Poetic Justice

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The term "poetic justice," which means the ideal judgement that rewards virtues and punishes vices in the characters of literary works, is first used by Thomas Rymer, an English critic in the seventeenth century, but, as a matter of fact, the concept of poetic justice has been known, employed or even avoided by playwrights since Greek times. In this article, I try to demonstrate that the term "poetic justice", which flowers in seventeenth and eighteenth century England and the Continent, is firstly, Platonic rather than Aristotelian, secondly, the result of the rigidification and codification of Aristotelian rules, and thirdly, the result of the manipulation of these rules for didactic purposes. Since Aristotle is the first critic who mentions the concept of poetic justice, though he does not recommend it in his ideal tragedy, in this article I will use Aristotle's *Poetics* as a basis for my argument, then trace and analyse the term"poetic justice"as it appears in the critical works of Francois Hedelin, Abbe d'Aubignac, Jean Racine, Thomas Rymer, Joseph Addison and John Dennis respectively.

It can be said that Aristotle's discussion of the tragic hero in chapter 13 of *Poetics* is the genesis from which the seventeenth and eighteenth century critics

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codify the principle of poetic justice and decree it as the ultimate goal of theatre.In this chapter, Aristotle states that the tragic hero must be "the character between these two extremes, that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity but by some error of frailty"[1] For Aristotle, contrary to Plato, the purpose of art is never to teach a moral lesson, but to produce a cathartic effect through pitiable and fearful incidents. As S.H.Butcher points out:

Aristotle 's critical judgements on poetry rest on aesthetic and logical grounds, they take no direct account of ethical aims or tendencies.[2]

Never prescribing a diactic purpose for tragedy, Aristotle discards the concept of poetic justice in which virtues are rewarded and vices are punished. He further explains that:

> It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacles of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity:for this moves neither pity nor fear:it merely shocks us. Nor,again,that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity:for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy;it possesses no tragic quality;it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls for pity and fear.[3]

Worth noticing is that the "moral sense" that Aristotle mentions in this passage is what the seventeenth and eighteenth century critics pick up and codify into the concept of poetic justice. Besides, it can be seen that even though Aristotle realizes this moral justice in literary works, he does not agree with the principle of punishing vices and rewarding virtues because he thinks that this concept is too simplistic for tragedy which is supposed to be a higher art form. The most important point is that the application of this principle in a tragedy will lessen the cathartic effect which is the aesthetic goal of his tragedy.

> Nor again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be never pitiful nor terrible.[4]

Believing that art can exist on its own intrinsic or aesthetic value, Aristotle defines moral judgement in theatre as an inferior part. Unlike the seventeenth

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[1] S.H.Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York : Dover Publications, 1951), p. 45.

[2] Butcher 225

[3] Butcher 45

[4] Butcher 45

and eighteenth century critics who think that art should be a microcosm of the larger world, Aristotle, on the contrary, believes that art is a different world with a logic of its own which cannot be judged by a normal standard. Thus, justice in art does not have to correspond to that of the real world. As S.H. Butcher points out,"Aristotle had already insisted that poetical truth and scientific truth are not identical."[5] Since poetic justice lessens the artistic value of any work, it mostly appears in an inferior art form such as comedy.

> Like the Odyssey, it has a doule thread of plot, and also an opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad. It is accounted the best because of the weakness of the spectators; for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of his audience. The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure. It is proper rather to comedy, where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies-like Orestes and Aegisthus-quit the stage as friends at the close, and no one slays or is slain.[6]

S.H. Butcher, is his commentary of *Poetics,* confirms that Aristotle's characterization of his tragic hero is not based on the principle of poetic justice.

> The character of the ideal tragic hero (ch.xiii) is deduced not from any ethical ideal of conduct, but from the need of calling forth the blended emotion of pity and fear, wherein the proper tragic pleasure resides. The catastrophe by which virtue is defeated and villainy in the end comes out triumphant is condemned by the same criterion;and on a similar principle the prosaic justice, misnamed "poetical" which rewards the good man and punishes the wicked, is pronounced to be appropriate only to comedy.[7]

Therefore, a work that has poetic justice as its goal functions only as a kind of wish fulfillment of the audience or the author and cannot exist on its own aesthetic plane. It is not surprising that few people can really enjoy reading the seventeenth and eighteenth century plays with its vehement didactic purpose whereas most Greek plays still can be read and reread for their aesthetic and universal values.

