

*Théâtre: Tome I.* Pierre Corneille.

Ed. Claire Carlin, Jean de Guardia, Marc Vuillermoz, and Liliane Picciola. Bibliothèque du Théâtre Français 20. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014. 974 pp. €49.

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This volume presents Corneille's first five plays — four comedies and one tragicomedy, written and staged between 1629 and 1633. In grouping together *Mélie*, *Clitandre*, *La Veuve*, *La Galerie du Palais*, and *La Suivante*, the editors make the case for the literary and

theatrical value of the lesser-known plays of the preeminent French tragedian. While these works have long been available in the *Œuvres complètes* edited by Georges Couton in the Edition de la Pléiade published in 1980, a volume upon which the four editors assembled here repeatedly draw, this collection offers a more general introduction to Corneille's comedies for a broader audience. In placing renewed attention on plays that have often been relegated to footnotes while critical attention has dwelt on Corneille's canonical tragedies, the editors effectively demonstrate the comedies' own merits, as well as their capacity to shed light on the playwright's more acclaimed plays.

The introductions provided by the four editors, all of whom have published widely on Corneille's early career, are thorough and insightful, though of uneven length and focus. Picciola and Vuillermoz's respective presentations of *La Galerie du Palais* and *Clitandre* exceed thirty pages, while Carlin's introductions to *La Suivante* and *La Veuve* end at fifteen. Aiming for somewhere in between, de Gurardia's introduction to *Mélite* settles for twenty. Carlin devotes a relatively substantial section to contemporary stagings of the plays, while the other editors barely mention such efforts, if at all. Nonetheless, the introductions converge on highlighting how well Corneille captures the energy, wit, and jargon of his *honnêtes gens* whom he places within an intriguing urban yet also pastoral setting.

Each editor provides a useful and up-to-date bibliography dedicated to the assigned play, in addition to a good general bibliography on Corneille at the volume's end. The glossary of terms whose French meanings have changed since the seventeenth century will be helpful to students and nonspecialists. Each word is defined and identified by verse number within the five plays, enabling one to remark, for example, on the rarity of a term such as *généreux*, so often associated with Cornelian dramaturgy, but which only appears twice, against the prevalence of the gallant vocabulary of *feu* and *flammes*, staples of the rival Racine's rhetoric, but which figure in Corneille's comedies almost 130 times each. The five indexes facilitate searches by going beyond proper names and listing mythological and literary characters, as well as geographical locations mentioned in the plays.

In her general introduction, Picciola explains the editors' intent to display the specificities of the five comedies of the pre-*Le Cid* era, but also to uncover the "paradoxical unity" (2) within the playwright's corpus. The Corneille that surfaces here is reluctant to obey the rigidity of the classical rules and unities, and he deploys a pronounced tone of irony, as well as a keen talent for mimicking the vocabulary, tastes, and financial preoccupations of the young Parisian aristocracy of the first half of the seventeenth century. Such insights are not insignificant in understanding the ethos of the much-admired Cornelian hero who emerges less than a decade after these works are staged.

The comedies are presented according to a chronology of their probable but uncertain dates of production, as opposed to their publication. This is done as a way of portraying Corneille at work and seeing the evolution of his drama from his perspective. This successful decision is part of the project's larger aim of bringing the plays to life as

theatrical productions rather than as purely literary texts. In this vein, the editors have decided to publish the plays' first editions so as to better illustrate the theatrical climate of the Paris stage in the 1630s and the vivacity of the young Corneille's sometimes uncouth language, especially in contrast to the 1660 or 1682 editions (used in the *Pléiade*), where the playwright's careful edits reflect a more mature and restrained writer. At the end of their introductions, the editors provide a detailed list of *variantes* allowing readers to gauge the shift from what they describe as a "naïve" and "malicious" (2) Corneille to the elder statesman of the weighty tragic genre of the later century. Accessible, informative, and affordable, this volume is a welcome addition to a growing corpus dedicated to enlarging our understanding of the variety present within the oftentimes staid category known as *le théâtre classique*.

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