

Universal wisdom and civil morality in tragic stories (1559-1656)

The genre of tragic stories (*histoires tragiques*) flourished in early modern Europe, in the wake of the trauma caused by religious conflicts. Written with moralizing intent, these short narratives depict the darkness of human nature (crime, cruelty, and disaster) in a style marked by violence and excess. We will argue that because of their dazzling success in the 16th and 17th centuries, and their widespread distribution throughout Europe, they not only helped to shape cross-European tastes and sensibilities, but also the perception of violence, and civil and moral order.

This project aims to study the canonical authors of French tragic stories, thanks to a corpus of almost 10,000 pages, from Boaistuau (1559) to Parival (1656). They will be studied in relation to their European, Oriental, and Greco-Latin sources and their translations-adaptations in Europe (especially in English, French and Spanish), as well as to the history of European collective values in these troubled times. The thesis will focus on these narratives as they were intended to elaborate a discourse of wisdom and civil morality in response to the violence that tore Europe apart at the time, by analyzing the utterances of general value (proverbs, maxims, and sentences) that they contain. They are exceptionally numerous in these stories, and define the genre. The thesis will aim to show that these texts constitute an essential step regarding the perception of violence and the aspiration for an order (moral, legal, divine) in Europe. It will explore the following areas:

1. The multilingual construction of a discourse of universal wisdom. The authors of tragic stories were polygraphers, translators, and compilers. They drew on various sources, especially Italian (Bandello) and Turkish, but also Hispanic and Germanic, and adapted them into French, which was then adapted throughout Europe. The diversity of cultural traditions reflected in these stories gives a universal overview of human violence. In response to this violence, the discourse of wisdom seeks to provide a moral and civil framework that is also universal. Thus, the authors of tragic stories used numerous popular sources (proverbs) and ancient wisdom to guide the reading of these stories and to help the reader discern their meaning. The thesis will attempt to determine how they worked, by comparing sources, examining the tools they used (manuals, adages, maxims, collections of commonplaces, lives of illustrious men, miscellaneous news items, etc.) and studying the circulation of texts in European space and over time. By transcending borders, tragic stories reflect a supranational sensibility and contribute to create the roots of a European community, based on the sharing of common values, in response to the threat of latent violence.

2. Containing horror and elaborating exemplarity. Violence frightens and fascinates simultaneously. The tragic stories understood this well. They tell the reader about violence that reaches the peaks of horror, and at the same time they try to make them exemplary. They present a tension between these sensational facts, which must affect the reader, arouse his curiosity and his taste for the macabre, and this concern to draw out a timeless lesson for the European, even supra-European, community. Caught in this tension between sensationalism and the collective construction of an order, the authors frame violence that threatens humanity. Therefore, the thesis will focus on the study of the insertion of moral and civil discourses in the textual economy. This requires studying their position in the text, even in the peritext (preface, summary, warning), but also the enunciative device in which they are inserted (addressees, contexts, polyphony) and the way in which they organize the argumentative structure of the text at strategic moments.

3. The construction of the effectiveness of civil discourse... and its discrepancies. The thesis will also focus on the pragmatic aspect, both from the point of view of the readership and the characters. It will study the way in which the effectiveness of moral and civil discourse is staged and reflected in texts, through their narrative, rhetorical, and enunciative devices. This reflection conveyed through tragic stories appeared as the reflection on politeness understood, not as a set of collective rules to be followed, but as a means of pacifying human relations (*cf.* D. Krawczyk) blossomed. This concern with community building helps to define the genre of tragic stories as a school of civil responsibility. The thesis will also raise the question of the appropriateness and, sometimes, the inappropriateness of these utterances which are intended to be civil and civilizing. Although these speeches are for the most part moralistic, pointing to good and bad deeds, in a

period marked by religious wars or their sad memory, they are, nevertheless, sometimes out of step with regard to the reader's horizon of expectation. In this case, the reasons for this incongruity deserve to be studied: where does this discrepancy come from and what are its potential effects? We will raise the question of humor and irony.

4. Shaping a speech that speaks to the ear and to the memory. These speeches of wisdom and order are often inspired by proverbs existing in different vernacular and ancient languages, and therefore require translation, transposition and adaptation. This work is all the more interesting, because these speeches were intended to strike minds and remain in memories – the duty of memory being particularly important for the European space haunted by the trauma of the wars of religion. The form of the sententious utterances from which they are inspired already aimed to produce these effects, which had to be recreated in the French language. The thesis will therefore have to deepen this work of developing a specific discourse, capable of generating collective support. It will study the striking features of these utterances, their rhythm and their musicality, their sometimes archaic form, the figures of speech that give them a very recognizable structure. It will also focus on the ways in which these discourses have been given authority, permanence and universality. It will suggest a typology and identify the choices of the authors. It will be crucial to demonstrate that this discourse of wisdom crystallizes the meaning of these narratives: far from being an accessory ornament (*parergon*), it is a generic marker, a vector of moral depth and an operator of singular authorial postures.

State of the art

Studies on tragic stories have greatly developed in recent decades. After pioneering thematic studies on the realism of tragic stories (Simonin, 1985) and their relation to legal discourse and news items (Pech, 2000; Combe, 2011), and the study of their poetics (Cremona, 2019), attention has recently been given to their exemplary dimension (Catel, 2023). However, the study of sententious utterances has so far been neglected, even though there is agreement on recognizing their importance in this genre. Therefore, this project aims to highlight how central these discourses have been and how they have conveyed specific meanings and issues and contributed to the construction of a collective space through the work of values.

The approach that the thesis will take – starting from the work of sources and form to analyze the mechanisms of construction of a civil discourse – is also original in the sense that this work of form has been neglected until now – and when attempted, it has focused on the narratives rather than the discourses that frame them.

This project is historically justified by the rediscovery, during the Renaissance, of the figures of the two Senecas (the philosopher and the rhetorician, still confused in the 16th century), the development of collections of adages (Erasmus) and the circulation of texts and ideas throughout Europe. Moreover, the early modern period, a period of emergence of this genre, is that of the birth of civil humanism, as much as of unrest that left its mark on the centuries that followed. The early modern age provides us, in this double respect, with many lessons to be learned.

This study finally takes place in a favorable context, marked by the rise of studies on maxims and proverbs in different linguistic fields (Quitout, 2002; Cadiot & Visetti, 2006; Claver Zouogbo, 2009; Gómez-Jordana Ferary, 2012; Maingueneau, 2012; Anscombre) and their promotion by three major multilingual journals (*Proverbium*, *Paremia*, *De Proverbio*), as well as by the renewal of pragmatic studies through the historical approach, particularly in the English-speaking world (Andreas H. Jucker; Michael Haugh; Dániel Kádár).

Therefore, this dissertation will contribute to informing complex issues through a detailed analysis of cross-disciplinary approaches (history, philosophy, and linguistics). It should also contribute to breaking down barriers between disciplines because these moral and civil discourses touch on various fields such as the study of languages and styles, philosophy, sociology or psychology, all of which question the values and functioning of a community. These discourses enable life, they are *hypomnemata* (Foucault, 1994): ways of thinking for oneself and for others, that allow us to think about the relationship between the individual and the community.