Racine's Classicized Baroque

by
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In his excellent 1977 *état présent* of baroque studies, Robert Nicolich comments on the need to identify "the baroque structure of a work, with its inward movements and reversals . . . rather than isolated stylistic elements ("The Baroque Dilemma" 32). Merely mentioning the words baroque and mannerism entails a dilemma: so many different definitions exist. Nicolich favors the Hatzfeldian hypothesis of a "classicized" baroque, suggesting that the baroque syndrome is the result of a fundamental tension between what some critics call mannerism, and classicism. In this definition, compartmentalized manifestations of literary mannerism such as movement, change, inconstancy, rhetorical ostentation (Jean Rousset's baroque) must fit into the global, orderly formal structure usually visible in seventeenth-century classical literature. So this sort of baroque tension is not primarily a pre-1660 phenomenon: it appears when the rules of classicism are well-entrenched. Certain Racinian plays (*Andromaque*, *Phèdre*) are proposed by Robert Nelson and by Nicolich as examples of the structural tension essential to this definition of the baroque, largely because their imagery of blood and language of folly exists within a tightly controlled model of classical composition.

In a 1971 article, "Door, Window and Balcony in *L'Ecole des Femmes*," Nicolich speaks of the principle of closure and release forming a pattern that expresses a fundamental tension in that play. It is not until the 1977 *état présent* that Nicolich makes explicit the connection between the series of closure/release reversals in *L'Ecole des femmes* and the baroque, influenced by the work of the art historian Wylie Sypher. Nicolich sees these reversals building up in a progression within which the mannerist concepts of movement and inconstancy are channelled; this directionality suggests classical order despite so-called

mannerist themes. Since I find intriguing the notion of Racine as the prime example of this sort of baroque, it would seem that *Les Plaideurs*, his only comedy, is worthy of examination since the rapid rhythm of comedy allows the playwright to exploit more easily the possibilities inherent in a series of reversals. In *Les Plaideurs* one finds the closure/release opposition and other antithetical structures along with the traditionally mannerist (or baroque, in Rousset's sense) elements of mask, illusion, and ostentation.

Three of the characters in the play are obsessed with court proceedings: Dandin the judge, along with Chicanneau and the Comtesse de Pimbesche are veteran plaintiffs. Their lives revolve around suits and counter-suits; a conventional love plot is included in the wish of Dandin's son Léandre and Chicanneau's daughter Isabelle to marry. A study of *Les Plaideurs* from a baroque perspective seems eminently justifiable given the ostentatious discourse during the trial of the dog Citron in Act III, Dandin's constant desire to shine before those assembled to hear his judgments, and the secretary L'Intimé's elaborate play within the play which allows Léandre to court Isabelle (pun intended). Louise Horowitz has in fact treated the powerful use of theatricality in the play in a cleverly-titled article, "Justice for Dogs: The Triumph of Illusion in *Les Plaideurs*," although she does not use the term baroque. However, when we consider Nicolich's view that the tensions inherent in the theme of change and inconstancy can be expressed through patterns of reversal that are not random but lead in a definite direction, and that paradoxically these reversals help form the play's well-ordered structure, *Les Plaideurs* appears all the more an example of the baroque in this sense.

In *Les Plaideurs*, several types of binary opposition can be cited. First and most evident, there is the control and release principle I have just described. Léandre tries to control his father Dandin, who constantly searches for release: he has been locked up because he wants to be in the courtroom day and night.

Within this category exists another opposition between high and lows, symmetrically presented as Dandin tries to burst forth from different points of the house: first an unspecified window, then up to the attic, down to the cellar, until finally he comes up again as he attempts to escape through the basement window--from which spot he pulls Chicanneau in with him. This is the turning point from which Dandin agrees to Léandre's decision that he should adjudicate at home, gaining a measure of somewhat illusory control for himself as the home (interior) symbolically absorbs the world outside (exterior). Dandin's pretension to ostentation has not been stopped, but it has been displaced, reduced, concentrated. Leo Spitzer claimed in an article originally published in 1931 that classicism *tames* the baroque; I would submit that the baroque tendencies in this play and in the entire secular corpus of Racine are not tamed, but rather repressed--just barely. Despite a generalized movement from chaos to order in *Les Plaideurs*, Dandin's nature has not changed and his potential to burst forth once again represents a threat that cannot be dissipated.

