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*Aristotle's Poetics in the Van Sickle Collection:
André Dacier's Pivotal Translation and Commentary (1692)*

I thank Rebecka Lindau for her invitation and kind introduction. It is an honor to have been asked to celebrate the gift of Professor Van Sickle's impressive collection of rare books alongside Anthony Grafton. Such collections embody the scholarly interests and bibliophilic practices of a collector, allowing for the investigation of how they conceived of intellectual or literary traditions — and how they documented them. This is why it is important — when such donations are folded into existing rare book collections — to ensure that the relation of each item to its collector and donor remains documented in the library's catalog, so that, when searches are performed, these collections can be retrieved and studied as cultural productions in their own right. When such searches are made possible, the books a collector has assembled can function as an invitation to study a given cultural tradition or set of intellectual practices from specific perspectives — those that appear to have oriented the gathering of the materials. But the proximity of certain items within a collection can also suggest other ways of envisaging past cultural productions — ones the collector may not have thought of, but which the books collected bring to mind when examined together.

My reflections today oscillate between these two types of collection-inspired musings. I will, however, be focusing our attention on a specific subgroup of this collection — the one composed of editions, commentaries, and translations of Aristotle's *Poetics*. After discussing what the arc of the Van Sickle Collection tells us about the early modern circulation of this text, both in 16th century Italy and in 17th century France, I will focus more closely on André Dacier's little-studied translation and commentary of it, published in 1692, which provides some clues as to how, in Dacier's efforts to adapt this text to contemporary preoccupations, erudite practices made way for the emergence of the figure of the modern "critic".

Aristotle's *Poetics* played an important role in the theoretical affirmations of literary autonomy during the 20th century, whether among the formalists who promoted New Criticism or within French structuralist approaches to literature, where the text was framed as the cornerstone

of a new discipline, defined as “literary theory”.¹ The text’s present status as a Classical foundation for a conception of literature that seeks to keep poetic, ethical, and political standards separate is, however, perplexing, given its transmission history. For, after having all but disappeared during the Middle Ages, the *Poetics* underwent a scholarly resurrection in the mid-16th century, during which it was mobilized mostly to support utilitarian understandings of poetry and theater. In 17th-century France, commentators working under the patronage of Cardinal Richelieu then turned the text into a set of “rules” by which the stage could be governed, if not itself be made into a tool of government. The Van Sickle Collection doesn’t allow us to understand how the *Poetics* came to be viewed as a formalist manifesto. But it does enable us to study some of the processes by which the text became so central to early modernity’s utilitarian understandings of literature and the arts, thereby also shedding light on the aura it retains to this day.

Until Greek manuscripts of the *Poetics* reached Italy in the 15th century, Aristotle’s reflections on poetry were mostly known to European scholars through a Latin translation of Averroes’ *Middle Commentary* on the *Poetics*. When the first Aldine edition of the Aristotelian corpus appeared, between 1495 and 1498, the *Poetics* was not included: its first printing occurred only a decade later, in 1508, among a collection of Greek rhetorical treatises (*Rhetores graeci*) also published by Aldus Manutius. But Italian scholars did not take to the text until Alessandro de’ Pazzi’s Latin translation appeared in 1536.² At which point, the *Poetics* suddenly becomes the text upon which to prove one’s scholarly value among the humanists of Northern Italy.

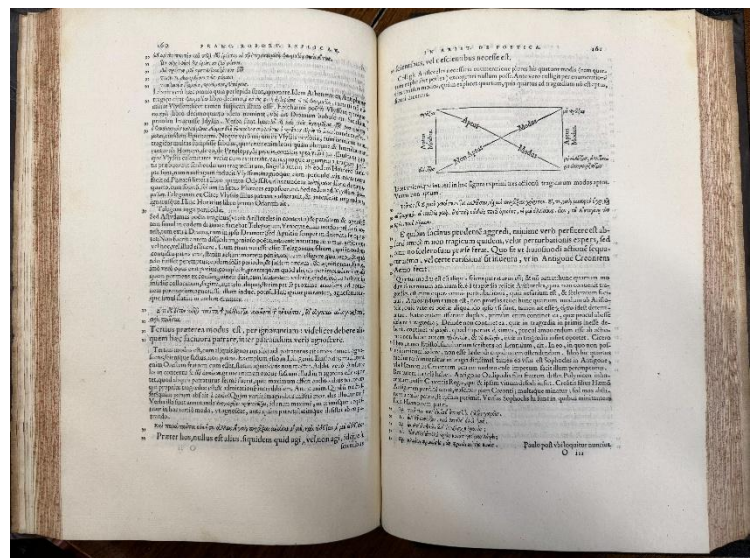
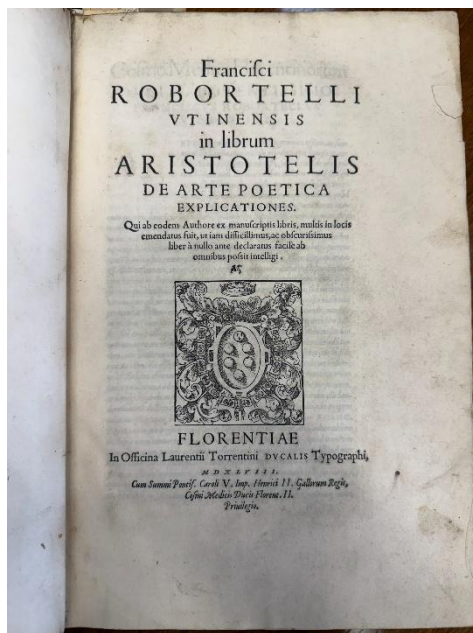
The Van Sickle collection abundantly documents this moment of extraordinary intellectual excitement. The craze began at the Academia degli Infiammati in Padova when, in 1541, Vincenzo Maggi, who taught Aristotelian philosophy in Ferrara, was asked to deliver lectures on the *Poetics*. When he declared himself unavailable, Alessandro Piccolomini, who presided over the academy in the spring of 1543, solicited Bartolomeo Lombardi, a prominent Veronese Aristotelian philosopher. Lombardi’s health prevented him from going beyond the *prolusio*, after which Maggi took his place and delivered nine lectures. Because the academy included many of

¹ B. Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, Chicago, Chicago University Press 1961, 2 vol. and *La Poétique*, Greek text edited and translated into French by J. Dupont-Roc and J. Lallot, with a preface by T. Todorov, Paris, Le Seuil, 1980.

