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**THE ARGUMENT FROM AUTHORITY IN THE DYNAMICS
OF THE FRENCH CLASSIC-ROMANTIC QUARREL (1821–1831)****ARGUMENT Z AUTORYTETU W DYNAMICE FRANCUSKIEGO
SPORU KLASYKÓW Z ROMANTYKAMI (1821–1831)**

Słowa kluczowe: Charles Nodier, Victor Hugo, *La Muse française*, Akademia Francuska, romantyzm jako nowoczesny klasycyzm

Key words: Charles Nodier, Victor Hugo, *La Muse française*, Académie française, Romanticism as classicism of modern times

In the 1820s, French classicists often accused the Romantics of a lack of proper education and an irreverence towards literary authorities. They saw the Romantics as a literary sect whose members were contributing to the group's undeserved success by promoting each other through flattery, quoting each other in epigraphs to their volumes of verse, and reviewing each other's works favourably in *La Muse française*, a leading journal of early French Romanticism¹. This had been unheard of in the past, when only quotations from classical writers such as Virgil or Horace were considered acceptable material for an epigraph. Nevertheless, the young Romantic writers quoted one another without proper respect towards the literary institutions, as if they had not read their classics at all. This strategy of undermining the classicist authority is clearly visible during the period when Romanticism was developing in a close relationship with classicism. In the 1830s, the argument from authority seems to have gradually lost its prominence as a Romantic poetics was evolving in new directions.

¹ This accusation is not unfounded: a Romantic dissident, Henri Latouche, took up the charge and turned his back on his Romantic colleagues in a satirical tract, "De la camaraderie littéraire" (1829). Cf. A. Glinoe, *La Querelle de la camaraderie littéraire. Les romantiques face à leurs contemporains*, Droz, Genève 2008.

The nineteenth-century French classic-Romantic quarrel² has already been well described *in extenso*³, which is why in this paper I would like to focus on its rhetorical dynamics, and particularly on the accusation of the lack of classical erudition levelled against the Romantics. This line of accusation deserves attention not only because it triggered an avalanche of spiteful responses which form an important part of the classic-Romantic debate, but also because it captures a specific feature of French Romanticism which has its source in the Romantic relation to classicism, and more generally, to the literary tradition. In essence, the strategy of the Romanticists in the early years of the quarrel can be described as an attempt to undermine the aesthetic difference between Romanticism and classicism, and to appropriate the argument from classical authority, making it a part of their line of defence. Analysis of the rhetorical dynamics of the quarrel can lead to conclusions expressed in sociological terms, as an attempt to replace the old generation with a new one in an increasingly commercialised literary field⁴ or in psychoanalytic terms, as a form of oedipal rivalry with the aim of taking the father's or precursor's place⁵.

² I have chosen not to use the well established military metaphors of “war” or “battle”, as they might create a false image of two opposing camps, which would be a considerable oversimplification. Instead, I employ the term “quarrel”, defined as a “socialising, creative and dynamic” form of debate which structures the literary field and plays the role of a “visibility vector” for its actors (cf. J.-P. Bertrand, D. Saint-Amand & V. Stiénon, *Les querelles littéraires: esquisse méthodologique*, “COntEXTES”, 2012, no. 10, <http://journals.openedition.org/contextes/5005> [10.01.2020]). In the quoted article, the quarrel, distinguished from dispute, polemics and controversy, is defined by its component of hostility and the fact that the “participants are not adversaries, but rivals who have similar motives and pursue the same goal, though not necessarily in a similar way”.

³ Cf. L. Séché, *Le Cénacle de La Muse française*, Mercure de France, Paris 1909; J. Marsan, *La Bataille romantique*, Hachette, Paris 1912; R. Bray, *Chronologie du romantisme 1803–1830*, Boivin, Paris 1932; E. Egli, P. Martino, *Le débat romantique en France (1813–1816)*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1933. More recently, some French critics have revisited the issue, mainly in order to deconstruct the overly teleological conception of the history of early French Romanticism; cf. V. Laisney, *L’Arsenal romantique. Le salon de Charles Nodier (1824–1834)*, Champion, Paris 2002.

