

Tragedy ends unhappily: the concealed influence of medieval poetics in early modern theory of tragedy

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We are accustomed to think that tragedy should end unhappily. We generally use the word «tragic» to describe an event that unexpectedly ends in sorrow and misery. The sad ending seems to be a rule of the tragic genre, or at least a part of its definition. However, many of the ancient tragedies we are still able to read have a happy ending and theorists proved that probably many of the tragedies that are now lost used to have a happy ending.¹ Therefore, the idea that tragedy must end unhappily is relatively recent. I would like to analyse the origins of this idea and to reassess if early modern poetical treatises and commentaries of Aristotle's *Poetics* also share this definition of the tragic ending. I will focus mainly on Italian theory of tragedy, but also briefly consider French and Spanish early modern theorisations of the genre. I hope thus to contribute to a better understanding of the reception of Aristotelian *Poetics* in early modern theory of tragedy.

According to early modern treatises, tragedy should end unhappily

In early modern Italian treatises it is generally asserted that a well-composed tragedy should have a sad ending. According to Bernardo Segni, who published an Italian translation and a commentary of Aristotle's *Poetics* in 1549, the best tragic plot goes from happiness to misery.² Niccolò Rossi, in his treatise published in 1590, describes the structure of the tragic plot. He asserts that a well-structured tragedy goes from happiness to misery because only such a plot can arouse pity and fear and therefore suit the tragic genre.³ Later, in 1613, Orazio Toscanella describes meticulously the best tragic subject:

1 Marx, 2012, p. 64–83. References at the end of this article.

2 «Migliore [intrigo] è quello che passa da felicità in miseria.» Segni, 1551, fol. 181 v.

3 See Niccolò Rossi, 1590, p. 113.

[La tragedia è] un abbracciamento della condizione eroica in stato di avventura. Il soggetto e la materia della tragedia sono i dolori, le lacrime, l'odio, gli ammazzamenti, veleni, incendi, amaritudini, povertà, cordogli, singulti, sospiri, sbranamenti di membra di figli, disgrazie di case.⁴

According to Toscanella, tragedy should be about pain, tears, hatred, slaughter, poison, fire, bitterness, poverty, mourning, sobbing, sights, son's limbs torn up, family shames. Quite clearly, then, according to early modern scholars, the structure and the subject of the tragedy have to be sad.

The sad ending becomes so important that it is soon considered as a part of the definition of the genre. Some Italian theorists, such as Viperano, define tragedy as a poem representing illustrious men and expressing calamities: «Tragedia est poesis virorum illustrium per agentes personas exprimens calamitates: illa proprietate a comœdia, hac ab epopeia distinguitur.»⁵

Not only in Italy, but also in Spain and in France the tragic ending is a part of the definition of the genre. Villén de Biedma, in his commentary on Horace (1599), asserts that the tragedy always progresses from bad to worse;⁶ Jacques Péletier, in his *Art poétique* (1555) claims that the tragic ending is always pitiful and dreadful;⁷ Jean Mairet, in the preface of his *Sylvanire* states that the beginning of the tragedy is always happy and its end always sad.⁸

Moreover, theorists claim that the unhappy ending is a rule of the genre, drawn from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Alessandro Piccolomini, in his capital commentary of the *Poetics* (1572), asserts that, unquestionably, Aristotle expresses many times in his *Poetics* that a tragedy ending sadly is more tragic than a tragedy ending happily:

4 «Tragedy is the comprehension of a heroic fortune in adversities. The subject and the matter of tragedy are pains, tears, hatred, slaughter, poison, fire, bitterness, poverty, mourning, sobbing, sights, son's limbs torn up and family shames.» Toscanella, p. 59, our translation.

5 «Tragedy is a poem staging illustrious men. It represents disasters through acting characters. These proprieties distinguish tragedy from comedy and epos.» Viperano, 1579, p. 94, our translation.

6 «Es Tragedia una representación del proceder de la fortuna; en los casos adversos, siempre de mal en peor.» Villén de Biedma, 1599, p. 314.