Be that as it may, never truly understanding Aristotle's emphasis on an aesthetic goal of theatre, the seventeenth and eighteenth century critics cite Aristotle as an authority to support their didactic argument. They rigidify and codify Aristotelian rules under the pretext of "le bon sens" or common

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[5] Butcher 222

[6] Butcher 47-9

[7] Butcher 224-5

sense or reason as we will see later on in the subsequent analysis of d'Aubignac's criticism in this article. With their moral sensibilities, they justify Aristotle's aesthetic pleasure with the Horatian concept of "utile et dulce" and the rhetorical tradition in Europe at that time.

Therefore "Aristotle" according to the understanding of the seventeenth and eighteenth century critics is rather a "pseudo-Aristotle" colored by the Italian literary background and its misinterpretation of Aristotle through Julius Caesar Scaliger. Moreover, because of the pervasive power of Christianity, theatre in order to survive has to justify its existence as a mode of moral teaching. Poetic justice thus becomes a convenient tool that concretely embodies the didactic message in the theatre. Theatre becomes a microcosm within which the poet as a "creator" is equivalent to the Cretor in punishing vices and rewarding virtues. Richard H.tyre, in his article, *Versions of Poetic Justice in the Early Eighteenth Century* points out that the flowering of poetic justice is the product of Puritanism in Europe in that period:

> One of the reasons, perhaps, for the almost universal acceptance during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the belief that poetic justice was nothing more than a necessary ingredient of the instructive fable in which the wages of sin (and to a lesser extent the rewards of virtue) are paid to the last penny was the strength of Puritan opposition to the stage. The whole concept of drama as devoted primarily to moral and ethical instruction was stressed as an answer to attacks.[8]

Despite their citations of Aristotle as an authority, the seventeenth and eighteenth century critics are rather more Platonic than Aristotelian in their attitudes toward the function of theatre. Plato, in book iii of *Republic* mentions clearly the "negative" power of Theatre in instigating passion and corrupting the souls. Similar to the seventeenth and eighteenth century critics, Plato, states that if Theatre is going to exist in his ideal society, it has to have didactic function:

> For ourselves, we shall for our own good employ story-tellers and poets who are severe rather than amusing, who portrays the stage of the good man and in their works abide by the principles we laid down for them when we started out on this attempt to educate our military class.[9]

Surprisingly, the authority of Plato is ignored and not cited at all in these periods.

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[8] Richard H. Tyre, "Versions of Poetic Justice in the Early Eighteenth Century," *Studies in Philology* 54 (1957): 32.

[9] Desmond Lee, *Plato:The Republic* (Penguin Books.1953) p.157.

The first critic who deals with the concept of poetic justice that I would like to talk about in this article is Francois Hedelin who is also known as Abbe d'Aubigmac. He lived between 1604-1676. His critical works *La Pratique du Theatre* or *The Whole Art of the Stage.* was very influential in the seventeenth century. It is held as a sacred text-book by many French dramatists including Racine who is said to have studied d'Aubignac's work in detail before writing his plays. As a clergyman, d'Aubignac justifies pleasure derived from Theatre in terms of moral teaching. In Book one, chapter one of *The Whole Art of the Stage,* d'Aubignac clearly states that poetic justice is the ultimate goal of tragedy. His very first paragraph in the work demonstrates his standpoint.

As for those spectacles which consist of as much discourse as action, such as formerly were the disputes upon the stage between the epic and dramatic poetry, they are not only useful but absolutely necessary to instruct the people and give them some tincture of moral virtues.[10]

D'Aubignac calls the representation of the stage, "People's school". He belives that since philosophy is too difficult for the uneducated people, the stage will serve as the most delightful means to concretely teach those people about truth and also to engage them in a constructive activity. To him, the best moral means in drama is the principle of poetic justice:

> One of the chiefest and indeed the most indispensable rules of dramatic poems is that in them virtues always ought to be rewarded, or at least commended, in spite of all the injuries of fortune, and that likewise vices be always punished, or at least detested with horror, though they triumph upon the stage for that time. The stage being thus regulated, what can philosophy teach that won't become much more sensibly touching by representation? [11]

It can be seen that nothing of what d'Aubignac elaborates on the didactic function of theatre reminds us of what Aristotle prescsribes in *Poetics.* On the contrary, d'Aubignac is very platonic in his emphasis on the social and moral function of Theatre. Worth noticing is that d'Aubignac's *The Whole Art of the Stage* becomes influential and is held as a dogma for the subsequent seventeenth and eighteenth century dramatists because of his "mis" citation of Aristotle as an authority and his use of "le bon sens" or common sense or reason as the basis for his codification of the rules. Obviously, this common sense would be the key

[10] Bernard Dukore, *Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1956) p. 238.