⁴ Cf. “The ageing of authors, works or schools is something quite different from a mechanical sliding into the past. It is engendered in the fight between those who have already left their mark and are trying to endure, and those who cannot make their own marks in their turn without consigning to the past those who have an interest in stopping time, in eternalizing the present state; between the dominants whose strategy is tied to continuity, identity and reproduction, and the dominated, the new entrants, whose interest is in discontinuity, rupture, difference and revolution”, P. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by S. Emanuel, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995, p. 157.

⁵ A process described by Bloom as a clearing of imaginative space by a misreading of great predecessors and then appropriating them. In Bloom’s terms, it can be said that the dynamics of the French Romantic debate, within the chronological scope of this paper, stops at the second of Bloom’s revisionary ratios, *tessera*, which is described as follows: “A poet antithetically ‘completes’ his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough”, H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford University Press, New York 1973, p. 14.

Frivolous quarrel

In April 1824, Louis-Simon Auger, secretary of the *Académie française*, delivered a memorable speech on the occasion of King Louis the XVIII's return after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era. Auger's speech was directed at the Romantic schism, which was, as he put it, a danger to the unity of the literary world. The political overtones in his speech are conspicuous: Romanticism is not only a manifestation of political liberalism⁶ but it is also anti-national in character. In contrast to Polish Romanticism, which was closely connected with the question of preserving national identity⁷, in France, at that stage in the Romantic debate, it was classicism that played the role of the defender of the national tradition. According to Auger, the anti-national character of Romanticism did not merely stem from the fact that it was a movement of foreign origin, but precisely from the fact that it was of German provenance. In Auger's words, the main representatives of the German "sect"⁸ in France, such as Madame de Staël or Benjamin Constant, were enchanted by a nation who had neither its own language nor literature, and who deemed it possible to build true art merely by staging folk tales. As he put it, Germany was a country:

where literature is as decentralised as political power, where guardians of good taste do not exist, where the minds, disposed to meditation by their isolation, to independence by their dispersion, and to error by their very sincerity, have often carried profundity to abstruseness, sentiment to mysticism, and enthusiasm to exaltation. That country had remained for a long time foreign to the refinement and elegance of modern civilisation. Endowed with an energetic but rough tongue; abundant, but not conducive to accuracy and clarity; of a language which, even today, has not yet been codified, [that country] could have no literature proper when other nations of Europe could already pride themselves on their own⁹.

In this diatribe against German literature Auger stresses its lack of taste and principles, as well as its primitivism and other-wordliness, none of which he recognises as

⁶ Six years before Victor Hugo ("Préface" of *Hernani*, 1830), Auger defines Romanticism as a form of liberalism, although his attack is mainly addressed to the strictly monarchist writers from *La Muse française*.

⁷ On the subject of this complex question, see T. Jędrzejewski, *Literatura w warszawskiej prasie kulturalnej pogranicza oświecenia i romantyzmu*, Kraków 2016, pp. 12–15, 21–26.

⁸ L.-S. Auger, *Recueil des discours prononcés dans la séance publique annuelle de l'Institut royal de France le samedi 24 avril 1824*, Firmin Didot, Paris 1824, p. 3.

⁹ «[En Allemagne] la littérature n'a pas plus de centre d'unité que le pouvoir, où la police du ridicule n'existe pas, où les esprits, disposés à la méditation par leur isolement, à l'indépendance par leur dispersion, et à l'erreur par leur sincérité même, ont souvent porté la profondeur jusqu'à l'abstrusion, le sentiment jusqu'au mysticisme, et l'enthousiasme jusqu'à l'exaltation. Cette contrée demeura longtemps étrangère au raffinement et à l'élégance de la civilisation moderne. Douée d'une langue énergique, mais rude ; abondante, mais peu favorable à la précision et à la clarté ; d'une langue qui, aujourd'hui même, n'est pas encore fixée, elle n'avait pas de littérature propre quand chacune des autres nations de l'Europe pouvait s'enorgueillir de la sienne»; *ibidem*, p. 5. Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are mine.

virtues. In this way, he explicitly discourages French authors from seeking inspiration in German writers. It is noteworthy, however, that Auger's paternalistic but benign tone aiming to instruct young writers gone astray is not one of vitriolic polemics, but of advice, employing deliberation rather than the demonstrative rhetoric of blame.

