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FRENCH EPIC POETRY
IN THE
SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Theory and Practice

by

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To Viola M. Wilson

PREFACE

This study is based on a dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan in 1966. I am very grateful to Professor Floyd F. Gray who suggested the topic and who guided and encouraged me throughout the course of my work with many valuable suggestions and criticisms. His interest in my work and his profound knowledge of the subject matter have been a constant source of inspiration to me.

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INTRODUCTION

French literature at the beginning of the sixteenth century was still medieval in form and content. Innovation dates from the middle of the century when a new school of poetry arose which proclaimed the need for a literary revolution and proposed to establish new genres based on classical models. The Pléiade, as this new school was called, discarded medieval poetic forms and called for the introduction of the epic, elegy, epistle, ode, and sonnet. It initiated the revival of tragedy and comedy, based on the precepts and models of the Ancients, to replace the popular *moralité, histoire, mystère,* and *sotie* that were performed by ambulant troupes stationed in large metropolitan areas. It further declared that the French language, if it were enriched and 'illustrated' with masterpieces, could be made as capable of literary expressions as Greek or Latin.

The manifesto of the Pléiade, Joachim du Bellay's *Deffense et Illustration de la langue francoyse,* marked not only the opening of an era in the history of French literature, but also the beginning of modern literary criticism. Of all the new genres thus being introduced into French poetry, the epic was held in highest esteem. The medieval epic poems which sang the deeds of Charlemagne, Roland, Guillaume d'Orange, and many feudal barons were not strictly 'epic' in a classical sense. Moreover, having degenerated over the centuries into lengthy *romans d'aventure,* they were long forgotten. Even though translations of the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey,* and the *AEneid* had existed since the late fifteenth century, the possibility of creating a poem approximating such great works in scope, intention, or style, had not been envisaged before the time of the Pléiade. Thomas Sebillet has only a few words to say about epic poetry in his *Art poétique françoys* (1548). But the *Deffense et Illustration* (1549) of Du Bellay contains an entire chapter devoted to a discussion of this genre, indicating the importance ascribed to it by

the Pléiade. During the second half of the sixteenth century, several treatises on poetry were published, nearly all of which included structural and stylistic advice to the writers of epic poetry. Among such treatises were the *Art poétique* (1555) of Jacques Peletier du Mans, the *Poetices libri septem* (1561) of Jules-César Scaliger, *L'abbregé de l'art poétique* (1565) and the two prefaces of *La Franciade* (1572, 1578) of Pierre de Ronsard, the *Art poétique* (1598) of Pierre Laudun d'Aigalier, and the *Art poétique* (1605) of Jean Vauquelin de la Fresnaye. These works contain the most important theoretical thinking on epic poetry of the sixteenth century.

Several ambitious critics and poets attempted to put theory into practice by writing epic poems. Some of these attempts never went beyond the first few strophes. Peletier du Mans, for instance, translator of the first two books of the *Odyssey,* mentions his abortive effort to write an epic based on the Hercules legend. Vauquelin de la Fresnaye refers to his plan to write an epic on the history of the Israelites and gives us its proem. The best known epic poems of the sixteenth century are *Le Microcosme* (1562) of Maurice Scève, the unfinished *Franciade* (1572) of Ronsard, *La Judit* (1574), *La Semaine sainte ou la creation du monde* (1578), and *La seconde semaine ou l'enfance du monde* (1584) of Du Bartas, and *Les Tragiques* of D'Aubigné (begun in 1577, published in 1616). These poems are known to most students of French literature only by their titles and are reminders of the ironical comment often attributed to Voltaire: "Les Français n'ont pas la tête épique."

Their relative failure was due to several factors, one of the most important of which was the misconception by theorists of the true nature of epic poetry. In order to formulate theories on the genre, they depended heavily on the precepts which they inherited from Latin and Italian critics and on their own highly prejudiced analyses of the works of Homer and Virgil. From their readings they extracted what they considered the 'essence' of epic poetry and insisted that a successful epic must observe the rules which they prescribed. The poets faced the seemingly impossible task of following such codes in the proposed works and at the same time satisfying the readers who were, of course, familiar with the Greek and Latin models and expected the poets to equal the masters. The desire to emulate classical poets and the ambition to surpass them blinded many writers. It never occured to them whether an epic might be successfully written in a modern society merely by imitating ancient models that

