The Long Century of the Enlightenment and the Revival of Greek Theater

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Abstract

The eighteenth century was "long" because the maturation of the ideals of the Enlightenment in Greek culture was a slow, protracted process. The quest for innovation led to fundamental ruptures with existing traditions, but, at the same time, it turned to the ancient Greek heritage for inspiration. A number of key methodological issues, including the precise nature of the quest for renewal (especially in drama during the Greek Enlightenment), merit closer inspection. Therefore, in this paper I focus on continuity and discontinuity in modern Greek theater and on the major landmarks in its development during the Greek Enlightenment.

Theatrical creation is inherently binary because it often starts out as text that is transformed into a staged performance. It requires a dual reception since a play, on the one hand, is usually addressed to a reader, but, on the other, is often written for a performance to be watched by an audience. This dual reception has not always been so obvious or self-evident during the protracted development of modern Greek theater of the Enlightenment. Its fragile structures that, over time, managed to emerge were invariably short-lived. A case in point is theater on the island of Crete.

During the Ottoman period, the bulk of the Greek population lived with a relatively sluggish, traditional mindset. The cultural counterweight presented by the Phanariot society was a view of theater as a new genre to be added to the other "modern" literary imports from Western Europe. Thus, for over half a century, the Greek Enlightenment, by showing an interest in innovation, tended to link the notion of drama with arousing the readers' "literary curiosity." It is also probably fair to say that drama was a key driving force behind the renewal of narrative traditions, a precursor, so to speak, of the novel (Angelou 1989:37). Hence, there were

many cases in which drama was not identical with theater and staged performance. This can be seen by the terms employed in literary production. The peculiar usage and function of the play (my focus here is on older manuscripts or printed translations of plays by Molière, Metastasio, and Goldoni) principally as a text *to be read* require special consideration because a play conforms to specific rules of dissemination and thus tends to exhibit its own trajectory (Tabaki 1988:27–29; 1995/2001:392).

How can one ignore the fact that "social character" goes hand in hand with dramatic art? In modern Greek intellectual and artistic life, the great moments of theatrical revival occurred when the doors of Greek culture were opened to influences from the West and new values were absorbed and assimilated. A couple of examples suffice to support this point: a) the flowering of Cretan drama in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and b) the contribution of the Phanariots in bringing modern theater into the mainstream of Greek cultural life in the eighteenth century. In both cases the impact of Western letters was very substantial, although via different modes. In the case of Cretan drama it happened through the creative imitation of Western models. In the case of the Phanariots, it happened through the translation of Western European plays.

Translations and original literary production followed a common evolutionary course: the moderate version of the ideals of the European Enlightenment that was interwoven with the reception of the model of the "enlightened despot" (propounded principally by Metastasio) was succeeded by a theater of "philosophical propaganda," the influence of revolutionary ideas, and anti-authoritarian themes that fostered a national consciousness and an ideological awakening (propounded by Voltaire and Alfieri). Likewise, instances of reception of new trends in sensibility can be seen in the pre-Romantic movement and the "bourgeois family drama" (in the mode of Kotzebue). In the early nineteenth century, in spite of the dominant craze for "neoclassicism," there was a variety of other aesthetic trends that deserve typological description.

With the establishment of the independent Greek state, the long but steady process of incorporating theater (as space, spectacle, and social agency) into, principally, the bourgeois cultural fabric involved both individual and collective efforts to create a national theatrical life. It was through surviving pre-Revolutionary aesthetic trends and ideological quests, alongside the emergence of Romanticism and the formation of national/nationalist dreams, that modern Greek cities came in contact with the theater, primarily as a product of the Enlightenment because of its didactic goals and secondarily as a structural component of a new "bourgeois" mentality. It is perhaps on this level of contending trends that

the dispute between "national" (Greek and didactic) theater and imported melodrama should be placed. Recent studies position this entire issue on a far more sophisticated interpretative level (Bakounakis 1991).