This attitude is visible also in another fragment, where Auger anticipates the arguments of the Romantics, who saw the Germans as a welcome source of new literary inspiration through a return to the Middle Ages, religiousness and the sublime. Auger suggests that if the Romantics desire literature which appeals to the heart, arouses emotions, speaks of national history and returns to religion and the Middle Ages, they should turn to classicists instead. He asserts that Corneille's *Polyeucte* and *Le Cid*, Racine's *Athalie* and *Bajazet*, Voltaire's *Zaïre* and *Tancrède* would fulfil the Romantic desire for emotional, national and historical subjects¹⁰. Auger goes on to question whether Romanticists had ever achieved or would achieve anything new in this respect and concludes that "Romanticism is not a system of composition; or rather, Romanticism does not exist, does not have a real life". It is a ghost, adolescent dream, "a vertigo of enthusiastic coteries"¹¹.

Perhaps rather surprisingly, Romanticists appropriated this argument and went on to demonstrate that the tragedies put forward by Auger are in fact Romantic tragedies. In a similar vein, they turned every classicist reproach to their own advantage, blurring the border between classicism and Romanticism. Consequently, the dynamic of the contention can be expressed by way of a very simple syllogism: if *La Muse française* is Romantic – and it is, at least according to what historians of literature state – and if, at the same time, *La Muse française* is classicist, which is what the Romantics declare in their press, then classicism and Romanticism are one and the same.

In fact, for a long time Romanticism in France had been considered complementary to classicism. It was a novelty which did not in fact break with tradition. This was the opinion of authors from *La Muse française* such as Charles Nodier, Alexandre Guiraud and Victor Hugo, who were all stipulating in the press that "it is absurd to suppose a war between classicists and Romanticists. It is absurd to distinguish Romanticism from classicism. [...] We must agree that Romanticism could be nothing else than the classicism of modern times, that is, an expression of a new society which is neither Greek nor Roman society"¹². The idea that Romanticism is just a renewed classicism adapted to nineteenth-century society was popular both in the monarchist and liberal factions of French Romanticism. With regard to the latter, in 1823,

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹¹ «Le romantisme n'est donc rien comme système de composition littéraire; ou plutôt le romantisme n'existe pas, n'a pas une vie réelle [...]. Ces vapeurs sont le délire de quelques orgueils adolescents, le vertige de quelques coteries enthousiastes, les sophismes de quelques esprits faux [...].», *ibidem*, p. 16.

¹² «Il est absurde de supposer qu'il y ait une guerre d'école à école entre les classiques et les romantiques. Il est même absurde de distinguer les classiques des romantiques. [...] convenons que le romantique pourrait bien n'être autre chose que le classique des modernes, c'est-à-dire l'expression d'une société nouvelle, qui n'est ni celle des Grecs, ni celle des Romains», C. Nodier, *Le Petit Pierre*, «Annales de la littérature et des arts», Au bureau des annales de la littérature et des arts, Paris, 1821, vol. 2, p. 78.

Stendhal published his famous pamphlet *Racine et Shakespeare* where he writes that “Romanticism is the art of presenting to people the literary works which, in the actual state of their habits and beliefs are capable of giving them the greatest possible pleasure; classicism, on the contrary, of presenting them with that which gave the greatest possible pleasure to their grandfathers”¹³. In the same year, Nodier – at that time a member of the monarchist Romantic faction – repeats the adage from Louis de Bonald that literature is an expression of society and consequently the “eternal rules of beauty” must be applied to the “new modes of thinking, [...] the new achievements of civilisation, [...] the new needs of the human heart”¹⁴, which is just a new formulation of André Chénier’s appeal “Sur des pensées nouveaux faisons des vers antiques”¹⁵, serving as an epigraph to the collection of poetry published in *La Muse française*¹⁶. In a similar vein, Victor Hugo declares in his third “Preface” (1824) to *Odes* that he does not understand the difference between the Romantic and classical genres, and that he sees the whole debate only as a “frivolous quarrel”. He insists, without any pretence to renew the literary form, that it is a need for truth that is the only reason for his irreverence towards academic taste: “It must be said and reiterated – it is not a need for novelty which torments the minds, it is a need for truth; and it is immense”¹⁷.