were produced under totally different social, religious, and political conditions.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the various treatises on epic poetry written during the sixteenth century and compare them with some of the poems actually composed at the same time, in order to determine the general attitude of the critics and the poets toward this recently revived genre. In Chapter I, an analysis of all the treatises produced during the century and especially those parts of them dealing with epic poetry will be presented in chronological order. It will show that during the half century between Sebillet's nebulous notion and Vauquelin de la Fresnaye's extensive treatment, there is a definite evolution in the theory of epic poetry as well as a conscious effort toward formulating a precise and specific set of rules. Towards the end of the century opinions became largely conclusive on such subjects as structure, including the use of the proem, episodes, allusions, battle scenes, assemblies, etc. and style, such as the use of the epithet, periphrasis, similes, metaphors, and proper descriptive techniques. These specific epic devices will serve in the following chapters as a point of departure for the analysis of representative epic poems. Since nearly all theoretical works have their sources in works other than French, brief references to Greek, Latin, and Italian critical writings will be made as they become pertinent to our discussion.

Chapters II through V will deal with four poems: *Le Microcosme* of Scève, *La Franciade* of Ronsard, *La Judit* of Du Bartas, and *Les Tragiques* of D'Aubigné, all of which reflect the influence of classical epics and to a varying degree the theories advanced by critics. Our primary concern will be to determine to what extent theory is carried out in practice, or in what respect practice reflects theory, and to account for the differences between them.

I

THEORISTS

1

The growth of interest in epic poetry in France dates from the early period of the Renaissance. The possibility of creating new epics was first suggested by critics who desired to redefine the nature of poetry and revitalize French literature by replacing sterile medieval genres with new ones borrowed from Greek and Latin literature. Their interest in French epics was closely related to the revival of classical studies, the Italian influence on cultural and particularly literary activities, and the gradual rise of nationalism in France, all of which seemed to reach a new height in the middle of the sixteenth century. Perhaps the most important contributing factor in the revival of epic poetry was the rediscovery of Greek and Latin poets, such as Homer, Apollonius of Rhodes, Virgil, Ovid, and Horace. This rediscovery led to the eventual adoption of new concepts of poetry and to the emphasis placed on aesthetics as an essential element of artistic creation. Of all the classical writers, Homer and Virgil played the most significant role in the development of sixteenth-century epic poetry. The study of epic theories must, then, begin with a summary of the gradual emergence of these poets as the undisputed masters of this genre.

The Middle Ages did not have the type of direct contact with Greek literature which the Renaissance enjoyed, and most of the Greek writers were known through the translations and commentaries of Roman writers and historians. Even to such a prominent poet as Dante, Homer was familiar only by name, and in some vague association with Virgil.[1] The Romans accepted the mythical connection

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[1] Domenico Comparetti, *Virgilio nel medio evo*, 2nd ed. (Firenze, 1958), I, 251, concludes, concerning Dante's acquaintance with Homer's works: "Conosce il posto che la storia assegna ad Omero, e sa che Omero è quagli 'che le muse allattar più ch'altri mai'; ma in fatto egli Omero non lo conosce, e per lui l'altissimo poeta ... è Virgilio."

of Rome with Troy as asserted by Naevius, Ennius, and Virgil, and preferred the stories which described the Trojans favorably and portrayed the Greeks as a treacherous race. Among such stories were the *Ephemeris belli trojani* (fourth century) based on the account by Dictys the Cretan who supposedly accompanied Idomeneus of Crete to Troy and witnessed the war, and the *Historia de excitio trojae* (sixth century) which was a translation of an earlier work in Greek by Dares the Phrygian. The two works became the fountainhead of the Troy-saga of the Middle Ages and furnished material for the very popular *Roman de Troie* (twelfth century) by Benoît de Sainte-Maure as well as the prose work of the Sicilian physician Guido delle Columne. These writers were either unaware of the existence of the *Iliad,* or they considered Dictys and Dares more 'accurate' than Homer because they claimed to have witnessed the events they describe.[2]