7 «En la tragédie, la fin est toujours luctueuse et lamentable, ou horrible à voir.» Péletier, p. 279.

8 «Le commencement de la Tragedie est tousiours gay, et la fin en est tousiours triste.» Mairet, p. 138.

Aristotele senz'alcun dubbio in più luoghi si lascia chiaramente intender essere più tragica la tragedia che finisce in misero, che quella che termina in lieto stato per esser più atta a far il proprio ufficio di eccitar timore e compassione.⁹

More strikingly, La Mesnardière, a theorist of the so-called French classicism, shows that Aristotle includes the tragic ending in his definition of the tragedy: «Commençons par la Tragédie, et disons avec Aristote accommodé à notre usage, que c'est *la représentation sérieuse et magnifique de quelque action funeste*.»¹⁰

La Mesnardière apparently translates Aristotle's text: he italicizes it and notes his sources in the margins (*Aristote Poétique*). According to his translation, then, tragedy is the serious imitation of a baneful action. It seems that, if tragedy ends sadly, it is because Aristotle states it in his *Poetics*.

However, a close reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* shows that the sad ending is not mentioned in the definition of the tragic genre. Aristotle defines tragedy as the imitation of a noble action, and not as the imitation of a sad action: «tragedy is mimesis of an action which is elevated (*spoudaia*), complete, and of magnitude.»¹¹

Besides, he asserts that the tragic plot can go either from happiness to sadness or from sadness to happiness.¹² Therefore, both happy and sad endings are possible. In the fourteenth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle writes a list of possible endings and considers which one may better arouse the spectator's emotions. He claims that the best tragic ending occurs when the hero is about to kill, but recognizes his or her victim and spares his or her life.¹³ This ending is a happy one. Aristotle then recommends effective and powerful endings, which can be either happy or unhappy. He never considers a sad ending as a poetic rule.

9 «Aristotle unquestionably in many passages of his *Poetics* clearly suggests that a tragedy ending sadly is more tragic than a tragedy ending happily.» Piccolomini, p. 215, our translation.

10 «Let us begin with the tragedy and let us say, adapting Aristotle to our uses, that tragedy is the serious and magnificent representation of some baneful action.» La Mesnardière, 2015, p. 163 and 1634, p. 8, our translation. The italics are in the original version.

11 Aristotle, 49b25, p. 47.

12 «The size which permits a transformation to occur, is a probable or necessary sequence of events, from adversity to prosperity or prosperity to adversity, is a sufficient limit of magnitude.» Aristotle, 51a15, p. 57.

13 «Best is the last option: I mean, for example, in *Cresphontes* Merope is about to kill her son, but recognizes him in time; likewise with sister and brother in *Iphigeneia*.» Aristotle, 54a5, p. 79.

Early modern theorists therefore tend to add the sad ending to the Aristotelian definition of tragedy: Viperano clearly includes the idea that the tragedy should depict disasters (*exprimens calamitates*) to his Aristotelian conception of the genre (the tragedy represents noble men). Theorists also manipulate Aristotle's definition. La Mesnardière, though he apparently quotes from the *Poetics*, asserts that he has adapted Aristotle to the modern uses (*adapté à notre usage*). According to him, the sad ending is more in accordance with the expectations of early modern audiences.

Indeed, some theorists condemn the manipulation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Jason Denores, in his *Discorso* of 1586, says that Aristotle does not attribute to tragedy a sad ending.¹⁴ In the same way, the Abbé d'Aubignac, in his treatise published in 1657, claims that the word «tragic» never meant sad and unhappy and that a tragedy, to be called so, does not need to stage a murder:

Plusieurs se sont imaginé que le mot de Tragique ne signifiait jamais qu'une aventure funeste et sanglante; et qu'un Poème Dramatique ne pouvait être nommé Tragédie, si la Catastrophe ne contenait la mort ou l'infortune des principaux personnages : mais c'est à tort [...] Une Pièce de Théâtre porte ce nom de Tragédie seulement en considération des Incidents et des personnes dont elle représente la vie, et non pas à raison de la Catastrophe.¹⁵

