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French Classical Theatre and Formal Garden Design

In her biography of André Le Nôtre, art historian Helen Fox sees the French garden architect as a perfect reflection of his time. His gardens, in her words, "express the political and philosophical thoughts of seventeenth-century France." They are "a perfect symbol of his era," and are "like a mathematical problem of Descartes solved in the terms of landscape." Going one step further, she makes an interesting parallel between two of the principal art forms of late seventeenth and eighteenth-century France, the classical theatre and the formal garden:

> There were unities in garden design similar to the unities of classical Greek and contemporary French drama: unity of time as brought about by the harmony between house and garden; of place, in the way each part contributed to the whole; and of action, by the construction of interest in the garden through the exclusion of all views of meadows and valleys and the constantly changing traffic along the roads.[1]

During the century and a half that preceded the French Revolution, a period that coincides with the classical spirit in art and literature, both the classical drama and the formal gardens were created and reached their highest form of expression. Here I would like to develop in detail an analysis of the *jardin français* based on the theory of classical theatre. Both these art forms, both these genres, sprang from the same cultural and historical roots and thrived in the same political and social milieux; both are manifestations of a very special French genius, and both express a similar artistic vision and reveal a similar technical expertise. Without suggesting that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries consciously made the connection that I am proposing here, I will nonetheless argue that both *le théâtre classique* and *le jardin français* are two distinct flowers growing on the same stem; that they are equivalent expressions, each in its own idiom, of a much deeper classicism. To show how similar they are, I will begin by

discussing the French formal garden as an instance of the three theatrical unities transposed into landscape terms.

Every successful literary work exhibits some type of internal coherence or unity, some basic design to which all its diverse parts are related. This, however, is not to say that "unity" is a single concept, always the same for various literatures and different epochs. French classical theatre imposed its own very particular definition of unity. As the first of the three Aristotelian rules which dominated theoretical considerations on the theatre at this time, *unité d'action* describes a very narrow and limiting concept of internal coherence. It demands a single-minded plot which never deviates from its narrow channel, relentlessly developing the original given to its inevitable catastrophe. Technical terms describing the classical plot indicate this clearly: the *noeud* (the knot, the tying up as in a knot) represents the complications which lead to the *dénouement*, the untying of the knots. Theoreticians were unanimously in accord on the limited focus of classical tragedy. Boileau's celebrated formula:

> Mais nous, que la raison à ses règles engage,
> Nous voulons qu'avec art l'action se menage
> Qu'en un lieu, qu'en un jour, un seul fait accompli
> Tienne jusqu'à la fin le théâtre rempli.[2]

as well as Voltaire's comments make the same point:

> C'est que l'esprit humain ne peut embrasser plusieurs objets à la fois; c'est que l'intérêt qui se partage s'anéantit bientôt; c'est que nous sommes choqués à voir, même dans un tableau, deux événements; c'est qu'enfin la nature seule nous a indiqué ce précepte, qui doit être invariable comme elle.[3]

No diversions, no extraneous elements, no sub-plots to distract from the principal intrigue: the polemic surrounding Corneille's *Cid* in 1637 involved precisely the contention that the Infante and her love for the hero Rodrigue were not integral parts of the main plot and therefore distracted attention from it. Despite the popularity of the play and the emotional impact of the Infante's role, theoreticians judged it to violate the unity of action.

Nothing so much resembles this rigorous unity of action as the formal garden's central alley, the longitudinal axis that Le Nôtre introduced into garden design and made the characteristic and defining

feature of the formal French garden. At Versailles, Le Nôtre's masterpiece and the consummate example of a French garden, the ideal viewpoint, the focal point and center of the garden's unity is situated high on the terrace, just behind the château and overlooking the main alley. From here, the spectator's gaze is drawn towards the (seemingly) narrowing tunnel of the tree-lined alley, past the fountain of Latone, down the *tapis vert* to the massive bronze statues in Apollo's basin and then beyond, across the Grand Canal to follow a large pathway cut through a heavy forest to a climax of rising hills and sky. This vanishing point and the carefully arranged perspective leading to it demand the spectator's attention. Truly, this central axis is an "élément si puissant et si dominateur qu'il allait permettre aux jardins français d'échapper aux désordres et aux délires du Baroque pour accéder, d'un seul coup, au grand Ordre classique."[4] Everything in the garden is subordinated to this main perspective, this single action which dominates the garden just as one simple and continuously developed intrigue sustains the classical drama. Voltaire's argument that only one action should occupy the theatrical audience applies perfectly to the garden spectator: nothing interferes with this principal line, no other objects divert his attention. For Georges Rémon, "l'allée centrale commande toute la composition et forme le grand axe, ou "percée" à partir duquel tout se montre, tout se déploie, tout s'ordonne, tout s'explique."[5] Benoit-Méchin also understands the garden's unity to depend on this longitudinal axis and the viewpoint it affords: "le jardin doit se déployer symétriquement à partir d'un point central, d'où la vue peut l'embrasser dans sa totalité comme un discours logique et bien composé."[6] His analogy is most suggestive: a well-made discourse, or a well-made play, exhibits the same tight and controlled unity as a formal garden.

