

Nicholas Dion. *Entre les larmes et l'effroi: la tragédie classique française, 1677–1726*.

Lire le XVII^e siècle 14. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012. 466 pp. €48. ISBN: 978–2–8124–0607–2.

This is a book about what became of French tragedy after Racine, a moment in the history of that genre that has fallen into relative neglect. The study is divided into three parts, though the distinction between the parts is rather elusive. In each section the author is concerned with the relations between fear and pity or compassion, the *phobos* and *eleos* of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The first section, after a lengthy justification of the chronological boundaries of the study, is primarily concerned with what late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century critics and

literary theorists had to say about tragedy, elegy, and the role of the emotions of sadness and horror in each. The second section more directly describes the plays written in this period that exhibit elegiac, plaintive themes or horrific, frightening ones. In the three chapters of this section the elegiac or horrifying dramatic components are described around three problematics: first, the problem of amplifying a very simple incident so that it can fill the five acts of a tragedy; second, the role of victims as protagonists; and finally, the relation between love and politics in the tragic plot. The third section concerns the production of a dramatic impact on the audience and also has a tripartite structure. Here Dion discusses first ways to make audiences weep; second, ways to frighten the audience, and finally the influence of Ovid's *Heroides* on French tragedy.

Entre les larmes et l'effroi is full of information about authors who, if they are remembered at all, are generally known as the butt of jokes, the likes of Crébillon père and Campistron. In fact, there are, as Dion shows, many exciting and colorful works, high in emotion, that appealed to audiences much as melodrama did in the nineteenth century. Because the book was written as the development of a French *thèse*, the emphasis on coverage and completeness prevents this study from becoming a page-turner, but Dion is certainly right to perceive the affinity between this forgotten dramatic world and twentieth-century films like *Night of the Living Dead*.

The most valuable parts of the book are those that most directly concern the two poles of the elegiac and the horrific as components of dramatic tragedy. Dion has much that is useful to say about the elegiac component of Racine's theater in general and on the influence of Ovid in particular. It is unfortunate that he did not mention the important work of Georges May, whose *D'Ovide à Racine* (1949) was an important study of Racine's interest in the Roman poet. Dion reminds us that contemporaries found Racine's theater too elegiac to suit everyone's taste, particularly in the case of *Bénérice*. After Racine, the assimilation of elegiac elements into tragedy increased, in part, argues Dion, to compensate for — or at least in a dialectic with — the use of exceptionally simple plots that required a certain amount of filling to last five acts. Dion gives a useful inventory and description of eighteenth-century theorists of elegy, authors like J.-B. Souchay, J.-B. Le Blanc, and J.-B. Michault.

The other emotion, which ramifies into fright, terror, weeping, and horror, is described as being revived after several decades of relative eclipse on the French stage. As Dion points out, Hardy's plays in the first decades of the seventeenth century staged a considerable amount of violence. At the end of the century and into the next, horrific tortures become at least discursively a major component of tragedy, especially in opera — that is, in *tragédie lyrique*. Dion retraces the theory of horrific representation from La Mesnardière onward as well as giving examples of the practice.

This study is a useful guide to the tragedy of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It is also valuable as a survey of the poetics of pity and fear as they were elaborated at this period.

JOHN D. LYONS
University of Virginia