According to him, the sad ending does not determine whether a play is a tragedy or not. Even in Spain, where Aristotle's *Poetics* is less read and commented, Francisco Fernandes de Cordóva acknowledges that by no means Aristotle mentions the unhappy ending in his definition of the genre.¹⁶ Despite these protests, the sad ending is generally considered as the most important feature of the tragedy. I would like to understand why the sad ending becomes so important, although it is not mentioned in Aristotle's

14 «Aristotele nella sua *Poetica*, non distingue la tragedia dalla commedia dall'essito felice et infelice [...], ma solamente dalla differenza delle persone illustri e private»; «Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, does not distinguish tragedy from comedy because the former has a happy ending and the latter a sad one, but because in the latter the characters are noble and in the former they are commoners.» Denores, p. 379, our translation.

15 «Many people think that the word tragic does only qualify a sad and baleful adventure, and that a dramatic poem can only be called a tragedy if its ending shows the death or the misery of its protagonists. But they are wrong. A play is called a tragedy only because of the characters and of the events that it represents, and not because of its ending». D'Aubignac, p. 211, our translation.

16 «Differentia certe Tragœdiæ, et Comoediæ in actione consistet, quæ in altera est illustris [...] et non in exitu foelici, aut infoelici, hilari, aut moesto, cuius certe in definitionibus nullam fecit mentionem Aristoteles»; «the difference between tragedy and comedy is certainly based on their action (which in the former is noble), and not on their happy or unhappy ending, because Aristotle never mentioned it in its definition.» Cordóva, 1615, p. 225, our translation.

definition of the genre, and to enquire why the scholars tend to attribute to Aristotle a «rule» that is not in his *Poetics*.

Why tragedy should have a sad ending

If early modern scholars alter Aristotle's definition of tragedy, it is because they follow other theorizations of it, and mainly the idea of tragedy that is formed in the Middle Ages, as analysed by Henri A. Kelly. In his *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy*, Kelly shows how tragedy is paradoxically theorized and defined at a time when ancient tragedies are neither read nor performed.¹⁷ I would like to show that the medieval idea of tragedy is not only relevant when Aristotle's *Poetics* and the ancient tragedies are very little known, but also when the *Poetics* is widely read and commented on. The theory of the tragedy is largely based on the medieval theorisation of the genre that largely biases the early modern understanding of the *Poetics*.

If we reconsider some early modern definitions of tragedy, we will easily recognize the influence of medieval and ancient conceptions of the genre. If Toscanella (as well as Carvallo¹⁸ in Spain) asserts that: «tragedy is the comprehension of an heroic fortune in adversities», it is because he quotes Diomedes' definition of the genre.¹⁹ Indeed, Diomedes' *Grammatica* was largely used as a grammar textbook in the Middle Ages and in the early Renaissance and it provides a simple definition of tragedy that affects early modern theorists. In the same way, Mairet claims that the beginning of the tragedy is always happy and that its ending always sad,²⁰ because he is inspired by Evanthius' depiction of the tragic structure. According to Evanthius, whose treatise is included in the commentary by Donatus on the comedies by Terence (a text, as we know, largely studied in the 15th and 16th centuries), «in the tragedy there is a sad ending (*exitus*

¹⁷ Kelly, 1993, p. 23–27.

¹⁸ «La tragedia [...] acaba en cosas tristes y lamentables habiendo al principio comenzado en cosas alegres y suaves, y de ordinario es de personas heroicas y famosas, abatidas por la fortuna, como de su definición consta, que es ésta : *tragedia est heroicæ fortunæ [in adversis] comprehension*»; «tragedy ends in sadness and mourning, while it begins by happy and pleasant things. It ordinary stages heroic and famous characters overcome by fortune, as it appears in its definition that is: tragedy is the comprehension of an heroic fortune in adversities.» Carvallo, 1602, 1997, p. 269, our translation.