In his *Pratique du théâtre* (1657), the abbé d'Aubignac states that all the scenes of a play lead necessarily to a climactic point, the "plus bel Evénement de toute l'histoire . . . celui qui doit faire la catastrophe, et où tous les autres aboutissent comme des lignes à leur centre . . . "[7] This analogy reminds us of the extent to which formal garden design and layout were based on geometrical configurations. The rigid linear nature of the unity of action is enhanced in classical drama by the supporting rule of *liaison des scènes:* each scene is like a dot and all these dots must be connected to describe a straight line. Connecting the dots or scenes is accomplished by having at least one actor from each scene remain on stage to link it to the following scene and to the actors who now enter. A break in this continuity of per-

sonages and of action is never permitted, except between acts. In the garden, the principal axis is continued and enhanced by other straight alleys, just as the unity of action in the theatre is sustained by the straight line of the linked scenes in each act. The single-minded concentration of the classical drama, focusing on the most significant moments which lead to a climactic event, achieves the same effect as do the straight lines, the rationally planned and cleanly executed paths of the formal garden. Furthermore, the possibilities of classical drama are limited by the small number of protagonists. Variety, surprise and diversity come, not from new elements, but rather from the author's ability to manipulate his givens. Complications and peripetia derive from the new combinations he is able to imagine, not from new material. Similarly, garden alleys, which on first glance all seem similar, acquire their interest not by novel elements but rather by their manipulative and combinatorial value. Paths converge, or diverge, at critical junctures, almost always punctuated by a fountain, a basin or a statue. *Etoiles* and *pattes d'oie* both gather in and disperse the converging alleys, mixing the heretofore separate lines and transforming them into a new figure. Such points are richly ambiguous since they change in nature depending on one's point of view: in or out, joining or separating, looking in this direction or that. Straight lines become circular, divergent paths are joined, and a single way becomes multiple, leading off in a variety of different directions. For the spectator, the garden, although a closed system, allows almost infinite variety in the sense that, as he walks through it, he can construct his own promenade out of the elements at his disposal. Just as no two dramatists treated the "same" subject in precisely the same manner (Oedipus, for example, was a popular topic, with Corneille, Voltaire and Ducis each trying his hand at it), so too different visitors experience the garden differently, depending on the directions chosen, the perspectives each alley offers, the possibilities offered by crossing alleys, round points, stars, etc.

Preference for geometric forms, so evident once we look at a plan or overview of a French garden, is just as prevalent in the structure of the classical drama. Like subsidiary alleys enlarging the thrust of the main axis, confidants parallel their masters on several levels. Socially, they reflect contemporary class distinctions, namely the nobility and their retainers; linguistically, confidants are addressed in the familiar *tu* form while replying in the more polite and deferential *vous*; dramatically, they can function as surrogates for their masters, sometimes articulating the latters' unmentionable secrets, other times

incarnating an internal struggle that is literally ripping them in two. Marivaux's comedies are frequently articulated around the contrasting levels of master and servant. A confidant can also be a dramatic tool, allowing the author to make a more rapid exposition; he is also a particularly French way of avoiding monologues and replacing them with dialogue. In his translations of Shakespeare (1768-80), Jean-François Ducis invariably eliminated the legion of Shakespeare's minor figures but added confidants to parallel the principal roles.