Although Virgil was much better known than Homer, the literary merit of his *AEneid* remained generally unrecognized during the Middle Ages, and only one poem, the *Roman d'Enéas,* seems to have been directly inspired by it. The verses of the *AEneid* were often used as a prognostic device in the late Middle Ages, and the Roman poet was known more as a resourceful magician than a literary master, as attested in such popular poems as *L'image du monde, Roman de Cléomadès, Renart le Contrefait,* and in extensive prose works such as *Les faictz merveilleux de Virgile.* Essentially, neither Homer nor Virgil was understood by medieval writers, and the attitude of the Middle Ages towards the two great poets of Antiquity is aptly summarized by Comparetti:

Allorchè adunque gli scrittori del medio evo, come fanno frequentissimamente, nel rammentare i grandi dell'antichità accoppiano i nomi di Omero e di Virgilio en quello stesso modo come ciò soleva farsi nei tempi romani, essi non fanno in realtà che ripetere meccanicamente le notizie e le idee che desumono dagli scrittori estini e dalla tradizione della scuola. Del rapporto fra Virgilio ed Omero non avevano direttamente alcuna idea ed un tal confronto era impossibile per essi. Omero era rimasto un

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[2] Carl Voretzsch, *Einführung in das Studium der altfranzösischen Literatur* (Halle a. S., 1905), p. 282, attributes the general discredit of Homer's work not to the inaccessibility of Greek literature but rather to the immense popularity of Dictys and Dares, and concludes: "Ihre Autorität das ganz Mittelalter hindurch war so gross, dass Homer daneben als unzuverlässiger Berichterstatter, wenn nicht gar (wie bei Guide de Columna) als Fälscher erschien."

nome e nulla più; il più grande poeta antico allora realmente conosciuto e studiato nella scuola, come primo autore profano, era Virgilio.[3]

The rediscovery of the two poets was not made by the Pléiade poets but by the scholars of the fifteenth century who attempted a Latin revival,[4] and more notably by the Rhétoriqueurs – some of whom had crossed the Alps and observed the great humanistic activities taking place in Italy. Already the literary reputation of Homer and Virgil is mentioned in the works of George Chastelian (1404-1475).[5] The first translation of the *Odyssey* was attempted before the turn of the century by Octavien de Saint-Gelais, who also translated Virgil's *AEneid* in decasyllabic verse and published it in 1509.[6] The works of Homer and Virgil are alluded to in *Le grand et vrai art de Pleine Rhétorique* (1521) by Pierre Fabri.[7]

Although the Rhétoriqueurs recognized the importance of the epic poems of Homer and Virgil, they did not envisage the possibility of creating a poem that would approximate them in intention, scope, or style. A number of treatises on poetry, commonly called *Arts de seconde rhétorique,* were written during the fifteenth and early six-teenth centuries, but they were no more than handbooks for young and hopeful poets. They dealt almost exclusively with the mechanics of versification and popular poetic genres of the Middle Ages, and they gave catalogues of mythological figures and rhymes to be used as poetic ornament. While the Rhétoriqueurs did much to complete the rules of versification and also popularize the cult of Antiquity to some extent by introducing classical mythology into poetry, they were completely mistaken, as Chamard points out,[8] in their concep-tion of the goal of poetry. They regarded poetry as a type of lin-guistic entertainment and wrote prosaic verses on trivial subjects, with complicated and amusing rhyme schemes. In short, except in matters of versification, they contributed very little to the develop-ment of poetry as a true art in France.

[3] Comparetti, *Virgilio nel medio evo*, I, 206.
[4] See J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (New York, 1924), p. 324.
[5] See Kenneth Urwin, *Georges Chastelain, la vie, les œuvres* (Paris, 1937), p. 104.
[6] For an analysis of the quality of this translation, see Alice Hulubei, "Virgile en France au XVIᵉ siècle: éditions, traductions, imitations", *Revue du Seizième Siècle*, XVIII (1931), 27-29.
[7] Pierre Fabri, *Le grand et vrai art de Pleine Rhétorique*, ed. A. Heron (Rouen, 1890), I, 10 and 41.
[8] Henri Chamard, *Les origines de la poésie française de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1920), p. 150.