¹⁹ «Tragoedia est heroicæ fortunæ in adversis comprehensio»; «tragedy is the comprehension of an heroic fortune in adversities.» Diomedes, 1857, p. 487, our translation.

²⁰ Mairet, 1631, p. 138.

funesti). If in comedy the beginnings are troubled and the endings quiet, in tragedy it is the reverse».²¹

In the medieval conception of the tragic genre, the sad ending is considered as the feature that distinguishes tragedy from the other genres. If according to Aristotle the style, the structure and the specific effects of tragedy are the criteria defining the genre, in the medieval theory, the subject and the theme are the elements that most accurately describe it. John of Garland, in his 12th century treatise, lists the criteria (*proprietaes*) that define tragedy: Tragedy is written with a serious style, it deals with shameful and criminal actions, it begins in happiness and ends in tears.²² Since tragedy is not considered as a performance, its subject and structure become its most important features. A tragedy is a poem relating the overthrow of the hero's good fortune.

This idea of tragedy appears not only in poetical treatises, but also in philosophical and in theological writings. Tragedy, in the Middle Ages, is not only a dramatic genre, but also a metaphorical object that helps understanding accidental misfortunes and unexpected miseries. Boethius refers to tragedy in his *Consolation of Philosophy* in order to explain the reversal of fortune: tragedy, according to him, describes how «happy states are overthrown by the indiscriminate blows of Fortune». ²³ His *Consolation* is widely commented on in the Middle Ages and Early Modernity, and many commentators underline the connection between tragedy and unexpected sorrow. William of Conches, commenting on this line, asserts that a tragedy is a poem relating how kings are unexpectedly reduced to misery by the blows of fortune.²⁴ Isidore of Seville, in his *Etymologiae* (an encyclopaedic book largely known since the 7th century), gives a

21 «In comoedia [...] parvi impetus pericula lætique sunt exitus actionum, at in tragoedia [...] exitus funesti habentur; et [in comoedia] prima turbulenta, tranquilla ultima, in tragoedia contrario ordine res aguntur»; «in comedy we see little troubles and the actions have a happy ending, but in tragedy the ending are baleful. In comedy, the beginning are troubled, but the ending are quiet: in tragedy the plot goes the other way round.» Evanthius, 1979, p. 146–147, our translation.

22 «Tragediae proprietates sunt tales: gravi stilo describitur; pudibunda proferuntur et scelerata; incipit a gaudio et in lacrimas terminator»; «the properties of tragedy are the following: serious style, terrible crimes, happy beginning and tearful ending.» John of Garland, 1974, p. 136, our translation.

23 «Quid tragœdiarum clamor aliud deflet nisi indiscreto ictu fortunam felicia regna vertentem?» Boethius, 1973, p. 182.

24 «*Quid tragediarum, etc.* [...] In hoc carmine potuisti perpendere reges et provectos deprimi per Fortunam indiscrete percipientem, id est improvise, quia nescitur dies vel hora miserarium»; «*quid tragediarum etc.* [...] in this kind of poems, you can see kings and old people overthrown by the unexpected blows of fortune, because we do not know the day or time of our miseries.» Kelly, 1993, p. 70. William of Conches is here commenting Boethius quoting from Matthew 24:42.

definition of «tragedian» that conveys the medieval understanding of tragedy. According to him, the authors of tragedies «express the ancient deeds and the crimes of shameful kings, singing publicly a song of sorrow». ²⁵ John of Salisbury, in the 12th century, explicitly refers to the metaphor of the theater of the world and explains that human life is like a tragedy, because it ends sadly. ²⁶ Tragedy is then considered as a metaphorical object that may describe every reversal of fortune.