Philip Butler finds *une tension féconde* in Racine's early tragedies, and indeed tension is continually communicated here. In another symmetrical opposition, Isabelle is also contained within her home by her father Chicanneau. The parent is imprisoned in one case by his child, while in the other the child is closed off from the outside world by her parent. However, Isabelle is able to gain a fuller release than does Dandin. She is granted permission to leave her enclosure permanently thanks to role playing on the part of Léandre and L'Intimé, who introduce themselves into the house in order to draw Chicanneau and Isabelle out; the exterior cuts into and opens up the interior. Chicanneau wants to keep the outside completely out, while Dandin, if unable to escape, wants to draw all of the outside in. The young people want to function in the open, neutral space that forms the usual setting for classical comedy. They are successful, and in conformance with the structure of

the comic genre, the young lovers are united, and family tensions are at least temporarily relieved--although structural tensions in the play remain.

A striking example of an issue left unresolved is the fate of the Countess. She is also controlled by her family, and although not literally enclosed when we see her on stage, she is obsessed with the idea that others are trying to "tie her up": the verb *lier* is constantly on her lips. We last see her shouting down the basement window into which Dandin and Chicanneau have disappeared. Not a member of the two principal families, she is not included in their resolution of difficulties: she is shut out of the play after Act II, whereas Chicanneau will have the pleasure of suing to his heart's content within a new extended family structure, with Dandin the judge as an in-law. The loose-end of the countess's disappearance seems ironic when we consider her fixation on being tied up--or down. Apparently, she has not been safely secured. The play reminds us that *plaideurs* with all of their unhealthy practices may re-emerge upon the scene at any time.

Another revealing and potentially menacing pattern forms between a state of wakefulness and sleep. The doorman Petit Jean opens the play hoping to bed down in the street, tired of being awakened at all hours by Dandin's efforts to escape. Not only is Dandin always awake and waking others, Chicanneau and the countess are normally on the judge's doorstep before dawn. Reasonable people want to sleep at night, but those touched by folly cannot. Because of the disturbances they create, others become wakeful, and in II, i, L'Intimé states that he is finally wide awake and ready to concoct his plot, while in II, iii he informs Isabelle that Léandre is no longer sleeping; rather, he is actively plotting against their fathers. Now that they are fully awake, their plans will triumph as Dandin at last falls asleep while listening to Citron the dog's lawyers in the mock trial in Act III. L'Intimé is proud to say in II, xiv that he can put people to sleep as well as any real lawyer, which in fact he does.

L'Intimé causes Dandin's slumber in a speech in Act III, scene 3 which brings together the closure/release and awake/asleep oppositions. He talks about the creation of the world out of chaos, of a universe

> . . . ensevelie au fond de la matière
>
> Les éléments . . .
>
> . . . enfoncés, entassés, ne faisaient qu'un [monceau
>
> Un désordre, un chaos, une cohue énorme.

Whereupon Dandin falls out of his chair, asleep. The fall of man follows the release of matter from chaos and its metamorphosis into order. Dandin says that "De monde, de chaos, j'ai la tête troublée." Nonetheless, he too is channelled into the new order envisaged by Léandre: Isabelle will be Léandre's wife, and his father will be safely under control at home, at last able to sleep. Dandin accepts the new order, yet as I have already suggested, tension is not altogether dissipated: he is still obsessed by court proceedings, a spectacle his future daughter-in-law abhors. she is silenced as Dandin declares in the last line of the play: "Allons nous délasser à voir d'autres procès."

