least commended, in spite of all the injuries of fortune, and that likewise vices be always punished, or at least detested with horror, though they triumph upon the stage for that time. The stage being thus regulated, what can philosophy teach that won't become much more sensibly touching by representation? 'Tis there that the meanest capacities may visibly see that favors of fortune are not real enjoyments, when they see the ruin of the royal family of Priam; all that they hear from the mouth of Hecuba seems very probable, having before their eyes the sad example of her calamities. 'Tis there that they are convinced that Heaven punishes the horrid crimes of the guilty

Selections. From François Hédelin, Abbot of Aubignac, *The Whole Art of the Stage*, trans. anonymous. London: William Cadman, 1684. Spelling and punctuation modernized by the editor.

with the remorse of them, when they see Orestes tormented by his own conscience and driven about by furies within his own breast. 'Tis there that ambition seems to them a very dangerous passion, when they see a man engaged in crimes to attain his ends, and after having violated the laws of heaven and earth, fall into misfortunes as great as those he had overwhelmed others in and [be] more tormented by himself than by his enemies. 'Tis there again that covetousness appears a disease of the soul, when they see a covetous man persecuted with continual restlessness and fears of want in the midst of all his riches. And lastly, 'tis there that a man, by representation, makes them penetrate into the most hidden secrets of human nature, while they seem to touch and feel in this living picture those truths which else they would scarce be capable of. But that which is most remarkable is that they never go from the theatre without carrying along with them the idea of the persons represented, the knowledge of those virtues and vices of which they have seen the examples, their memory repeating continually to them those lessons which have been derived to them from sensible and present objects.

Besides, in all governments there is a number of idle people, either because they hate taking pains or because they need not do it to live. This idleness carries them generally to many debaucheries, where they consume in a very little time what might suffice for the keeping of their families many months and are then forced upon ill actions for a supply to their present wants. Now, I think nothing worthier the care of a great prince than to prevent, if possible, his subjects from taking these extravagant courses, and as it would be too severe to enjoin them perpetual labor, so I think that public spectacles and entertainments would most innocently amuse those who have no other employment. Their own pleasure would carry them thither without constraint, their hours would slide away without regret, and their very idleness being busy, they would there lose all the thoughts of doing ill. . . .

Chapter IV

. . . Here are five objections which have been ordinarily made to me against the rules of the ancients.

First, that we are not to make laws to ourselves from custom and example but from reason, which ought to prevail over any authority.

Secondly, that the ancients themselves have often violated their own rules.

Thirdly, that diverse poems of the ancients have been translated and acted upon our stage with very ill success.

Fourthly, that divers of our modern plays, though quite contrary to these rules, had been acted with great applause.

And last of all, that if these rigorous maxims should be followed we should very often lose the greatest beauty of all true stories, their incidents having most commonly happened at different times and in different places.

As to the first objection, I answer that the rules of the stage are not founded upon authority but upon reason. They are not so much settled by example as by the natural judgment of mankind, and if we call them the rules and the art of the ancients, 'tis only because they have practiced them with great regularity, and much to their glory, having first made many observations upon the nature of moral actions and upon the probability of human accidents in this life and thereby drawing the pictures after the truth of the original; and observing all due circumstances, they reduced to an art this kind of poem, whose progress was very slow, though it were much in use among them and much admired all the world over. But, however, I am very sparing of citing their poems, and when I do it, it is only to show with what agreeable artifice they kept to these rules and not to buoy up my opinion by their authority.

As for the second objection, it seems not considerable, for reason, being alike all the world over, does equally require everybody's submission to it, and if our modern authors cannot without offense be dispensed from the rules of the stage, no more could the ancients; and where they have failed, I do not pretend to excuse them. . . . I do propose the ancients for models only in such things as they shall appear to have followed reason in, and their example will always be an ill pretext for faults, for which there is no excuse against reason. In things which are founded only in custom, as in grammar or in the art of making a verse with long or short syllables, the learned may often use a license against the received practice and be imitated in it by others, because custom may often have countenanced a thing not well of itself. But in all that depends upon common sense and reason, such as the rules of the stage, there to take license is a crime, because it offends not custom but natural light, which ought never to suffer an eclipse.