In the 13th century, the discovery of the *codex etruscus*, reporting Seneca's plays, confirms this idea of tragedy. The manuscript that Lovato Lovati finds in Pomposa contains an introduction that explains how to read the tragedies included. Tragedies are mournful poems (*luctuosa carmine*) read in public, dealing with the crimes of shameful kings (*facinora sceleratum regum*). ²⁷ In fact, this definition is directly drawn from Isidore's *Etymologiae* and shows thus how the medieval conception of tragedy influences its modern understanding. Indeed, Trevet, in his commentary on Senecan tragedies, draws his definition of tragedy from Isidore and Boethius. According to him, Seneca's plays are tragedies, because they are mournful poems (*luctuosa carmina*), as asserted by Isidore, describing the downfall of the mighty men (*casibus magnorum*), as reported by Boethius. ²⁸

Besides, Seneca's tragedies generally have a sad and gruesome ending. Therefore, it is not surprising that modern scholars and dramatists believe that tragedy should have an unhappy ending. Lopez de Mendoza, in 15th century Spain, ²⁹ and Giraldi Cinzio, who composes the model of Italian tragedy, *Orbecche* (1541), claim that Seneca never wrote a tragedy with a happy ending. ³⁰ The medieval idea of tragedy does not disappear when Aristotle's *Poetics* and the ancient plays are published, translated and commented on, in the 16th and 17th centuries. Indeed, the dissemination of the *Poetics*

25 «Tragoedi sunt qui antiqua gesta atque facinora sceleratorum regum, luctuoso carmine, spectante populo, concinebant.» Isidore of Seville, 1991, *tragedi*.

26 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 1990, 3, 8.

27 «Tragoedi sunt qui antiqua gesta atque facinora sceleratorum regum, luctuoso carmine, spectante populo, concinebant», *Notamentum*, Codex Laurentianus 37, 13, c.1r, reported in Pastore-Stocchi, 1964, p. 20.

28 «Merito liber iste Liber tragediarum dicitur; continent enim luctuosa carmina de casibus magnorum»; «It is right to call this book the *book of tragedies*: indeed, it includes mournful poems relating the downfalls of mighty people.» Trevet, 1938, p. 7, our translation.

29 Lopez de Mendoza, 1987, p. 272–273.

30 Giraldi Cinzio, 1554, p. 220–221.

did not erase the ancient conception of the genre. Conversely, the ancient idea of tragedy radically affects the conception and practice of the modern genre: if tragedy ends sadly, it is because the sad ending becomes the most prominent feature of the genre, at a time when tragedy was neither read nor performed. However, we may still wonder why the commentators generally attribute to Aristotle the prescription of the sad ending, instead of quoting openly their medieval sources.

Why the sad ending is considered an Aristotelian «rule»

The reason why early modern scholars, such as Piccolomini or La Mesnardière, assert that the sad ending is an Aristotelian rule has mainly to do with the authority of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Renaissance's scholars aim at respecting Aristotle's authority in order to bestow his legitimacy on their own writings and plays. But, at the same time, they wish to describe a tragedy that suits the taste and the expectations of their contemporaries. This tension between ancient authority and modern taste seems to foreshadow the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. More crucially, the rise of modern tragedy is possible only if the genre is legitimated by Aristotle's authority and, at the same time, fulfils the expectations of the public: if Aristotle never states that a tragedy must have an unhappy ending, early modern audiences expect to watch a tragedy that ends unhappily. Different poetical strategies are then displayed in order to establish tragedy as a modern – and yet as an Aristotelian – dramatic form.

In Italy, tragedy ends sadly, and the sad ending is described as an Aristotelian rule. As we have seen, the commentaries of the *Poetics* tend to stress the importance of the unhappy ending, and the imitation of Seneca's tragedies encourages the taste for pitiful and gruesome subjects. The rise of tragicomedy, in the second half of the century, radicalized the conception of tragedy. Modern scholars, such as Jason Denores, reject every poetical compromise in order to conform to the neo-Aristotelian view of tragedy. Tragedy, according to him, differs radically from comedy because the latter has a happy ending, while the former ends unhappily.³¹ As we have seen, this distinction is drawn from Evanthius' treatise, but is used by Denores in his *Discorso* to

³¹ Denores, 1586, 1972, p. 413.