² *Aristotelis Poetica, per Alexandrum Paccium, patritium Florentinum, in Latinum conuersa*, Venice, heirs of Aldo Manuzio and Andreas de Asula, 1536.

the most respected intellectuals and poets of Padova and Venice, as well as some Florentine exiles, such as Benedetto Varci, this lecture series played a central role in fostering scholarly interest in the text in Northern Italy. Francesco Robortello, who had just been appointed professor of Greek and Latin literature at the University of Pisa, had, for example, heard of these lectures when he decided to devote his teaching at the *Studio Pisano* to an explanation of Aristotle's *Poetics* — though it seems that his curiosity about the text had originally been kindled by Pazzi's Latin translation. Robortello subsequently published the first commented edition of the text in June 1548, with a dedication to Duke Cosimo de' Medici, his patron.³

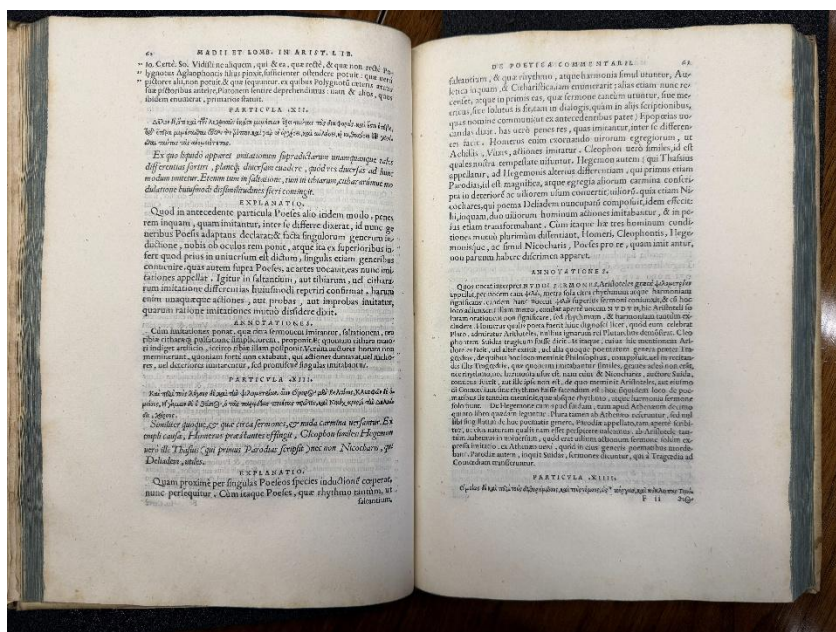
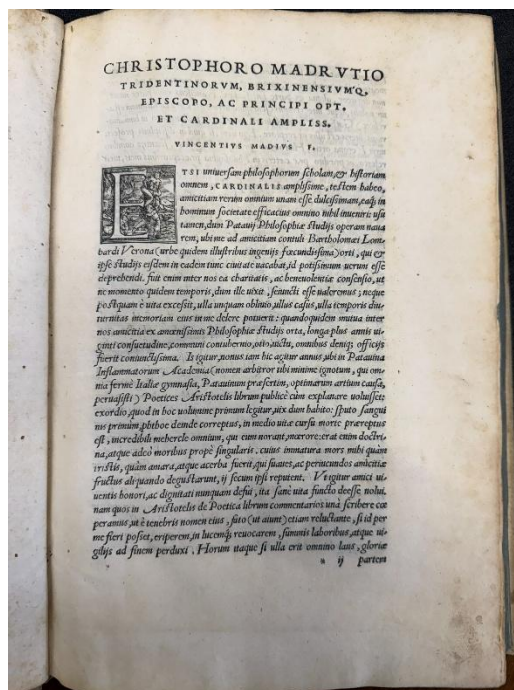
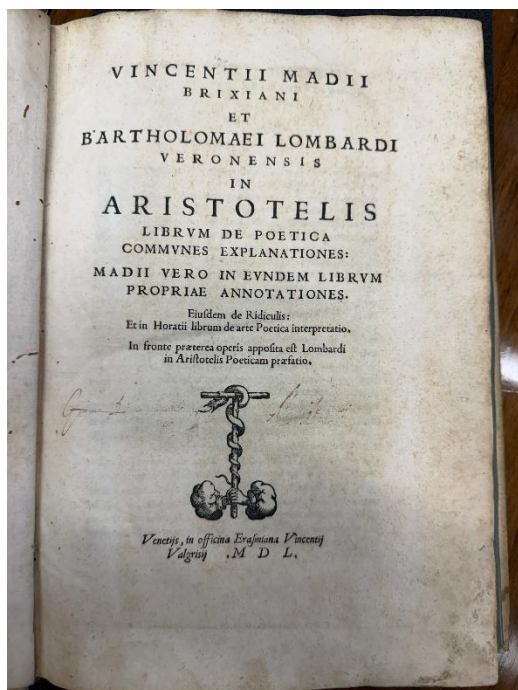
The handsome in-folio edition published by the Duke's newly appointed official printer Lorenzo Torrentino, deepened the attraction for the text. A copy of it is present in Professor Van Sickle's collection, and it is not hard to see from the format and care with which it was printed why such editions were instrumental in establishing not only the authority of scholars such as Robortello, but also the importance of the then little-known text he was commenting upon.



³ Francisci Robortelli Utinensis in librum Aristotelis De Arte poetica explicationes and Francisci Robortelli. Utinensis Paraphrasis in librum Horatii qui vulgo De Arte poetica ad Pisonem inscribitur, Florence, L. Torrentino, 1548, 2 parts in one vol.

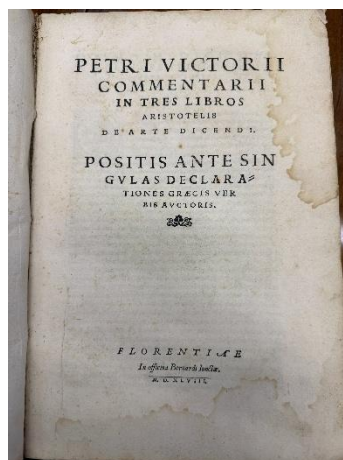
However, the publication of the first commentary of the *Poetics* also kindled rivalries, as Maggi became convinced that Robortello's edition had robbed Lombardi and himself of the honor of being the first to publish a commentary on the text.

The Van Sickle collection also contains an edition of Maggi's commentary, published in Venice in 1550 and dedicated to Cristoforo Madruzzo, the austere bishop of Trent.



