

**Actions and Reactions: Emotional *Vraisemblance* in
the *Tragédie-Lyrique***

by
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In case it is not obvious that *vraisemblance* can be a difficult notion to deal with, here is Corneille at the beginning of his first *Discours* (1660):

Il faut que le poète traite son sujet selon le vraisemblable et le nécessaire; Aristote le dit, et tous ses interprètes répètent les mêmes mots, qui leur semblent si clairs et si intelligibles qu'aucun d'eux n'a daigné nous dire non plus que lui, ce que c'est que ce vraisemblable et ce nécessaire. Beaucoup même ont si peu considéré ce dernier, qui accompagne toujours l'autre chez ce philosophe...qu'on en est venu jusqu'à établir une maxime très fausse, qu'il faut que le sujet d'une tragédie soit vraisemblable, appliquant ainsi aux conditions du sujet la moitié de ce qu'il a dit de la manière de le traiter. (*Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Seuil, 1963, 822; Corneille's italics)

I would like to concentrate on several aspects of this passage: the concern with the plot (*sujet*); the importance of "le nécessaire"; and the possibility that the plot of a tragedy does not have to be *vraisemblable*. I would then like to discuss these ideas in relation to seventeenth-century French opera, or *tragédie-lyrique*, in particular the importance for this genre of evoking an emotional response in the spectator.

Most discussions of *vraisemblance* in the theater are concerned with the plausibility of the plot, with the probability of an action taking place. "Probable" is the first definition given in Richelet's dictionary, Furetière gives "qui est dans la possibilité...", and writers on

theatrical *vraisemblance* usually discuss what could be *expected to happen*, what a character could be *expected to do*, which often means what he or she *should do*.¹ For Corneille, "le vraisemblable général est ce que peut faire et qu'il est à propos que fasse un roi, un général,..., etc." (second *Discours*, 838A). For d'Aubignac,

Il est vrai que Néron fit étrangler sa mère...; mais cette barbarie, bien qu'agréable à celui qui l'exécuta, serait non seulement horrible à ceux qui la verrait, mais même incroyable, à cause que cela ne devait pas arriver.²

This concern with plausibility of plot is what the Aristotelian tradition calls a first kind of *vraisemblance*, dealing with what normally happens, as opposed to a second kind which deals with what happens rarely but not rarely enough to be unbelievable, improbable. The distinction was important enough for Richelet to make it in his dictionary of 1680: "Les Poètes parlent d'une vraisemblance ordinaire et d'une autre qu'ils appellent vraisemblance extraordinaire"; he refers the reader to the 16th-century commentators Castelvetro and Piccolomini. Corneille uses the same terms "ordinaire" and "extraordinaire" (839), and gives as an example of the second type Rodrigue's victory over the Count in *Le Cid*. He also mentions that this second type of *vraisemblance* allows for the use of mythological and supernatural characters on the stage, since "l'opinion commune" makes them sufficiently known to be acceptable to audiences. Here the "opinion commune" plays the same role as history, making the seemingly false acceptable as *vraisemblable*, if not as true, as believable according to special circumstances.

The *nécessaire* also plays an important role in making a seemingly improbable plot acceptable as *vraisemblable*. The *nécessaire* deals not with the actions themselves, "accompagnées des inséparables circonstances du temps et du lieu," but with "la liaison qu'elles ont ensemble, qui les fait naître l'une de

l'autre" (837). This is an interior logic, a "cohérence intérieure," a "vraisemblance interne" where a character's actions make sense in light of an existing circumstance or action within the text.

According to Corneille, in the case of Cinna's love for Emélie and his plot against Auguste, the first action is *vraie* and the second is only *vraisemblable*, but "leur liaison [between the actions, not the lovers!] est nécessaire" (p. 838B). In the case of Auguste's goodness and Cinna's subsequent irresolution, however, the link is only *vraisemblable*, in spite of the truth of Auguste's goodness, since Cinna could accomplish his goal of marrying Emélie by remaining Auguste's enemy, by showing no irresolution. Both Cinna's plot and his irresolution are *vraisemblable* by seventeenth-century standards of plausibility, but only his plot has this necessity within the logic of the play itself.

For Corneille, "le nécessaire y est à préférer au vraisemblable" (p. 838A). He emphasizes the importance of this inner necessity by taking the process a step farther and showing how Cinna's consultation with Emélie is *vraisemblable* in itself but also a necessary production of Cinna's *vraisemblable*—but not necessary—irresolution: "voilà une liaison nécessaire entre deux actions vraisemblables" (838B). It is not so much the "conditions du sujet" that matter as it is the "manière de le traiter."