I must not omit, for the glory of the ancients, that if they have sometimes violated the art of dramatic poems, they have done it for some more powerful and inducing reason than all the interest of the play could amount to, as for example, Euripides in *The Suppliants* has preferred the glory of his country to that of his art. . . .

The third objection has no force but in the ignorance of those that allege it, for if some poems of the ancients, and even those which were most in esteem with them, have not succeeded upon our stage, the subject and not the want of art has been the cause of it, and sometimes likewise the changes made by the translators, which destroyed all the graces of the original: they have added improbable scenes between princes and have showed out of time that which the ancients had carefully concealed with art, and very often changed a fine relation into an impertinent, ridiculous

spectacle. But that which is more worthy our consideration is that there were certain stories fitted for the stage of Athens with great ornaments which would be in abomination upon ours, for example, the story of Thyestes, so that we may say that either the moderns have corrupted the ancients by changing their whole economy or the imperfection of the matter stifled the excellence of the art.

To destroy the fourth objection, we need only to remember that those plays of ours which took with the people and with the court were not liked in all their parts but only in those things which were reasonable and in which they were conformable to the rules. When there were any passionate scenes they were praised, and when there was any great appearance or noble spectacle it was esteemed, and if some notable event was well managed there was great satisfaction shown; but if in the rest of the play, or even in these beauties of it, any irregularities were discovered, or any fault against probability and decency, either in the persons, time, or place, or as to the state of the things represented, they were condemned as faults. And all the favor that was showed the poet was that out of the desire of preserving what was fine, the spectators were somewhat more indulgent to what was amiss. Therefore, that success so much bragged on is so far from contradicting the rules of the stage that, quite [the] contrary, it establishes their authority. . . .

The fifth objection is absolutely ridiculous, for the rules of the stage do not at all reject the most notable incidents of any story, but they furnish us with inventions how so to adjust the circumstances of the action, time, and place as not to go against all probable appearance and yet not to represent them always as they are in story but such as they ought to be, to have nothing but what's agreeable in them. . . .

Book Two

Chapter III

'Tis one of Aristotle's rules, and without doubt a very rational one, that a dramatic poem ought to comprehend but one action, and he does very pertinently condemn those who make a play of the whole story or life of a hero, for though we speak but of one principal part on which all the other events, bad and good, do depend, yet there are diverse, subordinate actions. . . .

'Tis certain that the stage is but a picture or image of human life, and as a picture cannot show us at the same time two originals and be an accomplished picture, it is likewise impossible that two actions (I mean principal ones) should be represented reasonably by one play. Let us consider what the painter does who is to make a picture of some story. He has no other design but to give the image of some action, and that action so limited that it cannot represent two parts of a story together, and less

all the story upon which he has fixed, because it would be necessary that the same person should be painted and appear in different places, which would make a strange confusion in the whole picture, and it would be hard to distinguish any order among so many different actions; and, by consequence, the story would be very obscure and confused. Therefore, instead of that, the painter would choose, among all the actions which made up the story, the most important one and the fittest for the excellence of his art, and [the one] which in some measure should contain all the others, so that with one look one might have a sufficient knowledge of all that he designed to express; and if he desired to express two parts of the same story, he would make in some corner of the picture a *lontananza*, where he would paint that other action which he had a mind to represent, that he might make it be understood that he designed the painting of two different actions, and that it was two pictures and not one.

As for example, suppose he designed to draw the story of Iphigenia, it would be hard for him to comprehend in one picture all the adventures of that princess. Therefore, he would choose that of the sacrifice which the Greeks were going to make of her to Diana to appease her anger and the storms of the sea, for in this action her whole story would in some measure be comprehended. . . . Then, if he had a mind to express that Diana carried her to Tauris, where she was upon the point of sacrificing her brother Orestes, he would put her in one of the corners of his picture in the particular dress of Diana's priestess, with some other marks of this second adventure, and so make two pictures of two different actions of the same story.