Rom(antique)

Nodier and Hugo assert that there is no substantial difference between Romantic and classical styles, but the other authors from *La Muse française* go even further to claim that the Romantics are in fact the true descendants of the great classical authors¹⁸. Alexandre Guiraud declares that the authors from *La Muse française* want to return to the aesthetic principles of the seventeenth century and to cleanse literature of the unbearable mannerisms and accretions which were a result of the poor work of Corneille’s and Racine’s imitators. Guiraud refers to no one else but Nicolas Boileau

¹³ «Le Romanticisme est l’art de présenter aux peuples les œuvres littéraires qui, dans l’état actuel de leurs habitudes et de leurs croyances, sont susceptibles de leur donner le plus de plaisir possible. Le classicisme, au contraire, leur présente la littérature qui donnait le plus grand plaisir possible à leurs arrière-grands-pères», Stendhal, *Racine and Shakespeare*, Michel Lévy, Paris 1854, pp. 33–34.

¹⁴ «nouvelles modifications de la pensée, [...] de nouveaux faits de la civilisation, [...] de nouveaux besoins du cœur humain»; C. Nodier, *Première lettre sur Paris. De quelques logomachies classiques*. In: *La Muse française 1823–1824*, (ed.) J. Marsan, E. Cornély, Paris 1909, vol. 2, p. 193.

¹⁵ “Filling them with a new thought, let us compose ancient lines” from the Chénier’s poem “Invention”.

¹⁶ In his critical edition of *La Muse française*, which I quote in this article, Jules Marsan didn’t include this epigraph. It is available in the original edition from 1823 (*La Muse française*, Tardieu, Paris 1823, vol. 1, p. 7).

¹⁷ «Il faut le dire et redire, ce n’est pas un besoin de nouveauté qui tourmente les esprits, c’est un besoin de vérité; et il est immense», V. Hugo, *Odes et ballades*, (ed.) Pierre A., Gallimard, Paris 2010, p. 29.

¹⁸ A. Guiraud, «Nos Doctrines». In: *La Muse française...*, vol. 2, pp. 3–5.

himself as the highest Romantic authority, with his adage from *Épîtres*: “Rien n’est beau que le vrai, le vrai seul est aimable”¹⁹.

In order to provide further examples of the attempts to appropriate the classicist traditions, I will refer to Nodier’s review of Victor Hugo’s play *Marion Delorme* (1831), published one year after the alleged Romantic victory over the classicists in the “battle of *Hernani*”. The academics accuse Hugo of faulty versification and bizarre metaphors, to which Nodier retorts that, at the level of versification, Hugo does nothing that Horace or Terence would not do²⁰. Nodier quotes Horace’s odes, where the poet “pushed his Romantic audacity” to such an extent that he employed an enjambement of a syllable and even of a letter, which can be seen in the second ode from the first volume of *Odes*:

... Jove non probante, u-
Xorius amnis.

And from the 13th ode, second volume:

...Non gemmis, nec purpura, ve-
Nale nec auro²¹.

According to Nodier, in comparison with Horace, Hugo’s audacity seems quite inoffensive. Besides versification, in Nodier’s view the academics simply fail to recognise the Virgilian sources of Hugo’s poetry with respect to metaphors. For instance, when they mock expressions such as “les flots qui baisent les rivages”, they fail to notice the Virgilian reference in Romantic poetry²². In this way Nodier repeats his charges from the article “Première lettre sur Paris”, where he claimed that the academics do not know what they are saying, that they are going into battle groping in the dark, and that they act like Roman priests during Lupercalia, striking blindly at anybody within their reach – but missing the Romantics, whom they cannot even recognise²³.