defend a neo-Aristotelian conception of tragedy, based on the radical separation between tragic and comic. The sad ending becomes thus a neo-Aristotelian rule, prompting Seneca's tragedies as the best tragic example and defending the radical distinction between tragic and comic style. However, the strict observance of the neo-Aristotelian rules is one of the causes of the decline of the tragic genre in Italy. By the end of the 16th century, scholars and dramatists lament that tragedy is difficult to compose and boring to be looked at. Angelo Ingegneri, the author of a dramatic treatise and of a tragedy, writes that «tragedy is lately a neglected genre». This is mainly because «it ends sadly», and because «the rules of the genre are too difficult.»³² Indeed, the desire of conforming to the *Poetics* leads to self-deception. If the non-Aristotelian prescription of the sad ending becomes a neo-Aristotelian rule, it is because the Italian commentators cannot help but read the *Poetics* with modern eyes, referring to a modern idea of tragedy and to modern models.

In Spain, tragedy ends happily, or rather, tragedies are few and rapidly supplanted by the *comedia nueva*, which may include some tragic elements – such as a threatening danger – but generally has a happy ending.³³ The dramatists and the scholars reject the authority of Aristotle, because they consider the poetical rules as an imposition by the Italian commentators. Indeed, the rise of Spanish comedy precedes the reception of the Italian poetics in Spain. Spanish scholars, such as Barreda, feel that the respect of the Aristotelian rules is the sign of an anachronistic faithfulness of some «men superstitious of the antiquity» (*hombres tan supersticiosos de la antigüedad*).³⁴ According to him, this faithfulness is dangerous because it induces the Spanish authors to practice a foreign genre, thus betraying their own country. The *comedia nueva* is against the authority of Aristotle: as Lope de Vega asserts, Spanish comedy does not respect what is

32 «Cotal sorta di Poesia si trouva a' nostri giorni presso che disusata; ò sia perché la spesa, e la malinconia dello spettacolo ne rende poco frequente la rappresentatione; ò sia più tosto, perché 'l mancamento di buoni soggetti tragici et la difficoltà de i precetti, dati in questa materia da i Maestri dell'arte, ne sbigottisce i compositori»; «this kind of poetry is almost neglected nowadays. The representations are few because they are quite expensive and excessively sad, and because the lack of good subjects and the difficulty of the rules given by the scholars frighten the dramatists.» Ingegneri, 1607, letter to Girolamo Fosco, our translation.

33 Couderc, 2012, chapter 1.

34 Barreda, 1622, fol. 127.

«right» (*justo*), according to some Italian or French rules (*preceptos*), but aims at pleasing the public, and at conforming to his taste (*gusto*).³⁵

In France, tragedy ends sadly, but the scholars try at the same time to respect the authority of Aristotle and to suit the taste of the public. If in Italy the sad ending is falsely considered as an Aristotelian prescription, and in Spain it is rejected as an Italian imposition, in France the sad ending is openly acknowledged as an «accommodation». La Mesnardière, as we have seen, quotes from Aristotle's *Poetics*, but he «accommodates» it to the uses of his contemporaries (*accomodé à notre usage*). According to him, it is necessary to adapt Aristotle in order to define the modern tragedy (*la tragédie d'aujourd'hui*).³⁶ La Mesnardière freed himself from the authority of the Italian commentators, whose treatises, according to him, are full of useless repetitions (*redites importunes*)³⁷. He does not try to observe Aristotle's prescriptions, but he bases his definition on «the *Poetics*, the reason, the ancient models, and the contemporary practice of the tragic genre».³⁸

French scholars want to free French tragedies from the authority of Aristotle and of the Italian commentators. In order to do so, they shift the poetical authority from Aristotle to an abstract principle universally shared, that is, human reason. Indeed, human reason, as universal principle, grants the French tragedy a new form of legitimacy. The Abbé d'Aubignac asserts thus that the rules of drama are grounded in the «natural judgement».³⁹ Therefore, Aristotle's prescriptions are to be observed only if they seem to be reasonable. If the French tragedy ends sadly, then, it is because the sad ending is a reasonable rule. Aristotle may not have said so, but the French dramatists are not

35 Lope de Vega, 1609, 2006, p. 151.

36 «J'estime que nous trouverons dans cette Définition une image reconnoissable de la Tragédie d'aujourd'hui.» La Mesnardière, 2015, p. 163.

