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PERFORMING MARTYRDOM: THE POETICS OF SUFFERING ON THE FRENCH STAGE 1600-1663

This dissertation investigates the production and reception of martyrological tragedy in 17th-Century France. Martyrological tragedies – plays which take martyrdom as their subject – briefly flourished in the professional theaters of Paris during the 1640s. Well-known dramatists, such as Pierre Corneille (*Polyeucte, martyr* 1642; *Théodore, vierge et martyre* 1646) and Jean Rotrou (*Le Véritable Saint Genest* 1642), tried their hand at martyrological tragedy. Additionally, many authors, popular in their day but variously remembered now, such as Boissin de Gallardon, Nicolas Desfontaines, and Jean Puget de la Serre, wrote martyrological tragedies. The fact that both established dramatists and amateurs contributed to this trend testifies to the genre’s popularity, yet it remains unclear why the genre disappeared almost as suddenly as it appeared. For many scholars, martyrological tragedy was an ill-fated marriage between a sacred subject and a secular stage, between an essentially passive character and a genre that demands action. Moreover, when held against the standard of classical tragedy, represented by Corneille and above all Racine, martyrological tragedies are a defective, mediocre genre unworthy of critical attention. Indeed, the vast majority of martyrological tragedies faded from scholarly memory until recently. Recent interest in questioning and deconstructing the concept of French “classicism” has prompted scholars to investigate minor authors and marginal genres; turning our eye toward marginal dramatic production complicates our understanding of seventeenth-century theater and reveals a decidedly non-Aristotelian understanding of tragedy. Privileging spectacle and suffering over the logical coherence of the plot, martyrological tragedy paradoxically conjoins a spectacular storyline that exceeds the limits of reason and a poetic form that supposes the logical succession of an inexorable course of events. My interest in martyrological tragedy lies primarily in the epistemological stakes of the genre. I situate martyrological tragedy within the contemporary debate surrounding poetics and theatrical representation. By examining negative responses to Christian theater, in pro- and anti-theatrical critics, I demonstrate that the critics found common ground in their suspicion of the effects religious theater might have on the spectator’s beliefs. In the context of a seventeenth-century understanding of theatrical representation, I argue that the dramatic adaptation of hagiography entails the fictionalization of religious truths. Consequently, the spectator’s “belief” in the spectacle unfolding before his or her eyes supersedes his or her erstwhile belief in doctrinal truths, thereby dislodging belief in doctrine from its privileged position. Ultimately, I argue that the greatest threat posed by martyrological tragedy was epistemological: by staging miraculous Christian hagiographies one risked calling into question their veracity and credibility. Martyrological tragedy, then, was not a blasphemous transgression of two independent spheres (religion and theater); rather, the threat it posed to the audience’s beliefs necessitated a separation between church and stage.

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