Symmetrical construction and the use of discrete components describe the technique of both classical drama and the formal garden. The central alley divides the entire garden into two equal parts, each the mirror image of the other. Transversal and parallel alleys together form a grid on which parterres and bosquets are positioned. Confidants can be placed on similar horizontal and vertical axes. As mentioned above, they stand in clear parallel to their masters. Seen from another angle, the confidant and his master belong together, on a vertical line as it were, in conflict with and in opposition to other pairs of masters and their respective confidants. Tragedy's mandatory five acts resemble a series of parterres in a garden. Each parterre has its own design, its own floral arrangement and its clearly marked limits just as each act has its own *liaison des scènes* and its opening and closing curtain. Despite this independence and autonomy of design, both parterre and act belong to a larger entity and possess a meaning and function only within that larger structure. Parterres in any one garden have approximately the same dimensions; at the very least, each parterre is identical in size to its symmetrical mate. Often the last set of parterres in a series is larger than the others so as to appear the same size when the ensemble is seen from the central point on the first floor of the château. Parterres were designed to be seen from this angle and the variation in size was a compensation for the perspective. Each act in a classical drama is approximately the same length, and every act is therefore an equal part of the whole. Corneille once pushed this concern for symmetry so far as to write (and then talk about it in his preface!) a play, *La Suivante*, in which each act is exactly 340 verses long.

The second classical unity is that of time. While the unity of action reduced complicated plots to one simple and continuous action, the unity of time required that the activities depicted in the play last no more than twenty-four hours, from beginning to end. Obviously, the unities were working to trim the classical drama to an intense and

concentrated minimum. During this one extraordinary day, a long period of latent tension and conflict suddenly erupts in, literally, a climactic moment. In order to manage the conflict so that all the emotions would burst out simultaneously, classical drama tried to manipulate time and thus to respect the twenty-four hour rule. Corneille claimed that the final act obeyed its own particular chronology and that it could compress events in time and "speed them up", so to speak. Ducis even succeeded in rearranging *Hamlet* and *Roméo et Juliette* so they would respect the unity of time.

French gardens knew a similar concentration of activity into a very short time span or, conversely, the unavowed expansion of time so as to include widely-spaced events: the formal garden was almost constantly at its point of climax; that is, in horticultural terms, its flowering season was managed so as to last beyond normal expectations. Flowers in the parterres at Versailles, for example, were continuously in bloom. Lawns were mowed constantly while trees and shrubs were pruned just as frequently, thus creating the impression that they were neither living nor growing, but sustained, retained at one moment of fruition. Helen Fox maintains that the *ifs taillés* did not even sway in the breeze, thereby adding to the impression of suspended and concentrated time. Rather than going through the seasonal cycles of growth, blossoming and dormancy, the formal garden with its emphasis on pruned shrubbery and constantly replenished floral patterns seemed to exist outside the normal temporal realm. The orchard and kitchen garden, indispensible but not often mentioned adjuncts of the formal garden, were programmed to produce fruit and vegetables almost continuously throughout the year. Only the dead of winter forced the French garden out of its perpetual spring. Integral parts of garden design, hothouses also contributed to the garden's defiance of time and seasons. The Orangerie at Versailles allowed Louis XIV and XV to delight their guests with fruits, expecially melons, unobtainable elsewhere. Such an artificially prolonged growing season is related to the overcharged day of the unity of time. In each genre, chronology is pushed to the limit to produce either the coveted fruit or a dramatic climax.

One further complication involves the question of *temps à perdre*. The classical theory of imitation eventually demanded an on-stage chronology that exactly duplicated the real time necessary to perform the actions represented on stage. The logic of the case was

> que la tragédie est une imitation, que la perfection d'une imitation est de se confondre avec l'objet imité, et que par conséquent la representa-

> tion et l'action représentée doivent avoir la même durée et s'étendre sur un même espace.[8]

Since an average play lasted two or two and one-half hours and the duration of the entire action was twenty four, some time had to be "lost," preferably between the acts. During each act, theatrical and real time coincided; during the intermissions, more time elapsed. Classical theatre thus played on two time scales, one scrupulously accurate (represented time equaling real time) and another flexible, telescoping some twenty-two hours into the few minutes of intermission.

Formal gardens, in their spatial idiom, play with distance which is the equivalent of time in the temporal vocabulary of drama. In the central alley at Versailles, Le Nôtre manipulates perspective so that the distance perceived optically is different from the actual distance one walks. Viewed from the terrace, the Apollo fountain and sculpture group appear to be much closer than they are in fact. Looking backwards from the basin towards the château, which is now uphill and silhouetted against the sky, the same distance seems much longer, as in a telescope reversed. Le Nôtre performed a similar feat at Vaux-le-Vicomte. Here transversal alleys break the longitudinal axis while pools of water foreshorten the optical line by their reflections, their mirroring of sky and light.

