

## INTRODUCTION

Although events in La Harpe's life led him to become a friend of the Catholic revival during which Chateaubriand, to name only one, was pleased to have his support,<sup>1</sup> he is rightly best remembered as a disciple of Voltaire who rose to eminence as a critic through his wholehearted acceptance of the latter's ideas.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, everything in the man and in his work is deeply marked by the influence of the patriarch. While he considered Voltaire to be the supreme example of man's failure to find a truly universal genius in the arts,<sup>3</sup> he too attempted to follow the latter's example of diversity: 'La littérature, telle que je l'ai conçue, comprend tout ce que les Anciens attribuaient au grammairien, au rhéteur, au *philosophe*, et n'exclut que les sciences physiques, les sciences exactes et les arts et métiers'.<sup>4</sup> He sought fame, not only as a critic, but as a playwright, poet, orator, translator and pamphleteer.

Of his varied work it is his criticism and his theatre that have attracted most attention in the past. As early as 1805, A. A. Barbier published an article on various bibliographical errors in the final section of the *Lycée ou cours de littérature*, — the *Histoire de la Philosophie du dix-huitième siècle*.<sup>5</sup> The whole of the *Lycée* was first analysed in some detail by M. J. Chénier in a report drawn up for the Institut de France in 1810.<sup>6</sup> He concentrated on the scope of the work, pointing out its gaps and the limits of La Harpe's erudition. The same interest in the general structure of the *Lycée* characterizes two further studies on the work by P. C. F. Daunou<sup>7</sup> and B. Jullien.<sup>8</sup> Various German scholars have written shortish dissertations on special aspects of La Harpe's criticism, such as his views on seventeenth-century French literature,<sup>9</sup> German literature,<sup>10</sup> and his critical theories and aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> In the field of stylistics, Emile Malakis has sought to prove that La Harpe's *Eloge de Racine* contains the earliest example in French literary criticism of the figurative use of the term *couleur locale*.<sup>12</sup> The first major thesis on La Harpe's criticism in general was written by an American scholar, Dr G. M. Sproull, who examined thoroughly the question of whether La Harpe was the first critic to draw up a proper history of literature.<sup>13</sup> Another American, Dr A. D. Bonneville, has shown La Harpe as a judge of his contemporaries, concentrating on those figures that have stood the test of time.<sup>14</sup> These are the only two fully developed studies yet written on what is undoubtedly the most important part of La Harpe's work.

Short but valuable studies of La Harpe's tragedies are given by Professor H. C. Lancaster in his monumental works on the history of French tragedy in the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> He includes useful summaries of plots together with

views by La Harpe's contemporaries. A fairly short but complete review of La Harpe's *dramas* as well as of his tragedies is provided by Walter Gasch.<sup>16</sup> La Harpe's views on dramatic theory are dealt with, together with those of other eighteenth-century critics, by J. H. Davis.<sup>17</sup> The hellenist and friend of La Harpe, J. B. Gail, drew up an interesting comparison of La Harpe's *Philoctète* and the Greek original,<sup>18</sup> and Alexis Pitou has in a subtle study of the various changes in the text of *Mélanie*<sup>19</sup> shown the hidden meaning behind many of these changes. We ourselves have attempted to reconstruct the plot of one play by La Harpe that was thought lost — *Gustave*, and have published this reconstruction together with the text of another of his previously unprinted tragedies — *Les Brames*.<sup>20</sup>

La Harpe's work in other genres has not received such full treatment. Apart from general comments in superficial studies of La Harpe, either written just after his death or to accompany various editions of his work, we know of no attempt to appraise systematically his value as an orator, translator or pamphleteer. His political and religious views have been largely ignored.<sup>21</sup> His poetry has been dealt with somewhat summarily by Emile Faguet, who sees La Harpe as in some ways a precursor of the early Romantics.<sup>22</sup> Recently, more attention has been given to his correspondence. Two major collections of letters have appeared, that published by Dr A. Jovicevich in 1965,<sup>23</sup> and that published by myself in 1967.<sup>24</sup> However, many letters remain unpublished.<sup>25</sup>

La Harpe's life has also been the subject of somewhat fragmentary treatment. Historians have concentrated on the more scandalous aspects such as his imprisonment in 1760<sup>26</sup> or his behaviour under the Revolution.<sup>27</sup> The only serious biography of La Harpe dates from 1820,<sup>28</sup> and posterity's picture of him has been coloured to a considerable extent by the harsh views of contemporary scandal-sheets. Many of La Harpe's contemporaries believed implicitly Chamfort's judgement of him: 'C'est un homme qui se sert de ses défauts pour cacher ses vices'.<sup>29</sup>

The aim of the present study is to give a less partial picture of the man and to produce for the first time a complete survey of the life and works of one of the most important literary figures of the second half of the eighteenth century.