[11] Dukore 238

term which the critics in these periods repeatedly used as a justification for their rule-bound criticism. As d'Aubignac elaborates in his *The Whole Art of the Stage:*

> But in all that depends upon common sense and reason, such as the rules of the stage, then to take license is a crime, because it offends not custom but natural light, which ought never to suffer an eclipse. [12]

Jean Racine (1639-1699), though very much influenced by d'Aubignac's - "pseudo- Aristotelian" dramatic rules, is different from many rigid theoreticians in the seventeenth century in that he perceives Theatre from the point of view of those who practice it. Thus, in Racine's Prefaces to his plays, we can see clearly his contradiction between an attempt to conform to the rigid rules and the realization of their futility in producing the true aesthetic effect. In *Preface to Berenice,* Racine points out the concept of genius that transcends the constraint of rules. And even despite the restriction of rules, genius is still able to "make something out of nothing."[13] Also in *Preface to Berenice* (1674), Racine defies the didactic critics by stating that the ultimate purpose of tragedy is "to please and stir; all others are simply means to arrive at the end. The rules are long and complicated, and I advise those who criticize the play on the grounds just mentioned not to bother about them : they have more important business to attend to." [14]

To me, Racine, as a dramatist, understands Aristotle more clearly than other theory-prone critics in his period. In *The First Preface to Andromaque* (1668), he talks about the demand posed by the audience/critics for poetic justice embodied through the characterization of the tragic hero as the ultimate goal in the plays.

> I am not bothered by the disappointment of the two or three individuals who would have us re-cast all the heroes of antiquity and make them paragons of perfection.[15]

Perceiving from the practical point of view of a dramatist, Racine sees that the one-dimensional characterization of "good man" and "bad man" does not enhance the aesthetic value of art.

Be that as it may, almost at the end of his career, due to his reconciliation with the Jansenists at Port-Royal, Racine thinks that tragedy should yield a moral

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[12] Dukore 240

[13] Barrett Clark *European Theories of Drama* (New York : Crown Publishers,Inc., 1947) p. 116.

[14] Clark 116

[15] Clark 114

lesson. In *Phedre,* Racine applies the principle of poetic justice and ingeniously uses it to enhance the tragic effect, Racine succeeds in reconciling his ideal tragic hero and the demand for poetic justice of his age.

> What I can assert is that I have not made one where virtue is put in a more favorable light than in this one ; the least faults are severely punished; the very thought of a crime is regarded with as much horrors as the crime itself; the weaknesses; the passions are displayed only to show all the disorder of which they are the cause; and vice is everywhere depicted in colors which make the deformnity recognized and hated.[16]

Nowhere in Racine's criticism can his contradiction be seen more cearly than in this passage in which Racine's purpose of tragedy is seen shifting from "to please and to stir" to that of "theatre was a school whose virtue was not less well taught than in the schools of the philosophers". [17] In portraying the agony within Phedre's mind, her attempt and failure in overcoming that passion, Racine succeeds in reconciling the aesthetic value and the demand of poetic justice. Moreover, I think that the poetic justice that Racine applies in *Phedre* is only his means to avoid the severe criticism of the public over his portraying of passion and bestiality in his tragic heroine.

Thomas Rymer (1641-1713) is known as the first English critic to coin the term "poetic justice". He is said to be the most rule-bound, "pseudo-Aristotelian" English critic. Rigidly following the dogmatic French school. Rymer judges a play according to its conformity to the "Aristotelian" rules. Similar to d'Aubignac, he considers Theatre as a moral school where vices are punished and virtues are rewarded. In his essay *A Short View of Tragedy* written in 1693, Rymer criticizes and condemns Shakespeare's *Othello* for its improbability, its violence and its non-didactic purpose. By using the "rules" of common sense and nature, Rymer finds Shakespeare's characterization of Iago intolerable:

> Shakespeare knew his character of Iago was inconsistent....This he knew, but to entertain the audience with something new and surprising, against common sense and Nature, he would pass upon us a close, dissembling, false, insinuating rascal, instead of an open-hearted, frank, plain-dealing soldier, a character constantly worn by them for some thousands of years in the world.[18]

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[16] Clark 118

[17] Clark 118

[18] Henry Hitch Adams, *Dramatic Essays of the Neoclassic Age* (New York : Morningside Heights,1950) p. 154.