This "nécessaire" is very much what Genette calls a "finalité du récit," yet one almost has the feeling in reading his "Vraisemblance et motivation" that he has made some kind of "discovery" in revealing that Valincour justifies Mme de Clèves's famous *aveu* and her husband's subsequent death by positing a novelistic world where the author is free to have characters do what she likes, regardless of what a reader might think a character should have done.³ It is true that one doesn't find seventeenth-century writers discussing "le récit arbitraire," but they had a much greater awareness of and concern with the text as a self-contained

structure than we moderns and postmoderns often think.⁴

Before we look at some helpful eighteenth-century texts, it is important to make some distinctions among different types of *vraisemblance*, and to look at how they apply to the *tragédie-lyrique*. We have seen not only what Corneille and others call *vraisemblance* "ordinaire" and "extraordinaire," where it is a question of what the spectator/reader is accustomed to accept as probable, but also an interior *vraisemblance* where what the spectator/reader expects, can accept as probable, is less important than the text's inner logic. In all three cases, the main elements are the same: (1) actions or decisions by characters in literary works; (2) reasons behind these actions or decisions; (3) the reaction of a spectator/reader to these actions or decisions and to the reasons behind them. In short, the spectator/reader judges the probability of actions or decisions, and in the classic example this judgment is based on "l'opinion du public."⁵ In most discussions of *vraisemblance* this public opinion is based on one of Corneille's two types of *vraisemblance*, what ordinarily happens or what is extraordinary but still acceptable as probable (falls short of the miraculous). Both standards thus come from what could happen in what a certain society sees as the "real" world, the *vrai* to which the *vraisemblable* is *semblable*. This makes perfect sense in an esthetic based on imitation and representation, and it allows a relatively easy transferal between the worlds of the spectator/reader and of the literary characters. It also makes sense in an esthetic where instruction is an important goal of literature, since it makes it easy for lessons in the text to be applied to "real life."⁶

On the other hand, this reference to an accepted reality makes less than perfect sense from the point of view of the author of a text. Without going into the possibilities of experimental, even arbitrary (à la Genette) texts in which there is no external representationality, there remains the possibility of authors who want either to make fun of existing literary modes (the beginning of *Le Roman bourgeois*,

for example) or to present behavior which is out of the ordinary, either to criticize it (comedy, where ordinary, real-seeming characters nevertheless have exaggerated traits of character and become entangled in actions that are *invraisemblables*) or to propose it as an alternative model (a feminist reading of *La Princesse de Clèves*, for example). One can thus go against the accepted norms of *vraisemblance* and still create coherent texts which please and instruct, which is precisely what Valincour said about Lafayette.⁷

One faces here a constant, fundamental contradiction, or at least debate, present in seventeenth-century French literature, from the *querelle du Cid* to the debate over *La Princesse de Clèves* and beyond (ancients and moderns, tragedy and opera, for example). How does one judge a work in which characters do things the spectator/reader would not expect them to do, in which things happen that the spectator/reader finds too far out of the ordinary to be plausible? And, on a more formal, esthetic (as opposed to content and plot) level, how does one judge a work that goes against expected esthetic norms? If the public likes non-conformist works, then conservative critics are upset; if the public does not like such works, then less conservative, more progressive authors and critics are upset. And of course, all of this depends on what the public really likes, which is not necessarily what authors and critics think it likes. For example, when Racine complains in the Preface to *Andromaque* that at least some members of the public expected his characters to behave like a Céladon, does this suggest that Racine (and Boileau and the ancients in general) is going against the literary taste of the majority of his public in imposing more classical standards, or just that there were a few recalcitrant baroque souls who had not yet seen the light of classicism?⁸

One finds a similar debate about works which go against certain standards in Charles Perrault's *Critique d'Alceste* ("Critique de l'opéra, ou Examen de la tragédie intitulée Alceste, ou le Triomphe D'Alcide"), published in 1674, the same year as Lully and

Quinault's second opera *Alceste*. Perrault's mouthpiece Cléon defends Quinault's libretto against the criticisms of Aristippe (which turn out to be based more on hearsay than on personal taste and judgment), who is content with the *musique* and *décorations* but not with the *poésie*, which he subdivides into "la conduite du sujet" and "la versification." There is, however, no discussion of versification, and the vast majority of the work is a discussion of scenes which Quinault omitted from or added to Euripides' *Alceste*. These modifications are justified according to the first type of *vraisemblance*, public opinion about what characters can be expected to do. Cléon is a modern, and his reasons for defending Quinault are based on conformity to current opinion, to "le goût de notre siècle" (286, 288) or "l'idée que l'on a" (290), to that which "peut convenir" (294), is "convenable" (297), "en sa place" (291), "naturel" (292), "séant" (293), "conforme aux moeurs" (302), which the public can "s'imaginer" (290), is "accoutumé à ...voir" (286).

