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Luc Foisneau, ed. *Dictionnaire des philosophes français du XVIIe siècle: Acteurs et réseaux du savoir*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 2138 pp. €295. ISBN 978-2-8124-1722-1.

Review by Emma Gilby, University of Cambridge.

As its first definition of the word “philosophe,” the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* gives the following: *Celui qui s’applique à l’étude des Sciences, et qui cherche à connaître les effets par leurs causes & par leurs principes*. This broad, and broadly Aristotelian, statement diverges significantly from the definitions encouraged in today’s universities, limited as they are by modern disciplinary boundaries. For the compilers of the Académie’s dictionary, it combines with other descriptions of the philosopher, which also move in and out of our modern understandings of the term: *Un homme sage qui mène une vie tranquille et retirée*, for example, or *Un homme, qui par libertinage d’esprit se met au dessus des devoirs, et des obligations ordinaires de la vie civile*. Perhaps the most counter-intuitive association is with alchemy: *Les Chymistes se donnent le nom de Philosophe par excellence*. The wealth of possibilities embraced by the term “philosophe” lies behind Luc Foisneau’s desire to bring together seventeenth-century French writers and thinkers of any intellectual stripe, from Molière to Mydorge, from D’Urfé to Désargues, from Racine to Retz to Richelieu. To be included, an individual author must have published at least one work (or written at least one manuscript) between 1601 and 1700—although the “long” seventeenth century inevitably emerges, too, as careers that began before and after the precise period under consideration are adumbrated.

An advantage of the encyclopaedic, alphabetical approach is that intriguing and democratic juxtapositions abound for the reader who is simply flicking through. Louis le Grand would no doubt be upset to find himself flanked by François Loryot, the obscure chronicler of *Les Secrets moraux concernant les passions du cœur humain* (1614), and the even lesser-known Louis de Dôle, author of a 1634 thesis on *le concours médiat*, or the mechanisms by which God intervenes in human interactions. Each author entry is accompanied not just by a list of works and a detailed bibliography, as one would expect, but also by a subheading offering very precise contextualizing references (“Écrits contemporains éclairant le contexte dans lequel s’inscrit le personnage, ou l’œuvre, étudié”). The resulting volume is an astonishing achievement, a landmark work of reference, and a pleasure to peruse. It is to be hoped that a digital version will be forthcoming.

As Luc Foisneau explains in the introduction, this enterprise has its origins in a project set up in 2000 by John Rogers and Rudy Thoemmes, aiming to cover the entirety of modern philosophy on a global scale. This vast collective project has resulted in such volumes as *The Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers* and *The Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophers*, in addition to the 2008 *Dictionary of Seventeenth-Century French Philosophers*, of which the present volume is the revised version.[1] 108 entries and a comprehensive *index historique et raisonné* have been added. The latter expands the twenty-five-page list of names and places given in the English volume to an impressive 345 pages, including invaluable thematic entries such as “collèges,” “universités,”

“antijansénisme” and so on, allowing the researcher who has a more precise target in mind to move usefully from cross-reference to cross-reference.

Another substantial supplement comes in the form of eight new thematic introductions: “Les cartésiens français” by Emmanuel Faye; “Philosophies et théologies scolastiques” by Jacob Schmutz; “Libertins’ et esprits forts” by Isabelle Moreau; “La pensée clandestine” by Gianni Paganini; “Les sciences” by Philippe Hamou; “Théorie des arts” by Carole Talon-Hugon; “Controverses religieuses et naissance de la République des lettres” by Antony McKenna; and “Lieux, sociabilités et pratiques philosophiques” by Stéphane Van Damme. These distinguished chapters account also for the addition of the volume’s subtitle, *Acteurs et réseaux du savoir*, as they pay nuanced attention to the relations that their subjects establish with each other and with their various intellectual milieux.

Descartes first appears in the second line of Foisneau’s *avant-propos*. Given its immense range (2138 pp), this volume seeks in its very form to counter simple stereotypes about the seventeenth century, looking therefore to define itself against any view of early modern philosophy as “un monument intellectuel que l’on reconnaît de loin à l’effigie d’un unique philosophe” (p. 25). Emmanuel Faye’s Descartes entry adds detail to the revision, rectifying “la vision d’un homme cartésien mesure de toute chose par sa raison calculatrice, dominant la nature à partir de la représentation qu’il s’en fait, et auteur d’un projet faustien de mise en coupe réglé du réel par son exploitation technique” (p. 538), although extra detail on the correspondence with Elisabeth of Bohemia and the *Passions de l’âme* would have been helpful here (more on the philosophical contributions of women in a moment). Similarly, this volume has little time for the tendency of history textbooks to reduce the century to the reign of Louis XIV (1661-1715). Much work is done on the political philosophy of the early seventeenth century and the development of the first academies. A useful entry on Nicolas Poussin (keywords: “peinture,” “plaisir”) is emblematic of the scope of Foisneau’s editorial ambition.