The accusation of ignorance levelled against classicists reappears in Nodier’s essay “Du fantastique en littérature” (1830), where he indicates the origins of the Romantic *fantastic* in Homer’s *Odyssey*:

The king of Ithaca’s descent to the underworld, although idealised and of a gigantic character – reminds us of ghouls and vampires from the Levantine tales, for which our learned critics reprimand us so severely. Those devoted followers

¹⁹ “Nothing but truth is lovely, nothing fair”, *ibidem*, p. 3. Charles Nodier quotes the same verse in «Première lettre sur Paris...», p. 199.

²⁰ C. Nodier, *Marion Delorme* par M. Victor Hugo. Premier article in: *Feuilletons du Temps*, (ed.) J.-R. Dahan, Classiques Garnier, Paris 2010, p. 144.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 144–145. Nodier erroneously quotes it as Ode no. 16.

²² C. Nodier, *Première lettre sur Paris...*, p. 194.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 197.

of Homeric antiquity, foolishly entrusted with care of the literary doctrine are so far from understanding Homer – or so vaguely remember the reading!²⁴

Furthermore, in the two different prefaces to his short story *Smarra*²⁵ (1821 and 1832), Nodier complains about the ignorant academic critics who are unable to recognise the classical allusions to Tibullus, Virgil and, above all, to Apuleius, who was the most evident authorial inspiration for *Smarra*. Nodier adopted several elements of *The Golden Ass*: the setting, Thessaly, a magical place, abundant in phantasmagorias and metamorphoses. He also borrowed the protagonists' names: Lucius is the main character of *The Golden Ass*, whereas Méroé is a witch, turning men into animals and tearing out their hearts. Lastly, he took inspiration from the plot structure, relying on metamorphoses and the fantastic. In the first preface, Nodier calls Apuleius "the most Romantic of the Classical authors"²⁶. Indeed, much to the horror of classicists and academics, Nodier often pointed out the "Romantic nature" of ancient authors such as Horace, Virgil or Terence with respect to their imagery and versification; Tasso and Ariosto, owing to their use of the fantastic; or even Corneille, Molière and late Racine, due to their disapproval of academic principles.

In *Smarra* itself, this strategy of deconstruction of the classic-Romantic opposition takes yet another form, although it still uses similar premises. In this case, Nodier highlights in the classical authors all elements related to irrationality, cruelty, savagery, prejudice, or belief in ghosts and magic. What he really appreciates in antiquity is not the harmony, the noble simplicity and the quietness (Winckelmann's *edel Einfalt und stille Größe*), but rather what he calls freneticism and fantasy. In this way, Nodier contrasts the savage antiquity with excessively refined – and thus effectively dead – French classicism. The only relevant opposition would be not between classicism and Romanticism, but between two different visions of antiquity, which corresponds to Maria Kalinowska's conclusions regarding the English and German Romantic interpretation of ancient literature: "The classicist relation to antiquity, defined by formalism, moralising and the principle of imitation, was transformed by the Romantics into an attitude no less reverential, but based on different foundations: freedom, primitivism, symbolism and individualism"²⁷.

²⁴ «La descente du roi d'Ithaque aux enfers rappelle, sous des proportions gigantesques et admirablement idéalisées, les goules et les vampires des fables levantines, que la savante critique des modernes reproche à notre nouvelle école; tant les pieux sectateurs de l'antiquité homérique, auxquels est si risiblement confiée chez nous la garde des bonnes doctrines, sont loin de comprendre Homère ou se souviennent mal de l'avoir lu!», C. Nodier, *Du fantastique en littérature*. In: *Œuvres de Charles Nodier*, vol. 5, Renduel, Paris 1830, p. 77.

²⁵ I have considered *Smarra* in detail in the article «*Smarra albo demony nocy* Charlesa Nodiera: zmierzch estetyki klasycystycznej?». In: *Noce romantyków. Kultura-literatura-obyczaj*, (eds.) D. Skiba, A. Rej, M. Ursela, Kraków 2015, pp. 287–300.