The volume includes Lombardi's *prolusio*, as well as numerous polemical remarks against Robortello's readings, which Maggi, who was renowned for his piety, believed downplayed the importance of poetry's moral uses. However, in the case of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the popularity of the text was spurred not only by longstanding polemics on the moral uses of poetry, but also by the *lacunae* (gaps) and interpolations (additions) which marred the text, including in some of the passages which came to be seen as its most central ones. Such is the case of the clause in which the text of the *Poetics* appears to suggest that tragedy, by arousing pity and fear, can help "purgate" men's souls from these (and/or a wider set of) emotions. The debate around not only which passions were to be purged but also what "purgation" effectively meant first congealed in Maggi's responses to Robortello. But it has continued to this day, down to Claudio Veloso's stimulating book entitled *Pourquoi la Poétique? (Why the Poetics?)*, published in 2018, which declares *catharsis* a Stoic interpolation and, drawing on Aristotle's *Politics*, focuses instead on theater as *diagogè* (that is, as an intellectual pastime, with societal benefits).⁴

The Van Sickle collection also contains other materials that help us better understand the circumstances under which the first full-length commentaries of Aristotle's *Poetics* were produced. While Piero Vettori's commented edition of the *Poetics* is not present in the collection, his commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is represented.⁵

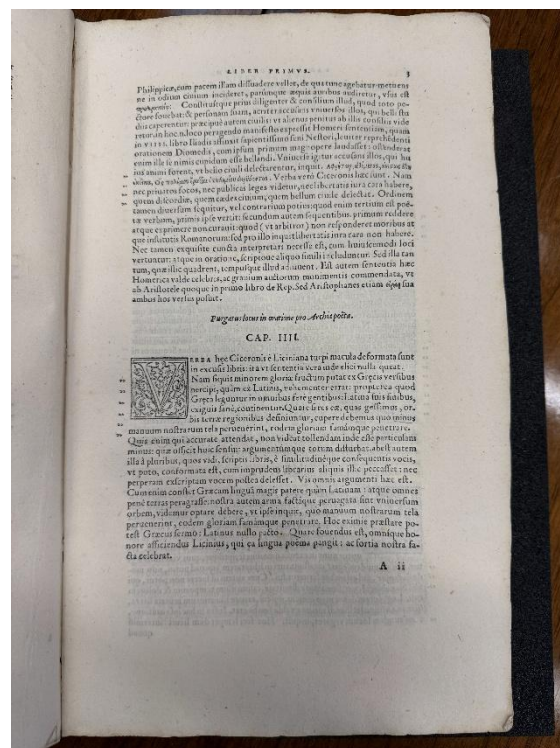
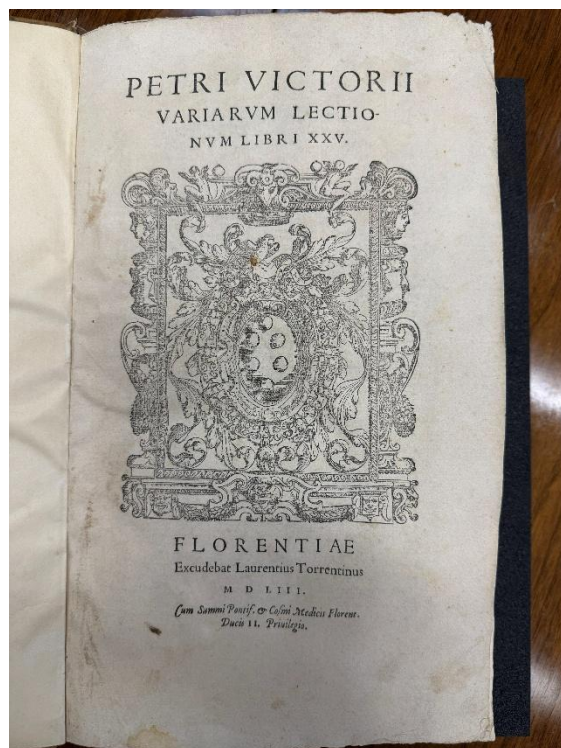


A copy of 1553 Vettori's *Variae lectiones* is also present.⁶

⁴ C. W. Veloso, *Pourquoi la Poétique d'Aristote? Diagogè*, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2018.

⁵ *Petri Victorii Commentarii in tres libros Aristotelis de arte dicendi, positus ante singulas declarationes Graecis verbis auctoris*, Florence, B. Giunta, 1548.

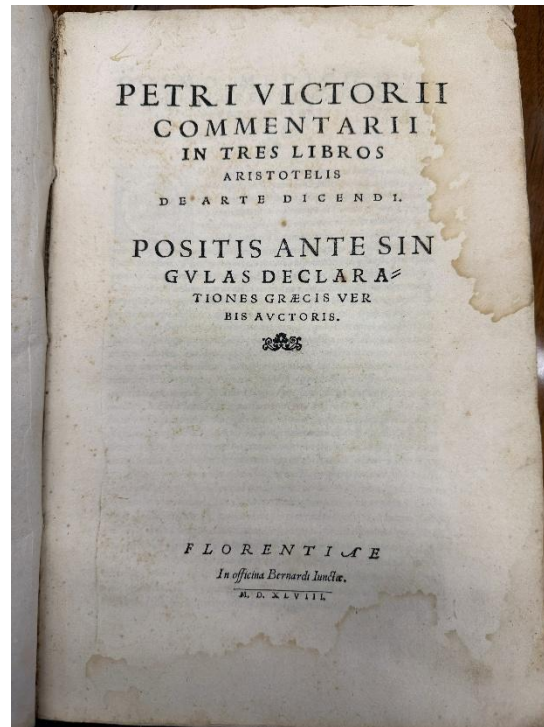
⁶ *Petri Victorii Variarum Lectionum libri XXV*, Florence, L. Torrentino, 1553.



The latter is a collection of difficult passages drawn from a wide variety of Classical texts, with the appropriate elucidations. Such books, which demonstrated a scholar's skill at working through textual conundrums, constitute a well-populated subgenre of 16th-century scholarly literature in the Peninsula.⁷ These *Variae lectiones* document Piero Vettori's activities in the initial stages of his career as a professor at the *Studio Fiorentino*, where he was appointed to teach Greek and Latin philology in 1538. They show him to be a careful collator of manuscripts, who works to identify the earliest extant witness and strives to eliminate unwarranted emendations. Having established his reputation as a Classicist with such publications, Vettori subsequently published a commented edition of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which appeared in 1548, as well as remarks on several of Cicero's major rhetorical works, including an edition of the

⁷ R. Mouren, "La *varietas* des philologues au XVI^e siècle : entre *varia lectio* et *variae lectiones*", in *La Varietas à la Renaissance*, edited by Dominique de Courcelles, Paris, Publications de l'École nationale des chartes, 2001, p. 5-31 (<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.enc.1074>).

Rhetorica ad Herennium (then believed to be by Cicero), published in 1546, together with the *De Inventione*.⁸



Finally, Vettori produced a commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*, published in 1576, followed by a commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, printed in 1584.⁹

Such a record of publications, spanning his 45 years of teaching at the Florentine *Studio*, exemplifies one of the most common scholarly trajectories among 16th-century Italian humanists. These scholars often began their *cursus honorum* by teaching Greek and Latin philology before engaging with the rhetorical and poetic traditions, and finally tackling ethics and politics, considered more difficult topics. Such trajectories mirror a widespread Southern European understanding of the organization of the humanist *curriculum*, which is neatly illustrated by the order in which the Aristotelian *corpus* was printed across all five Giunti editions published in Venice from 1550 to 1562. In these volumes, the logical works of Aristotle were followed by the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*, after which the ethical and political treatises appeared, with the

⁸ M. T. Ciceronis Epistolae ad Atticum, Brutum, & Q. fratrem. Ex diversorum exemplarium, praecipue Victorii ac Manutii, collatione diligentissima castigatae. T. Pomponii Attici vita, interpretatio eorum quae Graeci in epistolis scripta sunt, Lyon, S. Gryphius, 1546.