Moreover, unable to see the genius of Shakespeare, Rymer condemns his plays for their non-didactic aim. He thinks Shakespeare's *Othello* has no value because it does not edify the audience:

> What can remain with the audience to carry home with them from this sort of poetry, for their use and self edification? How can it work, unless (instead of settling the mind, and purging our passion) to delude our senses, disorder our thoughts, addle our brain, pervert our affections, harm our imaginations, corrupt our appetite, and fill our head with vanity and confusion...[19]

Even more radical than d'Aubignac and Racine in his moral standpoint, Rymer equates theatre with the Church.

> Our only hopes, for the good of the souls, can be that these people go to the playhouse as they do to church. [20]

In *The Tragedy of the Last Age Considered* written in 1678, Rymer emphasizes the importance of poetic justice. He says that poetic justice is superior to that of the real world. He said, "Poetry discovered crimes the law could never find out, and punished those the law had acquitted."[21] Also Rymer's criticism demonstrates the rise of sentimentalism in that tragedy's purpose lies in the application of poetic justice because it will produce "pity".

> The poets considered that naturally men were affected with pity when they saw others suffer more than their faults deserved, and vice, they thought, could never be painted too ugly and frightful; therefore, whether they would move pity or make vice detested, it concerned them to be somewhat of the severest in the punishments they inflicted. [22]

In Rymer's criticism, Aristotelian rules are pushed to the extreme and manipulated for a didactic purpose. In *Poetics*, Aristotle emphasizes neither the pitiable effect alone nor the punishment of his characters. But here, in Rymer, the exaggeration of the punishment of vices and pitiable effects is important for it will move tragedy to a realm of sentimental melodrama.

Worth noticing is that, in Rymer, an artis functions as the creator of his microcosm which is his play. Unlike the Omniscient Creator, his power is limited temporally and spatially. As Rymer explains, "Now, because their hands were

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[19] Adams 155

[20] Adams 155

[21] Adams 155

[22] Adams 155

[23] Adams 155

tied, that they could not punish beyond such a degree." [23] Thus the plot which is the heart of this microcosm must be contrived to such an extent that vices are completely punished within the performance time.

> For though historical justice might rest there, yet poetical justice could not be so content. It would require that the satisfaction be complete and full ere the malefactor goes off the stage, and nothing left to God Almighty and another world. [24]

The dichotomy between the historical justice/divine justice and poetic justice would be repeatedly raised by many subsequent critics such as Addison and Dennis. Those who agree or disagree on the concept of poetic justice also argue about whether the stage should be true to life or whether it should be contrived and manipulated for a certain goal. Fascinatingly, whereas Aristotle emphasizes that theatre or a work of art is an entity with its own logic, those who advocate for poetic justice like Rymer and Dennis also think in the same way. Rymer believes that in theatre, things can happen in any way that the playwright/creator desires it to be. Richard H. Tyre mentions this point of poetic justice in theatre:

> the punishment perfectly fits the crime in a play because the events have been chosen more for their literary or didactic effectiveness than for their similarities to life. This we call poetic justice to distinguish from real justice, which is rarely so satisfying. [25]

In the *Spectator*, No, 40 written on April 16, 1711, Joseph Addison attacks poetic justice which was prevalently employed by playwrights of his time. He writes: "The English writers of tragedy are possessed with a notion, that when they represent a virtuous or innocent person in distress, they ought not to leave him, till they have delivered him out of his troubles, or made him triumph over his enemies." [26] Addison attacks poetic justice on grounds that "it has no foundation in nature, in reason, or in the practice of the ancients." [27] Apparently, "nature", "reason", and "the ancients" have been the points that those who advocate for poetic justice recurringly use to justify their argument as d'Aubignac emphasized in *The Whole Art of the Stage.* Addison argues against the concept of poetic justice from a realistic standpoint, stating that "good and evil happen alike to all men on this side of the grave." [28] Agreeing with Aristotle, Addison

[24] Adams 155

[25] Tyre 33

[26] Dukore 388

[27] Dukore 388

[28] Dukore 388

thinks that poetic justice will lessen the aesthetic value of a work of art because "whatever crosses and disappointments a good man suffers in the body of the tragedy, they will make but a small impression on our minds, where we know that in the last act he is to arrive at the end of his wishes and desires." [29] Moreover, Addison realizes that poetic justice resulting from the "Aristotelian codification distorts genius and rigidifies a work of art. He cites the example of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and how its beauty is destroyed when "it is reformed according to the chimerical notion of poetic justice, in my humble opinion it has lost half of its beauty." [30]

The most important point that Addison makes in his attacks on poetic justice is what he calls "chimerical nature". He thinks that poetic justice not only destroys the beauty of a work of art, but also it distorts the perfect form of ancient tragedy. With vices punished and virtues rewarded and the virtuous and innocent person triumphing over his enemies at the end, tragic goal is distorted because of its happy ending.