The need for the rejuvenation of poetry had been felt long before the middle of the sixteenth century, but it reached a climax during the decade 1540-1550. This period witnessed a revival of Greek scholarship and a great number of translations of Greek works. Homer was apparently the most popular poet of the time. During this decade alone, for instance, no less than six editions of the *Iliad* and five editions of the *Odyssey* were published.[9] The literary circles became acquainted with the aesthetics of Horace in his *Ars poetica* as translated by Jacques Peletier du Mans in 1544. They also became familiar with the theory of the divine origin of poetry and the importance of poetic fury of inspiration through the influence of the Neo-Platonic Florentine Academy and in particular the writings of Marsilio Ficino. With the translations of Plato and especially with the publication of *Le dialogue de Plato intitulé Io; qui est de la fureur poétique et des louanges de poésie* (1546) by Richard Le Blanc, poetry came gradually to be regarded as a sacred vocation open only to those who could combine natural gifts with arduous work.

The popularity of Greek and Latin translations and the appreciation of classical literature had an enormous repercussion on the growing literary circles of the time. Many critics and poets began to believe that through a concerted effort the French language could be made equal to Greek and Latin both in literary production and linguistic excellence. Their opinion is best summarized by Estienne Dolet in the preface to his *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en aultres* (1540), which was to form eventually a general treatise entitled *L'orateur françoys:*

Je sçay que quand on voulut reduire la langue Grecque et Latine en art, cela ne fut absolu par ung homme mais par plusieurs; ce qui se faira pareillement de la langue Françoyse, et peu à peu par le moyen et travail des gens doctes elle pourra estre reduicte en telle perfection que les langues dessusdictes.[10]

In 1544, Jacques Peletier du Mans in the preface to *L'art poétique d'Horace* recognized the effort of Jean Lemaire de Belge to 'ennoble' the French language, and emphasized the need for careful, selective imitation of the Ancients in order to enrich the language. In a poem entitled *A un poëte qui n'escrivoit qu'en latin* (1547), Peletier proclaimed:

[9] Ruth Bunker, *A Bibliography of Greek Translations and Editions of Greek Works in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1936), pp. 225-226.
[10] In Bernard Weinberg, ed. *Critical Prefaces of the French Renaissance* (Evanston, Ill., 1950), p. 78.

J'escri en langue maternelle,
Et tasche à la mettre en valeur:
Affin de la rendre éternelle,
Comme les vieux ont fait la leur.
. . . .
Si les Grecz sont si fort fameux,
Si les Latins sont aussi tels,
Pourquoy ne faisons nous comme eux,
Pour estre comme eux immortels? [11]

To an aspiring poet in the sixteenth century, the production of a national epic meant the fulfillment of two goals: it would rank him among such immortals as Homer and Virgil, and it would at the same time glorify his nation and its language. Already in 1542 Hugues Salel, translator of the first two books of the *Iliad*, lamented the absence of a Homer in France at the time when men of letters were enjoying such a "heureuse et dorée saison" under the enlightened king, François I.[12]

The first reference to the possibility of creating an epic poem in French is found in the *Art poétique françoys* (1548) of Thomas Sebillet. It is the earliest Art of Poetry worthy of note in the sixteenth century and shows a curious fusion of the traditional concepts inherited from the Rhétoriqueurs and the Renaissance enthusiasm for learning and the renewal of poetry. Sebillet's notion of the epic is, however, vague and all-inclusive. It is treated in an incidental manner in a chapter dealing with the *version* or translation – a fact which reveals that the idea of composing epics began with the translations of classical models. To Sebillet epic poems are "des poémes qui tombent soubs l'appellation de Grand oeuvre, comme sont, en Homére, l'Iliade: en Virgile, l'Eneide: en Ovide, la Metamorphose".[13] He remarks that since such great works do not exist in French literature, the poet, besides imitating Homer and Virgil, will be obliged to have recourse to the *Roman de la rose*. The inclusion of the *Metamorphoses* and the *Roman de la rose* indicates Sebillet's inability to understand the very nature and purpose of heroic poetry. Like his contemporaries, he was unaware of the *chansons de geste* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Some of the epics had been transformed into lengthy *romans d'aventure*. The popularity of these

[11] *Les Œuvres poétiques de J. Peletier du Mans*, ed. Paul Laumonier (Paris, 1904), pp. 110-111.
[12] In Weinberg, *Critical Prefaces*, p. 126.
[13] Thomas Sebillet, *Art poétique françoys*, ed. Felix Gaiffe (Paris, 1910), p. 186.

romances of chivalry was such that many were recast in prose and published during the Renaissance.[14] As we shall see later, even Ronsard was not totally free from their influence. Sebillet's preoccupation with the mechanics of versification is reminiscent of the tradition of the Rhétoriqueurs, for whom he shows much respect. Yet his insistence on the necessity of erudition, inspiration, moral integrity of the poet, imitation of the Ancients, and creation of new genres like the *hymne* and *ode* indicates a marked departure from the attitude of his predecessors.