⁹ Petri Victorii Commentarii in VIII Libros Aristotelis De optimo statu civitatis, Florence, Giunti, 1576 and Petri Victorii Commentarii in X libros Aristotelis De moribus ad Nicomachum, Florence, Giunti, 1584.

metaphysical works being placed last, and often understood as a culmination.¹⁰ This order effectively transformed Aristotle's newly rediscovered text into a *passage obligé* for those seeking to demonstrate a full range of humanistic capacities, as it allowed one to move seamlessly from rhetorical to moral and political preoccupations. Accordingly, Vettori also produced a full-length edition and commentary of the *Poetics*, which first appeared in 1560, and was one of the few 16th-century commentaries to foreground Aristotle's understanding of the role of pleasure in the reception of poetry and theater.¹¹

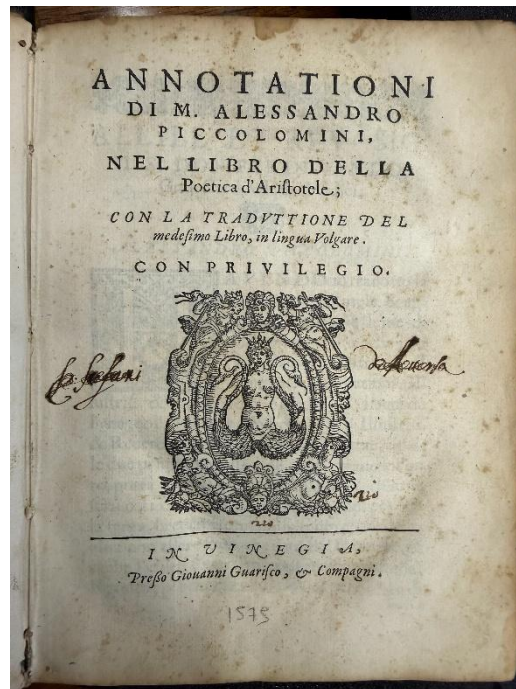
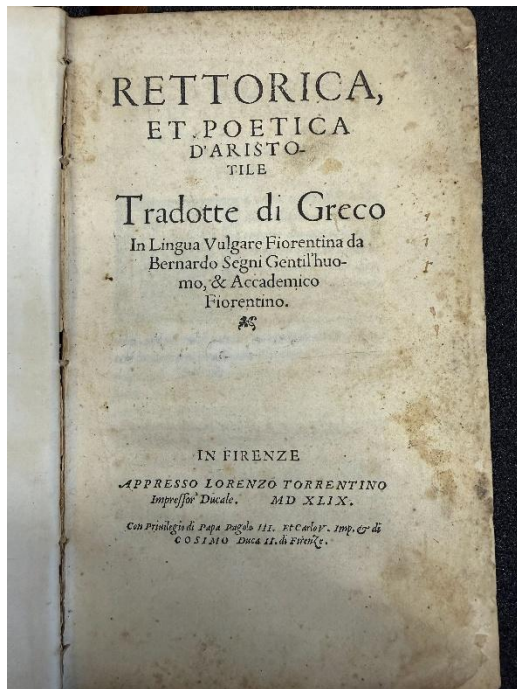
Conceiving of the *Poetics* as articulating logic and rhetoric, on the one hand, with ethics and politics, on the other, often carried with it a social and political understanding of poetry and theater as tools to persuade and pacify communities. As a result, the dedications of the first scholarly editions of the *Poetics* are often texts that make clear how poetry, theater, and poetics can serve the prince, to the point of becoming tools of moral and political regulation. When offering his commentary to Cosimo de' Medici, Robortello, for instance, stresses the political usefulness of both rhetoric and poetry, praising "those arts which rule within assemblies, dominating men's minds and penetrating into their most intimate feelings, to the point where there is no better way to pacify so many different wills, tastes and states of minds, and to lead them wherever one wishes"¹². At a time when Cosimo was seeking to develop more authoritarian forms of governance, Robortello presented Aristotle's *Poetics* to him as a work that explained how poetry and theater could enable the duke to govern his subjects' souls and ensure their submission.

Two other items in the Van Sickle collection further attest to the pervasiveness of this interest in the moral and political uses of the *Poetics*, which likely helped foster a growing fascination for the text. These are the Italian translations of Aristotle's *Poetics* by Bernardo Segni and Alessandro Piccolomini, the former published in 1549 and the latter in 1575, each with commentary or annotations.

¹⁰ D. Blocker, "The Hermeneutics of Transmission: Deciphering Discourses on Poetry and the Arts in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800)", *Intermedialités*, "Transmettre/Transmitting", 5, Spring 2005, p. 37-60 (<http://www.erudit.org/revue/im/2005/v/n5/1005491ar.pdf>), especially p. 49.

¹¹ *Petri Victorii Commentarii in primum librum Aristotelis De Arte poetarum*. Florence, sons of B. Giunti, 1560.

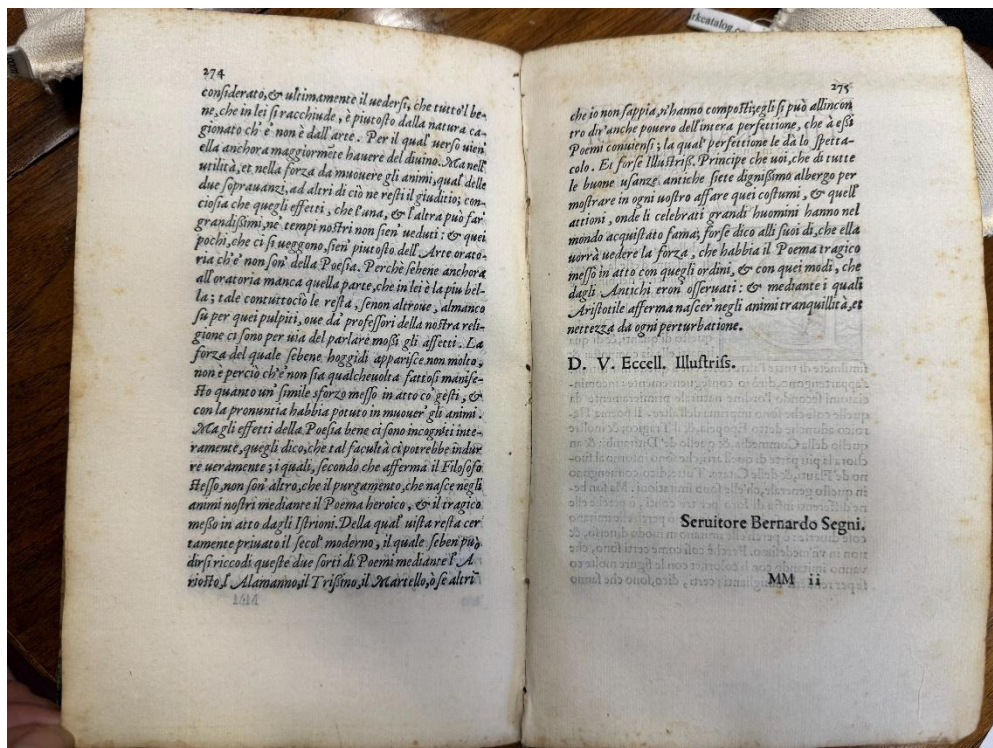
¹² *Francisci Robortelli Vtinensis in librum Aristotelis De Arte poetica, op. cit.*, dedication to Cosimo de' Medici, unpaginated (translation mine).



