CHAPTER SEVEN

JESUIT NEO-LATIN TRAGEDY IN FRANCE

Jean-Frédéric Chevalier

‘Seigneur, je Vous remercie de m’avoir ainsi attaché! Et parfois il m’est arrivé de trouver vos commandements pénibles et ma volonté en présence de Votre règle perplexe, rétive. Mais aujourd’hui il n’y a pas moyen d’être plus serré à Vous que je ne le suis et j’ai beau vérifier chacun de mes membres, il n’y en a plus un seul qui de Vous soit capable de s’écarter si peu.’

(Lord, I thank You for having thus bound me! And sometimes I have happened to find your commands difficult, and my will in the presence of Your rule troubled, rebellious. But today there is no way to be closer to You than I am, and I check each of my members in vain, there is not one left which could move away from You however little.)

Claudel, Le soulier de satin (Paris, Gallimard, 1929), Première journée, scène 1.

When the Jesuit father offers up in martyrdom his life to God in the opening scene of Le Soulier de satin (1929), Claudel is not only determining already the fate of Rodrigue, but he is also placing his play at the heart of a theatrical tradition which was born in the medieval mystery plays and saw its peak in Jesuit tragedy. In his study of martyrdom in the age of the Reformation, Frank Lestringant has shown the extent to which this scene from Le Soulier de satin was inspired by the tradition of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century martyrologies and theatre. Tragedy thus becomes the expression of communion with God in history and beyond. In Claudel’s theatre, however, the hero often resists the action of Providence, seeking to realize his desires, affirm his individuality, even in opposition to the order desired by God. In Jesuit theatre, on the other hand, the hero’s will is often at one with that of God. The drama is the expression not of the death

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1 I would like to thank Philip J. Ford for translating this chapter in English, Jan Bloemendal for his careful reading, and Alain Cullière for his valuable advice. This chapter places emphasis on the Latin tragedies of the Jesuits, since these are the ones with which we are most familiar due to the edition of major plays and tragedy is the genre that features most conspicuously in the Jesuits’ output. Such a focus should not give the impression that this is the only form of theatre adopted by the Jesuits. The pastoral, the tragicomedy and comedy would merit more extensive treatment.

2 Lestringant, Lumière des martyrs, pp. 187–90.
throes of the hero’s conscience but of the inexorable violence and cruelty of princes, kings or emperors who are blinded by their own power and rebelling against the will of God. The plays normally end with the re-establishment of divine order on earth and the punishment of the guilty. To take up a cry uttered by the same Jesuit father in his prayer:

[...] la vendange sans doute ne pouvait se faire sans désordre,  
Mais tout, après un peu de mouvement, est rentré dans la grande paix paternelle.

([...] no doubt the vintage could not have been gathered in without disorder, but everything, after a little disturbance, has returned to its great paternal peace.)

Jesuit theatre illustrates the history of this ‘vintage’, of this ‘disturbance’, and finally of this ‘paternal peace’ which has at last been regained.

THEATRE IN THE SERVICE OF TEACHING

François de Dainville is responsible for the fundamental study of the part played by the Society of Jesus in France in the history of education and the transfer of knowledge. In La naissance de l’humanisme moderne, he shows how Jesuit colleges managed to counter the disorder in educational systems at the start of the sixteenth century, and then to compete with the teaching methods and educational system established by the Reformation. The Jesuits benefited from the rapid rise of printing, which helped disseminate ancient texts and progressively gave access to Greek culture. At the same time, the middle classes wished to see their children attain, through schooling, a yet more prestigious success in society. What was needed, then, was high-quality education, based on the rediscovery of ancient literature, which was uniquely able to guarantee learning and eloquence. The Jesuits succeeded in fulfilling this aspiration. Their highly structured teaching aimed at mastering the art of rhetoric by means of education based on regular exercises and public contests. Pupils were progressively trained to write and to deliver a speech in the light of Cicero’s recommendations on inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria and actio.

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3 Many thanks to my colleague and friend Alain Cullière, Professor of French Language and Literature of the Renaissance at Lorraine University, who gave me sound advice about the history of the Company of Jesus in France. For the transmission of classics in Jesuit schools, see Dainville, L’éducation des jésuites, pp. 167–470.

4 François de Dainville’s papers about the social background of pupils in Jesuit schools have been compiled in the volume headed L’éducation des jésuites, pp. 25–164.