The dramatic poet must imitate the painter, and when he undertakes the composition of a play, he must reckon that he undertakes to make a living, speaking picture and that therefore he cannot comprehend in it a whole history or the life of a hero, because he would be necessitated to represent an infinite number of events and employ a vast number of actors and mingle so many things that he would make up a work of perfect confusion and would be forced in most places to offend against probability and decency, and to go beyond the time and extent ordinarily allowed to dramatic poems, or if he would keep within the limits of the rules of his art, he would be forced to hasten all the incidents and as it were heap them one upon another, without either graces or distinction, and so be obliged to stifle and suppress all the passionate strokes and, in a word, show such a monstrous, extravagant image as they have done who have represented in the first act of a tragedy the marriage of a princess, in the second the birth of her son, in the third the amours of that young prince, in the fourth his victories, and in the fifth his death, in all [of] which there was matter enough for above twenty plays. Our poet, therefore, amid this vast extent, shall pitch upon some one remarkable action, and, as one may

say, a point of story notable by the happiness or misfortune of some illustrious person, in which point he may comprehend, as circumstances, all the rest of the story, and by representing one chief part make the whole known by some slight to the spectators without multiplying the principal action and without retrenching any of the necessary beauties to the perfection of his work; and if by chance he should meet in the same story with two or more actions, so considerable that they each of them deserved a play, and so independent or opposite to each other as not to be reconciled, he ought to make two or more plays of them or choose the most important, and particularly the most pathetic, for his subject.

Thus, *The Suppliants* of Euripides does not contain the whole war of Thebes but only the burial of the two princes of Argos. *Hecuba* contains not the taking of Troy but the last misfortunes of that queen in her captivity. The *Ajax* of Sophocles shows not all the exploits of war of that hero, nor his disputes with Ulysses for the arms of Achilles, but only represents his madness, which was the cause of his death. And so we may say of most of the ancient plays. But in all these, the poets have showed so much art as to instruct the spectators either by narrations, discourses, complaints, or other slights of the art, in all the circumstances of those stories which they treated. . . .

Chapter VI

. . . To make his actors appear in different places would render his play ridiculous by the want of probability, which is to be the foundation of it. This rule of Unity of Place begins now to be looked upon as certain, but yet the ignorant and some others of weak judgment do still imagine that it cannot but be repugnant to the beauty of the incidents of a play. . . . As for the truly learned; they are thoroughly convinced of the necessity of this rule because they see clearly that probability can no ways be preserved without it. . . .

Aristotle has said nothing of it, and I believe he omitted it because this rule was in his time too well known, the Chorus, which ordinarily remained upon the stage from one end of the play to the other, marking the unity of the scene too visibly to need a rule for it. . . . The three famous tragedians of the Greeks whose works we have are so punctual in the observation of this rule and so often make their actors say where they are and whence they come that Aristotle must have supposed too much ignorance in his age and in those who should read these poets if he had gone about to explain so settled a rule. . . .

. . . One and the same image remaining in the same state cannot represent two different things. Now, it is highly improbable that the same space

and the same floor, which receives no change at all, should represent two different places, as, for example, France and Denmark, or, within Paris itself, the Tuileries and the Exchange....

Let it then be allowed for a certain truth that the place where the first actor, who opens the play, is supposed to be ought to be the same place to the end of the play, and that, it not being in the ordinary course of nature that the place can receive any change, there can be none likewise in the representation, and, by consequence, that all your other actors cannot rationally appear in any other place.