The third unity derived from Aristotle is the unity of place: the single, continuous and concentrated action (unity of action), lasting no longer than a single day (unity of time) can logically, given such severe limitations, have only one site or setting. The indication of décor in classical drama is as frequent as it is banal: "Un antichambre dans un palais." A recalcitrant Corneille saw the artificiality of such a definite yet characterless setting and argued for a more imaginative and evocative use of the unity of place:

> Je voudrais, à leur example, introduire des fictions de théâtre, pour établir un lieu théâtral qui ne serait ni l'appartement de Cléopâtre, ni celui de Rodogune . . . mais une salle sur laquelle ouvrent ces divers appartements.[9]

Although not mentioned as a regular décor by the playwright on his title page until the eighteenth century (Marivaux, Nivelle de la Chaussée and Beaumarchais use it, for example),[10] the formal garden offers an acceptable alternative to this vague antichambre and one that coincides with Corneille's description. It fits his dream of a "theatrical space" private yet public, contiguous to the heroes' apart-

ments and still large enough to permit the characters to move about without always meeting face to face. Architecturally, the garden and park were considered integral parts of the château, together comprising one single unit. To say then "in a château" or especially "in a château in the country" (which were frequent eighteenth-century indications of décor) signified not only the interior apartments but also the outside grounds. Furthermore, the garden itself could be considered a room or *salle* since many of the terms designating interior architectural features or furnishings were also applied to the garden. One spoke commonly of a *cabinet vert* for a shaded grove; the *tapis vert* was the main lawn; *salles de verdure* were common while *pièces d'eau* (or *miroirs)* mandatory. At Versailles, la Colonnade was a grove of trees inside which a circle of thirty-two marble columns and sixteen fountains was constructed; other garden locales ambiguously transformed into interior rooms or halls include the *salle des maronniers* and the *salle de bal.* The Tuileries boasted of a small outdoor theatre. Most châteaux had similar facilities for the reading or actual presentation of plays, the elaborate theatre at Versailles and Voltaire's private theatre at Ferney being two famous examples. Saint-Simon indicates that the politicking process at Louis XIV's court, centered in the elaborate ceremonies and royal protocol that were in fact not far removed from histrionics continued into the gardens. In fact, here his carefully graduated enumeration places the garden at the rhetorical highpoint of the sentence:

> Les fêtes fréquentes, les promenades particulières à Versailles, les voyages furent des moyens que le Roi saisit pour distinguer et pour mortifier en nommant les personnes qui à chaque fois en devoient être, et pour tenir chacun assidu et attentif à lui plaire . . . Non seulement il étoit sensible à la présence continuelle de ce qu'il y avoit de distingué, mais il l'étoit aussi aux étages inférieurs. Il regardait à droit et à gauche, à son lever, à son coucher, à ses repas, en passant dans les appartements, dans ses jardins à Versailles, oú seulement les courtisans avoient la liberté de le suivre.[11]

"Walking through the gardens" clearly presents the dramatist with the largest number of dramatic possibilities and the easiest motivation for exits and entrances. Much better than the illogical and unmotivated antichambre, the garden assumes the latent contradictions and the interpersonal conflicts of both the royal court and the classical drama. In the closed field of the formal garden, an intricate ballet or joust can be played out as various cabales compete for the sovereign's favor and as several personages enact a tragic conflict.

The garden's geometrical design, its criss-crossing paths resemble the mechanical protocol which brought together opposing courtiers without reconciling them; or scenes in which dialoguing actors talk at and not to each other. Entrances and exits, obeying the linear imperative of the *liaison des scènes,* are more easily justified at those points of juncture, fountains or *étoiles,* which architecturally duplicate the same rhythm and movement. Courtiers following the royal entourage and breaking into separate groups to discuss strategy or to gossip probably used the garden's space much as we imagine the theatre doing. Finally, the overall design and configuration of the garden responds to the drama's particular hermetic atmosphere. Straight and narrow, alleys can open up marvellous vistas and invite long-range perspectives towards distant horizons. But as closed tunnels, shielded by the impenetrable walls of *charmilles*, they also can hide from view converging alleys or enemies until the inevitable meeting, be it *étoile* or *reconnaissance.* The garden then offers the ideal locus or décor for classical drama and especially for its typically eighteenth-century offspring, opera, as Pierre Grimal points out:

> De même que l'intérieur d'un palais où se joue une tragédie est, alors, naturellement, un salon, de même, les extérieurs deviennent des jardins. Si bien que se produisent des actions réciproques du théâtre sur le jardin. Si le second impose au premier ses bosquets disciplinés, ses fontaines, ses vases de marbre ou de terre cuite, inversement, le décor théâtral vient confirmer les tendances propres au jardin: on trouvera, dans le parc, des coulisses (les allées couvertes glissées sous l'abri des charmilles), une machinerie secrète, des "rampes" (qui sont les buffets d'eau), des espaces vides volontairement ménagés pour le jeu des acteurs, des éclairages calculés, des illusions, des perspectives imposées.[12]

Related to the unity of place, at least for our purposes here, is another concept in the classical aesthetic, the separation of genres. Each genre was, in the theatre and in serious literature in general, independent of all the others; no mixing was tolerated. French tragedy was thus deprived of the comic interludes of the English Elizabethan or its own Renaissance traditions. Division into five acts was mandatory and each act, as we have seen, was something of a separate entity, having its own *liaison des scènes* and reestablishing the real time of action and performance in contrast to the *temps à perdre* of the intermission. This same careful separation and discrimination of component parts pervades the formal garden. Each parterre was separate from the others, both by its different design and its delimiting hedges,

although like the five acts of a play together they formed one single unity. Every section in the garden was clearly distinguished from all the others and the alteration of clearly differentiated elements further marked the distinctions among them. Bosquets were placed next to parterres which led to *quinconces* or *salles de verdure.* In contrast to the later "natural" English garden, even grass was considered a decorative element and so treated. Sand or crushed stone *(arène)* marked off boundaries and at the same time offered a contrast of color and material with grass and lawns. Alleys and paths, whether in grass or *arène*, cut the garden into crisp and neat sections. Subordination and separation reigned supreme: flower beds were laid side by side but never mixed, just as the technical term for them, *planches,* suggests. Graduation in scale, from the tiny hedges in box through the walls of *charmilles* to the higher yews and finally to the towering trees, depends on the separation of each species. The impact of building to a climax would be lost were the various shrubs and trees allowed to mingle. Again, the straight lines which dominate the formal garden (which was said to have been designed with a compass in hand while the landscape garden required a painter's brush) and its geometrical patterns all bespeak an intention to juxtapose, to place variegated components in contact with each other,but never to mix them. In his treatise, *Le Théâtre d' Agriculture* (1600), Olivier de Serres specifically enjoins the separation of genres upon all manner and form of garden elements:

> Ces herbes, non plus que celles des bordures ne seront posées confusément, mais selon la nature de l'oeuvre seront rangées par espèces distinctes, afin que les côtés demeurant uniformes tant en figure, grandeur, couleur, elles soient analogues. De même, les herbes seront placées en rangées équidistantes, et convenablement éloignés les unes des autres, afin d'éviter la confusion que le trop de presse causerait à l'oeuvre si les herbes s'entre-recouvraient . . . [13]

Beyond these formal symmetries derived from the theatrical unities lie other analogies based on the classical concepts of *vraisemblance* and the *bienséances. Vraisemblance* was a keystone in the classical edifice even though authors and theoreticians emphasized different aspects. Basically, however, it distinguished truth from what only appeared to be true, the *vrai* and the *vraisemblable.* The aesthetic of *vraisemblance* supposes that some additional criterion has been imposed upon reality, filtering out unacceptable truth and admitting only that portion of reality which, because of its beauty, significance or intrinsic importance, also qualifies as worthy of being represented in

art. *Vaisemblance* thus requires that an artful design, a man-made and intelligible pattern be imposed on the facts of reality while the *vrai* would allow those facts to retain their natural disorder or haphazard arrangement. In classical theatre, the unity of action is *vraisemblable* rather than *vrai* because it demands a simple, continuous and tight action that is dramatically satisfying but really impossible to find in so finished and perfected a state. *Vraisemblance* heightens the impact of the truth that it modifies, whose extraneous matter it reduces and shapes into a more pleasing form.