The opinions of the younger generation concerning the need for a reform of the French language and literature were expressed in the *Deffense et Illustration de la langue francoyse* (1549) of Joachim du Bellay. This manifesto was in part a hastily composed reply to Sebillet, whose *Art poétique françoys* represented the attitude of the traditional school of Marot, but it also advanced a series of specific recommendations on how to enrich the French language and literature. Du Bellay stresses the importance of the epic by assigning an entire chapter, *Du long poëme françoys,* to a discussion of this subject. He offers, however, very few concrete suggestions concerning this genre. He insists that the poet aspiring to write an epic must not only be endowed with talent, but that he must also possess a firm and virtuous character. The general attitude of his contemporaries is reflected in his opinion that the epic, the highest form of poetry, serves as an indication of the excellence of a language and its literature:

Si tu as quelquefois pitié de ton pauvre langaige, si tu daignes l'enrichir de tes thésors, ce sera toy veritablement qui luy feras hausser la teste, et d'un brave sourcil s'egaler aux superbes langues grecque et latine, comme faict de nostre tens en son vulgaire un Arioste Italien, que j'oseroy (n'estoit la saincteté des vieulx poëmes) comparer à un Homere et Virgile.[15]

Du Bellay's notion of the epic is as ambiguous as Sebillet's. The nature of epic poetry is suggested in a vague manner: "un oeuvre de si laborieuse longueur, et quasi de la vie d'homme",[16] and he advocates

[14] See the detailed study by Georges Doutrepont, *Les Mises en proses des Epopées et des Romans chevaleresques du XIVe au XVIe siècles,* Académie Royale de Belgique, classe des lettres, IIe série, XL (1939). The popularity of these prose romances may be attested by allusions which Rabelais makes to them in *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua,* and the medieval vocabulary in the translations of classical works by Peletier du Mans and Amyot.

[15] Joachim du Bellay, *La Deffense et Illustration de la langue francoyse,* ed. Henri Chamard (Paris, 1904), pp. 234-235.

[16] *Ibid.,* p. 238.

that the poet find material in "quelque un de ces beaux vieux romans francoys, comme un Lancelot, un Tristan, ou autre", and that those romances of chivalry might be rewritten in imitation of the "admirable *Iliade*" and the laborieuse *Enëide*".[17] The use of epithets, periphrases, and similes are recommended for all the genres of poetry. Failing to state what specific elements constitute an epic poem, Du Bellay seems to imply that the necessary rules and formulae could be extracted from analyses of the works of Homer, Virgil, and Ariosto. From the various comments in the *Deffense* it is fairly obvious that the author is only aware of the external aspects of epic poetry: it is a long poem requiring a considerable amount of diligence and dealing with the actions of a hero over an extended period of time. Like Sebillet, he mentions medieval romances, thereby indicating that he understood neither the great scope, the sweeping movement, the wide range of ideas and images found in the works of Homer and Virgil, nor the particular social and cultural conditions that favored such epics. This lack of understanding of the true nature of epic poetry and the curious parallel drawn between medieval romances and classical epics occur also in the theoretical writings of Ronsard and are reflected in his *Franciade*. Nevertheless, Du Bellay's contention that the creation of a true epic by his fellow poets "seroit à leur immortelle gloire, honneur de France, et grande illustration de nostre langue"[18] remained unchallenged even during the ensuing dispute between the Pléiade and the 'Marotiques'. It was to become, in fact, the ambition and even the obsession of many poets during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Du Bellay's suggestion that classical epics should be analyzed, and that some specific laws in regard to the composition of modern epics should be derived from them, was carried out by Jacques Peletier du Mans in his *Art poétique,* published at Lyons in 1555. Peletier du Mans had already expounded his views on the reform of poetry in his *Art poétique d'Horace* (1544), and he is heralded by Laumonier as the only advocator of new aesthetic ideas before Ronsard.[19] He was a true man of the Renaissance in his thirst for knowledge and his interest in diverse aspects of civilization such as law, medicine, poetry, mathematics, philosophy, algebra, and grammar. Among the members of the Pléiade he was unique in that he had wide contacts