The term *vraisemblance* is not used in this part of the dialogue, but it occurs as Aristippe makes one last effort to defend the ancients. He admits that they will not settle the quarrel between ancients and moderns, but adds: "mais faites-moi justice de ces divinités qui viennent à tous moments se présenter sur le théâtre, sans qu'il en soit aucun besoin" (304). His formulation of the question ("sans qu'il en soit aucun *besoin*") and Cléon's answer ("si l'on est *obligé* d'y mêler quelques incidents surnaturels"; 306) make it clear that the *merveilleux* is not *vraisemblable* but accepted, as Corneille said, because of the "opinion commune" which sees mythological characters as appropriate to certain genres, in certain situations.⁹ It is not a question of whether or not the actions of the divine characters themselves are *vraisemblables*, but of whether their presence on the stage is. In this way Cléon can call comedy *vraisemblable*, in spite of the exaggerated actions and implausible dénouements. He suggests the creation (consecration) of a third theatrical genre, "les opéra et les pièces de machines" (306), which would admit only "des événements

extraordinaires et surnaturels," while comedy admitted only the *vraisemblable* and tragedy a mixture of the *vraisemblable* and of the *merveilleux*. Even in this new genre, however, machines, miracles and apparitions of gods would be allowed only "quand il y a quelque fondement de les introduire" (307).

This somewhat unholy alliance of justifying plot ("conduite du sujet") by appeals to "ordinary" *vraisemblance* and then proposing that these plots be allowed to function within a genre which obeyed mainly the rules of "extraordinary" *vraisemblance* is typical of the first, somewhat confused, attempts to defend the new opera. Cléon uses traditional ("ancient") literary standards to justify the accommodation of a plot to a modern audience, and uses the traditional notions of *merveilleux* and *vraisemblance* to justify the creation of a new genre. He seems torn between defending the libretto of *Alceste* as one would a traditional tragedy and rejecting traditional rules in order to please a modern audience. If the public did not like scenes which appealed to the audience of Euripides, was Racine wrong in being so proud of creating scenes that would have pleased an ancient Greek audience as well as a seventeenth-century French one? If *vraisemblance* depends on "l'opinion du public," how can one ever have a true classicism? Is there no way for an author to please an audience without making all heroes act like Céladon (Racine's complaint), without introducing gods, goddesses, scene changes and machines at every turn (complaints of Racine, Boileau, Saint-Evremond, La Fontaine, et al.)?

In short, there is a basic difference of opinion in seventeenth-century France between conservative literary critics ("ancients") and "modern" audiences.¹⁰ Many members of these audiences were willing to accept not only obviously "unreal" characters (divine, mythological) and implausible scene changes, but also extraordinary behavior that goes against accepted norms. Still, I think we must assume that there was "quelque fondement de les introduire"—even the most

modern audience would be unlikely to accept completely gratuitous actions.

Corneille's discussion of *le nécessaire* provides part of this "fondement." There is an interior logic to a well-constructed work of art, a series of causes and effects which, in the case of linear arts such as theater, carry the action forward to a conclusion that satisfies both this inner logic and the spectator. Or rather, it satisfies the inner logic only because this inner logic satisfies the spectator's conception of theatrical logic, and ultimately it becomes a "simple" question of satisfying the spectator. This is what *vraisemblance* is all about, "conforme à l'opinion du public," but it is more than just conforming to a pre-conceived notion of what people should do in certain situations. If this were all there were to it, *Le Cid* would have been a flop, no one would have read past the *aveu* in *La Princesse de Clèves*, and no one would have gone to the opera.