These vernacular works were prepared by individuals who were not professionalized scholars, yet these authors also modeled their labors on the above-mentioned *cursus honorum*, producing a series of vernacular translations of Aristotle's rhetoric, poetics, ethics and/or politics with commentaries designed to make them accessible to educated but non-specialist readers — though Piccolomini limited himself to the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*, having published ethical works earlier in his career.¹³ Neither Segni nor Piccolomini mastered Greek, which led them to base their translations of the *Poetics* on existing editions: Segni relied on Robortello's edition, while Piccolomini resorted to Maggi's and Lombardi's work.

¹³ *Rettorica et Poetica d'Aristotile, tradutta di greco in lingua vulgare fiorentina da Bernardo Segni*, Florence, L. Torrentino, 1549; *Trattato dei governi di Aristotile, tradotto di Greco in lingua vulgare Fiorentina da Bernardo Segni Gentil'huomo & Accademico Fiorentino*, Florence, L. Torrentino, 1549; *L'Ethica d'Aristotile, tradotta in lingua vulgare fiorentina et comentata per Bernardo Segni*, Florence, L. Torrentino, 1550; *Il Trattato sopra l'Anima di Bernardo Segni, Gentilhuomo, & Accademico Fiorentino*, Florence, G. Marescotti, 1583 (also among the books donated by Professor Van Sickle) and *Della institutione di tutta la vita dell'huomo nato nobile, et in città libera libri diece in lingua toscana, dove et peripateticamente, et platonicamente, intorno alle cose dell'etica, et iconomica, et parte della politica, è raccolta la somma di quanto principalmente può concorrere alla perfetta, et felice vita di quello, composti dal S. Alessandro Piccolomini*, Venice, Giovanmaria Bonelli, 1552; *Della institutione morale di M. Alessandro Piccolomini libri XII*, Venice, G. Ziletti, 1560; *I tre libri della Retorica d'Aristotele a Theodette tradotti in lingua volgare da M. Alessandro Piccolomini*, Venice, Francesco de' Franceschi, 1571; *Annotationi di M. Alessandro Piccolomini, nel libro della Poetica d'Aristotele con la traduttione del medesimo libro, in lingua volgare*, Venice, PG. Guariseo, 1575.

Segni held middle-level administrative positions in Tuscany under Cosimo de' Medici, who also ensured that he was admitted to the Florentine Academy in 1540. Published between 1549 and 1550, Segni's commentaries on the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the *Politics* are all dedicated to Cosimo. The dedication of the *Poetics* contains interesting remarks on how Segni envisaged the moral and political uses of poetry and theater. In it, he underscores that, in his time, rhetoric is rarely used to its full effect, except in the pulpit. He also notes that, because much of the poetry and theater produced by his contemporaries is neither declaimed nor staged, the purgation of the passions described by Aristotle can often not be achieved. This leads him to suggest that Cosimo develop classically-inspired tragedies in Florence, most likely especially in his court, so as to facilitate the purgation of the passions among his subjects:



“And perhaps, most Illustrious Prince, you <...>, in your days, <...> will wish to see the power that the tragic poem possesses when put into action with those rules and in the manner that was observed by the Ancients, and through which Aristotle affirms that tranquility is born in the soul,

as well as purification from every perturbation?”¹⁴ With this rhetorical question, Segni was playing into the Medicean mythology that portrayed the Medici as doctors capable of pacifying the political passions that the Florentine Republic had proved unable to contain.¹⁵ This myth may also account for some of the extraordinary critical fortune of the notion of “purgation of the passions”: for, given its pervasiveness, Florentine scholars trying to flatter Cosimo de’ Medici foregrounded it insistently when presenting the duke with the *Poetics*.

The clause, however, also resonated with the moral preoccupations of those who adhered to Counter-Reformation ideals. Alessandro Piccolomini, who based much of his translation on Maggi’s Christianized understanding of the *Poetics*, is a good example of such moralized readings of the *Poetics*. He was a Siennese author stemming from one of the town’s most prestigious families, with interests in both the sciences and the *studia humanitatis*. Piccolomini declared himself a staunch supporter of the Medici during the summer of 1557, when Cosimo had just wrestled Siena out of the hands of the Spaniards. His 1575 translation and commentary of the *Poetics* is dedicated to Cardinal Ferdinando de’ Medici, who later became Grand Duke. In it, Piccolomini also upholds a moralistic understanding of poetry, with Counter-Reformation overtones, claiming in the preamble of his commentary, that “‘art’ does not legitimately deserve the name of ‘art’, but rather needs to be qualified with adjectives such as ‘false,’ ‘pernicious,’ ‘adulterated,’ and ‘illegitimate,’ if it is not determined by and directed toward some honest utility and benefit in human life”.¹⁶ Tragic *catharsis*, in Piccolomini’s reading, brings moral benefit by moderating our excessive emotions, including pity and fear, thereby helping us learn to face adversity with composure.¹⁷ This didactic perspective does not lead Piccolomini to articulate explicit political uses for poetry and theater, but the interpretation he proposes of the purgation of the passion could easily lend itself to such a reading.