For Greek culture, the nineteenth century was a remarkably complex period because it was both receptive and resistant to the Western European ideological trends that it encountered and assimilated. Scholars used every means possible in their quest to uncover the essence of the "national" while seeking to formulate an ideological construct—a national historiography, a national philosophy, and a national theater. The quest for a national character (génie national) via a creative blending of foreign Western elements, the critical stance against repetition, and the growing ability to transcend them (as Greek authors and artists drew on the Greek tradition) was a feature of the years that followed with the beginning of Romanticism (Tabaki 1996a[1999]:65–77). A phenomenon that was not given the attention it deserves and is worth considering particularly in the context of a more comprehensive account of the aesthetic and ideological trends of that period, is dramatic production in its entirety. It is important that the discussion is freed from established intellectual coordinates such as structuralist polarities between katharevousa and demotic forms of Greek and those between original play and translation or adaptation. These issues have undergone a radical reassessment in modern Greek studies.1

In addition, careful consideration should be given to other developments such as the transformation of sophisticated literary works (e.g., Cretan drama) into popular literature that either became assimilated into the oral tradition (e.g., references to stage productions) or evolved into popular books or pamphlets. After the fall of the island of Crete to the Turks, the influence of the Cretan tradition traveled to the Ionian Islands and then spread over the Greek mainland and across to the Aegean islands. Various problems of interpretation arose a) when the Cretan literary legacy was gradually assimilated into the popular oral tradition and was incorporated into the mechanisms that were associated with the dissemination of the popular "fyllada" (particularly prominent in the eighteenth century) and b) when the conservative literati gradually rejected the Cretan literary tradition as indecorous and lewd and, with the passing of time, also rejected the new stylistic preferences of the neoclassical movement during the last phase of the Enlightenment. A prime example of this development is embodied in the attitudes of Adamantios Korais, an enthusiastic proponent of classical ideals, who wrote the following in a letter to Alexandros Vasileiou: "I confess that it is not a pleasant pastime to read Erotokritos (Ερωτόκριτος) and other such monstrosities from humble Greece" (Korais 1966).² His opinion is

somewhat harsh, but valid for 1805. It must be understood in its own ideological and aesthetic perspective, and in the context of the values that comprised the desired literary and dramatic canon for a modern Greece.

Research in recent years has generated interesting findings. For instance, there is considerable evidence of religious drama authored by Jesuit and Greek Orthodox Christian playwrights on the islands of the Aegean Sea and in Constantinople. Walter Puchner identifies the linguistic and thematic antecedents of these religious dramas in the motifs of Cretan drama. The recently discovered plays provide the missing link that explains the transition from the Baroque to the Enlightenment (Puchner 1995:16). Likewise, theater in the Ionian Islands played an important and special role in modern Greek drama. The typological distinctions proposed by Spyros Evangelatos (now widely accepted by most scholars) identify three main periods of artistic expression that correspond to the late Italian Renaissance, the Baroque, and the Enlightenment (Evangelatos 1969:180; Puchner 1984:51-52, 153). It has been claimed that the special character of theater on the Ionian Islands in the eighteenth century lay in social satire implied in some original plays. True to the forms and language of the Cretan tradition that was kept alive on the Ionian Islands, the plays of the Ionian Islands contain sharp descriptions of people and events, but do not belong to the conventional genre of Cretan comedy. It should be recognized, however, that the social satire of these plays stands out because of its focus on characterization and self-criticism (Puchner 1993:188).

At this point the parallel intellectual and artistic paths of the Enlightenment are easy to discern principally through the choices made about which plays to translate (mainly ones by Metastasio and Alfieri) and what kind of original plays to write. As elsewhere in the Greek-speaking world under Otthoman rule, these choices led to a surge in translating and writing plays in the early decades of the nineteenth century. A fresh look at the dramatic works that appeared in the Ionian Islands in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries confirms that contemporary researchers verified earlier conclusions by subjecting the existing evidence to new impressive analyses. Nevertheless, the phenomena that predate "national," original plays written in Greek need to be re-examined, and the implications of a number of translated plays need to be reconsidered.