Once chaos is brought explicitly to the surface through the interplay of patterns of control/release and wakefulness/sleep, it can almost be tamed, just as classicism has almost, but not quite, tamed mannerist themes and directed them into a "happy ending" in *Les Plaideurs*. Youth not only triumphs in classical comedy fashion, it dominates as the reigns of power pass to Léandre. In yet another opposition basic to the play's structure, sanity is only for the young while those obsessed by legal procedure are of the older generation. Nevertheless, the young people are contaminated by the folly of their elders: they have to play the court-house game in order to bring Dandin and Chicanneau to agreement on the marriage, and they have to allow Dandin to keep on playing it in their home. Domination is only apparent.

Les Paideurs was written in 1668; it was Racine's third play, and, of course, his only comedy. In his preface, he expresses some discomfort about a certain irregularity in the work: it had not been successful at first, not until it had been seen at court and appreciated by the king. Racine complains about the reticence of the Paris audience: "Ceux mêmes qui s'y étaient le plus divertis eurent peur de n'avoir pas ri dans les règles." Yet the playwright himself is unsure of a subject where some incidents are, as he puts it, "au-delà du vraisemblable": "J'aimerais mieux imiter la régularité de Ménandre et de Térence, que la liberté de Plaute et d'Aristophane" (177). He has taken Aristophanes' *The Wasps* as a model despite its irregularity, but he never did try to imitate Menander or Terence; instead, he avoided comedy.

I believe that Racine's preference for tragedy and his avoidance of comedy can be shown from an interesting angle if we consider the baroque tendencies in his work. The tension central to the definition I have given is, at its most fundamental level, a tension between chaos and order. To go back to Nicolich's distinction between mannerism and baroque, he notes that "there exist different patterns in which literary tensions (even inconstancy) may be expressed. Patterns of clear reversals building up in a progression are quite different from patterns of tension based on indirect or allusive correlations. . . ." ("The Baroque Dilemma," 33). Thus progression or directionality in reversals forms a structure, an order within which these reversals have to be contained in a "classicized baroque" work like *Les Plaideurs*. Equally important is the relation between structural tension and the play's subject matter; the problem of chaos versus order is explicitly brought out in the discussion of the formation of the world at the end of the play. Of course, the play also deals with abuses of the judicial system, abuses of which Racine himself may have been the victim, a not uncommon predicament in seventeenth-century France (Racine 174).

In a recent article on *Les Plaideurs*, Timothy Reiss shows how "Racine's theater can usefully be understood as a series of 'thought experiments' applying different elements of contemporary political theory to partly fictional facts, events, and players" (5). According to Reiss, this play examines not only the abuse of the judicial system but also in a larger sense the state's internal constitution and its external relations, which must be rational and peaceful or the state will destroy itself. Reiss's thesis, juxtaposing the internal and the external, complements my reading of the comedy as a baroque masterpiece one of whose results is an illustration of how controlling structures function--or misfunction--in literature, and by analogy, in society. Reiss speaks of Racine's Hobbesian view of human nature: the social contract reins in uncivilized impulses and allows civil society to exist (13). Reiss sees in *Les Plaideurs* the triumph of rational justice in a rational world with rational, autonomous minds (14). "Justice--in due legal form--has been achieved, and everyone is happy with it" (15). But is everyone happy with it? Reiss has to note the Countess's disappearance, and he asks whether or not this is symbolic of woman's (non)place in the new order. Perhaps; I have already noted that Isabelle is silenced rather brutally in the last scene. However, since human nature of the unreasonable sort remains imbedded in society through the ever-threatening *plaideurs*, has not Racine subversively undermined his *fin de comédie*? The baroque label serves to highlight tensions that never completely subside.

That these tensions come explicitly to the surface in *Les Plaideurs* is not surprising: both the subject matter and the rapid rhythm of comedy lend themselves to the patterns of reversal I have shown in the play. Indeed, the reversals often seem self-generating because of the speed at which they occur, at which chaos multiplies in its ever so orderly fashion, only to be stopped short by reason--but for how long? I submit that one reason for Racine's abandonment of comedy after *Les Plaideurs* was that he chose to avoid a genre in which the basic structural tensions of his not entirely

"classical" theater could come to the forefront all too easily. Racinian tragedy is fraught with many of the same tensions outlined here, but its *tristesse majestueuse* could maintain at least the illusion of structural control amid the explosion of raw emotion.

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