Professor Van Sickle’s collection includes only one item documenting the circulation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in 17th-century France: the first edition of Dacier’s *La Poétique traduite en*

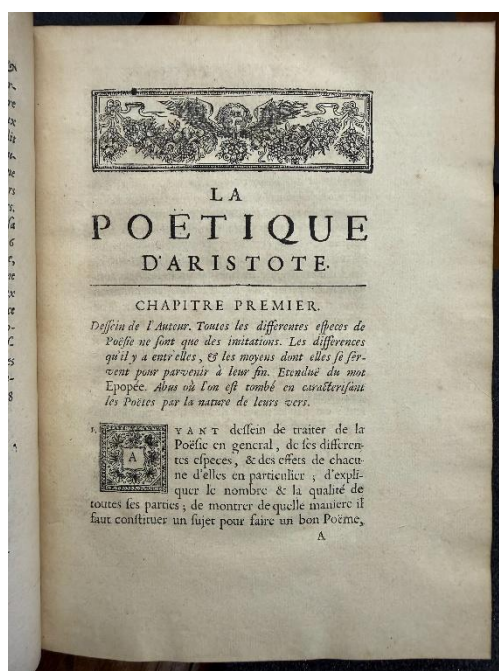
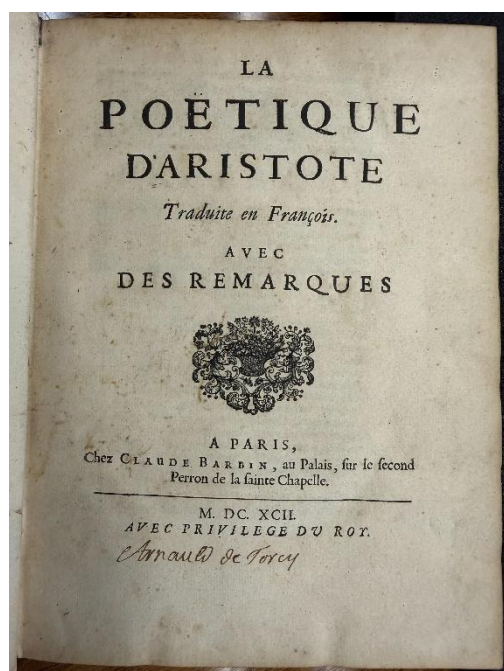
¹⁴ *Rettorica et Poetica d’Aristotile, tradutta di greco in lingua vulgare fiorentina da Bernardo Segni, op. cit.*, p. 274-275 (translation mine).

¹⁵ On this political myth, see J. Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art: Portormo, Leo X and the Two Cosimos*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984 (p. 18, p. 39, p. 40, p. 237 and p. 248).

¹⁶ *Annotationi di M. Alessandro Piccolomini, nel libro della Poetica d’Aristotele, op. cit.*, p. 6 of the unpaginated proemio.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100-106 (p. 103).

français avec des remarques (or *The Poetics translated in French, including remarks*) published in 1692 in an elegant and airy in-4° volume, with ample margins.



This, however, is not indicative of a gap in his carefully curated collection. Rather, it accurately reflects how Aristotle's *Poetics* traveled in France during the first half of the 17th century, during which no other full-length commented edition of this text was published, whether in Latin or French, although the treatise was consistently cited as the definitive authority by those drafting texts aimed at codifying the art of theatre.

After the triumph on stage of Pierre Corneille's play *Le Cid*, in 1637, Richelieu worked to control what could be staged in Parisian theaters. He focused primarily on encouraging men of letters with no training in Greek philology to produce texts that aligned dramatic performances with the monarchy's social and political needs. Among these men were the poet and critic Jean Chapelain, the doctor Hippolyte Jean de La Mesnardière, and the lawyer François Hédelin, who later became abbé d'Aubignac. Jean Chapelain authored the condemnation of Corneille's *Cid*, which the newly born French Academy published in the fall of 1637. La Mesnardière published his *Poétique* in 1640, while D'Aubignac began his treatise on the practice of theater (*La Pratique du théâtre*) at the Cardinal's instigation, but published only in 1657. These books were not aimed at scholars. Their goal was to educate well-to-do theater audiences about what to expect from a

play, while convincing the playwrights of their generation of the need to follow specific “rules” intended to ensure both the verisimilitude and the social and political usefulness of their works. Richelieu’s *protégés* claimed these “rules” had their source in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but the treatise effectively assumes a ghostlike status in their texts. Rather than being discussed extensively, it is mentioned only allusively and quoted in snippets if at all. Chapelain possessed a vast library, which included the major commentaries of the *Poetics*, published by Robortello, Maggi, and Vettori, and had studied these works, though not extensively. La Mesnardière’s and D’Aubignac’s knowledge of the commentaries produced in Italy in the preceding century was more superficial. They consulted them on specific topics (such as the unity of time or the purgation of the passions), without engaging with the Greek text. There was also knowledge among them of Segni’s and Piccolomini’s works, but it too was restricted to establishing the details of specific “rules”. Chapelain, La Mesnardière and D’Aubignac effectively transformed Aristotle’s *Poetics*, as it had been received in 16th-century Italy, into a distant quarry from which arguments could be extracted to compose normative handbooks explaining how theater should be written, watched and interpreted.¹⁸

While Segni had translated and commented upon the *Poetics* in a town where public theater houses did not yet exist,¹⁹ Chapelain, La Mesnardière, and D’Aubignac wrote for a minister who feared that Paris’s nascent public stages could get out of hand, leading to the circulation of problematic representations. In this context, the idea that theater could, as Robortello had phrased it, help “lead” a crowd “wherever one wishes” was enthusiastically embraced by Richelieu and his *protégés*. However, because the teaching of the humanities was confined in France to the *collèges* (in other words, to secondary education) and mostly absent from university *curricula*, Hellenists were in short supply, and none enjoyed the kind of positions in universities which had allowed for the production of the scholarly volumes devoted to Aristotle’s *Poetics* in 16th century Italy. So Richelieu resorted instead to individuals operating outside universities who acted as mediators between political power and the producers and consumers of

¹⁸ On these issues, see D. Blocker, *Instituer un “art” : politiques du théâtre dans la France du premier XVII^e siècle*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2009, ch. I and II, p. 33-184.

¹⁹ In Florence, the first theatre with a permanent proscenium stage, the *Teatro degli Uffizi*, was built by Bernardo Buontalenti in 1585, and was used exclusively for court performances. The *Teatro della Pergola*, built in 1656 by Ferdinando Tacca for the *Accademia degli Immobili*, was also originally utilized for court performances, but opened to the general public in the early years of the 18th century.

public spectacles. This configuration allows us to understand the guise under which the first two French translations of Aristotle's *Poetics* were circulated.

The first one, a clumsily prepared in-8° entitled *La Poétique d'Aristote traduite du grec par le sieur de Norville*, was published in Paris in 1671, by a printer of little renown, Thomas Moette. The name on the title page was a pseudonym concealing a translator who, while also targeting a readership of poets, well-to-do amateurs, and courtiers, intended to remain anonymous and seems to have labored without a patron's support. The fact that his identity has never been uncovered suggests that he was quite obscure. The book contains no Greek text and is devoid of notes or remarks. It was printed in small numbers (for very few copies survive) and never reprinted. In short, the book did not find an audience, likely because the translator had little standing among the readership he was targeting.

The case of André Dacier's *La Poétique traduite en français avec des remarques*, published in 1692 by Claude Barbin — a fashionable printer whose catalogue was filled with the most sought-after literary novelties, including scores of plays — is quite different. Yet Dacier also faced the absence of a pre-existing scholarly audience for his translation and had to adapt accordingly. What is especially interesting with his commented translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* is how he folds a scholarly ethos into the worldly reception of the text, which had previously predominated in France, using this uneasy combination to define a new profile for what he calls the “critic”.

