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Marin Mersenne: La Vérité des sciences contre les
Sceptiques ou Pyrrhoniens (review)

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including Verville's earlier writings that are reworked in *Le Moyen de parvenir* in precise ways. As before, two versions of the text are supplied: on the one hand a facsimile of what the editors demonstrate convincingly to be the earliest known state of the earliest known edition, and on the other hand a modernized transcription of that edition, which gives useful variants and also shows the tradition of dividing up and attributing the speeches that has become common since the eighteenth century. The transcription volume also concludes with an overview of Verville's voluminous writings (*Histoire vraie* is a slip for *Histoire véritable*, p. 456) and excellent indexes of themes and names. In physical terms alone, these sturdy and elegantly produced hardback volumes are designed to last much longer than the 1984 version. So there are many reasons why any person or library possessing that earlier version should, if it all possible, replace it with this one.

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MARIN MERSENNE: *La Vérité des sciences contre les Sceptiques ou Pyrrhoniens*. Édition et annotation par DOMINIQUE DESCOTES. (Sources classiques, 49). Paris, Champin, 2003. 1025 pp. Hb €120.00.

This work of 1625 comes from an early stage in Mersenne's career, before he became the centre of a dynamic intellectual network, and, as Descotes points out in his admirable introduction, it has therefore often been underestimated (although it is discussed in Popkin's *History of Scepticism*). Yet it deserves to be explored. Mersenne's preface represents scepticism as a strategy promoted by *libertins* targeting youthful pleasure-lovers: by sapping their faith in the sciences they hope to weaken their religion. Formally, the text is a dialogue, with, in the first book, the sceptic being confronted by an alchemist and a Christian philosopher. The two former are used to demolish each other, and the Christian philosopher picks up the pieces (an anticipation, Descotes suggests, of Pascal's technique in the *Entretien avec Monsieur de Sacy*). After Book 1, the alchemist disappears and the sceptic dwindles almost to nothing. For those interested in the history of scepticism, Book 1 is therefore the most rewarding. In Chapter 11, the Christian philosopher gives a succinct summary of Pyrrhonism, noting the technique of mutually destructive arguments, and enumerating the famous tropes, which he refutes as he goes along. However, the sceptic carries on the fight as long as he can using Pyrrhonist manoeuvres, already present in the *Apologie de Raymond Sebon*: attempts to justify knowledge involve a vicious circle, or an infinite regress from one reason to another. The validity of the syllogism, and Bacon's critique of it, are also discussed, as is the Baconian taxonomy of idols. The detailed and methodical nature of the discussion means that Mersenne is doing far more than merely restating Montaigne's presentation of Pyrrhonism, and there is much of interest in his attempts to rebut it. However, not content with a general refutation, he aims also to provide a specimen of certain knowledge, in the form of an abridgement of mathematics, which occupies the rest of the work and deals with arithmetic, algebra, geometry and trigonometry. As Descotes observes, Mersenne's text thus allows us to gauge 'ce que l'honnête homme pouvait savoir et comprendre des mathématiques du

temps' (p. 105). Mersenne lays especial stress on the musical applications of mathematics and also celebrates its technological benefits. It enables us to imitate the divine handiwork, but Mersenne sees this not as encroaching on the Creator's sphere, but rather as affording us further reason to admire him. And the applications of mathematics are not only technological; Mersenne uses the concepts of arithmetical and geometrical progression to analyse the effects of grace, and to distinguish democratic from aristocratic states (monarchy, the best of all forms, being based on harmonic proportion). This excellent edition, fully annotated, offers us access to a text that not only offers important insights into Descartes and Pascal, but constructs an intellectual world fascinating in its own right.

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Le Mémoire de Mabelot. Édition critique établie et commentée par PIERRE PASQUIER. Paris, Champion, 2005. 377 pp. Hb €70.00.

The so-called *Mémoire de Mabelot* is a crucial document for the study of seventeenth-century theatre, the notebook of scenic designers at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the miraculous survival of which offers unique insights into on-stage performance conditions. This is the first edition since that of Lancaster of 1920, and its 200 pages of introduction now offer the best available account of seventeenth-century French scenography pertaining to the performance of spoken drama. The manuscript, really several different manuscripts, in different hands, privileges the early 1630s and the 1670s. For most of the plays listed in the earlier period there is both a verbal description of the set requirements and a drawing; for the later plays, there is only a summary verbal description. Accordingly, Pasquier devotes most of his attention to the earlier material, although a strength of his presentation is to conjure up both as clear as possible a vision of the two different scenographic practices in force in the earlier and later parts of the century and an evolution between them. In the 1630s, the dominant scenography used five concurrent sets disposed around the stage, some of them flat, some practicable with doors and windows, some containing visible interiors in which actors could perform; Pasquier refines the traditionally sanctioned concept of simultaneity of decor into one of *relative* simultaneity, as the occasional use of small curtains (painted to represent yet another set) to hide and then reveal the sets rests on the opposite principle of successivity. By the 1670s, the dominant scenography used one single set, representing either outside or inside, but not allowing the on-stage transition from one to the other that the earlier scenography allowed. Pasquier suggests how the different components of the multiple sets became gradually unified in the late 1630s and early 1640s (for instance, the five components increasingly representing parts of the same town or palace). His discussion is informed not only by his knowledge of a vast number of plays, but also by his sensitivity to the traditions of medieval performance, Italian sets for comic and tragic performance in the sixteenth century, evolving practices in the staging of *ballets de cour*, and the elaborately spectacular staging of Italian opera in mid-century Paris. He shines the cold light of evidence and patient analysis