> as the principal design of tragedy is to raise commiseration and terror in the minds of the audience, we shall defeat this great end, if we always make virtue and innocence happy and successful. [31]

Quite paradoxically, Addison's attack on the rigidified concept of poetic justice stems from his strict conformity to the theory of genre. Though realizing the genius of Shakespeare, he still thinks that a good tragedy should conform to the rules. Tragicomedy as a mongrel genre offends him for he says, "the tragicomedy, which is the product of the English theatre, is one of the most monstrous inventions that ever entered into a poet's thoughts." [32] Addison's *Cato*, which is hardly readble today, is praised by Voltaire as the best English tragedy due to its conformity to the rules.

John Dennis (1657 - 1734) write *To the Spectator upon His Paper of the 16th of Aprit* in 1712 as an answer to Addison's attack on poetic justice. Dennis believes, like most critics of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, that Aristotle advocates for poetic justice in his discussion of the tragic hero in the thirteenth chapter of *Poetics*. Apparently, Dennis partly understands Aristotle. He argues, "It follows necessarily that we must not choose a very good man to plunge him from a prosperous condition into adversity, for instead of moving compassion

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[29] Dukore 388

[30] Dukore 388

[31] Dukore 388

[32] Dukore 389

and terror, that on the contrary would create horror and be "detested by all the world." [33] But Dennis neglects to mention that Aristotle also explains that though this changing of fortune from good to bad of a good man shocks us, he does neither recommend a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity nor the downfall of the villain because it does not enhance the tragic effect.

The most important point worth mentioning in Dennis'criticism is that he places fable as the very heart of poetic justice. It is true that Aristotle also states that plot or fable is the heart of tragedy but he does not say that fable should contain a moral lesson. Fable, according to Aristotle means simply plot. Here again, we see the manipulation of Aristotle for a didactic purpose of the period. Dennis, like many seventeenth and eighteenth century critics such as Rymer or Farquhar reaches a simplisic conclusion that since Aristotle says that the heart of tragedy is plot or fable, then the purpose of tragedy must be to teach a moral lesson. With an emphasis on fable, Dennis and the seventeenth and eighteenth century critics find the justification for the existence of the principle of poetic justice as the ultimate goal of tragedy.

> This contemptible doctrine of poetic justice is not only founded in reason and nature but is itself the foundation of all the rules and even tragedy itself,what tragedy can there be without a fable, or what fable without a moral, or what moral without poetic justice? [34]

To Addison's attack that "good and evil happen alike to all men on this side of the grave", Dennis answers that poetic justice is different from the historical justice or Divine Justice and the stage world is different from the world of reality. Dennis argues, "But the creatures of a poetic creator are imaginary and transitory. They have no longer duration than the representation of their respective fables; and, consequently, if they offend they must be punished during that representation. And therefore we are very far from pretending that poetical justice is an equal representation of the justice of the Almighty." [35] It can be seen that Dennis'argument on the validity of poetic justice is quite similar to Rymer's.

For Rymer and other seventeenth and eighteenth century critics, the stage world in which the principle of poetic justice reigns is the one in which everything is just, rational and comprehensible. The Divine Judgement which might not be clearly visible is immediately concretized within the temporal limitation of the stage performance. Being a microcosm of a larger world, the stage world represents eternal punishment with poetic justice. Richard H.Tyre

[33] Dukore 370

[34] Dukore 370

[35] Dukore 371

points out the correlation between poetic justice and Divine Justice:

> It is dedicated to the idea that life has meaning, order and coherence which may be totally incomprehensible to the earth-bound observer. To deny this would not only be a blaspheny against God, the Divine Orders, but would also imply a belief that no action on earth has meaning, and that all punishments and rewards are the results of capricious coincidence or arbitrary judgement. [36]

In conclusion, the study of the concept of poetic justice in the seventeenth and eighteenth century criticism demonstrates the controversial dichotomy between a didactic function and an aesthetic value in literature. It can be said that poetic justice becomes an ultimate goal of art in an age in which the value of literature is secondary to a moral teaching. Literature or Theatre is only an instrument of immediate wish fulfillment. The almost unreadability and dryness of many seventeenth and eighteenth century plays have proved that the true value of literature lies in an aesthetic beauty, not in a didactic function.

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[36] Tyre 34