37 La Mesnardière, 2015, p. 157.

38 «Sans m'arrêter à des redites importunes, dont les Traitez de Poësie Latins et Italiens ne sont déjà que trop chargez, je me contenteray de dire ce qu'Aristote, la raison et la lecture des anciens Poëtes, et quelques usages du Théâtre m'ont coniointement appris touchant les Poëmes dramatiques.» La Mesnardière, 2015, p. 157.

39 «Les Règles du théâtre ne sont pas fondées en autorité, mais en raison. Elles ne sont pas établies sur l'exemple, mais sur le Jugement naturel. Et quand nous les nommons l'Art ou les Règles des Anciens, c'est parce qu'ils les ont pratiquées avec beaucoup de gloire»; «The rules of the theatre are not based on authority, but on reason. They are not established on examples, but on the natural judgement. When we call them: <the art> or <the rules of the Ancient>, it is because they have practised them with great glory.» D'Aubignac, 2001, p. 66–67, our translation.

bound to respect neither his rules, nor the Italian commentaries. Since the sad ending seems a reasonable rule for tragedy, tragedy should end sadly. The French scholars, therefore, succeed in freeing tragedy from the authority of Aristotle and of the Italian commentators, submitting their theory to the universal principle of reason, and asserting that their tragedy is more «reasonable» than the Italian or the Spanish ones. Replacing authority by reason, French scholars establish tragedy as a national genre and increase its dignity.

Conclusion

In the 16th century, the sad ending becomes a rule of the tragic genre, although it is not mentioned in Aristotle's definition of the tragedy. Indeed, the idea of tragedy which is formed in the Middle Ages does not only affect the reception of Seneca's tragedies, as asserted by Kelly, but also the later reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*, thus influencing the theory and more largely the practice of the tragedy not only in Spain, where the *Poetics* was less known, but also in Italy and in France, where the *Poetics* was widely read and commented on.⁴⁰ The relevance of the sad ending shows the complexity of the reception of the *Poetics*, which was not only an ancient text edited and commented on with more or less accuracy and insight, as critics have generally asserted.⁴¹ Aristotle's *Poetics* was rather an early modern construction, condensing all the available knowledge on tragedy, summing up different critical traditions and digesting different dramatic models. Aristotle's authority was applied to non-Aristotelian ideas (such as to the sad ending), was refused or displaced in order to legitimate or to discard new forms of drama, issued from a plurality of dramatic (and non-dramatic) models. Indeed, Aristotle's *Poetics* was not only a poetical guide, but mainly a political reference, used to support or to reject different poetical ideas.⁴² Paradoxically enough, in Italy,

40 See Lohse, 2015, chap. 1–2, and Zanin, 2014, chap. 4–5.

41 Spingarn, 1899, p. 60. In a sense, Bernard Weinberg's vast and accurate interpretation of the Renaissance poetical treatises (1961) may sometimes adopt this view on the *Poetics*. His impressive *History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* proposed a textual approach to early modern poetics, thus applying to early modern texts the methods and ideas of New Criticism. Indeed, if New Criticism positively drew the critical attention to poetical issues, it also promoted an approach of the *Poetics* that tends to elude the complexity of its transmission and the multiplicity of the ideas and approaches of the tragic genre that were investigated and tested through the reconstruction and interpretation of Aristotle's work.

42 Blocker, 2009, and namely chapters 1 and 2.

where the *Poetics* was first theorised, tragedy failed and was rarely composed and staged. On the contrary, in France where Aristotelian tragedy was surreptitiously adapted, tragedy powerfully rose. As to imply that, the less the *Poetics* is read, the better the tragedy succeeds.

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