In exactly the same sense as the classical drama, the formal garden is *vraisemblable* rather than *vrai*. The unnaturally straight alleys, the intricate designs and complex floral arrangements in its parterres, the clipped trees and hedges, the carefully planned perspectives drawing the spectator's eye and his attention inevitably in one precise direction, the staged effects achieved by graduating different masses of plants and shrubs through the entire range of size and shading: all these essential components of the formal garden modify nature in the name of *vraisemblance*. Like the incredible truth in literature which *vraisemblance* banned in favor of believable fiction, nature cannot be permitted to remain merely what she is. Rather than being *vrai* she must be *vraisemblable:* she is obliged to fit into those artificial patterns which the classical mind found more appealing and more credible. In gardens and in drama, the doctrine of *vraisemblance* announces man's confidence in himself, in his ability to improve upon the material before him and his desire to distinguish between art and nature by form and structure. The Abbé Pluche, a natural scientist and author of the *Spectacle de la nature*, wrote: "Un jardin est moins une imitation de la nature, que la nature même rapprochée sous nos yeux et mise en oeuvre avec art."[14] He could just as accurately have said: "Une pièce de théatre . . . . "

Once we accept that theatrical *vraisemblance* is an active force at work in the formal garden, a number of the latter's characteristics, which heretofore seemed odd, now become comprehensible. Thanks to *vraisemblance*, garden materials can be transformed into something else; their true nature counts for less than what they seem to be. Trees and shrubs are shaped like doors; hedges are grown next to walls, imitating them, duplicating them and eventually replacing them. An entire vocabulary, drawn from home furnishings, applied equally to the garden as we have already seen: *tapis* for lawn, *cabinet (vert, de verdure)* for a bosquet, *parterre, planche*, etc. Appearances are more important than essences. Once this confusion engendered by

vraisemblance is recognized, the curious mixture of stone and greenery in French gardens becomes explicable and even logical. Placed in the midst of a garden, stairways continue the lines and the architectural statements first articulated by the walls of trees or else, marking different levels, break the garden into sections just like the separate acts of a play. In truth, stone and plants are not interchangeable entities. In the garden discourse governed by *vraisemblance*, however, they are complementary and compatible.

This conflation of stone and greenery furthers the concept, already mentioned, which makes the garden and the château two parts of a single unit. Rather than separate and antagonistic elements, they are analogous and collaborative. To the extent that they share a definite architectural and decorative vocabulary they can be assimilated to each other. *Vraisemblance* allows us to see the garden as an equivalent, a synonym of the château, a connection that the *vrai* would never permit.

Like *vraisemblance*, the *bienséances* voice another concept fundamental to classical French drama and the formal garden. In the theatre, *bienséances* require a certain decorum, an elevated tone and a noble language as well as the elimination of anything considered low, common, vulgar or shocking. Duels, fighting and killing, for example, were not permitted to be enacted on the stage although they could be recounted there by a witness. The actual bloody event, which has just taken place in the wings, loses its shocking power when mediated through poetic diction and noble language. Similarly the garden hides potentially shocking items. Commemorative urns, symbolic statues and mythological figures mediate and represent in fitting and seemly terms what otherwise might be considered offensive. The bloody battles of Louis XIV are depicted at Versailles not in their suffering and horror but sublimated in the form of huge urns decorated with the full panoply of military symbolism. Actual physical suffering and death are abstracted by the sculptor's noble diction, his abstract discourse thereby becoming an acceptable manifestation of something that is itself unacceptable.

Mythological backgrounds are also common to both classical theatre and to formal gardens. To a large extent the *bienséances* dictated that mythological subjects alone were sufficiently noble and elevated for the tragic stage. They alone were fitting in a context which demanded conflict enacted by kings and princes. Only these elevated personages could be construed as the proper reference for a theatre which was supported by royal subsidy and largely patronized

by aristocrats. Consequently, from Corneille to Voltaire, the titles of classical tragedy read like the entries in a mythological dictionary, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries including in that single category both Greek myths and Roman history.

