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Molière: Les Fâcheux (review)

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accepted view that although the use of the ‘play within the play’ is widespread in Elizabethan theatre, it is absent from Corneille, Molière and Racine. His subtle and convincing analysis of Racine’s less obvious use of the technique, although undoubtedly controversial, adds to the chilling cruelty of Agamemnon, Titus and Néron, as they adopt the roles of lead actor and director in the dramas they concoct within the plays. Finally, Larry Riggs explores issues of gender, hegemonic discourse, self-fashioning and surveillance in the theatre of power of absolute monarchy and the theatrical entertainment provided by that power. He revisits the well-worn parallelism between the suppression of the body (and its desire and disorder) in the Cartesian epistemology of objectivism, and the violent repression of painful feelings and memories of wounded bodies, which makes heroic masculinity possible in Corneille’s theatre. His argument is seductive but unconvincing. It relegates Corneille’s women to a femaleness that is defined by the ‘disorders’ of emotion, the body, and contestation of the discursive and political dominance of masculine power. In fact, some of the women in Corneille’s theatre provide a reasoned middle path between the violence of ‘masculine reason’ and order, and the disorder of ‘feminine emotion’, demonstrating that they shared the same human rationality with the men of the plays, but not necessarily the same value system. Undergraduates may find this book useful because the short essays will allow them to sip the work of leading specialists of seventeenth-century theatre and culture. Academics may find it stimulating and be prompted to revisit well-known plays, themes and texts from early modern France.

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MOLIÈRE: *Les Fâcheux*. Édition présentée, établie et annotée par JEAN SERROY. (Folio Théâtre). Paris, Gallimard, 2005. 160 pp. Pb €4.10.

*Les Fâcheux* was commissioned by Louis XIV’s Minister of Finance, Nicolas Fouquet, as part of an elaborate court fête held at Vaux-le-Vicomte in the king’s honour in August 1661. The play and its performance context mark an important turning point in Molière’s career, and for this reason alone a separate edition of the play is most welcome. Its creation coincided with the unexpected birth of *comédie-ballet* — a genre that was to culminate famously in the delightful theatricality of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) and *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673). In his preface to the play, published in 1662, Molière explains how his own comedy and Beauchamp’s ballet came to be combined: ‘comme il n’y avait qu’un petit nombre choisi de danseurs excellents, on fut contraint de séparer les entrées de ce ballet, et l’avis fut de les jeter dans les entractes de la comédie [...] on s’avisait de les couvrir au sujet du mieux que l’on put’. At the same time, his production of *Les Fâcheux* propelled Molière into the world of court entertainment. Although Fouquet was imprisoned nineteen days after the premiere of *Les Fâcheux*, Molière and his troupe were immediately invited to give two performances of the work (complete with an additional scene suggested by the king) at Louis XIV’s palace in Fontainebleau. Molière’s dedication to the king in the printed edition of the play demonstrates his desire to pursue this association with Louis XIV and his court. He writes of how the king has inspired him better

than Apollo and all the Muses and politely invites Louis XIV to continue to support his work in the future. Most importantly, Molière makes a case for the political importance of theatrical entertainment, writing ‘je crois qu’en quelque façon ce n’est pas être inutile à la France que de contribuer quelque chose au divertissement de son roi’. Serroy reproduces here the original published text of 1662 (with variants from the 1682 *Œuvres complètes*). His preface stresses the original court context of the work and reminds us of the thin line that separated Molière’s fiction from Foucquet’s fanciful reality (in both, most of the action took place in an avenue in a park). Serroy draws some worthwhile parallels between *Les Fâcheux* and other better-known works by Molière, noting, for instance, that the meta-theatrical allusions of the first scene of the play will be developed further in *La Critique de l’École des femmes* (1663) and *L’Impromptu de Versailles* (1663). At the back of the volume, Serroy provides a useful ‘dossier’, which includes a detailed chronology of Molière’s life and career, a section on sources of the play and its structure, a brief performance history over the centuries and a bibliography, as well as notes on the text and a plot summary act by act. Overall this is a useful edition of a somewhat neglected work.

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LAURENT DRELINCOURT: *Sonnets chrétiens sur divers sujets*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par JULIEN GÆURY. Paris, Champion, 2004. 450 pp. Hb €75.00.

The Huguenot contribution to French literature and spirituality remains markedly under-studied. With the exception of the subtle ideologue who was their founder (Calvin) and their most extravagant epic poet (d’Aubigné), I doubt if any of their works features on a syllabus today. Yet I distantly recall that Calvinist writing was once an option in the MML Schools in Oxford, and it would fittingly adorn the teaching programme of a Scottish university. The Huguenots very quickly evolved specialist dynasties and, by the mid-seventeenth century, the Drelincourts had become one such in the field of preaching and *belles lettres*. Charles Drelin-court, Minister at the central *temple* at Charenton under Louis XIII, had half a dozen of his sermons printed (as the editor of this book would know if, instead of relying on the inaccurate nineteenth-century Haag brothers’ *France protestante* or Pannier’s pre-War works, he had consulted the catalogue in my own *French Pulpit Oratory*). Laurent Drelin-court was his son, and became the pastor first of La Rochelle then of Niort. He too was a published preacher, albeit a minor one, and we owe to Julien Gæury an edition of his sermons (2002). Now it is the turn of his poetry, several times published in the 1670s with the final edition as a *recueil* in 1677. It was reissued in 1680 and is thus the swansong of literary French Protestantism before the apocalypse of the Revocation in 1685 silenced or dispersed that community in Louis XIV’s own despotic and murderous version of the ‘final solution’ — a crime alas often unremarked by the increasing number of ahistorical *dix-septiémistes* who inanely perceive later seventeenth-century literature purely as a kind of icing on the cake of Versailles.

The poet seems to have shared with his Protestant contemporary John Milton a fondness for numerology and intricate organization. The sonnets are arranged in