²⁶ Charles Nodier, *Smarra*. In: *La Fée aux miettes. Smarra. Trilby*, Paris 1982, p. 338.

²⁷ „Klasykystyczne odnośnienie się starożytności, określone przez formalizm, moralizatorstwo i zasadę naśladownictwa, zostało przekształcone w romantyzmie w stosunek równie admirujący, ale oparty na innych podstawach: wolności, prymitywizmie, symbolizmie i indywidualizmie”; M. Kalinowska, *Grecja romantyków. Studia nad obrazem Grecji w literaturze romantycznej*, Toruń 1994, p. 109.

Corneille, c'est moi

“Boileau would be on our side”, argues Alexandre Guiraud in an editorial in *La Muse française* from January 1824, “because Boileau defended Corneille against academic attacks on his tragicomedy *Le Cid*; he also came to the defence of Racine’s *Britannicus*, scorned by pedantic critics – and he recognised the sublimity of Racine’s biblical tragedy *Athalie*”²⁸. What the Romantics saw in seventeenth-century aesthetics was not the rigidity of the *système dramatique* with all the rules of *bienséance* and *vraisemblance*, but rather a set of flexible and effective techniques for composing great works of art.

In numerous works of Hugo, Vigny and Dumas, Pierre Corneille is depicted as a misunderstood, rebellious genius and as a poet refusing to submit to the rigours of academic principles. He is the embodiment of a writer persecuted by the mediocre literary world, a pariah whose greatness offends the high and mighty²⁹. In his preface to *Cromwell* (1827), the most famous French Romantic drama, Hugo shows Corneille as a “muzzled lion”³⁰, an energetic and free-spirited artist censured by academic authorities. This image echoes the way in which Hugo intended to portray Corneille in his unfinished play, known only under the working title of *Corneille*. Hugo abandoned his project for unknown reasons – it could have been the difficulty of the task, the unsuitability of the subject or the absence of dramatic intrigue. The only surviving fragments of *Corneille* are plans for several scenes, published posthumously in Hugo’s *Complete Theatre*. The scenes show the author of *Le Cid* as misunderstood and persecuted by his peers, editors and bourgeois readers. The only person who seems to understand Corneille is an eccentric aristocrat (Le Duc) who recognises the sovereignty and uniqueness of Corneille’s genius:

Je vais le voir ! je vais contempler un grand homme !
 Corneille ! que déjà le monde entier renomme !
 Le chantre glorieux du Cid, mon noble aïeul !
 Je lui dois cet hommage, et le dois à lui seul.
 Il a droit aux respects de ma fierté muette.
 Je suis le fils du Cid : mais il est son poète³¹.

These lines superimpose on the seventeenth-century realities the anachronistic Romantic concept of the sovereignty of poetic genius³². In her introduction to this

²⁸ A. Guiraud, *Nos Doctrines*. In: *La Muse française...*, vol. 2, pp. 3–4.

²⁹ M. Dufour-Maître, F. Naugrette, «Présentation». In: *Corneille des romantiques*, (eds.) M. Dufour-Maître, F. Naugrette, Presses des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, Mont-Saint-Aignan 2006, p. 10.

³⁰ V. Hugo, *Préface*, in: *Cromwell*, Paris 1968, p. 86.

³¹ “I will see him! I will contemplate a great man! / Corneille! whom the whole world already praises! / The glorious bard who sang of Cid, my noble ancestor! / I owe this homage to him, and to him only. / He has the right to the respects of my silent pride. / I am the son of Cid: but he is his poet”, V. Hugo, “Corneille” in: *Théâtre complet de Victor Hugo*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris 1967, vol. 2, p. 943.