Garden statuary is almost exclusively mythological in its choice of subject. Fountain sculpture in particular leans heavily on mythic heroes and their feats: Neptune in his grotto at Vaux-le-Vicomte and, at Versailles, Apollo rising from the waves in his sun chariot or the Titans thrown down from Olympus. Such allusions in garden sculpture serve the same function as those in the theatre: they create a backdrop, an atmosphere appropriate to the site. Great achievements of the heroic past were not accidentally placed in gardens, one of whose principal purposes was to announce the power and importance of its proprietor. In the alleys of Versailles, peopled with a whole mythological world of heroes, Louis XIV's image of himself as Apollo, the Sun King, was not at all out of place. The final symmetry linking classical theatre and formal gardens is to be found in the very language of those two genres, in the idiom particular to each one.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the formal garden is the slow, stately and regular rhythm of its central alley, an effect achieved at Vaux-le-Vicomte by the double row of fountains extending down its main axis. These fountains punctuate the alley in pairs like the mandatory *rimes plates* of tragedy while the strict, unvarying interval between them reproduces the regular scansion of the *alexandrin* which is broken by a pronounced caesura into two equal hemistiches. A certain monotonous drone, as harsh critics like the Romantics pointed out, resulted from this repetitive binary structure, both in rhyme (aa, bb) and meter (6/6 or 3-3/3-3). At Versailles the same binary rhythm we noticed at Vaux-le-Vicomte is produced in the *allée royale* by the regularly spaced statues along the sides.

A favorite rhetorical device in the classical theatre involves chiasmus which can be expressed $a:b :: b' : a'$. Chiasmus establishes its own particular rhythm and its own logic in the poetic line, requiring a reversal at midpoint to maintain the correct equilibrium. For poets working within the constraints of a fixed meter, chiasmus is a handy trick that can often turn an ordinary statement into a striking and significant one, as Voltaire knew very well:

> Oedipe est vertueux, sa vertu m'était chère.[15]
> Vous cherchez la mort; la mort fuira de vous. (p. 88)

Even when the correspondence of every term is not exact, many phrases still provide the change of pace rhythm that we easily recognize as chiasmus:

> Et ne me forcez point /a/, quand je suis innocent /b/
> A devenir coupable /b′ /, en vous obeissant. /a′ / (p. 83)

Gardens have their own kind of chiasmus, expressed in their own garden idiom. At Sceaux, a sequence of five sculpted heads above the famous fountains reproduces the chiasmus disposition. The unmatched middle figure functions as the ": :", the "as is" or the indication to reverse the order in the second half. *Pattes d'oie,* so frequent in formal gardens, are chiasmus forms. Reading them from one side to the other we have: a: a secondary alley; b: an intervening bosquet or grove of trees; "as is": the center or pivot of the figure which is the main longitudinal axis; b′ : an intervening bosquet or grove of trees; a′: another secondary alley. At Rambouillet, even though the alleys are all replaced by canals, the chiasmus arrangement is still evident.

Much of the impact the reader feels from the chiasmus comes not from extensive use but rather from its contrast with the binary or parallel figure. These are the mainstays of classical theatre's poetic line since they easily create antitheses or establish forceful contrasts. Like chiasmus, they have an energy and a rhythm of their own (a-b/a-b) which harmonize particularly well with the binary structure of the *alexandrin* and indeed the basic structure of classical drama itself:

> [Il]Fit taire nos soupçons et suspendit nos coups. (p. 71)
> Et mes premiers amours et mes premiers serments. (p.72)
> J'aurais donné mes jours et défendu les vôtres. (p.77)

This binary movement can be found even in a unit as small as a single hemistiche:

> Pour Hercule et pour moi . . . (p.78)
> . . . tel que vous tel que moi. (p.78)

The same need to balance off a phrase, to proceed by groups of two can be seen in any formal garden plan. The central alley cuts the garden invariably into two complementary and symmetrical halves; parterres are usually arranged in symmetrical pairs even if there is a slight difference in the floral design; groves of trees are usually plant-

ed in apposition to each other, balancing each other by their simple presence.

Another geometrical figure in the garden that has a symmetrical counterpart in classical prosody is the circle. Fountains are usually circular as are the *ronds points* or *étoiles* which, like hubs, gather in the radiating spokes of various alleys. Because they are circular, these figures appear to have neither an easily defined beginning nor end, but rotate and spin continually upon themselves. In contrast to the definite, albeit two way, direction of the straight alleys, circular *ronds points* are alternations and alternators of direction, free figures in the rigid garden discourse, "phrases" whose position is misplaced, displaced, in the garden syntax. In the theatre, Voltaire's equivalent of the *rond point* is the three member line. Unlike the true Romantic tercet which divides the *alexandrin* into three equal parts (4/4/4), Voltaire's tripartite line respects the caesura and therefore scans: 3/3/6. Nonetheless the content is clearly grouped in three and the effect, as well as the intention, is an authentic triple beat and a real alternative to the binary 6/6 of the *alexandrin*:

> Qu'on ouvre sa prison, qu'il vienne, qu'il paraisse. (p.68)
> Errant, abandonné, proscrit dans l'univers (p.69)
> C'est lui-même; je tremble; évitons sa présence. (p.74)
> On le cherche, on vous nomme, on vous accuse enfin. (p.74)

The contrast of triplet to the binary rhythm is much like the meeting of straight alley and circular *étoile*: variety, excitement, something new and different, and sudden change in speed and direction.