In re-examining the culture of theater and its reception by the Greek public, the analysis should not be limited by ethnic linguistic restrictions or by narrow definitions of the ilk of "the Italian repertoire." The analysis should include the abundant material brought to light in recent years by archival research on theatrical life on the island of Corfu and Italian melodrama in the eighteenth century (Mavromoustakos 1995:147–191). Similarly, the discussion of plays written in Italian should not be separate from the discussion of plays written in Greek, as in the case of the classicizing tragedies composed by Andreas Kalvos (Vitti 1960; Vayenas 1995:123–133). The need for an inclusive approach is aptly illustrated in the bilingualism (Italian and Greek) of Elisavet Moutzan-Martinengou's plays (Tabaki 1996a:59–74; 2004b:363–375). The changes in social and cultural structures, as well as the gradual democratization that emerged with the change in polity on the Ionian Islands and the demise of the aristocratic model embodied in the *Ancien Régime*, should also be taken into account (Moschonas 1974:382–401; Leontsinis 1991). As the Enlightenment reached full maturity throughout the Greek world in the early nineteenth century, the first organized examples of theatrical activity of a didactic and distinctly nationalist character appeared on the Ionian Islands (Tabaki 1995/2001:124–276).

Walter Puchner's paper, "Research problems in the History of the Greek Theater" (1984:51–55, 153), prompted researchers to reexamine a) the way in which key historians of modern Greek theater treat their material and b) the theoretical approach that they choose to take, usually stated in the introduction of their histories. The contradictions that run through the overall approach to the subject and the ideological mechanisms at work behind the models employed by scholars are worth discussing. More often than not, these mechanisms require the adoption of a model of national continuity (from Antiquity to the Enlightenment with Byzantium in the middle) as is the case with Laskaris's history (1938:7-97); or they require that the beginning of modern Greek theater is defined as lying in the period of national ideological awakening; i.e. the Enlightenment, as is the case with Sideris's history (1991). I also consider the interesting division between those who support the idea of an essentially foreign, imported theatrical culture (e.g., Cretan theater) and those who believe that it was a homegrown theatrical culture (Enlightenment theater) (Tabaki 1995/2001:26, 34–35).

Although I am of the opinion that, in the case of the long rebirth of Greek theater, it is far more meaningful to seek the formative components and points of transition, the convergence, and the grafting of one tradition onto the other, I cannot ignore the fact that the Enlightenment marks a break in the space within which Greek learning was developed. This break, as far as theater goes, consisted of renewing a play's dramatic form and function, principally an ideological function. One outcome of the social processes that led to the national awakening was that the theater of the Greek Enlightenment, much like the European theater of "philosophical propaganda," became a vehicle of radical and democratic

286

ideas. Moreover, this was reflected in the way Greek theater evolved from a spasmodic, scattered life before the Greek War of Independence to the laborious process of acquiring norms and institutional status in the independent nation state (Tabaki 1995/2001:36–37; Spathis 1986:10).

The theater of the Enlightenment or the "common school of man"

At the turn of the eighteenth century, when the Greek Enlightenment took on a more collective face, Western European theater (as text, discourse, and stage performance) had a markedly ideological color and was imbued with the key philosophical questions of the period. Drama functioned as a catalyst; it was radical and frequently unsettling. Western European drama made its first hesitant inroads into Greek cultural space facing diverse forms of resistance, questioning, and examination, resulting, in part, from traditional modern Greek mindsets and, in part, from trends in Balkan societies under Ottoman rule. The fate of Western European theater in southeast Europe was, to a great extent, concomitant with (if not totally dependent on) the steady growth of the Enlightenment movement.

The theater of the Enlightenment prompted a break with the pre-existing Cretan and Ionian Island traditions. These traditions had retreated, but survived in popular literature (written or oral) among the Greeks under Turkish and Venetian rule and in key communities of the Greek diaspora. Despite the dissemination of this literature among the educated Greeks in the Balkans and a handful of cities in central Europe, the aesthetic appeal of works from the Cretan renaissance had declined in the eighteenth century, and it did not, on the whole, touch the core of the "modernizing" authors.

The Phanariots, who were polyglots and exceptionally open to new influences, had included the plays of Molière in their preferred reading lists as early as 1720 and they translated Molière into Greek around 1740 (Tabaki 1992:1518–1521). About 40 years later the Phanariots were attracted to "bourgeois themes" made popular by Carlo Goldoni, the Venetian reformer of Italian comedy. Similarly, they were moved by the frequent use of classical mythology and history and the sublime sentiments expressed in late Baroque style by the popular court poet Pietro Metastasio whose heroic dramas are to be found precisely at the point where reading and stage performance meet. The subjects that he treated (as in plays like *Temistocle, Achille in Sciro, Olimpiade, Alessandro nell'Indie*) appealed to Greek readers and, later, to Greek audiences because his plays revived a time of glory and brought the ancient Greek heritage into the present. It was this use of the classical past that Rigas sought to

utilize when, in 1797, he published $T\alpha$ Ολύμπια (The Olympics), a verse reworking of Olimpiade. An earlier, prose version of Olimpiade had in fact already been translated and published in the Danube Principalities. Temistocle was translated into Greek as Θεμιστοκλής εν Περσία (Themistocles in Persia) for a stage production in Odessa in 1814.