In this sense, it all boils down to pleasing the audience, and many of Cléon's judgments in the *Critique d'Alceste* about what would be acceptable to a modern audience are expressed with words such as *plaire* (308, 309), *ne pas déplaire* (287), *plaisir* (296, 299), *divertir* (307) and *agréable* (297). Did the moderns really have no standards other than the caprices of their public? Corneille again provides part of the answer, though less explicitly. Toward the end of the second *Discours* he completes his discussion of *vraisemblance* and *le nécessaire*, offers a definition of the latter, proposes a combination of the two, says he has said enough, then without transition begins his next paragraph with "Le but du poète est de plaire..."¹¹ Pleasing the audience, however, cannot be reduced to meeting its expectations, so there must be some other kind of pleasure, a pleasure not incompatible with a certain type of *vraisemblance* or of inner logic. This interior logic may go against traditional *vraisemblance*, but not against what could be called an emotional *vraisemblance*. Chimène's actions were not what one expected, yet her plight moved audiences; members of

the audience would not necessarily have reacted as she did, and they would not even have to sympathize with her, but they could find emotional *vraisemblance* in seeing a young woman torn between love and family honor and duty.¹²

Similarly, spectators at the opera would certainly not find many of the actions of mythological heroes, heroines or divinities in conformity with what they ordinarily do or see happen, but they could recognize expectable emotional situations. Few wives choose to die for their husbands, yet Alceste's desire to sacrifice herself, to save her husband is a recognizable emotional response. Even fewer wives are rescued from hell by a dotting Hercules, yet seeing such great virtue rewarded rarely fails to move an audience.¹³

This emotional type of *vraisemblance*, then, falls perfectly into the category of "conforme à l'opinion du public," but it is an opinion about emotional reactions to actions which make up a plot, not about the actions themselves; it is based on a concept of truth or plausibility that is less objective than subjective and emotional. It is only in the eighteenth century that I have found explicit statements about this emotional *vraisemblance*, which can be summed up by Batteux' statement in *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe*: "Ce qui intéresse le plus n'est pas le fond même de l'action, mais les sentiments qui sortent des situations amenées par l'action." Similarly, Marmontel says in the chapter on *vraisemblance* in his *Eléments de littérature* (1787): "la vraisemblance dans les choses de sentiment, n'est donc que l'accord parfait du génie du poète avec l'âme du spectateur." The idea is present in Le Cerf's *Comparaison de la musique italienne et de la musique française*, where a discussion (directed against Saint-Evremond) of whether it is *vraisemblable* for characters in opera to express everything in song develops into a discussion of how certain airs of Lambert and Lully can imitate nature and express feelings in a natural, "naïf," *vraisemblable* way.¹⁴

Similarly, Du Bos, in his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* of 1719, for whom poetry, painting and music have as their goal to please through the *sentiment* without necessarily instructing, discusses a musical *vraisemblance* which is necessary to "rendre le spectacle touchant," to reach the spectator in "les mouvements les plus intimes de son coeur."¹⁵ This emotional *vraisemblance* is by no means independent of literary *vraisemblance*:

Il est donc une vérité dans les récits des Opéra; et cette vérité consiste dans l'imitation des tons, des accents, des soupirs, et des sons qui sont propres naturellement aux sentiments contenus dans les paroles. La même vérité peut se trouver dans l'harmonie et dans le rythme de toute la composition.

The emphasis is on imitation of emotion, on touching the spectator; it is less important whether a character would have done something than whether the characters' actions move the spectator.

I would like to argue that this emotional *vraisemblance* is definitely present in the seventeenth century, where there is frequent mention of *plaire*, *toucher* and *émouvoir*, even if these terms are not coupled directly with the term *vraisemblance*. The conservative classical esthetic, while usually willing to accept a supernatural, "extra-ordinary" *vraisemblance*, tries to be as reasonable as possible, to maintain a more traditional, "ordinary" *vraisemblance* along with the appeal to the senses and the emotions. I suspect that much of the literary criticism of the period, and especially criticism of opera by literary critics, is an effort to play down this emotional side, to make literature look more reasonable than it is, when in truth all authors, as well as composers, are trying to "plaire et toucher." This emotional response is the artist's ultimate goal, and what inner, essential *vraisemblance* is all about. It just took critics who understood music and painting as well as literature—and were not afraid

of being "modern" (or sentimental, or feminine)—to put it into words.¹⁶

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Notes

¹This is of course only the surface of *vraisemblance*. As Roger Zuber points out in volume 4 ("Le Classicisme") of *Littérature française* (Paris: Arthaud, 1984), pp. 98-102, there are two *vraisemblances*—the "lazy" conformity to public opinion and the search for the essential truth beneath the object which a literary text is supposed to represent. For more details, see Aron Kibédi Varga, *Rhétorique et Littérature* (Paris: Didier, 1970).

²*La Pratique du théâtre*, ed Martino (Paris: Champion, 1927), p. 76.

³In *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 71-99.

⁴Marmontel, summing up these various aspects of literary *vraisemblance* in the eighteenth century, defends Racine's liberties with history in *Britannicus*: "Il s'agit donc, non d'aller chercher dans l'histoire si Narcisse était vivant et si Junie était à Rome, mais de voir dans la tragédie s'il était bon de faire vivre Narcisse et d'oublier l'exil de Junie" (chapter on *vraisemblance* in *Eléments de littérature*, in his *Oeuvres*, Paris, 1818-20, XV, 547-48; my emphasis).