This same effect is also produced by another syntactical construction which places a prepositional phrase in front of the noun or verb upon which it depends and which it should therefore follow:

> Par un monstre cruel Thèbe alors ravagée
> A son libérateur avait promis ma foi. (p.73)
>
> De mon premier époux l'ombre pâle et sanglante . . . (p.74)
>
> A son maitre nouveau tout le peuple obéit. (p.103)

Such inversions, such curved and circular syntax, are especially significant since in the preface to the play from which they are taken Voltaire claims that the genius of the French language was precisely to refuse such manipulation:

> Chaque langue a son génie déterminé par la nature de la construction de ses phrases . . . Le génie de notre langue est la clarté et l'élégance; nous ne permettons nulle licence à notre pensée, qui doit marcher, comme notre prose, dans l'ordre précis de nos idées. (p.56)

Yet, in the phrases quoted, two activities are taking place simultaneously: we read the word order a-b but we understand the idea sequence b-a. These two contrary yet simultaneous directions in a single line offer a theatrical equivalent to the *ronds points, étoiles* and circular fountains which, although placed in a preferred line of vision, can be seen, approached and appreciated from several different directions. It is precisely the circular form that permits intelligible contact from any vantage point.

Classical theatre and the formal French gardens are then much less different than we once might have supposed. As I have tried to demonstrate, it is not impossible to analyze the *jardin français* in those terms we normally apply to *la tragédie classique*: the famous theatrical unities of time, place and action for example can be profitably understood as "garden unities." More importantly, it is only the formal garden which can sustain this comparison with the classical theatre: the English or landscape garden, which was also a contemporary phenomenon, does not possess the characteristics needed to make a connection with the classical stage.

As art forms, both tragedy and the formal garden exemplify the classical French spirit of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Not only are the garden and the theatre informed by a regular and balanced geometrical construction, but both of them exhibit similarities of form, technique and idiomatic expression which make them analogous productions. Classical theatre and the formal garden are two parallel genres whose close relationship has unfortunately been overlooked in the past.

NOTES

1. Helen Fox, *André Le Nôtre: Garden Architect to Kings* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1962), p. 20.
2. Nicolas Boileau, *L'Art poétique*, chant III in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Garnier, 1961), p. 172.
3. Voltaire, "Préface à *Oedipe*," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Moland edition, 1877), vol. II, p. 49.
4. Benoit-Méchin, *L'Homme et ses jardins* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1975), p. 171.
5. Quoted in Benoit-Méchin, p.190.
6. *Ibid.* p. 189.

7. Abbé d'Aubignac, *La Pratique du théâtre* (Amsterdam: J-F Bernard, 1715), vol. I, p. 112.
8. Antoine Adam, *Histoire de la littérature française au XVIIième siècle* (Paris: Del Duca, 1962), vol. II, p. 360. Originally published in 1952.
9. Pierre Corneille, "Discours sur les trois unités," in *Théâtre complet* (Paris: Intégrale, 1963), p. 846.
10. Although dramatists themselves are reticent about their décors, we do have, nonetheless, a number of eighteenth-century sketches and engravings which use the garden as a theatrical setting. See, for example, M. Viale Ferrero, *La Scenografia del 700 e i Fratelli Galliari* (Torino: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1963).
11. Louis, Duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires* (Paris: Pléiade, 1953), vol. IV, pp. 996-997.
12. Pierre Grimal, *L'Art des jardins* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p. 87. *Que sais-je?* volume no. 618.
13. Quoted in Benoit-Méchin, p. 163.
14. Abbé Pluche, *Le Spectacle de la nature* (Paris: 1737), tome II, p. 92.
15. Voltaire, *Oedipe* in Moland, vol. II, p. 73. All the other quotations will be taken from this same play and their page references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.