Seventy years passed before modern Greek plays attained the ethical and didactic status of their counterparts of the Western European Enlightenment. It was only after the French Revolution of 1789 and the transmission of revolutionary ideals to neighboring Italy that Konstantinos Asopios claimed, in a speech that he delivered right before an examination took place at the Greek School of Trieste on 30 April 1817, that the theater was "the third means of education" and:

(the theater) aims simply at correcting and educating people in their manners; it is the common school of man, making up for the deficiencies of other schools. (Asopios 1817)

Another instance of the influence of the Western European Enlightenment on the Greeks can be seen in the case of the cleric Konstantinos Oikonomos, a teacher at the *Philologikon Gymnasion* of Smyrna. In his work, Γραμματικά (*Grammatika* or *Poetics*), he describes the theater as "a public school of gentle manners and philanthropy" (1817:xx11). Reflecting a similar mindset, Adamantios Korais, in 1822, wrote that the theater is one of the two "schools for the political education of the people" (Korais 1822).

The above is only one side of the story, the other of which was expressed in varied ways and modes of resistance and can be seen in the fears of the simple-minded Stamatis Petrou. When Petrou lived in Amsterdam in 1773, he was horrified that Korais had embraced a Western European lifestyle with youthful boldness to such a degree that it seemed dangerous and corrupt. Petrou was particularly horrified by Korais's enjoyment of European opera (Petrou 1976). The corruption of manners and morals also preoccupied the anonymous author of the Ελληνική Νομαρχία (Hellenic Nomarchy) from 1806, and the same attitude was found in another anonymous text published in 1807, attributed by some to the Zakynthian author Antonios Martelaos. The anonymous author of this text talks about the fine arts in general, much in the fashion of the Platonic moral code (Tabaki 1995/2001:382-391). In Odessa, according to an account of 1816, "a number of peculiar old men" succeeded through their complaints and protests in closing down the theater company, despite its initial successes. On the other hand, Korais himself, in a later work, Korais (1825) questioned the likely negative impact that melodrama could have on the restored Greek society and

supported his views with arguments taken from the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Tabaki 2004a:208–210).

In the years before the Greek War of Independence the interest of Greek intellectuals in Odessa, Bucharest, Iasi, and Asia Minor was focused on translated and original plays that, both as text and performance, could be understood as promoting exemplary manners and morals. The philosophical and political content of European theater of the Enlightenment reached the Greek-speaking world primarily via translations of plays by Voltaire (*Brutus, Mérope, La mort de César*, and *Mahomet*) and Alfieri (*Orestes* and *Philip II*). At the same time, key features in original Greek plays included loyalty to the Greek national ideal, respect for democratic principles, and a loathing for tyranny (Tabaki 2002:51–73).

Except for Athanasios Christopoulos's Αχιλλεύς (Achilles) from 1805 that deals with the notion of "enlightened despotism" and Iakovakis Rizos Neroulos's *Polyxene* (1814) that followed the classicizing French school of Racine's tragic style, the democratic trend is most obvious in Neroulos's Aspasia (1813). The preoccupations of this period are illustrated in the following brief sample of plays: Λεωνίδαε εν Θερμοπύλαις (Leonidas at Thermopylae), Ο θάνατος του Δημοσθένους (The Death of Demosthenes), Αρμόδιος και Αριστογείτων (Harmodios and Aristogeiton), and Τιμολέων (Timoleon). The anonymous play, Leonidas at Thermopylae (1816), juxtaposes Greek democracy and Asian despotism. Nikolaos Pikkolos's The Death of Demosthenes (1818), a play that survives only in its English translation along with the testimony by someone who had seen it performed, adopts the historical periodization preferred by the Enlightenment and the reign of Alexander the Great is seen as the beginning of the decline. It dramatizes the last phase of Athenian democracy as seen through the eyes of Demosthenes, who represents the free citizens of Athens against the absolute rule of Philip II of Macedon. The end of Athenian democracy is blamed on the indolence of its citizens: "Freedom requires virtue!" Demosthenes declares. His discourse is replete with the revolutionary vocabulary of the times; he exhorts Democharis:

Learn, young man, how one's country should be loved, if you want to be a free citizen. A free citizen, yes! A citizen means that above all you should wish to be a true human being. (Tabaki 2002:70–71)

The most inspiring topic during this period of ideological fermentation for the national awakening of the Greeks was regicide as dramatized in Georgios Lassanis's play *Harmodios and Aristogeiton*, in Konstantinos Kyriakos Aristias's play of the same title, and in Ioannis Zambelios's *Timoleon* of 1817 which imitated Alfieri's tragedy by the same name (Tabaki 2002:71–72; 1995/2001:497–499).

Greek drama of the Enlightenment embodied many other trends as well. For example, a comedy of manners and social satire emerged in Constantinople and other cities under Phanariot influence at the dawn of the eighteenth century. The oldest satire is *To Αχούρι* (*The Stable*) from 1692, written in a hybrid theatrical style by Neophytos, a prior at the monastery of Saint Sabbas (Legrand 1881), while the Κωμωδία αληθών συμβάντων (Comedy of True Events) is dated around 1750 (Skouvaras 1970). The precise date of the unpublished prose comedy, Έργα και καμώματα του ψευδοασκητού Αυξεντίου ή Αυξεντιανός μετανοημένος (Works and Doings of the Pseudo-Ascetic Auxentios or Auxentian Repentant), is uncertain (Vivilakis 2002). An important text from this period is G. N. Soutsos's Αλεξανδροβόδας ο ασυνείδητος (Alexandrovodas the Unscrupulous) from 1785 (Spathis 1995). It lampoons Alexander Mavrokordatos's O Firaris, but it also ridicules the manners of the Phanariots and, in a sense, the idea of moral emancipation promoted by the Enlightenment (Papacostea-Danielopolu 1977:75–92). A sharp satire by Nikolaos Mavrogenis, the non-Phanariot prince of Wallachia, was launched in Το σαγανάκι της τρέλλας (The Wind of Madness), written sometime before 1786 (Chisacof 1998).³ In Ο Χαρακτήρ της Βλαχίας (The Character of Wallachia), written between 1785 and 1820, the author criticized changes in Greek-Romanian society and the emergence of new social elements. Using biting satire, the author of Νέα Κωμωδία της Βλαχίας (New Comedy of Wallachia in April of 1820 attacked the doctors of Bucharest, among whom were the famous Apostolos Arsakis and Michael Christaris, the latter an important scholar and translator of Voltaire's tragedies. In the play he is satirized for using methods involving animal magnetism that dispatch his patients to their Maker. Criticism of the philosophical ideas of Voltaire appeared in H Επάνοδος ή το Φανάρι του Διογένους (The Return, or the Lamp of Diogenes),written around 1803, but only published in 1836. It was circulated in manuscript form in the intervening years (Dimaras 1969).

A number of Greek translations of German plays at the turn of the eighteenth century show a pre-romantic temperament. The German "bourgeois, family drama" entered Greek theatrical culture when Konstantinos Kokkinakis translated four plays by August von Kotzebue. Comedy that was morally corrective also made its appearance around that time with Molière's Tartuffe and The Miser (which was translated into Greek as O $E\xi\eta\nu\tau\alpha\beta\varepsilon\lambda\acute{o}\nu\eta\varsigma$ [O Exintavelonis]) (Tabaki 1995/2001:446–462). Diderot's highly significant theories about bourgeois family drama found their way in Antonios Matesis's play, O $B\alpha\sigma\iota\lambda\iota\kappa\acute{o}\varsigma$ (The Basil Plant) of 1830 (Spathis 1989:54–63; 1989:447–469; Tabaki 1995/2001:253–276).