⁵For example, D'Aubignac wrote in *la Pratique du théâtre*, pp. 76-77, "la poésie et les autres arts qui ne sont fondés qu'en imitation, ne suivent pas la vérité, mais l'opinion et le sentiment ordinaire des hommes." Rapin defines *vraisemblance* as "tout ce qui est conforme à l'opinion du public" (*Réflexions sur la poétique...*, ed. Dubois and Cap, Geneva: Droz, 1970, p. 39). Jean-Pierre Dens presents these and other similar quotations in *L'Honnête homme et la critique du goût* (Lexington, Ky.: French Forum, 1981), pp. 121-

23. Todorov's first two types of *vraisemblance* are similar: "relation avec la vérité" and "rapport avec un autre texte...qu'on appelle l'opinion publique" ("Introduction au vraisemblable," in *La Notion de littérature et autres essais*, Paris: Seuil, 1987, p. 88; originally published in *Les Genres du discours*, 1971).

⁶Again (see note 1), such a view of *vraisemblance* and of the real remains at the surface, and does not deal with the complexities of the nature of the real and of truth. There is certainly an ideal truth as well as that of the "real" world, but it is possible to discuss the practice of authors without dealing in depth with these complexities.

⁷*Lettres à Madame la Marquise *** sur le sujet de La Princesse de Clèves* (Paris: Sébastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1678), pp. 105 and 258-60.

⁸See Hugh M. Davidson, *Audience, Words and Art* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1965): Racine "certainly knows his seventeenth-century audience, but he is inclined to distrust it and to quarrel with it; he actually writes for a generalized and even idealized public that is his own creation" (153).

A related issue is that of the famous rules, which are more concerned with surface, exterior *vraisemblance* (see note 1), and which most major writers were more than willing to break. Corneille says that the tragic poet can bend *vraisemblance* a bit to fit the unity of time or place (third *Discours*, p. 837), but that the novelist can't; for him, the novel is the "pierre de touche" of theatrical *vraisemblance*. Others didn't like the slightest deviation from the rules, but Corneille, Molière and Racine all defended successful works which were criticized by those more worried about rules than about pleasing and moving the public.

⁹See Todorov, p. 88.

Bouhours refers to the pagan *merveilleux* as a "système" (*La Manière de bien penser*, Paris: Brunet,

1715; rpt. Brighton: Sussex Reprints, 1971, pp. 14, 80) within which actions that would normally be considered false have their own *vraisemblance*: "Mais ce système estant une fois supposé, tout ce qu'on feint dans l'étendue du mesme système ne passe point pour faux parmi les Sçavants, sur tout quand la fiction est vray-semblable, et qu'elle cache quelque vérité (p. 14). In Corneille's terms, this system has its own "nécessaire."

¹⁰This difference is not always taken into account by more traditional critics, who tend to see classicism as an all-pervasive, dominant esthetic. It is refreshing to read Roger Zuber's account (in "Le Classicisme" in the Arthaud series) of "un nombre assez faible d'auteurs, mais d'auteurs importants, [qui] suivent une autre mode...(p. 110).

¹¹The quotation continues "selon les règles de son art." Boileau of course says much the same thing in the *Art poétique*, but he is interested in pleasing an audience different from that of Perrault.

¹²To take a more classical example, Oedipus' situation stretches the *vraisemblable*, but his emotional reactions were not only *vraisemblables* but also capable of striking a recognizable (not necessarily sympathetic) chord in the spectator.

¹³This emphasis on the audience's perception of, reaction to a scene rather than on the place of the scene in a series of events is similar to what Todorov calls the "gnoséologique" type of "organisation du récit," as opposed to the "mythologique."

¹⁴Paris: Durand, 1747, p. 303. Marmontel, *Oeuvres*, XV, 536). Le Cerf, 2nd ed., 1705; rpt. Geneva: Minkoff, 1972), I, 30-33.

¹⁵Reprint of 7th ed., 1770 (Geneva: Slatkine, 1967), I, 7, 303-11, 482, 3. It is important to remember that when Du Bos uses the word *sentiment*

he sometimes means a thought or idea (I, 56, 250), sometimes an opinion, sometimes a feeling (I, 41).

¹⁶There is much of the Louis XIII, baroque, esthetic in this "modern" openness to the sensuous, this more immediate reaction to the arts.