³² The sovereignty of poetic genius is interpreted by P. Bénichou in terms of *le sacre de l'écrivain*. P. Bénichou, *Le sacre de l'écrivain*. In: *Romantismes français*, Gallimard Quarto, Paris 2004, vol. 1.

play, Anne Ubersfeld reveals the poet's intentions: "first, to show the genius struggling with the jealousy of the mighty, then with that of inferior writers, and finally with misunderstanding on the part of dull bourgeoisie"³³, Corneille is depicted as a great, lonely, misunderstood man, surpassing mediocrity – an image in which Hugo no doubt wanted to recognise his own face³⁴.

The same device can be identified in Alfred de Vigny's Corneille from the historical novel *Cinq-Mars* (1826). Corneille is compared to John Milton, whom he sees in a Parisian literary salon. After trivial recitations in the *préciosité* style favoured by the most popular poets of the day, such as Madeleine de Scudéry, John Milton takes the floor. The fragment he recites of *Paradise Lost* is received as incomprehensible, insipid and blasphemous by the admirers of Honoré d'Urfé, complaining about the "absence of grace, gallantry and the *belle flamme*"³⁵ in the work of the English poet. After the reading, Corneille approaches Milton and says:

Listen. If you aim at present glory, do not expect it from so fine a work. Pure poetry is appreciated by but few souls. For the common run of men, it must be closely allied with the almost physical interest of the drama. I had been tempted to make a poem of 'Polyeuctes'; but I shall cut down this subject, abridge it of the heavens, and it shall be only a tragedy³⁶.

Corneille speaks like a Romantic poet; just like Vigny himself, he values poetry higher than tragedy, which is obviously at odds with historical Corneille and his opinions – not unlike Hugo, when depicting Corneille, Vigny portrays himself. Furthermore, Milton and Corneille are shown as superior to all the other writers thanks to their sovereignty of genius, an idea which Vigny borrows from Félicité de Lamennais and uses in the epigraph to the cited chapter:

Circumstances reveal, so to speak, the royalty of genius, the last resort for the vanishing peoples. The great writers – those kings, who may not have a title, but who truly reign by the force of their character and the greatness of their thoughts, who are chosen by the very events which they are to command³⁷.

This quotation from Lamennais' *Pensées diverses* is inaccurate. Unlike Hugo, who respected the original version in the epigraph to his ode "Le Génie" (1820),

³³ «[...] montrer le génie aux prises tout d'abord avec la jalousie du puissant, ensuite avec celle des écrivains médiocres, enfin même avec l'incompréhension du bourgeois épais», A. Ubersfeld, *Présentation*. In: V. Hugo, «Corneille» in: *Théâtre complet...*, p. 936.

³⁴ This Romantic interpretation of Corneille could be considered an example of the voluntary misreading and appropriation of a great predecessor's work, as defined by H. Bloom (*The Anxiety of Influence...*, p. 13).

³⁵ A. de Vigny, *Cinq-Mars or a conspiracy under Louis XIII*, trans. by W. Hazlitt, D. Bogue, London 1847, p. 247.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

³⁷ «Les circonstances dévoilent pour ainsi dire la royauté du génie, dernière ressource des peuples éteints. Les grands écrivains ... ces rois qui n'en ont pas le nom, mais qui règnent véritablement par la force du caractère et la grandeur des pensées, sont élus par les événements auxquels ils doivent commander», *ibidem*, p. 241.

Vigny adds the phrase “les grands écrivains”, literally identifying the Lamennais’ prophet with a great writer, with whom he identifies himself³⁸.

It is worth noting that both Vigny and Hugo depict the academics in a denigrating light as if they were taking aim not at the seventeenth-century authors, but directly at Louis-Simon Auger and his acolytes from the *Académie française*. Through the symbolic substitution of themselves for Pierre Corneille, a consecrated author in both the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the Romantic writers provide themselves with *auctoritas* and anoint themselves as legitimate authors who speak from the very core of the literary tradition.