[17]   *Ibid.,* pp. 235-236.
[18]   *Ibid.,* p. 238.
[19]   P. Laumonier, ed., *Œuvres poétiques de J. Peletier du Mans,* p. 148.

with poets outside the Pléiade, particularly with those of Lyons. At any rate, in 1547 Peletier published his translation of the first two books of the *Odyssey* in decasyllabic verse, and dedicated it to François I. He also had the ambition of composing an epic based on the legend of Hercules which was very popular in the fifteenth century. He renounced this project when he realized his inadequacy as a poet, although he did not give up the hope that perhaps someday this poem might be written by a more capable poet.[20]

The epic is treated much more extensively by Peletier than by any of his predecessors. Like his contemporaries, he holds it in the highest esteem and considers a successful epic to be the greatest testimony of poetic genius and the excellence of a nation's language:

L'Euure Heroïque ęt celui qui donne le pris, e le vrei titre de Poëte. E si ęt de tel conte e de tel honneur: qu'une Langue n'ęt pour passer en celebrite vęrs les Siecles: sinon qu'ęle ęt tretè le Sugęt Heroïque: qui sont les guęrres. Nous dirons donq les autres g'anres d'Ecriz ętre les Riuieres e ruisseaus: e l'Heroïque ętre comme une Mer, einçoęs une forme e image d'Vniuęrs.[21]

According to Peletier, the epic should begin with a proem containing an invocation to the Muse. In mentioning possible subjects for an heroic poem, he rejects history as a suitable source of material. Historical events are generally too well documented to permit the insertion of enhancing and digressive details. They also do not allow the narration to begin *in medias res*. He thinks as does Du Bellay, that the *romans d'aventure* should provide the material for an epic because they furnish many episodes of love, voyages, combats, and the *merveilleux*. He also admits the popularity of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* but alleges that its success is due to the author's borrowings from the French romances of chivalry:

... an quelques uns d'iceus bien choęsiz, le Poëte Heroïque pourra trouuer a fęre son profit: comme sont les auantures des Cheualiers, les amours, les voyages, les anchantemans, les combaz, e samblables choses: déqueles l'Arioste à fęt amprunt de nous, pour transporter an son Liure.[22]

Peletier maintains that discretion must be exercised in the invention of episodes. He criticizes the lack of organic unity in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso,* which he attributes to the excessive number of episodes

[20] J. Peletier du Mans, *Art poétique*, ed. André Boulanger (Paris, 1930), pp. 86-87.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 194. I have modified Peletier's orthography in my quotations.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 201.

inserted in the main action. According to Peletier, episodes may be introduced in the poem only if the reader's curiosity is kept aroused by their presence and if they constitute a natural and essential part of the story. Unfortunately, he does not offer enough specific examples for the benefit of the poets. He mentions briefly the *merveilleux* as necessary epic machinery without discussing how it is to be utilized. He has little to say about epic style. As did Du Bellay, he recommends the use of epithets, periphrases, and extended comparisons, and lists four basic styles which the epic writer must employ:

Comme il i ęt quatre generales sortes de stile es Orateurs: l'un qui flue e redonde, qui se dìt Copieus: l'autre, consis e succint, qui ęt le Brief: l'un sobre e sans exquisicion, qui ęt apelè Sęc: l'autre ęt luculant e galhard, que les Latins ont nommè Floride: cęrtes Virgile se trouuera auoer aportè an son Liure une eloquance de toutes ces especes la.[23]

Peletier emphasizes the importance of realism in the description of actions, and endorses the Horatian precept that poetry must have a didactic purpose. Referring to specific episodes in the *AEneid,* he states that sadness and joy, misfortune and fortune, violence and calm, should follow each other in succession, intermingled with themes dealing with piety, different kinds of love, court life, and so on. Such episodes not only give a more lifelike impression to the reader and keep him in suspense, but also satisfy the moral intention of the poet:

Vożla commant les infortunes parmi les felicitez, les jożes parmi les tris-tęces: sont le jeu du Teatre de ce monde: dont le poeme et miroer.[24]

Much of Peletier's practical advice to the poet derives from an analysis of the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey,* and the *AEneid,* augmented by his interpretation of Horace's *Ars poetica.* While the ideas he advanced were new in France at the time and formed the basis of future theories on the epic, they were not entirely his own. Many of his precepts were borrowed from Horace, and there is also some evidence of borrowing from Vida's *De arte poetica* (1527). His analysis and comments on classical epics were largely based on the detailed comparison of the works of Homer and Virgil made by Macrobius in the *Saturnalia* (fourth century), who favored and glorified Virgil over

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 207. This is a paraphrase of the *Saturnalia* of Macrobius (ed. and trans. Henri Bornecque [Paris, 1937], p. 40): "Quattor sunt ... genera dicendi: *capiosum*, in quo Cicero dominatur, *breve*, in quo Sallustius regnat, *siccum*, quod Frontoni adscribitur, *pingue et floridum*, in quo Plinius Secundus quondam et nunc nullo veterum minor noster Symmachus luxuriantur. Sed apud unum Maronem haec quattuor genera reperries."
[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

the Greek poet. Yet, despite this lack of originality, there is little doubt that his *Art poétique* played a major role in the development of poetic theories in the Renaissance. Patterson calls it "the best composed of the sixteenth-century *Arts Poétiques*".[25] Indeed, its clear treatment of new ideas and its more objective analysis of the conditions of contemporary poetry single it out as the most logically and extensively developed Art of Poetry of the century.

2

Aside from the critical writings based on various analyses of the epics of Homer and Virgil, the most instrumental work in the formation of aesthetics for epic poetry was Aristotle's *Poetics*. Du Bellay mentions Aristotle in his *Deffense et Illustration:* "Quand aux vertuz et vices du poëme, si diligemment traités par les anciens, comme Aristote, Horace, et après eux Hieronyme Vide",[26] but an examination of his work fails to show any trace of Aristotelian influence on his concept of poetry. Jacques Grévin mentions specifically the *Poetics* in the *Brief discours pour l'intelligence de ce théâtre (1561)*, the preface to his dramatic works:

La tragedie donc (comme dit Aristote en son Art Poétique) est une imitation ou representation de quelque faict illustre et grand de soy-mesme.[27]

André de Rivaudeau, in the *Avant-parler* of his dramatic works (1565), refers to Aristotle's criticism of *Medea*, which implies a familiarity with the *Poetics*.[28] Finally, Ronsard in his *Abbregé de l'art poétique* (1565), recommends the reading of both Horace and Aristotle to the young poet:

Je te dirois icy particulierement les propres subjectz d'un chacun poesme, si tu n'avois desja veu l'Art Poetique d'Horace et d'Aristote, ausquels je te connois assez mediocrement versé.[29]

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[25] Warner F. Patterson, *Three Centuries of French Poetic Theory* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1935), I, 481.
[26] Du Bellay, *Deffense*, p. 282.
[27] Weinberg, *Critical Prefaces*, p. 184.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 216.
[29] Pierre de Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Laumonier, XIV (Paris, 1949), 17. Jurgen V. Stackelberg, in "Ronsard und Aristoteles", *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XXV (1963), 359, claims that Ronsard became familiar with the Aristotelean concepts on poetry only during 1565-1567.

The first Latin translation of Aristotle's *Poetics,* published in Italy
by George Valla as early as 1498, gave the Italian critics of the six-
teenth century the opportunity to become familiar with the Aris-
totelian theory of the epic. In France, however, the *Poetics* made its
appearance only in the period 1555-1559, in a work entitled *Aris-
totelis de arte poetica liber,* by Guillaume Morel. This seems to have
been the only translation of the *Poetics* published in France during the
sixteenth century.[30] In Italy, however, during the short period 1548-
1560, several editions and commentaries on the *Poetics* were pub-
lished.[31] Many of them were undoubtedly introduced into France
during the two decades after the appearance of the *Deffense et Illus-
tration,* and their ready availability may have been the reason for the
single edition of the *Poetics* during the sixteenth century.