But we must remember that this place which cannot be supposed to change is the area or floor of the stage, upon which the actors walk.... 'Tis not the same with the sides and end of the theatre, for as they do but represent those things which did actually environ the persons acting and which might receive some change, they may likewise receive some in the representation, and 'tis in that that consists the changing of scenes and other ornaments of decoration, which always ravish the people and please the best judges when they are well done. So we have seen upon our stage a temple adorned with a noble front of architecture which, coming to be set open, showed the inside of it, where in perspective were descried pillars and an altar and all the other ornaments of a church extremely well done, so that the place did not change and yet had a fine decoration.... So, for example, [the poet] might feign a palace upon the seaside, forsaken and left to be inhabited by poor fishermen; a prince landing or being cast away there might adorn it with all the rich furniture fit for it; after this, by some accident, it might be set on fire; and then, behind it, the sea might appear, upon which one might represent a sea fight, so that in all the five changes of the stage the Unity of Place would still be ingeniously preserved....

As for the extent which the poet may allow to the scene he chooses, when it is not in a house but open, I believe it may be as far as a man can see another walk and yet not know perfectly that 'tis he, for to take a smaller space would be ridiculous, it being improbable that two people being each of them at one end of the stage without any object between should look at one another and yet not see one another, whereas this distance, which we allow often, contributes to the working of the play by the mistakes and doubts which a man may make by seeing another at a distance....

Chapter VII

... One must consider that a dramatic poem has two sorts of time, each of which has a different and proper lasting. The first is the true time of the representation... that is, from the opening of the stage to the end of

the play.... Of this time, the measure can be no other but so much time as will reasonably spend the patience of the audience, for this sort of poem being made for pleasure, it ought not to weary and fatigue the mind, and it must not likewise be so short as that the spectators go away with an opinion of not having been well nor enough diverted. In all this, experience is the faithfulest guide and tells us most commonly that a play cannot last above three hours without wearying of us nor less without coming short of pleasing us....

The other time of the dramatic poem is that of the action represented... containing all that space which is necessary to the performing of those things which are to be exposed to the knowledge of the spectators from the first to the last act of the play.... The three Greek tragics, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, allow but a few hours to the lasting of the theatrical action in their poems, but their example was not followed by the poets who succeeded them, for Aristotle blames those of his time for giving too long an extent to the lasting of their plays, which makes him set down the rule, or rather renew it from the model of the ancients, saying that tragedy ought to be comprehended in the revolution of one sun.... As the day is considered two ways, the one with regard to the *primum mobile*,¹ which is called the natural day, and is of twenty-four hours, and the other by the sun's presence upon the horizon, between his rising and setting, which is called the artificial day, it is necessary to observe that Aristotle means only the artificial day, in the extent of which he makes the theatrical action to be comprehended. Castelvetro and Piccolomini,² upon Aristotle's *Poetics*, are of this opinion, against Segni,³ who extends the rule to the natural day of twenty-four hours.

The reason of this is certain, and founded upon the nature of dramatic poems, for this sort of poem ought to carry a sensible image of the actions of human life. Now, we do not see that regularly men are busy before day, nor much after night, and accordingly, in all well-governed places, there are magistrates to watch those who employ the night, naturally designed for rest, in the actions of the day.

Besides, we have said, and it cannot be called in question, that the theatrical action ought to be one and not comprehend any other actions which are not necessary to the intrigue of the stage. Now, how can that be observed in a play of twenty-four hours? Would it not be a necessity that

¹ Literally, the first moving thing, the sun was supposed to revolve around the earth in twenty-four hours, moving from east to west.

² Alessandro Piccolomini (1508-1578) translated Aristotle's *Poetics* and appended notes interpreting that work.

³ Bernardo Segni (1504-1558) translated Aristotle's *Poetics* into Italian (the first vernacular translation) in 1549.

the persons acting should sleep and eat and busy themselves in many things which would not be of the subject of the play, and though the poet should say nothing of it, yet the spectators must needs conceive it so?

But besides, the action of the stage is to be continued and not interrupted or broken. Now, that could not be in a play of twenty-four hours. Nature could not without some rest endure so long an action. . . .