Last but not least, female playwrights made their appearance. In the beginning they merely did translations such as those by Mitio Sakellariou

of Goldoni's L'amor paterno ovvero la serva riconoscente (Η Πατρική αγάπη ή Η Ευγνώμων δούλη) and La vedova scaltra (Η Πανούργος χήρα) and Roxane Samourkasi's translation of Salomon Gessner's Erastos. Later, women began writing original plays. Elisavet Moutzan-Martinengou, a brilliant and prominent woman from the island of Zakynthos, was a prolific writer. She is a fascinating case because, despite her erudition, she kept her intellectual pursuits private. She wrote no fewer than 22 plays, some of them "according to the rules of the tragic style." Her plays belong to various types of drama: Ο Φιλάργυρος (The Miser) belongs to the type of "serious comedy" which engaged in social critique. Some of her work and life is thematically parallel to Matesis's Βασιλικός (The Basil Plant), a play focused on a tyrannical father figure. In 1826, Evanthia Kairi anonymously published Νικήρατος (Nikiratos), a work that blends heroic tragedy and patriotic drama and mixes neoclassical and romantic elements. Evanthia, the erudite and sophisticated sister of Theophilos Kairis, was inspired to write this play when she heard the shocking news about the fall of Mesolonghi (Puchner 2003).

My essay ends here, but not the debate about the issues it outlines, issues far more complicated because Greek theater during the Enlightenment is the outcome of multiple interpretations. Various factors have led to misunderstandings and contradictions. The initial inexperience of the Greeks led to theatrical failures. The poor application of aesthetic norms to their original plays and satires which had loose dramatic structures, and their awkward handling of style, led to the coexistence of heterogeneous elements within the same play. These elements are sometimes silly and sometimes interesting; sometimes they make sense, sometimes they do not. Elements of neoclassicism and elements of romanticism are often interwoven in Greek drama of the early nineteenth century. The form and style of the plays and the aspirations of the playwrights and translators, particularly in the later phase of the Enlightenment, are issues of considerable interest and complexity for researchers who must explain them through a broader analysis. Therefore, I limit myself to a few key conclusions (Tabaki 1995:483f).4

Despite the programmatic nature of neoclassicism in the years before the Greek War of Independence, vague signs of romanticism appear in a rudimentary form without any apparent reason or supporting theoretical substantiation. The plays incorporate trends ranging from neoclassical tragedy to patriotic/historical drama. Even among playwrights who followed Aristotelian precepts, there are clear signs of their concern about the typology and morphology of their plays. Those who earnestly hoped to revive the spirit of Classical Greek drama in their plays experimented with conjoining the present with the past and one

of their prime preoccupations was meter. The adoption or rejection of rhyme and the quest for an appropriate meter for modern Greek drama (which would be consistent with ancient prosody) are the two primary prevailing conscious stylistic trends in the years before the War of Independence. These playwrights sought the subtle notion of Greekness in a verse form that would be appropriate for fostering a national awakening; i.e., via the "old meter" of their classical forbears and against the background of European classicism, the simplicity of structure, and the rise of heroism as a core theme (Tabaki 2002:65).

The playwright who contributed the most comprehensive treatment of the issues outlined above in his plays is Ioannis Zambelios (1787–1856), a staunch supporter of Korais, a sworn classicist, and a proficient playwright. He took pains to explain his art and gave careful accounts of the way that he used meter and language in his plays. Furthermore, he offered researchers an opportunity to watch the evolution of his themes, from the heroes of ancient Greece and Byzantium to those of modern Greece in such plays as Timoleon, Konstantinos Palaiologos, Georgios Kastriotis (Skenderbey), Rigas Thessalos, Markos Bossaris, Ioannis Kapodistrias, Georgios Karaiskakis, Kodros, and Odysseus Androutsos. Finally, he offered researchers an opportunity to observe his style as it gradually retreated from pure neoclassicism to early romanticism (Tabaki 2002:91-107). Zambelios's playwriting developed over time and found inspiration in the changing reality with the establishment of an independent Greek state. His is a course that starts out as "national tragedy" and ends up as "historical (romantic) drama" (Tabaki 2003:62-85).

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NOTES

¹This interpretative approach is adopted by many of the studies contained in a collective volume edited by Nasos Vayenas (1997)

²Its attribution to Rigas has not, as yet, been convincingly demonstrated.

³NOTE 3: missing

⁴ "Vers une typologie des pièces théâtrales." Walter Puchner, notably, in his introductions to modern editions of theatrical works of the period, has led research systematically in this direction.

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