Conclusion

Nodier qualified the whole classicist-Romantic quarrel as a logomachy, a vain dispute about words, but from a historical perspective it reveals important features of nineteenth-century French literature. At a time when the history of literature was emerging to replace the normative poetics of classicism, the Romantics revisited the literary tradition to make themselves its very epitome. On the one hand, the debate allowed the Romantics to rewrite the history of classicist literature, to see new aspects in the works of Corneille, whom they promoted as the author of *Le Cid*, an irregular tragicomedy, rather than as the author of the more regular tragedy *Horace*; Racine, whom they saw as the author of the biblical tragedy *Athalie* rather than mythological *Phèdre*; or Charles Perrault, promoted at the expense of Jean de La Fontaine.³⁹ On the other hand, the quarrel also reveals the specificity of French Romanticism: the importance of the argument from authority shows how strongly the authors from *La Muse française* were attached to classical culture and how much they did not want to break with the classical identity.

In the 1820s, the aesthetic polemic could be reduced to a generational conflict, which manifests itself in the Romantics’ desire to replace their enemies in the *Académie française*, supporting their cause with the backing of classical authority. Alexandre Soumet, the founder of *La Muse française*, joined the Academy at the very beginning of the quarrel in 1824. Lamartine tried for the first time in the same year and succeeded only five years later. Nodier tried three times and was finally accepted in 1833. Victor Hugo had tried several times since 1836 and was eventually appointed in 1841. Alfred de Vigny was the most persistent: he had tried seven times before he was ultimately named a member in 1845. This attraction to the “bastion” of classicism may be surprising, but it also shows that the distance between the Romantics and classicists was not as vast as it might seem.

³⁸ In the preface to his play *Chatterton*, Vigny established a typology of different kinds of authors. He distinguished the classicist « homme de lettres », the Romantic « poet » and finally the « great writer » which is a synthesis of the two previous types; A. de Vigny, *Dernière nuit de travail*, dans: *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris 1948, vol. 1, pp. 813–814.

³⁹ Cf. C. Nodier, *Du fantastique en littérature*, pp. 97–99.

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Streszczenie

Na początku drugiej dekady XIX wieku francuscy klasycy starali się zdyskredytować estetykę romantyzmu, piętnując ją w akademickich mowach jako obcą narodowym wzorcom literackim. Oskarżali oni romantyków o zły smak i brak erudycji, ale argument ten obrócił się przeciwko nim w trakcie sporu, który wywiązał się między reprezentantami dwóch estetyk. Romantycy równie zapalczywie jak klasycy posługiwali się argumentem z autorytetu autorów antycznych. Starali się oni przywłaszczyć sobie dziedzictwo Wergiliusza, Horacego, Boileau i Corneille'a, by ugruntować w ten sposób własną estetykę. Artykuł opisuje retoryczną dynamikę tego odcinka francuskiego sporu klasyków z romantykami i ukazuje, jak autorzy związani z pismem *La Muse française* usiłowali zająć miejsce klasyków w nowym panteonie pisarzy pełnych klasycznej erudycji, ale też będących wyrazicielami głosu nowej epoki.

Summary

In the early 1820s, French classicists tried to discredit the Romantic aesthetics, considering it foreign and anti-national in character. They accused the Romantics of bad taste and lack of classical erudition, but the Romantics turned the accusation against the classicists. In fact, both sides of the ensuing quarrel employed the argument from classical authority. French Romantics appropriated the heritage of ancient and classical literature, relying on Virgil, Horace, Boileau and Corneille in order to legitimate their own aesthetics. This paper describes the rhetorical dynamics of the French classic-Romantic quarrel to demonstrate how the authors from *La Muse française* were aiming to replace their opponents as actual representatives of erudite and yet modern literature.

Biography

Marta Sukiennicka – is assistant professor at Adam Mickiewicz University's Institute of Romance Philology. Her main research interests are in the history of rhetoric in nineteenth century French literature and in the work of Charles Nodier (*Éloquences romantiques: les années de l' Arsenal* to be published in 2020). Currently she is also taking part in a NPRH research project "Forms of life, forms of literature", aiming to investigate the influence of natural sciences on nineteenth century French literature (*Geneza i palingeneza życia* co-writed with Juliette Azoulai and Carmen Husti, to be published in 2020). She published several papers on the work of Charles Nodier in French and Polish journals and conference proceedings.

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