Moreover, we cannot omit a reason of the ancients, which is essential to tragedy, which is that the Choruses, which they used, did not regularly use to stir off the stage for the whole play, or at least from the time they first came on, and I do not know with what appearance of probability the spectators could have been persuaded that people who were never out of their sight should have stayed twenty-four hours in that place, nor how in the truth of the action they could imagine that those whom they represented had passed all that time without satisfying some necessities of nature.

After all, we can never better understand Aristotle than by those three excellent tragic poets whom he always proposes for examples, who have regularly observed not to give above twelve hours to their plays. And I do not think that there are any of their works which do comprehend the whole space between the rising and setting of the sun.

It being most certain that their stage generally opens after sunrise and is shut up before sunset, as one may observe in the comedies of Plautus and Terence, 'tis therefore that Rossi, an Italian, allows but eight or ten hours. And Scaliger, more rigorously but more reasonably, would have the action performed in six hours. It were even to be wished that the action of the poem did not take up more time than that of the representation, but that being hard, and almost impossible, in certain occasions the poet has the liberty to suppose a longer time by some hours, in which the music that marks the intervals of the acts, and the relations of the actors upon the stage while the others are busy off of it, with the natural desire of the spectators to see the event, do all contribute very much and help to deceive the audience so as to make them think there has passed time enough for the performance of the things represented. . . .

Book Four

Chapter V

The stage . . . became a sensible and moving image of all human life. Now, there being three sorts of conditions or ways of living—that of great persons in the courts of kings, that of citizens and gentry in towns, and that of the country people in the country—the stage has likewise received three kinds of dramatic poems, to wit, Tragedy, Comedy, and Pastoral. Tragedy represented the life of princes and great people full of dis-

quiets, suspicions, troubles, rebellions, wars, murders, and all sorts of violent passions and mighty adventures. . . . Now, to distinguish Tragedies by their catastrophe, they were of two sorts. The one were calamitous and bloody in their events, ending generally by the death or some great misfortune of the hero. The others were more happy and concluded by the felicity of the chief persons upon the stage. And yet, because the poets, out of complaisance to the Athenians, who loved spectacles of horror, ended often their tragedies by unfortunate catastrophes, many people have thought that the word Tragic never signifies anything but some sad, bloody event, and that a dramatic poem could not be called a Tragedy if the catastrophe did not contain the death of the chief persons in the play. But they are mistaken, that word in its true signification meaning nothing else but a magnificent, serious, grave poem, conformable to the agitations and sudden turns of the fortune of great people. And accordingly, in the nineteen tragedies of Euripides, many of them have a happy conclusion. . . .

Comedy was the picture of the actions of the people, in which were generally represented the debaucheries of young people, with the tricks and jests of slaves and courtesans, full of raileries and jests, and ending in marriages or some other pleasant adventure of common life; and this poem was so confined to represent a popular life that the style of it was to be low and mean, the expressions taken out of the mouths of ordinary people, the passions were to be short and without violence. In a word, all the intrigues were to be upheld by slight and cunning and not by the sublime and marvellous part of human life. . . .

Pastoral or Satyr had a mixture of serious and pleasant; heroes and satyrs were its actors; and this sort of poem ought to be considered two ways. At first, it was nothing but a little poem called *Idyllium* or *Eclogue*, sung or recited by one man alone and seldom by two or more, and they were generally shepherds, gardeners, husbandmen, satyrs, nymphs, and all sorts of country people. There was nothing but complaints of lovers, cruelties of shepherdeses, disputes for singing, ambuscados of satyrs, and ravishing of nymphs, with such like diverting, easy adventures. But the poems were all loose pieces without any story or necessity of action. . . . The other sort was a dramatic poem, carried on according to the rules of the stage, where heroes and satyrs were mingled together, representing both grave and pleasant, ridiculous things, and for that reason this poem had the name of Satyrical Tragedy. This sort of poem had not any course among the Romans, at least that ever I could observe either in their historians or poets, that which they called *Satire* being only a copy of verses made to slander or reprove and never used for the stage but with the mimes and by way of interlude. . . .