Dacier stemmed from a family of Protestant jurists. He was educated at the Protestant Academy of Saumur, which was one of the few places in France where Greek and Latin philology were taught at advanced levels. There, he studied under the Hellenist Tanneguy Lefèvre, whose daughter Anne he ultimately married. They moved to Paris in 1673 and abjured Protestantism in 1685.²⁰ Anne was closely associated with the project of producing editions of Classical texts to support the education of the King's heir (known as the collection *Ad usum Delphini*), in which André also produced an edition of Festus. Understanding, however, that such

²⁰ Anne and André Dacier's trajectory, see E. Itti, “Tanneguy Le Fèvre et les époux Dacier entre mécénat privé et mécénat royal”, *Littératures classiques*, 2010, 72 (2), p. 21-47 (<https://doi.org/10.3917/licla.072.0021>), D. Ribard, “Les usages politiques des intellectuels protestants à la cour de Louis XIV (Anne Le Fèvre, André Dacier, Pierre-Daniel Huet et Tanneguy Le Fèvre)”, *Littératures classiques*, 2010, 72 (2), p. 49-62 (<https://doi.org/10.3917/licla.072.0049>) and D. Blocker, D., “Servir le prince par la philologie : André Dacier (1651-1722), un érudit dans l'orbite du pouvoir royal”, *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 35 (1), p. 3-22 (<https://doi.org/10.1179/0265106813Z.00000000019>).

works of erudition would not help him gain worldly recognition, he embarked on an edition of the complete works of Horace, designed to attract well-to-do readers. Despite his efforts, the ten volumes of this bilingual edition — published between 1681 and 1689 — remained very evidently a work of professionalized erudition, to the point that his scholarship was characterized as pedantic in a polemic with the marquis de Sévigné. It is at this moment in his career that Dacier turned to finalizing a translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, with remarks, which he had been working on since at least 1683 (as suggested by the date appearing in the *privilège* of his 1692 *Poétique*). It is likely that one of his main hopes in choosing this text was that producing an authoritative rendering of the text on which Richelieu and their *protégés* had based their affirmation of the usefulness of the stage might help him secure royal patronage. But Dacier did not, however, abandon the idea of capturing a worldly audience and, to this end, accompanied his translation of the *Poetics* with a rendition of two plays by Sophocles, also published in 1692. Deeming *Oedipus* and *Electra* essential to the proper understanding of Aristotle’s conceptions, Dacier explained that he had glossed both works in such a manner to make them appealing to “all persons of good taste”.²¹

Dacier’s translation of the *Poetics* comes without a Greek text, which would have risked disconcerting such readers. The in-4^o edition was also published anonymously, as if Dacier had feared the type of adverse reception that had greeted his scholarly edition of Horace among Parisian elites. Though the book bears no dedication, the author does seem intent on attracting the King’s patronage. Indeed, the preface of the work expresses unconditional adoption of the theories on the usefulness of the stage popularized at Cardinal Richelieu’s instigation. Dacier even takes matters one step further, declaring poetry to be “the daughter of Religion”, and subsequently characterizing Father René Le Bossu’s heavily Christianized understanding of epic poetry in his 1675 *Traité du poème épique*, to be the “best commentary” of Aristotle’s *Poetics*.²²

The outlining of theater’s moral uses, with which Dacier worked to capture the attention of a monarch who had grown increasingly pious, also goes hand in hand, in Dacier’s preface, with the definition of his own position as a “critic”. He begins by pointing to his capacity to provide a “simple and literal” translation, while others, such as La Mesnardière, are said to have proven

²¹ *L’Edipe et l’Electre de Sophocle, tragédies grecques, traduites en François avec des remarques*, Paris, Claude Barbin, 1692, unpaginated preface (translation mine).

²² *La Poétique traduite en français avec des remarques*, Paris, Claude Barbin, 1692, preface, p. xvii (“c’est le meilleur Commentaire qu’on puisse voir sur tout ce qu’Aristote écrit de ce Poème”).

themselves poor “critics” because of their inability to understand both Aristotle’s language and his philosophical conceptions.²³ Dacier also explains that he purports to imitate the “freedom of those ancient critics” who did not hesitate to “censure” any “faults” they spotted in the conceptions of the author they were elucidating.²⁴ This definition of the “critic” foregrounds knowledge, discernment, and impartiality — the latter distinguishing Dacier from playwrights such as Corneille, whose interpretations of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in the 1660 edition of his plays, Dacier deems self-serving.²⁵ Yet, this definition of the “critic”, which ties Dacier’s practices not only to those of Italian humanists such as Vettori,²⁶ but also to a largely mythical understanding of how textual criticism was practiced in Classical Antiquity, gives way, towards the end of the preface, to a different kind of critical figure. This other form of “critic” is an author who is not afraid to suggest to his readers their own defects and works to make them aware of their “vices”.²⁷ Here, Dacier repositions himself as the censor of contemporary theatrical practices, suggesting that his translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* will allow playwrights to see their “defaults”, while making their audiences capable of evaluating them: “If these rules are not *for* <the playwrights>, he concludes, they will be *against* them, and their works shall be judged by them.”²⁸

Though Dacier’s *Poétique* claims to revive the practices of the Renaissance “critic,” the book conflates this figure with that of a modern evaluator of contemporary literary practices, thereby reconfiguring the claims of Richelieu’s *protégés* to focus even more closely on disciplining the tastes of theatergoers. This strategy was clearly a gamble — but it succeeded remarkably well. A second edition of the text, published by Barbin the same year, in-8°, with a frontispiece and additional “remarks,” was immediately counterfeited in Amsterdam by George Gallet, which unmistakably suggests a roaring success. Both in-8° editions bear Dacier’s name on the title page. And both clarify the shift to normative and evaluative poetics on that same page, which states that the book offers the “most detailed rules” for evaluating epic poetry and

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xx (“j’ai imité la liberté des anciens Critiques”).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xviii-xix.