Indeed, everything about this volume’s expansion of philosophers to include those who were primarily known for, say, artistic or religious or theatrical output is laudable. An undergraduate student who read the entries for seventeenth-century playwrights alongside, for instance, the more generally thematic entries on tragedy and comedy in *A New History of French Literature* or *The Cambridge History of French Literature* would receive an excellent introduction to these dramatists.[2] One may search Molière’s plays in vain for the coherent expression of a single philosophical position, but, as Olivier Bloch shows, “l’oeuvre est de bout en bout imprégnée de philosophie” (p. 229). Eliante’s tirade about the illusory nature of love in *Le Misanthrope* is “le vestige probable d’une traduction perdue du poème de Lucrèce effectuée par Molière” (p. 1230), and Bloch’s discussion of the libertine discourse that occupies a central position in *Don Juan* ties in nicely with Isabelle Moreau’s introductory remarks on “Libertins’ et esprits forts.” It is similarly refreshing to see Pierre Corneille feature in a dictionary of seventeenth-century philosophers, although anyone who has engaged with the dramatic twists and turns of the tragicomedy *Clitandre* (1631) will be surprised to read in François Lasserre’s entry that Corneille neglects “les aventures turbulentes de la tragi-comédie” and indeed “n’aborde la tragi-comédie qu’avec sa neuvième pièce, *Le Cid* [1637]” (pp. 455-6). John D. Lyons’ work on philosophies of chance and the poetics of gratuity would be a useful further reference here.[3]

The editors of volumes that are similar in scope to this one tend to offer apologies, of varying degrees of elegance, to those looking for a female contribution to the history of philosophy. “One omission from Part I which the editors particularly regret,” write Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, “is that of any discussion either of the rôle of women in philosophical debate or of seventeenth-century arguments, advanced by philosophers of both sexes, about the place of women in society and specifically in intellectual life.”[4] Luc Foisneau does not make the same mistake. He does, however, note that, “les rares femmes philosophes qui figurent dans notre dictionnaire—Geneviève Forest, et Gabrielle Suchon, par exemple—ont été le plus souvent méprisées, à l’instar des femmes savantes moquées par Molière” (p. 31). Even the first treatises on the equality of the

sexes, so important to the seventeenth century, “ne doivent pas nous faire oublier que, toute universelle qu’elle se soit voulue, la philosophie était, au XVII^e siècle, une activité réservée aux hommes.” Such a statement—although clearly true, on one level, and immediately comprehensible—does sit a little strangely alongside the editor’s own desire to stretch and expand definitions of philosophy in general.

Some effort is made to extend the sociological scope of the dictionary to the salon, in which women debated the nature of virtue, employed the language of “proof” and in many cases demonstrated their powerful and extensive philosophical training. The entries on Madeleine de Scudéry and Mme de Villegle make this clear. It was good to see Catherine Descartes’s name preceding that of her uncle. But Mme de Sablé—whose salon at Port-Royal demonstrates many clear connections with the scientific academies, as Valentin Conrart’s work as salon archivist shows—does not receive much space from Jean Lesaulnier, and Jacques Prévot’s entry on the fascinating and hugely influential Mme de Maintenon is likewise very brief. Such writers as Anne de la Vigne (1634-1684), Marguerite de la Sablière (1636-1693) and Louise de la Vallière (1644-1710) do not get an entry at all. Much careful and nuanced work has been done in recent years on how women have practiced philosophy and on what they have generated with the forms—the letter, the commentary, the pedagogical dialogue—that they have taken up. A few of the absences and elisions in this volume generate the impression that some contributors may have been influenced by static caricatures about “the history of great philosophers” that they otherwise so eloquently reject and surpass.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Luc Foisneau, “Avant-propos”

Emmanuel Faye, “Les Cartésiens français”

Jacob Schmutz, “Philosophies et théologies scolastiques”

Isabelle Moreau, “Libertins’ et esprits forts”

Gianni Paganini, “La Pensée clandestine”

Philippe Hamou, “Les Sciences”

Carole Talon-Hugon, “Théories des arts”

Antony McKenna, “Controverses religieuses et naissance de la République des Lettres”

Stéphane Van Damme, “Lieux, sociabilités et pratiques philosophiques”

NOTES

[1] Wiep van Bunge, [Henri Krop](#), [Bart Leeuwenburgh](#), [Paul Schuurman](#), [Han van Ruler](#), [Michiel Wielema](#), eds., *The Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003); Heiner F. Klemme and Manfred Kuehn, eds., *The Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophers* (London: Continuum, 2010); Luc Foisneau, ed., *Dictionary of Seventeenth-Century French Philosophers* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[2] Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001 [1989]); William Burgwinkle, Nicholas Hammond and Emma Wilson, eds., *The Cambridge History of French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[3] John D. Lyons, *The Phantom of Chance: From Fortune to Randomness in Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

[4] Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, eds., *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), vol. 1, p. 3.

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