These three sorts of poems are not now upon the stage in the same manner as they were anciently, for, to begin with Pastorals, they are now a

dramatic poem according to the rules of all other dramas, composed of five acts and many agreeable events and intrigues, but all regarding a country life, so that we have borrowed the matter of the Eclogues from the ancients and applied it to the rules of Satyrical Tragedy.

Comedy among us has remained long not only in meanness and obscurity but looked upon as infamous, being changed into that sort of Farce which we still retain at the end of some of our tragedies, though they are certainly things without art or grace and only recommendable to the rascally sort of mankind. . . .

As for Tragedy, it has been preserved a little better among us because, the manners of our nobility being serious and heroic, they have with more pleasure seen upon the stage the adventures of such persons and have showed no disposition at all to that mixture of serious and burlesque which we blame in the Italians. But besides the niceties of the art, which as well as the Italians we have long been ignorant of, we have done two things, one of which is very reasonable and the other without any good grounds. The first is that we have rejected all those stories full of horror and cruelty which made the pleasure of the Roman and Athenian stages. . . . But the second thing, which we do without any ground at all, is that we have taken away the name of Tragedy from all those plays where the catastrophe is happy and without blood, though both the subject and persons are heroic, and have given them the name of Tragicomedy. . . .

I shall not absolutely fall out with this name but I shall show that it is at least superfluous, since the word Tragedy signifies as well those plays that end in joy as those that end in blood, provided still the adventures be of illustrious persons. And besides, the signification of the word Tragicomedy is not true in the sense we use it, for in those plays that we apply it to there is nothing at all comical; all is grave and heroic, nothing popular and burlesque.

But moreover, this title alone may destroy all the beauty of a play, which, consisting particularly in the *Peripeteia*, or return of affairs, it may discover that too soon, since the most agreeable thing in a drama is that out of many sad and tragic appearances the event should at last be happy against the expectation of the whole audience. But when once the word Tragicomedy is prefixed, the catastrophe is presently known and the audience is less concerned with all the incidents that trouble the designs of the chief actors, so that all their pathetic complaints do but weakly move the spectator, who is prepossessed with an opinion that all will end well, whereas if we were ignorant of the event we should tremble for them and be likewise more delighted with the return of good fortune that should deliver them.

One thing which surprises me the most in this occasion is that there are men of learning and parts who out of complaisance to popular errors

do maintain that this was a word used by the Romans, for, for my part, I cannot imagine where they can find that a drama containing the adventures of heroic persons and ending in a happy catastrophe had the name of Tragicomedy. We see nothing of this in what remains of the works of the ancients, nor in those who have compiled fragments or written their own sense about the art and maxims of the stage. 'Tis true that Plautus in the Prologue to his *Amphitruon* uses the word Tragicomedy, but as he is the only Roman that has used it, so has he done it in a sense very remote from the use we make of it.

Molière **(Jean-Baptiste Poquelin) 1622-1673** **Critique of School for Wives 1663**

THE MARQUIS It is necessary merely to take note of the continual bursts of laughter coming from the pit. That's all the evidence I need to prove that the play is worthless.

DORANTE Are you then, Marquis, one of those fashionable gentlemen who will not have it that the pit may possess common sense, and who would be annoyed if you were to laugh with them, even at the funniest joke in the world? The other day at the theatre I saw one of our friends making himself ridiculous in this manner. He listened to the entire play with the most somber seriousness in the world, and everything that made other people smile made him frown. At every burst of laughter he would shrug his shoulders and look at the pit with pity; and sometimes too, looking at them with annoyance, he would loudly tell them, "Laugh away, pit, laugh away." It was a second comedy, our friend's irritation; like a true gentleman, he played it for everyone without charging an admission price, and they all agreed that no one else could have played it better. Learn, Marquis, I beg of you, and others as well, that in the theatre good sense is not restricted to any particular part of the house, that differences in the price of admission have nothing whatever to do with good taste, that those who stand and