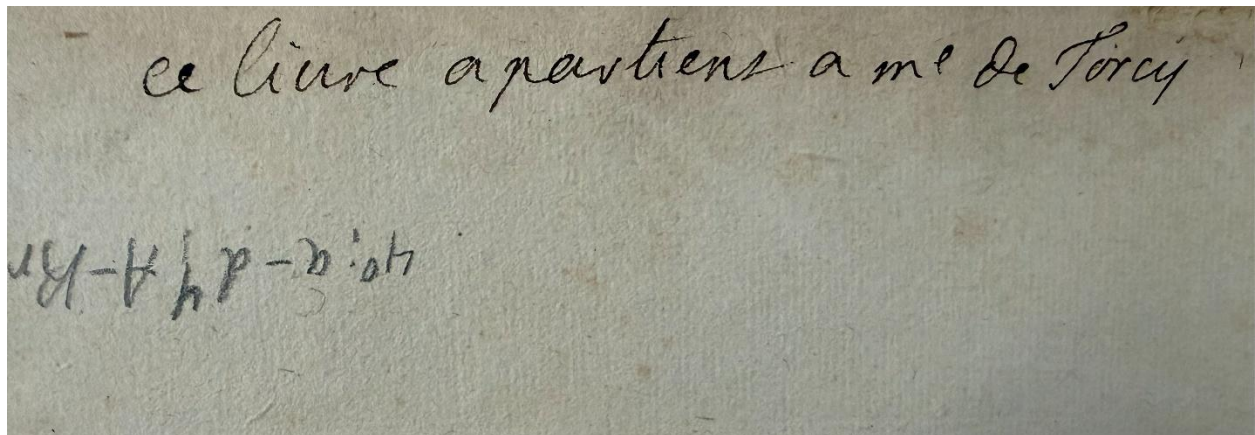
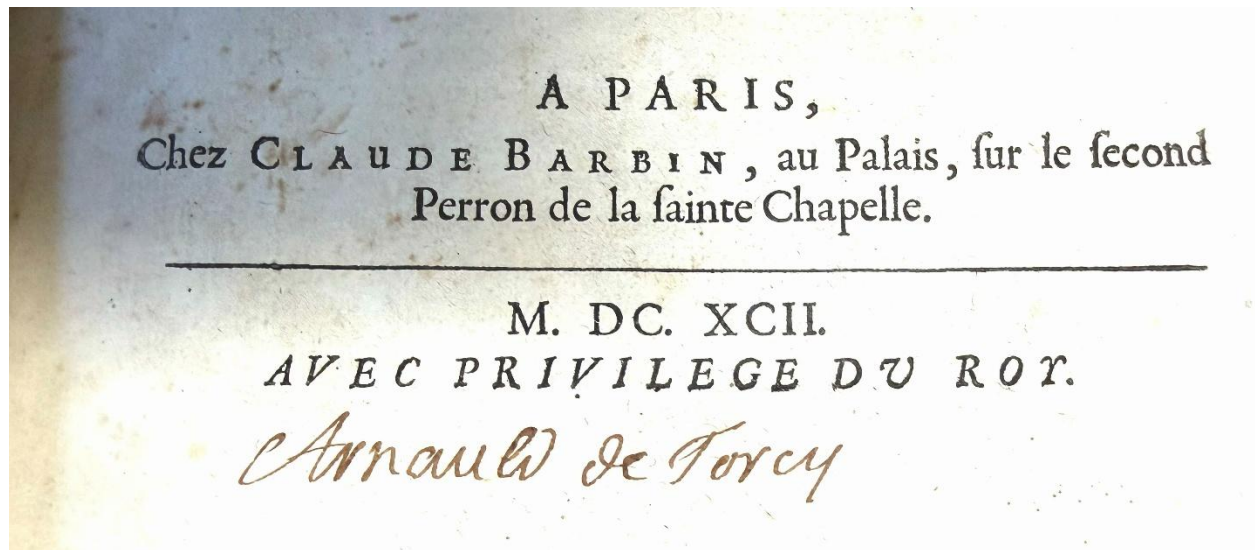
²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xvii: “De tous les Commentateurs Latins Victorius me paroît le plus sçavant, le plus exact & le plus sage; mais pour entendre la *Poétique*, ce secours ne suffit pas.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv (translation mine): “Si ces règles ne sont pour eux, elles seront contre eux & feront juger de leurs ouvrages.”

theater (“contenant les regles les plus exactes pour juger du poëme heroïque, & des pieces de theatre, la tragedie & la comedie”).

The copy that Professor Van Sickle is generously donating to the Center also bears witness to the book’s worldly appeal. A possessor’s note on the title page (stating “Arnauld de Pomponne”), completed by an additional inscription on the book’s last leaf (“ce livre appartient a M^e de Torcy”, or “this book belongs to Madame de Torcy”) indicate that the copy was owned by Catherine-Félicité Arnauld de Pomponne, who married Jean-Baptiste Colbert de Torcy in 1696.



Jean-Baptiste Colbert de Torcy was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs from 1689 onwards and owned a library of 1,300 volumes, which was auctioned off after his death in 1755.²⁹ According to the auctioneer's catalogue, this *Poetics* was among the books offered for sale.³⁰ It is important to note, however, that Professor Van Sickle's copy belonged not to the minister himself but to his wife, who stemmed from a wealthy and learned Jansenist family. As such, this inscribed volume clearly suggests that Dacier succeeded in making Aristotle's *Poetics* readable not only for poets and playwrights, or well-read male readers, but also for the educated *salonnières* of late 17th-century Paris.

The book clearly also struck the right balance to earn the King's favor. In 1695, Dacier was admitted to the Academy of Inscriptions before being elected to the French Academy. Between 1699 and 1704, he also served as a royal censor for books, overseeing both Classical scholarship and contemporary theater. In 1702, he was appointed guardian of the books in the King's Cabinet at the Louvre. These roles allowed him to continue producing Christianized translations of Classical texts, including the complete works of Plato and Plutarch's *Lives*, thereby positioning himself as a successor to Renaissance philology in the age of absolutism. His bestselling edition of the *Poetics* also formed the basis of the first English translation of the text, which appeared in London in 1705, together with a translation of all of Dacier's remarks on Aristotle's work.³¹ In other words, Dacier effectively transformed Aristotle's text into the most relevant Classical text for fashionable 18th-century theater audiences not only in France but across Europe — a remarkable outcome for an element of the Aristotelian corpus that was all but forgotten among Western scholars two centuries earlier. As such, Dacier played a key role in endowing the *Poetics* with the aura it still possesses today. I am thankful to Professor Van Sickle and his collection for having made it possible to retrace some of this text's complex history with you this evening.

²⁹ Summary information about this collector and his collection is available [here](#).

³⁰ *Catalogue de tous les livres de M. le Marquis de Torcy, ministre et secrétaire d'État*, Paris, Barrois (1755), p. 35, item n° 538 (in-4° edition).

³¹ *Aristotle's Art of Poetry, translated from the Original Greek, according to Mr. Theodore Goulfton's edition, together, with Mr. D'Acier's Notes Translated from the French*, London, D. Browne and W. Turner, 1705 (in-8°). The text made available in this edition of the *Poetics* was established by comparing Dacier's translation to a book entitled *Aristotelis De poetica liber, Latine conversus, et analytica methodo illustratus* (London, Thomas Snodham, 1623), which contains an annotated Latin translation prepared by Theodore Goulfton. Goulfton was a physician with extensive knowledge in Classics and theology. He studied at Oxford and was later active in London († 1632). He also published a translation of the *Rhetoric* in 1619. But the editor of 1705 English adaptation/translation of Dacier's *Poétique* remains unknown.