   As the critics began to recognize the importance of the *Poetics,*
the influence of the Aristotelian concept of poetry spread and played
a significant role in the evolution of epic theory. The *Poetics* con-
tained such generalizations and ambiguities in the treatment of dif-
ferent poetic genres that it later gave rise to numerous commentaries,
elaborations, and dogmatic interpretations. Aristotle's opinion that
tragedy is superior to epic, and that all the elements of epic can be
found in tragedy,[32] had an important bearing on the development of
literary theories of the sixteenth century. The critics were obviously
at variance with him as to the relative merits of the two genres, even
though they did not question the validity of his opinion. His com-
ments generated, in fact, much interest in dramatic art and contributed
greatly to the development of theories pertaining to tragedy. These
theories, in turn, exercised an influence on the formation of precise
formulae in epic poetry.

   Most noteworthy in the introduction and popularization of the

[30] See René Bray, *La formation de la doctrine classique en France* (Paris,
1927), p. 49.
[31] Among such editions and commentaries were those of Robertello, *In librum
Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes* (1548), Bernardo Segni, *Rettorica e
poetica d'Aristotele* (1549), Maggi and Lombardo, *In Aristotelis librum de
poetica explicationes* (1550), and Vettori, *Commentarii in primum librum Aris-
totelis de arte poetarum* (1560). Besides such works, several Arts of Poetry
were written during the same period, including *Dell'Arte poetica* (1551) of
Mutio, *Lezzioni della poetica* (1553) of Varchi, *Discorsi* (1554) of Giraldi
Cinthio, *Della vera poetica* (1555) of Capriano, and *De poeta libri sex* (1559)
of Minturno. The listing of these critical works is based on the table found in
Ralph C. Williams, *The Theory of the Heroic Epic in Italian Criticism of the
Sixteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1917), p. iii.
[32] Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (London, 1898), p. 23.

Aristotelian concepts on poetry in France was Jules-César Scaliger's *Poetices libri septem* (1561), published in Lyons three years after the author's death. Scaliger's discussion was limited to Greek, Latin, and Neo-Latin writers, and he treated his subject matter in an erudite but highly dogmatic manner.

He was nevertheless much respected by all French critics and was to be quoted by a number of them during the remainder of the century. In his book he devotes considerable space to a discussion of Aristotle's ideas on the aesthetics of poetry. He compares the various aspects of epic with those of tragedy, such as the unity of action, the consistency of characters, and the appropriateness of language. He also treats the question of verisimilitude and the *merveilleux*. His most important contribution to the theory of poetry lies in his combination of the Aristotelian aesthetics with the more practical advice on poetic compositions by Horace and Vida. He thus asserts, as did Aristotle, that the immediate aim of poetry is to imitate actions, inasmuch as the instinct of imitation is found in every man. He insists at the same time, as did Horace, that the ultimate goal of poetry is to instruct in a pleasing manner.[33]

Scaliger, curiously enough, places epic poetry third in the order of excellence, after the first group consisting of hymn and paean and the second group of mele, ode, and scolia. He considers epic more important than tragedy and comedy, however, and calls it the foremost of all forms because it is a 'mixed' genre containing a wide range of subject matter and characters.[34] His 'laws', which tend to be quite general, are formulated mainly in Book Three in a chapter entitled *Praecepta in unoquoque genere: Poematum heroica*. He stresses the necessity of keeping the reader in suspense by means of episodes, provided that they are not so repetitious as to render the entire poem tedious. He recommends that the poet begin his work not *ab ovo* as Horace suggested, but *ad illustri re* which is closely related to the main action. He urges that the 'organic unity' of the work be maintained by the division of the poem into cantos and sub-

[33] Jules-Cesar Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem*, editio quinta (n.p., 1617), p. 2: "Quamobrem tota in imitatione sita fuit. Hic enim finis est medius ad illum ultimum, qui est docĕdi cum delectatione. Namque Poeta etiam docet, non solum delectat, ut quidam arbitrabantur."

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 13: "Genus antiquissimum, Pastorale. proximum, Comicum, è quo natum Tragicum: mistum autem Epicum, quod iccirco omnium est princeps: quia continet materias universas .... Ac nobilissimi quidem Hymni, & Paeanes. secundo loco Mele, & Odae, & Scolia, quae in virorum fortium laudibus versabantur, tertio loco Epica: in quibus & Heroes sunt, & alij minutiores."